You had no way of knowing what would happen when you defeated Lord English, but waking up a newly-minted troll on a strange planet in a new universe wasn't exactly what you were expecting. On top of everything else, it turns out that being a troll is a lot more complicated than you thought.

It's like one of Karkat's terrible movies has suddenly become your life.
Chapter 1

At this point you’ve gotten so used to shit going sideways that it doesn’t much phase you when you wake up who-knows-where, draped over something lumpy with a killer headache and a face full of dirt. You lay there for a moment while your brain tries to reboot, watching a small glossy beetle trundle along just past your nose. Your eyes hurt and your skin feels foreign, and it takes you entirely too long to realize that the thing you’re laying across is a person.

You try to scramble upright, but your limbs don’t want to work, and the best you can manage is a bit of flailing before you get your arms steady enough to lever yourself up. The lucky bastard with a lapful of Strider is a troll you don’t recognize. Except you do, you realize, squinting at the lines of his face with a frown. He’s sprawled on the ground and out like a light, and you’re certain you’ve never seen him before because he’s older than the trolls you know. But you can’t shake the feeling that you know him, and maybe if the world didn’t look too sharp and oversaturated, if you didn’t feel like the sixteen worst hangovers you’ve never had you’d be able to figure out why.

He snorts and shifts, coming around. You try to shove yourself off him, but holding yourself up is hard enough, and you give up for the moment when he blinks up at you with brown eyes. “Dave?” he rasps, sounding as disoriented as you feel. “Why are you an alien?”

The moment you hear his voice impossible recognition slots into place. “Bro?” you choke. Your brain fritzes and shorts at the revelation, and for a moment you think you’re wrong; it’s not Bro, it’s Dirk, except Dirk is the same age you are and neither of them are trolls and what the actual fuck.

He paws at your chest with a gruff, “G’roff,” and you manage to get your ass underneath you, sitting in the dirt and staring blankly as Bro --holyshitholyshit Bro-- manages to drag himself upright. His hat and his shades are nowhere to be seen, and you think that’s maybe why you didn’t peg him instantly, the whole supposed to be dead and also not a troll thing aside.

Then you remember what he said. Why are you an alien? You stare at your hands, splayed in the dirt between your legs, covered in unfamiliar gray skin. You reach up apprehensively, and oh god, there they are. You trace a finger along the horn, texture smooth and rough in turns as it curls just behind your ear. “I have no fucking clue,” you say, dumbstruck. No one knew for sure what would happen at the end of the game, but you’re pretty sure ‘waking up in the backwoods of nowhere with everything coming up trolls’ hadn’t been on the list.

Bro snorts a laugh and you just stare at each other for a minute. His horns aren’t like yours; they jut from dark hair in a zigzag ripple, and you think a little stupidly that he’s going to have to give up hats for good. Otherwise he’s mostly the same, the line of his jaw and the crook of his nose, and it’s really just his eyes that surprise you. They’re perplexed and pleased and other emotions harder to name, and you always knew the shades were armor, but you can’t remember if he used to be this easy to read without them. You’re not sure how you feel about your eternally inscrutable Bro being less so, but then he smiles at you just a little, his eyes crinkling a bit at the corners, and you decide it’s actually pretty great.

“You’re older,” he says, and you realize the last time he saw you, you were still a scrawny, thirteen year-old little shit without a clue. It feels like a lifetime ago.

“Sixteen,” you say, and the conversation feels completely inane. There are a hundred thousand things you want to say to this man, I couldn’t fix it I tried I tried I love you I’m sorry, but none of them come out. They knot in your throat, make it hard to breathe and Bro is staring at you in growing alarm.
“Dave? Whoa, shit, are you crying?”

Shit, shit, you are crying, and you swipe roughly at your eyes and try to will it away. You haven’t cried in front of Bro since you were little because you never wanted him to see you weak. “Fuck, sorry. I don’t know what my malfunction is.” Your voice is watery and tight, and your eyes won’t stop leaking, god this is humiliating.

You half expect him to poke fun or abscond, but he doesn’t. “Hey, hey,” he says, gruff in that way he gets when he’s uncomfortable. “Can the waterworks, alright?” He grabs the front of your shirt and hauls you into a hug that you’re too startled to resist, and you honestly can’t remember the last time he hugged you. An arm slung over your shoulder, noogies and manly backslaps, sure. But hugs? Not for ages, not since you were what? Nine? You bury your face in his shoulder and do your best to get your ragged breathing under control. It’s nice to be held even if you feel like a wuss, and you figure you can blame it on the stress later.

It doesn’t take you long to man up. You’re a Strider dammit, and you don’t sit around snivelling like a baby all day just because your Bro came back from the dead. You pull away and park your ass back in the dirt, swiping at your cheeks to wipe away the evidence. Bro doesn’t look at you, giving you the illusion of privacy for a moment while he examines his hands, prodding unfamiliar gray flesh. Eventually he says, “So, you wanna fill me in?”

Jesus. Where the fuck do you even start? “Can it wait?” You clamber to your feet, brushing the dirt from your pants and taking stock of your surroundings. There’s not much to see, but the foliage is pretty dense, and if Bro is here there’s no telling who else got ejected into trollville along with you. “It’s kind of a long story, and we should probably find the others first.”

Bro shrugs. “Yeah, sure. A little more waiting isn’t going to make much of a difference.” He stands, and for a startled moment you think he got shorter until it occurs to you that no, you’ve just grown. He’s still taller than you by nearly a head, but you’re starting to catch up. Weird.

“Hey, Bro?”

He raises a brow at you, and for some reason the part of his appearance that throws you the most isn’t the horns or the skin, but the fact that his hair is the wrong color. “Sup?”

It’s stupid and sappy and you two already had your girl moment, but. “I’m glad you’re okay.” His expression goes soft for the space of a heartbeat, and then he grabs you and plants a loud, sloppy kiss right on your forehead. “Ugh Bro, gross!” You shove him off and wipe his spit off your face, wrinkling your nose. You almost forgot what a giant dork he could be sometimes.

He just winks at you, slinging an arm around your shoulders and saying, “Ditto, li’l man. Course, I always knew you had it in you.”

You grumble and shrug his arm off, pretending not to be pleased by the praise. “Whatever, let’s just find everyone else so we can figure out what the hell is going on.”

In the end, John’s the one who finds you. There isn’t much warning, just the rustling of leaves before he drops through the canopy like a stone, and you can see Bro twitch for a weapon he doesn’t have. You put a quelling hand on his arm because you don’t want anyone getting thrashed, but that’s all you manage before John practically clotheslines you. “Dave! Oh man, we were so worried, we couldn’t find you anywhere and everyone’s trolls or something now and it’s just really weird, and—”

John is babbling, and he’s also kind of strangling you. “Whoa, settle down, Egbert.” You pry him from around your neck, pushing him back a little so you can get a good look at him, and yep. John is
also a troll. His horns sweep back over his head in a low wave, but unlike Bro the change isn’t quite as jarring. He still looks just like John.

Except with pointier teeth, because he’s grinning at you like the unholy lovechild of the Cheshire Cat and a shark. “Sorry! I’m just glad I found you. Everyone else seems to be okay, but we’re still picking up some stragglers and uh.” He stops abruptly, noticing Bro for the first time. “I don’t know you?”

Shit. You hadn’t stopped to think about how there would have to be introductions. Or how everyone knows Bro is supposed to be dead. “This is Bro. Bro, this is John Egbert,” you wave a hand vaguely between them and hope that John doesn’t make a big deal out of it, because you’re still quietly freaking out and you kind of need everyone else not to be.

“Hello Dave’s alien friend with an unexpectedly normal name.” Bro thrusts out a hand and John just stares at it for a second before remembering that handshakes are a thing.

“Uh. Right, hi.” He takes the offered hand before tacking on an indignant, “I’m not an alien! Er.” He pauses, face twisting up a little. “At least I wasn’t.” Bro drops his hand with a snort, and you can practically see the gears in John’s head turning.

He looks at you with cautious hope. “Do you suppose my dad...?”

Oh hell. You really, really hope so, and maybe it’s even likely, because why Bro and not everyone else? “I dunno,” is what you say, because it’s the truth and you don’t want to get John’s hopes up.

“Yeah,” he says, gnawing his lip and you think maybe his hopes are up anyway. “I should get back to looking, last time I checked in we were still missing a few trolls.” He points off into the trees. “If you guys keep heading that way, you should run into everyone pretty soon. It’s not that far.” John hops into the air and hovers for a second, glancing at Bro. “You should probably tell him about Dirk,” he advises, before shooting back into the air calling, “Bye Dave!”

Bro watches him go with his eyebrows crawling up to his hairline, and you think it’s probably a testament to his perpetual chill that he hasn’t flipped the fuck out yet. You’re pretty sure you would have if your positions were reversed. Once John’s gone, Bro glances at you and asks, “Who the fuck is Dirk?”

Right, shit. Bro’s first name is actually Dirk, a fact you only know because you’d gone through his wallet once when you were nine because one of your classmates had insisted that Bro couldn’t be his actual name. Turned out the little shit was right, and needless to say it had rocked your third grade worldview. You’d confronted Bro with all the indignant fury of a kid finding out Santa wasn’t real, and he’d laughed himself sick before ordering a conciliatory pizza and offering to lie to the kid straight up just to screw with him.

You remember sitting tucked in the shelter of his arms that night, too old to cuddle but young enough to want to anyway. He was still larger than life to you then, some kind of real-life superhero, and you’d known with the absolute surety of childhood that he would always keep you safe. You’d asked him why everyone called him Bro if his name was Dirk. He’d rested his chin on top of your head, and when he spoke you could hear the rumble of his voice in his chest. Bro told you that a name was just a name, but being your big bro? That was what defined him, that was who he was, so why shouldn’t he use it instead of the label someone had given him when he was still pink and squalling.

You’d considered this with a great deal of gravity before announcing that yeah, that made sense. Then you’d worried that Bro might expect you to pick your own name at some point, and you’d
informed him that you wanted to keep Dave because he was the one who gave it to you. Bro had laughed and kissed your hair, and that night you’d slept with him for the first time since you were six.

And shit, Bro’s just standing there watching you get all nostalgic. Goddamn, what is your problem today? This isn’t exactly your first miraculous resurrection, although maybe it’s the most unexpected. You clear your throat and start heading in the direction John indicated, because you figure you can walk and talk at the same time. When Bro falls in beside you, you decide to tackle his question head-on. “Dirk’s basically an alternate universe version of you.”

Bro falters for a second, and you can feel him staring at you. “What.” It’s so flat it’s not even a question, and you suppose even with all the crazy Bro’s seen so far, this might be a little much.

So you do your best to explain all the ectobiology nonsense. You tell him about the meteors, the scratch, and how the game had decided to pull a little switcheroo for round two. “So you and Dirk are kinda like long-lost twins, I guess.”

Bro hums thoughtfully, and you can tell by the way the corner of his mouth pulls down that he’s not too happy, but you figure he’ll get over it when he realizes that Dirk isn’t some sort of bizarro Bro photocopy. “So does that mean in another universe you raised me?”

Whoa, wouldn’t that be a mindfuck? You hop on a fallen log, balancing for a second before jumping off. “Nah. I mean, I think I was supposed to, but shit went wrong and we wound up about four hundred years apart or something. But apparently I made myself useful by leading a rebellion against Betty Crocker and decapitating ICP on the roof of the White House, so there’s that.” The things Dirk had told you about your alter-self were pretty incredible, if somewhat hard to believe.

He responds to this in the only reasonable way possible— by offering you a totally righteous high five.

You spend the rest of your trek doing your best to explain everything that happened after he checked out. You hit all the big points and don’t bother much with the details; the whole story would take weeks to tell in its entirety and you can worry about the rest some other time. Bro asks about Davesprite, which forces you to tell him about the doomed timeline where John died and what Davesprite had done to prevent it from happening. Unfortunately that leads into questions about time travel and doomed timelines and it sort of comes out that you racked up an impressive body count.

You try to play it off with a joke, but Bro doesn’t laugh. Instead he stops short, arms crossed and head cocked, looking at you with an expression you can’t place. You just stand there staring at each other like a couple of morons for way too long before he finally says, soft and serious, “You did good, kid. I’m proud of you.”

You know you’re gaping like a slack-jawed idiot, but you don’t think Bro’s ever said that to you before. Not seriously, anyway. He’d do stupid shit like put your report card on the refrigerator and warble about what a proud mama he was because Bro always liked to toe the line between being terminally cool and a complete fucking doofus, but that was just Bro being Bro. Right here and now he meant it, and you’re not sure you know how to deal with that.

Bro’s approval is something you’d been chasing after all your life, and now that you have it the best you can manage is a muttered, “What is with all this touchy-feely bullshit?”

Just like that, the moment’s over. You killed it, Dave. Good job. Way to go. Bro rolls his eyes and shoves your shoulder. “Sorry Princess, I didn’t mean to get yucky feelings all over you. You want a cootie shot just in case? Can’t be taking risks with this sort of thing.”
You punch him in the arm. He punches you back harder. The two of you are still taking potshots at each other when you stumble into Troll Central Station.

* * *

The first thing you have to deal with are the logistics of food and shelter for thirty plus trolls, and you’re kind of glad that everyone is too distracted to worry much about Bro. Except Rose, of course, who had made it a point to come and offer a gracious hand and say stupid shit like, “It’s nice to finally meet you,” and “I’m a fan of your work.” You’re pretty sure Bro had been seconds away from a marriage proposal, and you swear to anything that might be listening that if those two ever team up, you are going to find the nearest body of water and drown yourself.

The game saw fit to provide you with an alchemiter, and thanks to your frankly ridiculous hoard of collective grist you probably aren’t in danger of dying of starvation or exposure anytime soon. All the same, the girls insisted on sticking to necessities—campfire-friendly food, sleeping bags and tents, mostly. Despite that, Bro had somehow managed to charm another pair of shades off of Jade and her suddenly crucial pictionary modus, and you’re privately a little relieved because now he looks a lot more like Bro.

And now you’re sitting in front of a campfire, eating a pig-in-a-blanket which is somehow both simultaneously raw and burnt to hell, as per time-honored camping tradition. Or so Jane tells you, because you haven’t been camping one single day in your entire urban existence, and frankly you aren’t seeing the appeal. You pick at the doughy crap clinging to your hotdog and sneak a sideways glance at Bro. He’s been on edge ever since you joined the others, thrumming with a strange mix of the familiar sharp tension that was usually a prelude to strife, and a bristling kind of almost-paranoia. The latter is so uncharacteristic that it’s actually kind of worrying you a little, but you keep reminding yourself that as weird as things are for you, they’re doubly so for Bro. Hell, he didn’t even know that trolls existed until he woke up as one. He’s entitled to being a bit off-kilter.

It hasn’t been a bad day though, all things considered. You’re still not sure you’re on board with the troll thing, especially after going to take a piss and discovering that your dick has gone the way of the dodo, but all the people who matter to you are alive, and that counts for a hell of a lot.

Just as you give up on your meal on a stick, Karkat appears out of the dark and slumps into the dirt beside you looking like certified shit. You hand him your dog and he doesn’t even look at the thing before cramming the gooey abomination straight into his maw. “You look like crap.”

Karkat drags a hand over his face and just looks at you. “Thank you for that stunning observation. Any other blindingly obvious statements you’d like to make?”

You suck a bit of sticky dough off your thumb and shrug. “Nope. I’m good.”

Karkat huffs and goes quiet for a minute. You wait, poking at the fire with your stick while he works up to whatever he wants to say. “Listen,” he snaps, gesturing vaguely towards the rest of the camp.

You do, but all you hear is the low hum of conversation from other small groups around their fires, and the rustle of leaves and other nature-y sounds. “Seems quiet,” you say, not sure what he expects.

“I know!” Karkat explodes, then abruptly subsides as a few heads swing your way. “It can’t last. I’m pretty sure I’m the only one in my group who hasn’t killed or been killed by a person who was supposed to be on their side, and fuck, I’m glad everyone is okay but it’s only a matter of time before someone decides a score needs settling.” He sighs heavily and pinches the bridge of his nose. “I am so fucking sick of people dying. Vriska’s already vanished and I don’t know if that’s a good thing or not, Eridan won’t talk to anyone but me and Gamzee keeps trying to apologize and I just,” he sucks
in a breath and holds it. “Need a minute.”

You just nod, because you’ve known Karkat long enough to know he’s not looking for comfort or platitudes. You stretch out your legs and lean back on your hands, saying, “Well, lucky for you the Strider fire is a drama-free zone. Excellent company and all the shitty hotdogs you can eat.”

Karkat snorts softly and goes quiet, fishing another hotdog from the package and eating it cold. The silence lasts for all of a minute before he grumbles, “Where the fuck is Egbert, anyway? He was supposed to be back before dark.”

His irritation is a flimsy mask for concern. “Jade’s got tabs on him. Says he’ll be back soon.” You don’t tell him that you only know that because you were getting a little worried yourself. Instead you say, “Wait, does that mean I was your second choice? That you wanted to bring all your woes to Egbert instead? I am wounded, man. You have shattered my delicate feelings into a billion pieces. Excuse me while I go cry a single manly tear of heartbreak.”

“I think I might actually be developing some kind of immunity to the sewage constantly spewing from your flap,” Karkat mutters, then flops back into the dirt and rubs his eyes. “I’m just trying to figure out who’s going to flip the fuck out first. One of your people, or one of mine.”

You can understand why he’d be worried about his people. You aren’t sure why he’d be worried about yours. You’re pretty sure no one has any vendettas on tap, at any rate. “Dude, I don’t think you have to worry about us.”

Karkat groans and shoves himself upright like it might actually be the most difficult thing he’s ever done. “Do you even use your thinkpan? No, don’t answer that, it was a stupid question. Look, let me explain something that should be obvious even to the most useless of pan-addled fuckwits. Yesterday, you were all still human. Today, you’re trolls.”

“Wow, thanks for the lesson, professor.”

“Shut the fuck up, I’m not done. My species is a fucking mess of violent instincts and impulses, none of which you are used to. Let that sink into your sponge for a minute, okay? Trolls have sweeps to get used to not indulging every murderous impulse before they lock us in a spacefaring tin can with a bunch of potentially dangerous strangers. None of you have had that luxury. If we get through this without any spontaneous bloodshed it will be a fucking miracle.”

Bro finally takes an interest in the conversation, leaning over you so he can get a look at Karkat. “Seems a little melodramatic. You make it sound like everyone is a slave to their baser instincts.”

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Karkat’s default setting is melodramatic, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t have a point. Before you have a chance to interject, Karkat throws his hands up in frustration and growls, “That’s because we are. I’ll give you a pass on being insufferably fucking stupid this once, and point out that it takes time and experience to keep a lid on this festering pustule of imminent mayhem. Even that only counts for so much, as evidenced by the impressive body count wracked up by my own fucking people the instant they didn’t have any other outlet. Case in point,” he says, and then reaches out and smacks Bro right upside the head.

Bro goes rigid and you feel a thrill of alarm. Your brain knows that Bro will probably just swat him back and that’ll be that, but something in your gut disagrees, twisting around your spine in dread, chanting ohfuckohfuck. The moment hangs for such an impossibly still instant that you wonder if you stopped time by accident, but then Bro snarls a furious sound that could never come from a human throat and you know your gut won.
He vaults over you and tackles Karkat, pinning him to the dirt by his throat. There’s violence in every line of his body, and Karkat’s never been big, but next to Bro he suddenly looks very small and very fragile. Thank fucking god he isn’t fighting back, because you pretty sure that’s the only thing keeping him alive. You scramble to your feet, not sure what to do, but Bro is growling like a feral dog and you can’t let him kill Karkat, you won’t. “Bro, hey. Hey, c’mon.” Some instinct keeps your voice low and soothing, and after a moment of indecision you kneel down and take his face in both hands because it seems like the right thing to do.

You can feel Bro’s attention shifting from Karkat to you, and the growling stutters to a stop. You take a chance and say, “I’m going to need you not to kill my friends, Bro.” You aren’t sure if it’s the words or the tone, but it does the trick, and as Bro eases off Karkat you relax a little. Karkat doesn’t move, staying splayed on the ground and sucking in harsh, panting breaths.

You don’t take your hands off Bro’s face because it doesn’t seem like a good idea just yet. He’s still tense but he’s leaning into your hands, and you stroke his face a little. He leans into you harder, eyes fluttering closed in a way that seems almost involuntary. Bro’s relaxing by inches, and you reach up and smooth the little pinch of skin between his brows with a thumb. Bro pitches into you like someone cut his strings, making this strange, soft little chirrup against your shoulder that hits you like a fucking freight train. You feel a little dizzy, almost giddy, and it takes you a minute to realize that rusty, stuttering purr is coming from you. Suddenly you want nothing more than to curl around Bro and never stop touching him, and you’re not even sure what that means, but the intensity of the urge scares the fuck out of you and you jerk away.

The sudden loss of contact seems to snap Bro out of it, and you’re still close enough that you can see him blink several times behind the shades. “What the fuck just happened?” He sounds thick and dazed, like he’s not quite awake. You stamp down viciously on the urge to touch him again.

Karkat wheezes. “I made the mistake of trying to prove a point because I’m a spectacular fuckup who does not think things through.”

Bro doesn’t reply, bracing his arms on his knees and taking a few perfectly measured, artificial breaths. It takes you a second to realize you’re watching Bro quietly flip the fuck out, and you’re not sure what to do with any of this. You’re struggling with the need to help, to soothe, and that stupid purr keeps trying to sputter back to life despite your best efforts. You’ve never seen Bro lose his cool like this. You’ve seen him mad before, dude’s not a robot, but it’s always been cold anger— silent stares and clipped words. You’ve never seen anything like the kneejerk violence you just witnessed, and you think Bro might have actually scared himself with that fucking swan dive right off the handle.

Karkat sits up slowly, watching Bro warily as he does, and you put yourself back between them without any clear idea who exactly you’re trying to protect. "You okay?" you ask. Vivid bruises are already visible on his throat, and he frowns, rubbing at his neck gingerly.

"I'll live, which is probably more than I deserve after that rotbrained stunt. Past Me continues to demonstrate that he's nothing more than a festering pustule on the multiverse’s collective ass." He sighs. "I should probably get back to Gamzee."

You don't blame him for wanting to make a quick exit. You grope for something to say and blurt, "I didn't think you two were still a thing."

Karkat snorts, then winces and swallows. "Shit. Ow. And we're not, but someone has to be responsible for him, and no one else is volunteering." He climbs to his feet slowly, and you're not sure if it's because he's in pain or just wary of setting Bro off again.
Bro doesn't so much as twitch as Karkat leaves, skirting wide around the fire to avoid walking behind him. The two of you sit in silence for a while after that, and you take the time to stare blankly into the flames and try to parse exactly what the hell happened, to Bro and you, because whatever that was it was discomfiting as all hell. It must have been some kind of troll thing, because you were running almost on autopilot. Sort of like you didn't know what to do, but your body did, so it just went ahead and did what needed doing without much input from you.

And hell, it had definitely worked. Bro had gone into some kind of hypnotic daze like you were shooting tranquilizers from your fingertips. It wouldn't even bother you much because you are more than used to rolling with weird shit at this point if it weren't for all the unsettling feelings that had come part and parcel of your impromptu little cuddlefest. You didn't even know what to call them, other than really strong and really alarming. Also not particularly brother-appropriate, but you're not thinking about that last part, because you just fucking aren't.

"Thanks. For whatever the fuck that was," Bro says like he can read your mind.

You shrug, try to make light. "Don't sweat it. Most people want to strangle Karkat sometimes." You're pretty sure Bro is the only one who's actually tried, but you wisely keep that to yourself.

Bro snorts a humorless laugh and stands, brushing the dirt from his pants. "I'm gonna crash. It's been a hell of a day."

Talk about an understatement. "Yeah, okay. Night Bro."

He hesitates a second, then swoops down, grabbing one of your horns and planting a kiss right between them, just like he used to do when you were little. He absconds the fuck out before you can do much more than stare. You're used to Bro kissing you; he does it all the time, often loudly and with great fanfare because he knows it annoys you. Except you're pretty sure that one had been entirely sincere and you don't even know what to think.

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John wakes you up sometime in the middle of the night by tripping over you. "The fuck, man?" you grumble, shoving at his ankle.

"Sorry," he says in a stage whisper. Then, "Can I sleep in here with you guys? I was supposed to share with Jade, but she and Roxy and Jane decided to have a slumber party or something, and—"

"Dude, you don't need an excuse to hang with the cool kids." You yawn, scooting back towards Bro, who shifts a bit to accommodate you. The tents aren't really meant for three people, but you'll deal. John manages to get settled after a little shuffling, and you ask without thinking, "Find everyone?"

John goes still, and it occurs to you that you're a tactless jerk. After a long moment he says, "Jade says there's still someone out there she's having a hard time pinning down."

His voice is getting suspiciously thick, and you can hear the 'but' hanging on the end of his sentence. Damn it. "Yeah?"

"She's pretty sure that it's not my dad." He says it with such sad resignation that it breaks your heart a little.

"I'm sorry," you say, and it's so fucking inadequate.

"Me too." The two of you fall silent, John sniffling in that quiet, stifled way people do when they're
trying to pretend they aren't crying.

It's beyond unfair. You're insanely happy to have Bro back, weird-fuck evening aside, and John deserves that for himself. He should be with his dad right now, not squashed in a tent with you and Bro, trying not to cry. "C'mere."

"What?" You try to ignore how watery his voice sounds.

You wriggle half out of your sleeping bag and hold out your arms invitingly. "I think it's time for a tender bro embrace."

John giggles a little, and you count it a victory. "You don't have to."

"This is a limited time offer, Egbert. You know you want some of these prime cuddles." Bro is totally going to hassle you about this tomorrow, but he’s keeping his trap shut for now, and that’s good enough. John hesitates, and you think that shows how upset he actually is, because under normal circumstances John would be on bro cuddles like a fat kid on cake. You waggle your outstretched arms pointedly, and John relents with a sigh, scoot-hopping the short distance between you.

John sort of crumples the instant you’ve got got him tucked in your arms, head burrowed in the hollow of your shoulder and hands fisted in your shirt. You adjust his head a bit so his horns aren’t digging into your collarbone quite so hard, then take off his glasses so he doesn’t have to sleep in them, storing them in your sylladex for safekeeping.

You don’t know what to say, so you don’t say anything; you just sling your sleeping bag-covered legs over his and stroke the short hairs on the back of his neck until his breathing goes deep and even, wishing all the while that there was something more you could do.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

It's tough being Bro.

Chapter Notes

Holy crap I know I said updates would be sporadic but it wasn't supposed to take this long! I'm so sorry.

I'm dubious as hell about this chapter, probably because I've been writing it a paragraph at a time for two months, but I think it's time to release it into the wild and move on.

Also I shall make a genuine effort not to go six hundred years until the next update.

ETA: I forgot to mention that this fic was planned during the hiatus, so it's probably not going to take any recent events into account.

You wake the next morning a little more centered, but you still feel like certified shit.

You almost killed that kid last night.

Hell, if it weren't for Dave you probably would have, for no crime greater than annoying you. Something primal at the back of your mind asserts that he attacked you, but you dismiss it. It isn’t even the fact that you almost killed someone that bothers you— it’s the fact that you'd lost control so absolutely that you'd almost taken a life without making the conscious decision to do so. It makes you dangerous in a way you really don't want to be.

You have no idea what time it is beyond 'daylight' but you’re fidgety and restless and there’s no way you’re getting back to sleep. Dave and his friend are still snuggled together all adorable-like, and you pause in your hunt for your left shoe to watch them with a strange mix of nostalgia and jealousy. Dave's always been a cuddler— hell, for the first year of his life he refused to sleep anywhere but on your chest, which meant you’d gotten zero fucking sleep because you were terrified that if you nodded off you’d roll over and smother him or something. He'd decided he was too old for it at some point, although he'd always relapse when he was too tired or sick to remember that snuggling with his big bro was hells of lame.

The last time must have been when he was twelve or so, when he'd caught that flu going around. You remember he'd woken you up at the asscrack of dawn by pasting himself over you like a human blanket and whining that he felt too shitty to sleep. You're pretty sure it was just an excuse, because he was out like a light the minute you'd started stroking his hair, and goddamn you love that kid so much it's kind of killing you right now. There’s this big knot of emotion right in your core with Dave’s name scrawled across it, and it actually takes a minute of not thinking about much of anything for the ache in your chest to subside. You wonder if getting all maudlin is a side-effect of miraculous resurrection or if your age is just catching up with you. Probably a little of both.
Once properly shod you consider letting them sleep. You feel bad for the Egbert kid; it sounds like he got a pretty raw deal and you’re actually not as big an asshole as Dave likes to think. On the other hand, who knows when you’re going to get another opportunity like this? In the end you decide that Dave has gone three years without your unique brand of brotherly affection, and that was three years too many. “Well, isn’t this just the cutest thing,” you say a little louder than strictly necessary. Dave groans and flops an arm in the general direction of your voice. “You guys are slaughtering me with this saccharine shit right here. Just being in the general vicinity has turned my blood to pure sugar. Fluffy little kittens don’t even reach the stratospheric levels of adorable I’m witnessing.”

Dave raises his head and turns a bleary-eyed glare on you before letting his head fall back onto Egbert’s chest with a soft thump. “Bro, do you have any idea what time it is?” he mumbles.

“Not a clue,” you say cheerfully.

“It is fucking five thirty-four,” he pauses a beat, then adds, “Ish. This planet seems to operate on twenty-seven hour days and it’s kind of throwing me off. The point is that it’s early as hell and you’re an asshole.”

It takes you a second to realize that Dave’s not being a wiseass, that he just rattled off the time with a little added planetary rotation for flavor half-asleep and with zero hesitation. He’d told you about his time stuff, and you were not even a little surprised to discover that the baby you found chilling in a fucking crater has some sort of crazy superpowers—hell, for the first few years you were half-expecting some kind of Superman schtick—but the practical demonstration throws you a little. It’s not even something he has to think about. “Okay then Princess, I’ll leave you and your boyfriend to your beauty sleep.”

Dave flips you off lazily, and you grin and slip out of the tent. You wait for a second, because there’s no way Egbert actually slept through that, the big faker. A beat passes and then, “Dave, your brother is kind of a dick.”

“Only kind of?” you call back, and you hear the kid squeak.

"Seriously Bro, fuck right off and let the sane people go back to sleep." You chuckle under your breath because ruffling Dave's feathers always lifts your mood. You go to fuck off as requested when Dave's voice chases you. "Shit, wait hold on." You can hear him scrambling around in the tent before the flap unzips and he pokes his head out, squinting against the light. "Do you want me to come with you?"

He's worried about you, you realize, which is equal parts annoying and sweet. "Nah, go back to sleep. No more attempted murder from me, promise." You hear the Egbert kid squawk a startled what and have to bite down on a grin, because it's not really a laughing matter. Dave stares at you for a few seconds longer like he's not quite sure he should let you out of his sight, so you sigh a little and add, "I'm aware that it's an issue now, and we both know no one is sneaking in any cheap shots when I'm paying attention." It's half a lie, because you were on edge all day yesterday and you couldn’t help but be hyper-aware of all the strangers around you, but your new body is foreign and a little ill-fitting, like too-tight shoes, and it’s wreaking havoc on your reflexes. Your little bro doesn’t need to know that though, because you don’t want him to feel like he has to babysit you.

Dave considers this briefly before accepting your rationale with a slow nod. "Okay."

You nod back before tucking your hands in your pockets and wandering off. There’s a few other people up and about, but not many, and you’re kind of glad. You’ve got a lot to think about, and and it’s becoming quickly apparent that too many people makes your new troll brain kind of squirrely. Unfortunately Rose spots you almost immediately and stops you with a wave, and you check a sigh
and wait while she extracts herself from a conversation with a troll in a red sweater. Looks like your me-time will just have to wait.

She takes your arm like an old-fashioned lady and urges you to keep walking. “Good morning. I hope you don’t mind me ambushing you so early, but I thought we should talk.” She tilts her head to look up at you, and it strikes you with a sort of queasy alarm that this girl is your daughter. It was like you’d made a few bad choices on prom night and a kid shows up on your doorstep sixteen years later, wearing your face and calling you dad. Except you hadn’t actually had a say in her creation, and Rose doesn’t really look much like you at all. It’s a lot more alarming in some ways than discovering that Dave is actually your son from a biological standpoint, but then you were already family to begin with; the rest is just details.

Rose smiles up at you and says like she can read your mind, “I’m not expecting child support and a pony on my birthday, you know. I just think it’d be nice if we could be friends.” It occurs to you that if Dave can do crazy things like travel through time, it’s entirely possible that Rose can actually, in fact, read your goddamned mind. You say as much and she laughs, smile turning a little enigmatic. “No, nothing like that. I just see things.”

“You see things,” you repeat a little flatly, because you’re getting the feeling you might actually be the most normal person here, which is a very strange first. “What, like the future?”

She bobs her head a little. “Sometimes the things I see are possible future events, yes, although that certainly isn’t the limit of my vision. It’s a bit hard to explain, I’m afraid.” Something about the way she says it makes you think that she could explain it just fine if she were so inclined, but you don’t call her on it.

Instead, you ask, “So how’re things going to work out for us here then?”

“Oh, well enough I think. There are a lot of possibilities at the moment, and not all of them are pleasant, but I believe we’re leaning towards a positive future.” She sounds a bit like some sort of charlatan fortune teller, and you’re willing to bet money that it’s intentional. “Where’s Dave? I expected we’d have a hard time prying the two of you apart for a few days at least.”

You shrug. The two of you were never attached at the hip and you don’t see why that’d change now that he’s all grown up and independent. Not that you are even remotely sour about that last point, because you’re not some sort of empty nester flipping through baby albums and crying about the good ol’ days. Nope. Not you. Granted, maybe you’re feeling a little nostalgic, but that’s only to be expected when your brother aged three years in a day from your perspective. You are proud as hell of the man he’s turning into, you just can’t help but wish you’d been around for it. Although you suppose you should be glad you’re around at all. “Last I checked he was getting all cozy with Egbert and whining about his beauty sleep.”

Rose’s eyebrows lift a little. “Already? Hm.”

You wait for her to elaborate before you realize she isn’t going to. “Already what? Are you actually telling me you expect them to hook up?” Because you were honestly just teasing. Last time you checked Dave was straight, but hell, that’s what you’d thought when you were thirteen and boy was that ever completely off base.

Her brows pinch together in a delicate frown. “I can’t confirm or deny one way or the other, but I would appreciate it if you didn’t mention this conversation to Dave.” Something in her eyes goes far away and glassy. “The result could be...unfortunate.”

You believe her. You aren’t sure what kind of trainwreck that could possibly cause, but you’re not
the voodoo priestess and there’s a certain sort of gravity to the way she says it that makes you inclined to behave. “You got it.”

She shakes her head a little as though trying to clear it. “I appreciate your discretion.”

“Sure,” you grin down at her, trying to lighten the mood. “You’re going to have to put out a little fortune telling for my silence though. Illuminate my future, kid. Gimme something good.”

She’s silent for a minute, head tilted a little as though she’s flipping through her mental rolodex of foreknowledge and deciding what tidbit is safe to impart. “You haven’t had much luck in love,” she says after a moment, and you wonder if she knows or if she’s guessing. Either way she’s right, because your love life before Dave consisted of a few short-lived, volatile relationships, and after Dave it was nothing much more than a string of one-night stands. Who had time for dating when you had a kid to raise? Rose gives your arm a gentle pat. “That’s going to change.”

You stare at her, because that’s not what you were expecting, not to mention you’re pretty sure that everyone on this planet besides you is jailbait. “You’re all kids,” you say a bit helplessly, because as much as you want to hope that she’s screwing with you, you don’t think she is.

The look she gives you is a solemn one. “We may be young, but I think you’ll find that most of us haven’t been children for a long time. Besides, measuring the appropriateness of romantic entanglements by a human metric seems a bit pointless now, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I don’t know about that.” You wish you hadn’t asked. It’s not like you have any objection to the idea of a relationship in theory, but you’ve never been an easy person to live with and everyone here is so fucking young.

Rose doesn’t reply, smoothly changing the subject. “I heard about what happened last night. Are you alright?”

You can’t decide if this topic is better or worse than the last one. Are your only conversational options about banging kids or assaulting them? Christ. “Shouldn’t you be asking the other guy?”

“Oh, Karkat’s very durable, and I’m given to understand it was provoked.” She peers up at you and you get the uncomfortable feeling that she wants to crawl inside your brain. “I imagine it must have been very unsettling to lose control of your faculties so unexpectedly.”

You study Rose’s horns so you don’t have to look her in the eye. They’re small but viciously barbed, and you’re beginning to suspect they might be a little too apt. “Something like that,” you reply with all the non-inflection you can muster. Unsettling was too gentle a word, because self-control is the foundation on which you’d built all your skills, and you’re afraid of what might happen without it. If this turns out to be more than just a freak occurrence you will banish yourself to other side of the fucking planet before you’ll risk hurting someone who doesn’t deserve it. You’re still not sure exactly how Dave defused you, and you can’t expect him to always be on hand in case you flip your shit.

Rose hums to herself, strange little ear-fins perking up like you’d said something particularly interesting. You walk a little longer in silence before she says, “We’re having a bit of a meeting later to explain some of the more significant differences between trolls and humans. I can only hope you’ll feel more at ease once you have a better notion what to expect from your new biology.” Knowledge is good. You’re a stalwart believer in the old adage that forewarned is forearmed, although being literally armed is also a must. You aren’t sure about being around that many people, because when it comes right down to it you’ve already proven that you can’t trust yourself. No way around it though, and you suppose it also means more people around to knock you on your ass if your brain goes
You let Rose drag you off to meet a couple of girls who are apparently friends with the clone you’ve reportedly got walking around, but have yet to actually meet. It turns out Dirk is off with a couple others scouting for a more permanent settlement location, and you’re pretty okay with postponing that encounter until you’ve got a better handle on your shit. The girls seem nice enough, and you decide you particularly like the one with the whimsical corkscrew horns when she says you look just like Dirk except quote, ‘so much hotter ohmygawd Janey look at his arms.’

What can you say? You like a good ego-stroking as much as the next guy.

Unfortunately her enthusiasm draws the attention of a few more trolls, and now there are six people milling around you and it’s making you twitchy and tense. You keep trying to remind yourself that you’re in no actual danger, but that doesn’t do much to quell the warning klaxons in your head. So when Jade turns up with her modus interface tucked under one arm and asking to steal you for a little manual labor, you jump at the excuse to extricate yourself from the group.

When you’re out of earshot, Jade smiles and taps her nose. “Sorry for butting in, but you were starting to smell a little anxious.”

You are pretty much done being surprised by anything at this point. “Appreciate it,” is all you say, following her to the alchemiter. You’re going to have to figure out how to deal with this sooner rather than later, because dangerous instability aside, your pride just can’t take having to be rescued from basic social interaction. “So, is that your schtick? Super-smell?”

Jade gigglesnorts, which is kind of adorable. “Oh no, that’s just because I’m part dog.” You wait a beat until you realize that she’s not kidding, and you’re beginning to wish you had brought Dave along after all, if only to have a tour guide to crazy-town. She plunks down on the ground, balancing her tablet on her knees and drawing something you think is supposed to be a chair. Her modus figures it out on the first try, unlike last night when it kept thinking she was trying to draw an F-16 instead of a pair of undeniably rad shades.

You consider asking her for a sword, because you feel naked as hell with an empty strife specibus, and it’s probably half the reason you’re so damn twitchy. Except, shit. With a feeling like you swallowed a ball of hot lead, you realize if you’d been armed last night that kid would’ve been dead before Dave could stop you. Fucking hell. So weapons are right out, at least until you’re confident you can keep your head when it counts.

Jade hands you a newly alchemized chair and points you in the direction of a relatively even patch of ground. It turns out there’s something strangely meditative about being bossed around by a teenage girl as you arrange and rearrange chairs to her liking, which is how Dave finds you about an hour later, just as you’re setting the last chair in place for the semi-circle arrangement she seems mostly satisfied with. “Looks like Jade got her hooks in you,” he drawls, and the instant you hear his voice the knot of tension that’s taken up residence in your spine completely unravels.

Huh.

Jade ignores the dig and says brightly, “Bro’s been very helpful!”

Dave looks extremely dubious at this proclamation. He slants you a sideways glance and says, “Right.”

You slap him upside the head because you might be three years dead but that doesn’t give him a pass to sass you. “Fuck you, I can be helpful.”
Dave yelps and you can feel the heat of his glare even if you can’t see it. You smirk and he rubs at his head in irritation. “You are like the polar opposite of helpful. Remember that time when I was eight and I took the wrong bus and got lost? I called you to come get me and all you said was ‘Fuck kid, do I look like a chauffeur? Figure out how to get home your own damned self.’ Then you hung up on me because you’re a dick.”

You do in fact remember that incident. There was a slight edge of panic in his voice that’d wrapped around your heartstrings and fucking yanked, but it was too good of an opportunity to pass up. “I was trying to teach you how to deal with shit when you were alone and scared.”

Dave snorts. “More like too lazy to pry your carcass off the couch.”

You roll your eyes, although the effect is probably lost behind your shades. “Kid, do you honestly think I would have left you wandering around a shit neighborhood alone? I tracked you down as soon as I hung up and followed you until you made it home.”

It’s obvious that he doesn’t know what to think of that, brows pinching together in a small frown. “Bullshit.”

If that’s how he wants to play this. “When you found that park you sat down at a picnic table and bawled your eyes out for fifteen minutes.” It had taken all your willpower just to sit back and watch. It occurs to you that it might be a little screwed up that you could beat Dave’s ass regularly with no issue, but seeing him cry wrecked you without fail.

“Wow Bro, shut the fuck up.” He glances at Jade, who’s watching the conversation with interest.

You shrug and let it drop. Jade looks a little disappointed when she realizes story time is over, but brightens up almost immediately. “You two stay here! I think almost everyone is up now, so I’m gonna go round people up so we can get this started.” She bounds off like an excited puppy, which reminds you.

“She told me she was half dog,” you say, half question and half statement. You flop into the chair at the end of the back row, so at least you won’t have anyone at your back or to your right.


You stare at him and he stares back, and you decide your new policy is to accept things at face value because you’ll go crazy if you don’t. “I’m going to want the whole story at some point,” you say.

Dave heaves a sigh. “Shit Bro, do you have any idea how much there is to tell?”

You shrug because you don’t fucking care, and Dave grumbles and stretches his long legs out, staring at his battered sneakers like they’re the most fascinating things he’s ever seen. You think he must have gotten his build from the other half of the genetic cocktail, because he’s shaping up to be long and lean, and he sure as hell didn’t get that birdlike bone structure from you.

The two of you are quiet for a long time before Dave says, so softly you almost don’t catch it, “How much did you know?”

“You,” you say, “that’s what I’m asking.”

“About what?”

Dave turns his head a little, and you can tell he’s looking at you sidelong. “About the game. About what was going to happen.”
You knew this conversation was inevitable, although you were hoping it wouldn’t crop up quite so soon. You’d always known on some level that there was something dark and dangerous in Dave’s future. It was nothing like a premonition, but more like immutable fact; an inevitability seared straight into your core, etched into your marrow. That was probably why you’d always been a little afraid for him in a way most parents couldn’t fathom. You wanted to keep him safe, but you’d known from the start that you wouldn’t be able to when it really mattered. So you’d always struggled with this strange dysphoric need to both push and protect. “I knew something was going to happen to you, and I knew I had to make sure you were ready for it. That’s all, really.”

He’s looking at you face-on now. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

You snort. “What was I suppose to say? Hey little man, I’ve got this weird feeling that shit’s gonna hit the fan at some indeterminate future point, and it’s my job to make sure you can handle it? You’d have just thought I was fucking with you.”

Dave doesn’t argue because he knows you’re right. Instead he just gnaws his lip for a minute before saying, “I guess you did okay. I actually lived through this shit which is more than a lot of the people here can say.”

You’re struck by the sudden and totally unironic urge to hug the shit out of your little bro. You don’t, but only because he’d throw a bitch fit if you tried. Instead you just kick his foot, and he kicks you back with the ghost of a smile. It’s right about that point that people start turning up and finding seats, and you check a sigh and try to tell your newfound troll neurosis to fuck right off. It doesn’t work, and it’s all you can do to swallow a growl when someone jostles your chair. This is getting old very, very fast.

John zeroes right in on Dave, and you can’t quite resist the urge to trip him as he steps over your outstretched legs. Call it petty vengeance for invading your bubble. Except he doesn’t fall, he just catches himself and sort of floats there because right, the kid can fly. Still, the dirty look he shoots in your direction as he settles beside Dave is pretty satisfying. Your brother elbows you sharply and mutters, “Don’t be a dick.”

“What?” You protest, “It was an accident.” You’re completely full of shit, and they both know it.

Dave opens his mouth to retort, but he’s interrupted by a sharp voice ringing out across the clearing. “Everyone sit down and shut the fuck up!” It’s Karkat, scowling at the crowd like a tiny force of permanently infuriated nature. You’re relieved to see the bruises on his neck appear a lot less nasty in the light of day, although you aren’t sure if that’s because trolls heal quickly or if they just looked worse last night than they actually were.

Some douchebag you don’t know practically crawls over you to get at the chair on John’s left, and you cross your arms and take a long, steady breath, reminding yourself pointedly that you chose this spot so that you wouldn’t feel boxed in.

It’s not really working.

Dave shifts and leans his shoulder against yours, casual-smooth like he was just finding a more comfortable position and the touch was entirely incidental. You know better, and want to be irritated that he’s mother-henning you, except you can’t because you actually kind of need it. It’s harshing your tough guy vibe but the contact grounds you, and while you can’t bring yourself to relax, at least you aren’t well on your way to becoming a vibrating mass of ‘fuck with me I dare you’ anymore.

When everyone is more or less settled, Karkat pipes up again. “Shut your flaps and pay attention, because I have better things to do than schoolfeed a bunch of hapless wigglers, and I’m not going to
repeat myself.” His gaze darts over the gathering like he’s daring someone to argue before he continues. “First order of business, the hemocaste bullshit is officially no longer A Thing. This is a new start and we aren’t carrying over the garbage from Alternia or Beforus, because your system was just as terrible as ours in a diff—SIT THE FUCK DOWN KANKRI I AM NOT DEALING WITH YOUR SHIT.” Red-sweater troll freezes half-standing for a moment, before sinking back into his chair without a peep. “As of right now everyone from Feferi on down is on equal footing, and if you want some sort of standing you’re going to have to earn it by not being a useless bag of meat.”

“You can’t be serious!”

Everyone turns to look at the speaker, some kid with fins and a douchebag hipster aesthetic sitting at the other end of the back row. He wilts a bit under the collective stare, and Karkat says, ice-cold, “I’m sorry Eridan, I didn’t realize you were so eager to see me fucking culled.”

Eridan looks a little bewildered, and when he doesn’t reply Karkat snarls, “Well?”

“I didn’t mean it like that, Kar, I just—” He cuts himself off, fins drooping in a way that screams ‘kicked puppy’. “Forget it,” he grumbles. It feels a bit like you’re watching the second half of a movie and you’re trying to piece together the plot without context.

Karkat snorts with all the scorn in his tiny body. “This glaring stupidity brings me to my next point. Murder is completely off the metaphorical table. For any reason. I don’t give a shit about any outstanding revenge plots. You will calm your rumble spheres, reign in your bloodthirsty impulses and suck it the fuck up. You don’t have to be nice, you don’t have to be friends. You don’t even have to be fucking civil. All you have to do is not kill each other. For some reason the game saw fit to turn everyone into the species that can’t reproduce independently, so unless someone has a matriorb crammed up their nook,” he pauses briefly, almost like he’s hoping someone actually does, “we’re all that’s left. This pathetic collection of sorry sacks is all there is and all that there is ever going to be.”

"Shit, I forgot about that," Dave says, and you cant him a questioning look, because playing collective Adam and Eve is going to be a little difficult if no one can make with the babies. "Trolls are weird," he explains. "They need some kind of giant bug—"

"A mother grub," John chimes in.

"How do you even know that?"

John rolls his eyes dramatically, "I pay attention, Dave."

Dave huffs and turns his attention back to you. "Anyway, it's the mother grub that makes all the baby trolls, so without one… " He trails off with a shrug.

"We're all that's left," you finish, echoing Karkat.

You're all quiet for a moment, listening to Karkat ramble on some tangent before John says, "That's awful."

You don't say anything, but you privately agree. Not that you'd have kids even if you could — raising one little hellspawn was plenty, thanks — but it was pretty shit to realize that you'd all be the first and last generation. Lacking a means of reproduction seems like a pretty big oversight.

“Okay!” Karkat snaps, catching your attention again. “If you were born a troll, you don’t have to stick around for the next part unless you want to be schooled on things you should already know.
But for the love of my dwindling fucking sanity, please stay in the area. Or at least tell someone if you’re going to wander off into the mystery forest on the mystery planet like a complete and utter moron. There’s a good chance we’ll be moving when the scouts get back and I’ll be more inclined to leave you behind than track you down.”

The majority of the gathering scatters, that same asshole from before climbing over your goddamned legs again like you’re some kind of fucking jungle gym. Dave leans into you hard, and it makes you feel marginally less homicidal. You glance at him and he’s watching you with pinched eyebrows, and you try to think of some kind of reassurance before you realize there’s no point. That kid is jacked into your mental state like some kind of psychic right now. So instead you shrug a little, apologetic, because you know he has better things to do than to babysit a grown man that can’t handle his shit.

“Alright you halfwits, I’m going to explain quadrants.” John and Dave groan quietly in unison, and Karkat locks on Dave like a missile with laser-targeting and grinds out, “And maybe you should pay some fucking attention this time, because like it or not it directly affects you now.”

Dave sags in his chair like someone let all the air out of a balloon. “I didn’t even think about that. Ugh.”

“Maybe it won’t be so bad?” John suggests, although he doesn’t sound particularly convinced himself.

“You want to fill me in on what we’re having a fit about?” You hate being out of the loop, and right now you are nothing but out of the loop. Dave doesn’t answer you, just waves a little dejectedly towards Karkat.

Quadrants, as it turns out, are how trolls do relationships. It’s all pretty damn interesting, considering you are now one of the newest members of a species that is apparently polyamorous by nature. Karkat’s outlining how matespritship works, and it’s all sounding pretty familiar except, “Pity?” you ask, leaning towards Dave.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure that’s just tough-guy troll code for love,” he says. “I mean, Rose and Kanaya have been shacked up for years and if all Kanaya feels for her is pity I will eat my shades whole without ketchup.” You accept this with a thoughtful nod. It even makes sense in a backwards, emotionally constipated sort of way.

Next Karkat delves into kismessitude, which seems to be some ass-backwards relationship built on hatefucking and driving each other batshit, with a little dash of physical violence to spice things up. And not to be culturally insensitive or whatever, but you’d had a relationship that fit into that framework pre-Dave, and it was pretty much a mutually abusive nightmare that made you both miserable. Karkat’s selling it as some kind of beneficial arrangement, but you aren’t buying.

Apparently you aren’t the only one to think so, because the other girl from earlier—Jane? Too many new people all at once, christ—raises her hand like everyone’s still in gradeschool. It takes Karkat a second to realize she has a question and she’s not just being strange. “That sounds awfully abusive,” she says, and you’re inclined to agree.

Karkat makes a face like he swallowed something slimy and wiggling. Then he explains that no, no, it’s more like a kind of rivalry. Like sparring! Sometimes verbal, sometimes physical, but a proper kismesis would never cause any real or lasting harm. And yeah, okay, put like that you can see how it might work. You’ve bled Dave countless times over the years during your rooftop scuffles, and you know most people would call it abuse. But most people are idiots, and you and Dave have always had an understanding. If you’re going to learn to fight, you’ve got to take your lumps. It’s not
quite what Karkat is talking about, but it’s enough of a parallel that you think you get the picture.

Then he moves on to moirallegiance, and it doesn’t take long before Dave draws away from you a bit, crossing his arms defensively. You can’t blame him, because the things Karkat’s talking about sound a lot like the way the two of you have been acting since last night, and it doesn’t help that he keeps glancing over at you and Dave like he knows it too. It wouldn’t even bother you, because yeah, of course you trust your lil bro to reign you in, but Karkat’s careful to emphasize that even though it’s not a sexual quadrant it’s still very much a romantic one. Dave looks a little like he wants to crawl under his chair and die.

You’re trying very hard not to think about your conversation with Rose.

Then Karkat starts talking about emergency stand-ins, how other quadrants and friends can play moirail when someone needs pacifying and there isn’t an actual moirail on hand. Dave unwinds a little at that, and suddenly the universe makes sense again. Something undeniably shitty would have happened if Dave hadn’t stepped in last night, and he’s been keeping you grounded today because he doesn’t want you flying off the handle again. Which, as much as it chaps your hide to admit, is a very real possibility. That’s all.

You only listen to the rest with half an ear, because frankly you’re pretty much done with show and tell for the time being. The fact that you and Dave have been getting your unintentional platonic mack on would be hilarious under other circumstances. Except there’s nothing funny about the fact that you might need him, even temporarily, to keep you from doing something you can’t take back.

You really need to do something about this, and that means you’re probably going to have to talk to somebody. You don’t like it because you prefer to deal with your shit yourself, but you’re man enough to admit that you just don’t have the mental framework for this particular problem. Maybe you’ll ask Karkat, assuming he wants anything to do with you. Kid has a temper, but doesn’t seem likely to snap at a moment’s notice. Maybe he can give you a few pointers.

There’s a rustle of foliage you only see because you happen to be staring vacantly at the treeline behind Karkat. A woman steps out of the trees, and you wouldn’t think much of it except she’s a dead ringer for that Roxy girl from this morning, and she looks a little worse for wear. You elbow Dave and nod in her direction.

Dave only gets out ‘holy shit’ before the woman says with exhaustion-laced cheer. “I thought I heard voices!” Heedless of the fact that the ground isn’t particularly barefoot friendly, she peels off her heels and adds, “Please tell me someone has some sensible shoes, my feet are killing me.”

There’s a beat of absolute silence before Rose manages a strangled, “Mom?”

She smiles at that, warm and bright. “Hullo darling.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

John isn't really adjusting all that well.

Chapter Notes

Okay, so I'm suffering from an overabundance of emotions regarding the fact that we only have one (albeit large) Homestuck update left. The only reasonable way to deal with all those emotions was to spend all night writing fic.

So uh, have an update earlier than anticipated?

(Also it's late and I'm sleepy, so I apologize in advance for any silly errors I missed.)

You shouldn’t be jealous because that would be childish and also stupid. You’re more or less an adult, and adults don’t have petulant fits over things that no one has any control over. In fact, you should be happy! You should be happy because any reasonable person would be under the circumstances.

...You are so, so jealous.

You’re aware that this probably makes you a really terrible friend.

It’s not that you’re upset that Dave’s brother and Rose’s mom are both back from the dead. Maybe you’re being a bit of a self-centered jerk, but you’re not heartless. You’re glad for them, really, even if Dave’s bro is kind of a dick. It’s just that you don’t understand why they got to come back and your dad didn’t. It isn’t fair, and yeah, you have a doctorate in ‘life isn’t fair’, you all do, but this is somehow worse. This is the end, this is supposed to be your reward, and all you have to show for everything you’ve been through is a body that’s not yours and a dad that’s still dead.

Rose thinks it might have something to do with her mom and Bro being genetically identical to Roxy and Dirk. Her mom probably has some kind of latent void powers, which would explain why Jade couldn’t find her and why Rose had no idea she was alive. So they got a free ticket on the resurrection train by virtue of being biologically indistinct from their younger selves. Which is great! Really it is, it’s just.

You miss your dad.

Then you see Dave bickering with his bro or Rose introducing Kanaya to her mom and it just makes you want to cry because you’re never going to have that. You're never going to have the opportunity to complain about your dad's cakes, you're never going to hear him tell you how proud he is, never going to smell the smoke from his pipe. Not ever again. You thought you’d come to terms with that, but seeing your friends get their family back makes you realize that you haven't come to terms with anything at all.
You thought about talking to Jane, because she's the only other one in the same boat as you. She'd understand, you think. You could commiserate. Except the father she lost and the father you lost are virtually the same man and you can't stand the idea of sharing his memory with her. It's the only thing you have left. It's stupid and selfish, but you just can't help it.

You hear the rustle of branches, and you look down from your perch to see Karkat halfway up the tree with leaves in his hair and a scowl on his face. "Karkat? What are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing, Egbert? I'm climbing a goddamned tree because some of us can't fly. Obviously." Karkat grumbles and sits on a branch, some ten feet below you, apparently content to stay where he is now that he has your attention. "What is with you and heights anyway?"

"It's a good place to think," you say, taking pity on him and floating down to his level.

That earns you a snort. "Do you honestly expect me to believe that thinking is an activity in which you actively partake?" He starts picking the leaves out of his hair, glowering at each one like it's a personal offense.

You can't help but smile, because Karkat's surliness always seems to paradoxically lift your mood. It probably helps that you know he doesn't mean it. "It's been known to happen on occasion," you say, perching lightly on the end of his branch. It dips a little beneath your weight, causing Karkat to dig his claws into the trunk and snarl wordlessly at you. "Seriously though, why didn't you just yell instead of climbing up here?"

Karkat rolls his eyes. "Are you going to get me out of this tree sometime this sweep, or are we going to sit here having a stupid conversation until I inevitably slip and fall to my death?" You look down and yeah, this is actually high enough to do some serious damage if Karkat were to fall. Not that you'd let him, jeeze, what does he take you for?

"I swear you're a bigger drama queen than Dave," you say, ignoring the indignant fuck you Karkat slings your way in favor of scooping him up and jumping free of the branches. He's heavier than he looks like he should be. Karkat squawks in what could be either indignation or alarm, throwing his arms around your neck and swearing a blue streak in your ear.

He doesn't notice when you land, still half-strangling you with eyes squeezed tightly shut. "Karkat," you say, more than amused, "you can let go now. You're now safe and sound on the ground courtesy of the John Egbert express."

"Oh." He opens his eyes but doesn't immediately let go. He glances around as if to verify that you are actually on the ground and you're not just messing with him. Then he releases his stranglehold and wriggles out of your arms, slugging you hard in the shoulder. "You complete and utter shitwaffle. Warn me before you do something like that."

You grin brightly. "But then I wouldn't get to hear you scream."
“I did not scream you insufferable waste of flesh.” Before you realize what he’s doing, Karkat reaches up and flicks one of your horns.

You yelp and leap back, even though it doesn’t actually hurt so much as it feels really, really weird. Karkat seems startled by your reaction, and when he reaches for you, you can’t help the growl that rumbles under your sternum and lodges in the back of your throat. He freezes for a second before holding out a placating hand. “Shit, sorry. I wasn’t thinking, which seems to be a trend with me lately.”

You don’t speak until you can swallow the foreign rumbling. “It’s okay, you just surprised me I guess.” You’re honestly not upset, or angry. Just unsettled. You growled at your friend and your horn feels like like a tuning fork and neither of these things are problems a human should have. “Sorry I uh, growled at you.” You give your head a hard shake, and when that doesn’t seem to help the lingering numb echo, you rub at your temple and ask, “How long is it going to feel like this?”

Karkat blinks. “Oh, you have to,” he makes a little swirly motion over his horn that explains exactly nothing and then snorts at your blank look, “Shit, here, just let me.” He reaches for your head again, but this time he sort of rubs your horn right at the base and oh. That feels nice. The ringing dissipates almost immediately, and you can’t help but lean into Karkat’s hand a little. It doesn’t last long, and when Karkat pulls back he looks decidedly embarrassed. “Better?”

You give your head an experimental shake. “Yep, all better.” Troll physiology is so weird.

“Good,” he says a little gruffly. “Now you know, because I’m not doing that again.”

“Why not?” you ask, a little curious about the way he’s acting. You don’t really see what’s so embarrassing.

Karkat goes a little red, which is kind of fascinating to watch on grey skin. “You don’t go around just fondling other people’s horns, Egbert! It’s kind of,” he pauses, casting around for the right word. “Intimate.”

You raise your eyebrows because really. “So are you saying you just groped me?” you ask, doing your best to stifle a grin. “Did we just get to troll first base?”

Karkat splutters, waving his hands a little frantically. “What, no! That’s not what I meant! Well, I mean it can be like that I guess but it wasn’t this time.”

You just can’t bite down on your grin any longer. “But it might be next time?”

“No!” Karkat explodes, and holy shit your face is starting to hurt. He buries his face in his hands, and the tips of his ears are bright pink. It’s really kinda cute. Karkat takes a long, deep breath and when he speaks the words are muffled, “What I meant is that it’s not the sort of thing you do with just anyone.”

Karkat is really adorable when he’s flustered. “So does that mean I’m not just anyone?” You’d waggle your eyebrows but he’s not actually looking at you, so.

He drops his hands and pins you with the most incredulous stare you ever been on the receiving end of. “Are you flirting with me? Is that what’s happening right now?”

You totally are. It occurs to your that your friendship with Dave might have skewed your perception of acceptable levels of teasing between bros, but it’s at least half Karkat’s fault for making it so entertaining. “Maybe a little. But you started it by getting handsy.”
Karkat throws his hands up like he’s just completely done with you and screeches, “I was just trying to help!”

“Okay, okay,” you say, grabbing his wrists and pulling his arms back down. “I was just teasing. Calm down.”

“Don’t shoosh me,” he grumbles.

You raise an eyebrow. “Stop being so dramatic and I won’t have to.”

You don’t even realize you’re still holding his wrists until he tugs them out of your hands. “Anyway, before you completely derailed me by being annoying and insufferable, I was coming to tell you that Dirk and Rufioh are back.”

Okay, now you feel like a bit of a butt because that’s actually kind of important. “What about Jake and Aradia?”

He shrugs. “Stayed behind I guess, I don’t know. I came to find you because I figured you’d want to hear the news.”

“Yeah, definitely. Thanks.”

By the time the two of you get back to camp Dirk and Rufioh have gathered themselves a bit of an audience. Dave and Bro are there, standing well away from the cluster, and Dave is sort of leaning on Bro the way he’s taken to doing. Apparently it calms him down, and you can’t really argue if it keeps him from flipping out again. You slide a sideways glance at Karkat. He doesn’t seem to be too bothered by what happened, but you’re kind of upset on his behalf. No one else is having violent outbursts, so you don’t know what Bro’s problem is.

But that’s not important right now! You forget about Bro for the time being and drag Karkat closer so you can hear. Dirk is talking. “—by the ocean, which I figure the seadwellers will appreciate, and it’ll give us ready access to good fishing.”

Rufioh chimes in, “I didn’t come across any particularly dangerous wildlife in the area, either.”

The discussion devolves into a bunch of chattering and an informal kind of vote. The general consensus seems to be that you don’t have much in the way of other options, and you obviously can’t stay here. It’s a bit distressing how little collective knowledge you seem to have about wilderness survival, but you suppose you’ll just have to make the best of it.

When the conversation turns to the logistics of moving everyone nearly a day’s flight away, Dirk eels out of the center of the group, saying, “I’m gonna go catch a few, wake me up when we leave.”

You can actually pinpoint the exact moment he notices Bro, because he stops so abruptly he actually teeters a bit, and you realize that no one warned him. The two of them just stare at each other for a long, long moment, and Dave looks so tense that a strong breeze might snap him in half.

Eventually Dirk says, “Huh.” Then he nods at Bro, and Bro nods back, and that’s it. Dirk walks off to presumably find a good spot to nap, and Dave looks like he finally remembered how to breathe. Bro looks like… Bro, because you haven’t really learned how to read him.

“That was anticlimactic.” You’re not sure what you were expecting exactly, obviously they weren’t going to gush over each other like Roxy and Rose’s mom had, but still.

“Good,” Karkat snaps. “I could do with a little anticlimax in my life. It would be nice to go a whole
sweep for once without any serious fighting, or life and death drama. Which is probably hopeless with this lot, but let me have my fantasy."

“I dunno, too much peace and quiet might drive you just as crazy.”

“I’ll take my chances,” he says drily, and you can’t help but smile at that.

“Yeah, me too.”

* * *

“All this manual labor. I can’t take it!” You only barely manage to catch Dave as he swoons into your arms with all the theatrical drama a teenage boy can muster.

God, he’s such a dork. “You had to take down one tent and roll up a sleeping bag, Dave. And I’m pretty sure Bro did that for you.”

Dave scowls up at you. “Fuck you Egbert, I am a delicate lady and as such should not be subjected to all this dirt and fresh air and nature.” He thrusts a hand in your face and you can’t quite help jerking your head back because those are claws coming at your eyes. “My manicure is ruined!”

You snort a laugh and heave him back onto his feet, because he’s heavier than such a scrawny dude has any right to be and your arms are getting tired. “Such a tragedy, Dave. My heart bleeds for you.”

“Shit is so tragic the angels are weeping, John. If you listen closely you can hear them.” He tries to cup a hand behind his ear and winds up jabbing himself with his own horn instead. “Ow, fuck, I keep forgetting about those.”

It makes you feel a lot better that you’re not the only one. You show him the collection of minor puncture wounds on your palm and say, “Me too. You never really realize how often you touch your head until there’s something sharp in the way.” And your horns are sharp. It’s really kind of unnecessary and you hate it. Mostly because every single jab results in a tiny bead of blue that reinforces that nothing about you is the same as it used to be. Not even your blood.

“Oh man,” Dave glances around and then leans in a little conspiratorily. “Bro’s got those tall, vertical horns, right? He keeps walking into shit and it’s hilarious. I think he’s cracked his head on low hanging branches like four times already, and he almost took down the whole tent with them earlier.”

You giggle because you can just picture him walking smack into things like a moron, and you are sorely disappointed you missed it. You’re also beginning to appreciate that backswept thing yours do a little more, because at least you don’t have to compensate for additional height. You bite down on your amusement and ask, “How’re things going with him, anyway?”

Dave’s eyebrows inch over the rim of his shades. “What, with Bro?” He shrugs. “Okay, I guess.”

You wait for him to elaborate, and when he doesn’t you fill the silence with, “You know, he’s different than I expected.”

“What do you mean?”

Good question. You hadn’t even realized you’d had expectations in the first place. “I dunno, I guess I just expected some kind of mega-cool guy. The way you talked about him painted a different picture I suppose.”

Dave’s frowning at you like he’s hearing the words but they aren’t making any sense. “Dude, when
did I ever talk about Bro?"

Wow, selective memory much? “All the time! You were always going on about his ‘sick beats’, or how he kicked your ass, and if it wasn’t that then you were waxing poetic about his masterful layers of irony.” The hero worship thing was actually kind of cute when it wasn’t annoying as hell. “I honestly thought he was some sort of ironic rap ninja.”

Dave slaps a hand to his forehead and sighs long and loud through his nose. “Sometimes I wonder why no one ran thirteen year-old me over with a bus.”

You grin. “Sometimes I wonder the same thing.”

“Don’t be a bitch,” he grumbles, and both of you fall silent. It’s really strange to think about how much has changed. There was a time when you were all just normal, dumb kids. When you think back on it, it feels like someone else’s life. Like everything before the game was just a dream.

“I’m worried about him,” Dave says softly.

“Bro?”

“Yeah,” he rubs his knuckles absently. “This isn’t like him, y’know? Bro has always been a hundred and ten percent in control of any given situation. Dude doesn’t even have any powers like we do and he still sliced through a fucking meteor like hot butter to buy me a little more time. Except he’s on some sort of biological hair trigger right now and it’s really screwing with him. Neither of us can figure out what’s got him so tightly wound, either. I mean, I’m new to this whole troll business too and I haven’t felt particularly compelled to bust out an ass-kicking. What about you?”

You’ve been feeling a little twitchy, maybe, but, “I haven’t felt the urge to murder anyone, no.”

It comes out a little more snide than you intended, and Dave sighs. “Seriously, man?”

“Sorry,” your hand goes for your head out of habit, but you catch it in time to avoid stabbing yourself again. “I guess I’m just upset on Karkat’s behalf? Which is dumb because Karkat isn’t even upset on Karkat’s behalf. I dunno.” It’s stupid, you know it’s stupid, but every time you think about what could have happened, even if it was all Karkat’s fault, you just kind of want to punch Bro in the face. But getting all passive-aggressive bitchy at Dave when he’s obviously worried is pretty shitty of you. “I’ve been kind of jumpy I guess,” you say like a peace offering. “I growled at Karkat.”

“Really?” Dave sounds intrigued. “Like, you literally growled at him?”

“It sounded like I was gargling rocks so yeah, literally growled at him.” You pause, then feel the need to qualify, “He just startled me, I wasn’t mad or anything.”

“Neat.”

Dave’s response doesn’t quite parse. “Neat?”

“Yeah man,” he says, entirely too enthusiastic considering the topic. “Think about it, we are now physically capable of actual, honest to god growling. You have to admit that’s pretty badass.”

The crazy thing is that you don’t think he’s fronting. You know Dave well enough to know that he deals with stress by not dealing with it, but you honestly don’t think that’s what’s happening here. “You’re really not upset about any of this, are you? You’re actually okay with being a troll.” You can’t even fathom being okay with any of this, hell, the only reason you haven’t had some kind of
breakdown is because you’ve been careful not to think about anything too hard. Except that isn’t going to work forever, you know it isn’t, because all the tiny things just keep piling up. Your blood is blue, and you keep stabbing yourself with your own horns. You want to chew your thumbnail except you can’t because they aren’t nails anymore, they’re claws, and you’re suddenly half girl in the most alarming way possible and you have to sit down to pee which as it turns out is really fucking difficult in the woods, and how can Dave be okay with any of this? How?

“Sure? I mean it’s not ideal but hey, gotta roll with—whoa, John, are you okay?”

All the panic you’ve been trying so hard to keep at bay hits you like a boulder and sitting down suddenly sounds like a fantastic idea, so you do. “Not really,” you say to Dave’s knees, and it feels like you’re trying to talk around a mouthful of peanut butter. Your heart is fluttering in your throat, you can’t seem to get enough air, and none of that matters more than the fact that you aren’t human anymore, won’t ever be human again.

“John? Hey buddy, stay with me.” Dave’s crouching in front of you now, hands fluttering like he wants to touch you, and after a second he fists them in his pants.”Fuck, fuck I can’t—Karkat! A little help over here?” His voice ratchets up like it does when he’s worried, and you want to apologize but the words stick in your throat.

There’s a flurry of movement and voices above your head but you don’t care. You can’t do this, this is your limit, your dad is dead and so are you, and you’ve been given this body that’s not yours like some sort of consolation prize and you don’t want it. Through everything that happened at least you were always yourself, and now you’re not even that. A hard tap on your jaw rattles your thoughts, and you blink, realizing that it’s Karkat crouched in front of you now. He does it again once he realizes he has your attention, a little more gently.

“John, I’m going to need you to calm the fuck down,” the words are all Karkat but the tone is new. It’s soft and coaxing, and somehow it helps you breathe a little easier. “I know this has been tough on you, but if we’re going to herd these morons it would really help if you weren’t having a meltdown.” Then he runs a knuckle along your jawline from ear to chin, and the noise you make is involuntary and a little embarrassing, but all the buzzing in your head goes blessedly quiet.

“Sorry,” you manage. Your voice is rough and you’re a little shaky, and you’re absurdly glad when Karkat doesn’t stop touching you just yet.

“Christ Egbert, you scared the shit out of me,” Dave leans down and lifts his shades to get a better look at you, eyes tracking back and forth although you aren’t sure what he’s looking for.

“Sorry,” you say again. Your head feels like it’s stuffed with cotton, but you’re strangely relaxed considering your state a minute ago. “I don’t think I’m adjusting well.”

“No shit,” Karkat says, although he sounds more worried than annoyed. He takes his hand back and you feel instantly bereft, and suddenly you really want nothing more than to crawl into his lap and stay there indefinitely. You guess that’s probably a testament to how shitty you’re feeling. “You gonna be okay?”

“Don’t really have much choice,” you say with a weak smile. The look Karkat gives you is extremely dubious. You suck in a deep breath and hold it while you take stock. You still feel awful, but it’s a little less and slightly different, and at least the sky doesn’t feel like it’s going to cave in on you anymore. “I’ll be fine. Thanks for um, helping.”

Karkat looks abruptly embarrassed. “Yeah, sure.” He pats your cheek a little awkwardly and climbs to his feet. “I think we’ll be ready to head out in an hour or so, so just take it easy until then, okay?”
You promise you will, and after Karkat leaves Dave settles himself beside you. He holds out his hand palm up and waits pointedly until you take it, feeling a little silly and a little better. “We’ll be alright,” he says, quiet and with enough conviction that you almost believe him.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Karkat ships brodave.

No, really.

Chapter Notes

Wow, this chapter just did not want to end.

Also what was I thinking including all the kids AND trolls? I have no idea how to write half of them, how did this fic wind up so ambitious? It was just supposed to be self-indulgent fluff help

There are days when you wish there were more of you. Wait, no, that’s a lie, more of you would be a fucking disaster. You guess that you just wish you could be everywhere at once, because you have a compulsive need to keep an eye on everyone and everything, and the fact that you can’t irritates you no end.

The lot of you are strung out like a drunken game of follow the leader, mostly single-file or in pairs because the forest is too dense for anything else most of the time. Dirk and Rufioh are at the head of the column since they’re the ones who know where you’re going, and they seem to be sticking to animal trails when they can, but more often than not you’re stuck bulling your way directly through the brush.

It’s shitty as hell and being so spread out makes you nervous. You wish, not for the first time since you started this nightmare trek, that Jade could have just teleported you en masse. That would have been nice. In fact, it was actually the plan, but she’d come to you with a frown and told you that her powers were acting strangely and she didn’t feel comfortable moving people at all, let alone so many. And since you actually like your torso being attached to your legs, the only option was to walk.

And walk.

And walk.

You’ve got John cruising up and down the line since he doesn’t have to worry about silly things like gravity. It serves the dual purpose of keeping you informed and keeping him busy, because frankly giving him plenty of time to think seems like a bad idea. You’re a little worried after his meltdown yesterday, even if it was totally justified. You’d probably flip the most spectacular shit of your life if your positions were reversed. It’s just that you have zero idea how to help beyond papping him back to his senses when required.

Which you are absolutely not thinking about. At all. Because what’s a little papping between friends? You just did what needed to be done, not a big deal, and it’s not like you’re at all hung up
on the way he’d leaned into your touch, or the way he’d trilled at you like he couldn’t fucking help it. The former humans are basically all giant wigglers right now, you can’t take anything they do at face value. They’re just a weird mashup of troll instincts and human values, and fuck John with a sharp rusty implement for being so fucking pitiable anyway.

Okay, so it’s reasonably possible that you might be nursing a pale crush. A small one. Which will undoubtedly pass once John stops being so pathetic. It wouldn’t even be an issue in the first place if Dave had dealt with it instead of calling you over.

Although. Your eyes find Dave’s back and you watch him contemplatively for a minute. His reluctance to pacify one of his closest friends is actually pretty telling. Not that it wasn’t already incredibly obvious that he and Bro are fucking made for each other. That night when he kept Bro from strangling you might actually be the most romantic thing you’ve ever witnessed, and you regret being too distracted by your brush with death to properly appreciate it. Theirs is a written-in-the-stars moirallegience if you have ever seen one, and it’s driving you crazy that neither one of them seems to realize it, even despite your very pointed lecture on the subject.

Dave seems to think he’s some sort of stopgap stand-in moiral who’s just there to make sure Bro doesn’t grind anyone into meatpaste in a fit of temper. Which you guess is technically true, but they are so blindingly pale that you cannot fathom how exactly either of them are deluding themselves into thinking it’s anything other than what it is. Dave is obviously concerned even though he’s trying to hide it, the two of them are touching all the fucking time and they are so disgustingly adorable that you just want to shove both of them into a pile and sit on them until they come out moirails.

You wonder if this is how Nepeta always feels.

It’s doubly frustrating because you know it probably has something to do with the human hangup over romance and biological relationships. Which is the most patently stupid thing you’ve ever heard in a life full of stupid shit. Who in their right mind would let something like a few common genes get in the way of a relationship? You find the whole concept completely confounding, and now also personally irritating. You aren’t even sure why you’re so invested in this. Maybe you just hate seeing such a perfect potential moirallegience go unrealized when your own crashed and burned so badly.

You just don’t know what to do with him. Even now he’s trailing a few paces behind you and you aren’t sure if it’s because you don’t want to let him out of your sight or that he won’t let you out of
his. You sigh. At least he’s not constantly trying to strike up a conversation anymore, you guess that’s something. There are times when you wish you didn’t feel so completely responsible for everyone. Eridan is easier. He’s miserable and evasive and it’s so fucking clear how terrible he feels about what he’s done that he might as well be made of glass. He’s going to have to get over it eventually, but for the time being you don’t mind letting him sulk. Sulking is a lot easier to deal with than whatever is going on with Gamzee.

There’s a whoosh of displaced air and then John’s setting down beside you. Thank fucking god, you don’t want to be alone with your own thoughts anymore. Your thoughts are shit company. John beams at you and your insides start doing all sorts of fluttery gymnastics. Sweet grubfucking hell, it was one pap, why are you so unbelievably easy? “What’re you so happy about?” you grump.

“Vriska’s back.”

Thank whatever deities this universe may or may not have. That’s one less worry on your mind. You’d really rather not go losing people already. “When did she turn up?”

John shrugs, “Dunno, I just noticed her at the back talking to Meenah. Oh, and Dirk says we’ll be stopping as soon as he finds a decent place to set up camp since it’s getting a little late and we don’t really want to be doing this in the dark.”

You point out that your species is functionally nocturnal and that you can see perfectly well in the dark, which he should have very well noticed by now. John looks up at the sunlight filtering through the trees and then at you, eyebrows raised. “Then why are we out during the day?”

That… is actually a very good question. You’ve been living without any sort of actual day/night cycle for so long that it hadn’t even occurred to you to think about it. The former humans had fallen into their typical diurnal habits and the rest of you had just followed along. “Well, since the sun on this planet isn’t a blazing ball of fiery death and I’ve yet to come across any raving undead hordes I suppose it doesn’t really matter.”

“Wow, can you imagine if we got dropped on a planet swarming with zombies? That would suck so much, oh man.” He raises his voice into an almost-shout, “But I bet Dave would be great at killing zombies!”

“Damn right I would be,” Dave calls over his shoulder without missing a beat.

John laughs, and you can’t help but watch him sidelong. He seems good, happy. You wouldn’t believe that he was halfway catatonic less than a day ago if you hadn’t seen it for yourself. There is absolutely no way that he’s as okay as he seems, because the level of stress likely to trigger a reaction like that doesn’t just go away overnight. He catches you looking, eyebrows drawing together in a puzzled frown. “What?”

You almost deflect because despite your silly pale leanings, John isn’t actually your moirail and it isn’t really your place. Except if you don’t look out for him, who will? Dave has his hands full with Bro and no one else is going to realize just how badly off he is if he’s hiding it so well. “How are you feeling?” you blurt before you’ve even made up your mind. Damn your giant fucking mouth.

“I’m fine,” John says on autopilot, and you stare at him flatly until he deflates a little and says, “Okay, I might not be completely fine.” He fiddles a bit with the end of his hood, and you wait because it’s obvious that he’s winding up to something. “It’s just,” his voice dips so low you have to move closer just to hear him. “This is huge, you know? We’ve been turned into a completely different species and no one but me seems to be freaked out about it. And mostly I just figured everyone was dealing with it their own way, but when I was talking to Dave yesterday I realized that
he’s actually okay with this somehow. A week ago we were human and now we’re not. How can he be okay?"

“You aren’t Dave,” you tell him sternly. “You’re allowed to be freaked out. Hell, I would probably lose my shit every five minutes in a fiery explosion of rage and bad choices if it were me. Just do me a favor and talk to someone before it gets that bad again, okay? Dave, Rose, even me if you’re feeling particularly masochistic.” You need to stop talking before this becomes more of a feelings jam than it already is. “If you force me to pap you out of another episode I am going to be severely annoyed.”

John shoots you a crooked little smile that is in no way completely endearing. “Sorry about that.”

“I’m not mad,” you grumble. “I’m worried.”

“I think,” John says a little slowly, “that now that I’ve gotten it out of my system it won’t happen again? I mean I can’t be sure, but.” He shakes his head. “Anyway, thanks. For caring.”

“Yeah, yeah,” You wave a hand, embarrassed. “Stop vomiting feelings all over me. Don’t you have better things to be doing?”

“I should probably get back to it,” John agrees. When he moves you think he’s going to take off, but instead does something completely incomprehensible. He hugs you. It’s over before you can do much more than stand there in stiff, flustered surprise, and he’s already off harassing Dave by the time you recover your wits. That idiot and his demonstrably affectionate habits are going to be the death of you.

“Hey.”

You start and only just manage to bite down on an embarrassing screech. “Where in the deepest pits of grubfucking hell did you did you even come from?”

Bro raises his eyebrows at your outburst. “Well,” he says with an exaggerated drawl that you realize is a lot more pronounced than Dave’s. “I walked from there,” he points at Dave’s back, “to here.”

“Wow, thank you for that reasonable and in no way sarcastic or condescending response,” you snap, annoyed that he snuck up on you while you were being addlepated over Egbert.

He shrugs loosely. “You mind if I ask you something?”

You peer up at him suspiciously. You aren’t particularly angry with him, because what happened was entirely your fault even if you hadn’t predicted a reaction quite so extreme. But he’s a virtual stranger who is both considerably larger and heavier than you are, and he pings all the little places in your brain primed to avoid bigger, meaner trolls. “What?” you ask, a little suspicious.

He’s quiet for a minute before he responds. “How do you keep a lid on it? You seem to be perpetually pissed off at everyone and everything, but you also don’t seem like you’re about to fly off the handle at any moment.”

Sweet nookblistering fuck, he’s asking you for advice. Worse, you don’t think you have any, because you might be a cantankerous little shit but you’re not actually particularly violent unless you need to be. “Probably because I get most of my aggression out verbally,” you admit grudgingly. “Which I’m guessing isn’t going to work for you.”

He snorts softly. “Probably not.” His shoulders droop a little, and for some reason that subtle gesture makes you feel like a complete shit. “Worth a shot, thanks anyway.”
“Hold on, fucking hell. Did I say I was finished?” Bro turns back to you, waiting. You are sorely tempted to tell him to stop this almost-moirallegience nonsense with Dave and just fucking accept it, because a good pile would probably go a long fucking way towards calming his rumble spheres. You don’t, because Dave is a contrary shithead and you have no reason to believe that his human lusus-ancestor-sibling isn’t just as stubborn. “Look, the point is if you sit on all that natural aggression, eventually something is going to set you off again. Because for some fucked up reason you seem to have a psychotic highblood’s share of violent impulses.” Which is really strange now that you think about it, because he’s practically on the bottom of the hemospectrum. A thought occurs to you. “You could probably really use a kismesis.”

“I’ll take that under advisement,” he says in a way that means ‘you must be fucking kidding me.’

Okay, that was probably a stupid suggestion. Kismessitudes don’t typically spontaneously develop, and the only person he has any history with is Dave. Which is a relationship about as far from black as it gets. “What about strife?” you suggest. You certainly feel less irritable after a good fight. “Dave mentioned you used to strife all the time.”

He actually seems to be considering it. “I’m not sure putting a weapon in my hands is a good idea at this point.”

You roll your eyes and wonder if he’s being deliberately obtuse or if he’s just an idiot. “There’s this thing called hand-to-hand, numbnuts. You could probably talk Equius into sparring with you provided you can prove he won’t snap you in half.”

Bro hums thoughtfully, but before he can reply John is rocketing through the trees and comes to a stop so abruptly it’s like he slammed into an invisible wall. “Dirk’s flipping out, he almost killed Cronus,” he pants, a little winded. “Rufioh’s got him under control, kind of. I gotta get Jane.” He’s off again before you can even get a word in.

You look at Bro. Bro looks at you. “There is no way that’s a fucking coincidence,” you say. You aren’t sure what it means exactly, but there has to be a reason that your only two violent outbursts so far have been from a pair of ecto-clones. You call over your shoulder, telling Gamzee to stay put. “Dave—”

“Oh I heard,” and then he just scoops you up under the arms and flies off, and you don’t have time to do much more than clutch at his forearms and swear. “Calm down,” he says in your ear. “This is faster.”

You don’t argue because he’s right, but you really, really hate being carried around like a fucking ragdoll. It’s undignified and it just pisses you right off. Dave keeps low, skimming directly over the others, and you only just manage to draw your legs up before you take Terezi’s head off. Then Dave deposits you right in the middle of a giant clusterfuck and your annoyance evaporates instantly.

Rufioh has Dirk restrained, barely. Dirk’s straining against his grip, snarling at Cronus in single-minded rage, and Cronus—fucking hell John wasn’t exaggerating. Dirk’s sword is lying abandoned on the ground, slick with purple blood, and Cronus is propped against a tree, clutching at a vicious gut wound. He’s still conscious, but pale and breathing in labored, ragged gasps. Dave makes a beeline for Cronus, kneeling at his side to get a better look at the wound. You opt for Rufioh, because John was already fetching Jane, and you’re hardly going to be any help. Skirting carefully around Dirk’s thrashing, you ask, “What the fuck happened?”

“I don’t know,” Rufioh says, wide-eyed and a little strained. “Cronus has been flirting with him all day, but he seemed fine until he just lost it. Would you please calm down?” The last was directed at Dirk, who responded with a feral snarl and a renewed bout of struggling.
This is the last thing any of you need right now, fucking hell. Once John gets back you’re going to have to send him for Aranea or Vriska, because Rufioh can’t hold Dirk forever and the best option you can think of is to knock him out and let him sleep it off. You’re beginning to realize how lucky you are that Dave was there to save your sorry ass from Bro.

As if your thoughts summoned him, John arrives in a flurry of motion, Jane and Roxy on his heels. Jane goes straight to Cronus, and you say a little prayer of thanks because Cronus might be an insufferable douchewaffle, but you don’t actually want him to die. Roxy plants herself in front of Dirk and makes a concerted effort to alternately berate and pap him back into a sane state of mind. You go to John’s side and leave her to it. At first it doesn’t seem like it’s working, but gradually he goes still and quiet, thank fuck.

“Let go of me,” he says, stilted and sharp. Rufioh does, cautiously, and for a minute Dirk just stands there, stock still. Then he turns abruptly on his heel and stalks off into the woods.

“I’ll keep an eye on him,” Roxy says hurriedly, before chasing after him.

You wind up setting up camp where you are, even though it’s a terrible spot with no room for the tents and you’re all still sort of spread out. But Dirk and Roxy are fuck knows where and Jane insists that Cronus be allowed to rest, and you certainly aren’t going to argue with her.

What a fucking mess. Now you have two violent, twitchy assholes on your hands and someone almost died because of it. You were worried that you might have trouble with the former humans because you’re a pessimist, but you did not expect it to be this bad. You’d anticipated bad tempers, some arguments, maybe a few brawls. Worse, you’re not sure what to do about it because you aren’t sure what’s causing the problem. If they were highbloods you might chalk it up to highblood psychosis, and while that wouldn’t be a good thing, at least you’d know why. Instead you have two bronzebloods who seem otherwise very self-possessed erupting into overblown violence at the slightest provocation. The fact that they’re ecto-clones adds a whole new level of confusion—something is seriously screwed in their pans and that something is probably genetic.

Oh.

Your stupidity is so breathtaking that it’s a miracle that you didn’t expire immediately upon hatching. You need to find Aranea, because this is not your area and she has both practical experience and an encyclopedic knowledge of just about fucking everything.

It doesn’t take you long. You find her with Meenah and Vriska, which isn’t at all surprising, and Terezi, which kind of is. You want to ask what that’s about, but you suppose this isn’t really the time. “Aranea, is it possible that some of the humans developed psychic abilities when they turned into trolls?”

If she’s at all confused by your abrupt appearance and strange question, she doesn’t show it. Instead she just tucks her legs neatly under and looks thoughtful. “I can’t say for certain, because there’s really no precedent for this kind of transformation. The whole thing is positively fascinating though, I was speaking with Jane earlier and—”

“The point,” you growl.

“It’s very possible. As far as we’ve been able to determine, they are now biologically indistinguishable from those of us who were born trolls. While no one has yet shown any signs of psychic ability, that doesn’t rule out the possibility. Some abilities are a great deal more subtle than others.” She peers up at you. “Do you think this has something to do with what happened earlier?”
“Maybe.” You might be completely off base, but you don’t think you are. “Would a pair of ecto-clones have the same ability?”

“That’s a reasonable assumption, considering specific psychic abilities are genetic, but,” she shrugs, “there’s no telling for certain, since we know nothing about the process used to turn them into trolls in the first place.”

“Could you tell if they did?” At this point you don’t really care if she has to rummage around in some brains to sort this shit out. Because if they have some sort of psychic ability making them go haywire, it might very well be fixable. Or at least manageable.

“Certainly, but—”

That’s all you need to hear. “Okay, come on.” You march off without waiting to see if she’s following, because you are going to sort this shit out right the fuck now, before someone else gets a blade through the gut for being mildly annoying.

You find Dave and Bro where you last saw them, well away from everyone else. They’re sitting back to back, Dave babbling animatedly about something, Bro with his hands folded over his stomach and listening to Dave talk with the faintest hint of a smile. It occurs to your that if you’re right, this could wind up murdering their burgeoning moirallegience because humans are stupid creatures incapable of recognizing a good thing even when it’s bludgeoning them repeatedly between the eyes. You will be beyond infuriated if that happens, but there’s really no way around it.

Still, you almost hate to interrupt. “I think I figured out what’s wrong with you.”

Dave cuts off mid-sentence, and they both look up at you in perfect unison. “That’s a pretty long list,” Bro says. He climbs to his feet, offering Dave a hand up. “Might wanna be more specific.”

“Don’t be obtuse,” you growl.

Aranea speaks up from behind you. “Karkat believes that your difficulty controlling your more violent impulses might stem from some unrecognized psychic ability.”

“You think Bro’s psychic?” Dave asks incredulously. He’s staring at you like you’ve finally taken a flying leap off the deep end.

“Yeah, I hate to stomp all over your theory, but I’m pretty sure I’d have noticed.”

“Not necessarily!” Aranea skirts around you, marching right up to Bro with a fearlessness borne of academic interest. “I’m going to assume that you haven’t been hearing voices.”

Bro raises an eyebrow. “No.”

“Perhaps the unshakable sensation of being watched?”

“No.”

“Feelings of impending doom?”

“No.”

“Extreme mood swings?”

Bro hesitates, and after a second concedes with a nod. “I guess you might call them that.”
“Maybe you’re pregnant,” Dave suggests with a snicker, neatly sidestepping Bro’s attempt to swat him.

“Oh, no,” Aranea says, deadpan serious. “That’s extremely unlikely, trolls as a species haven’t been able to reproduce independently since—”

You sigh. “Aranea.”

“Ah, yes. Sorry.” She doesn’t actually seem contrite in the least. “I think I may have an idea what the problem is.” She gestures towards Bro’s head. “May I?”

“Sure?” Bro says, like he’s not entirely sure what she’s asking.

Dave bursts out, “Shit, shit, wait don’t—” but Bro’s posture has already gone slack. “Son of a bitch,” Dave snarls, pulling off Bro’s shades and grabbing his face, peering into strangely blank eyes. “Shit, he’s gonna be furious.” He shoots Aranea a venomous look without releasing Bro. “Let him go.”

It occurs to you that not warning Bro that Aranea is capable of mind control was a bit of a stupid oversight. For her part, Aranea just seems perplexed. “I did ask his permission.”

“Yeah, except he obviously didn’t know what you were talking about,” Dave barks, dropping his hands to Bro’s shoulders. “Now let him go.”

“Of course. He might be a little disoriented,” she warns. “And irate.”

You can see the precise moment she lets him go, because Bro goes instantly rigid and orients on Aranea like the needle on a compass. He’s growling, and you take an involuntary step back because it reminds you viscerally of being pinned under his weight and thinking you were going to die. It’s nothing at all like the other day when you startled John. That was a warning. This is a threat.

Dave is between them in an instant, taking Bro’s face in his hands. “Hey, hey. Bro. Look at me,” he says without a trace of the anger from moments before, coaxing Bro’s attention from Aranea. The growling eases off almost immediately and you feel marginally less alarmed. “Look at me. That was a seriously dick move she just pulled, and you have every right to be pissed. I know I’d be pissed. But it happened and it’s over, so we might as well hear what she found out. I promise if she pulls anything again I will rip her arms off and shove them down her throat.”

“That seems a bit extreme,” Aranea murmurs, and you motion for her to be quiet.
Bro is visibly struggling to regain his composure, and Dave slides his hands up and grips handfuls of hair, pulling him down until their foreheads are pressed together. Bro’s hands creep up to Dave’s waist, and then they just stand braced against each other, Dave audibly purring in an attempt to soothe. You watch with a twinge of wistful jealousy, because you want something like that so badly. Very briefly, you’d even thought you had it, which had made it all the worse when you realized it wasn’t anything close.

“They’re very sweet,” Aranea says, and thank fucking god someone else finally noticed. “I didn’t realize they were moirails.”

“They aren’t,” you say, incredibly sour over the fact. Aranea looks at you like you sprouted a second head and started speaking in tongues. You know the feeling. “I don’t know, humans have some stupid issue with biological relationships that I don’t get.”

Her expression lights in understanding. “Ah, yes. Incestuous relationships are incredibly taboo in most human cultures. And while a moirallegience might not fit the technical definition, I can see how the situation might be uncomfortable for those unused to differentiating romantic attraction from sexual attraction. It’s a shame though, they seem very well-matched.”

What a spectacular fucking understatement. Movement draws your attention back to the two assholes who are giving you so much grief. You can’t see Dave’s face from this angle, but you can see Bro’s, and his expression punches a hole right through your chest. How can you look at someone like that and not realize? It makes you want to tear your hair out in sheer frustration. How can humans be so stupid?

That soft, unguarded look doesn’t last long before Bro plucks his shades from Dave’s collar, putting them back on and effectively shuttering himself behind tinted plastic. That seems to be some sort of signal, because Dave abruptly skitters a few steps away, a flush creeping up his neck as he shoves his hands in his pockets, embarrassment tangible.

So. Unbelievably. Stupid.

“So,” Bro says, voice rough but controlled. “Find anything good while you were brain-surfing?”

“Oh, yes!” Aranea says, a little too enthusiastic, considering. “It turns out Karkat was right. You’re an empath.” Apparently you actually did something right for once in your miserable existence. Go figure.

Bro frowns. “Meaning what?”

“You have the ability to sense the emotional state of those around you,” she explains. “On Alternia this particular ability evolved as a defense mechanism, because as it turned out being able to tell when a highblood was in a foul mood was an excellent survival skill. The ability is fairly common, to varying degrees, as those with empathic traits were more likely to survive long enough to contribute to the slurry, and thus pass on their abilities to their descendants. What I find particularly fascinating is… ah. Hm. You don’t care about the history, do you?” she finishes with a sigh.

“Not particularly, no,” Bro says, stone-faced. “And I think I would have noticed if I was picking up on people’s emotions.”

“That’s not quite how it works. Let me see if I can explain.” She lapses into thoughtful silence for a moment, before continuing. “If you had been hatched a troll, your powers would have developed gradually, and you would have received the knowledge to use them from your ancestor in much the same way we inherit language. Your case is unique in that you were ‘hatched’ a fully developed
adult, with a fully developed psychic ability, but without the skill necessary to control it. Right now your brain is a little like a radio you can’t turn off. You don’t have the skill to tune it to any particular station, so all you receive is static. There’s no doubt that you’re picking up on the emotional state of everyone around you, but you don’t recognize it as such because at this stage you don’t know how. It’s essentially white noise.”

There’s a moment of silence as everyone digests what Aranea said. “So what you’re saying is that this white noise is what’s making me so volatile?”

Aranea nods eagerly. “Certainly. And Dirk as well, I’m sure. Collectively, there’s undoubtedly a great deal of agitation going around. Uncertainty, fear of the unknown. Stress, anger, conflict. And considering you’ve been steeped in it since the moment you woke up on this planet, it’s no wonder you’ve been having so much trouble keeping your aggression in check.”

You hear Dave mutter ‘holy shit’ and you privately agree. You always knew psychic abilities are more trouble than they’re worth.

“Is there any way to turn it off?” Bro asks.

Aranea shakes her head. “It doesn’t work that way. You’ll have to learn to control it. I’d offer to teach you, but our abilities are somewhat inverse and I doubt I’d be the best tutor. Aradia would be a better choice as her talents are much more similar to yours.”

“What’s her deal?”

“She hears the voices of the dead.”

“Fucking hell,” Bro says wearily, dragging a hand down his face. “Alright. Okay. I guess that’s a plan then. Thanks for figuring out my malfunction.” He strides over to Aranea and leans down, clasping her shoulder in a firm grip so she can’t back away. “But if you ever hijack my brain again I will cut you into pieces so small that no one will be able to identify the remains. Am I clear?”

Aranea looks like she’s just now realizing how intimidating Bro can be. “Very.”

“Good.”
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

ComplexQuanta called this the hot springs episode, and now I can’t unsee it, so.

Hot springs episode.

Chapter Notes

I am now free of finals, FREE TO WRITE FANFIC FOR THREE WEEKS UNIMPEDED.

Ahem.

Chapter beta'd by the fantabulous complexQuanta, who is also an excellent ass-kicker.

With lots of fretting Dave and pale shenanigans for tacticalTempest, because she is the best cheerleader and she deserves only nice things.

Also I received not one, not two, but THREE pieces of fanart, and I’m pretty sure everyone should go look at them and bask in their beauty and follow the artists and lavish praise upon them.

here
here
and here

There are plenty of things about your newfound trollhood you don’t really mind. You’re not too fussed about the cosmetic changes, although you suppose it’ll be a little jarring if you ever get your hands on a mirror. And hey, let’s be honest here, there is nothing about having claws that isn’t totally rad. You’re kinda ambivalent about having your junk summarily rearranged; like, it’s a little weird that you’re rocking lady parts in addition to your brand-new tentadick, but you’re not as bothered as you expected to be. Rose is probably having a ball though, tentacles are right up her alley—and whoa, okay, time to put the brakes on that brain train before it goes careening off the rails into disturbingly hot territory.

The point is, the physical stuff isn’t really bothering you. On the other hand, the emotional shit is causing you some serious fucking grief. Things with Bro are starting to get downright weird, we are not in Kansas anymore, I repeat, we are not in Kansas. It’s not anything that Bro’s doing, either. Although you sort of get the feeling that maybe he’s a little more comfortable with you than he used to be. Or maybe it’s just that he’s treating you more like an equal and less like his dumbshit little bro, who knows. The point is that Bro isn’t what’s making things weird.
That’s all you.

You get that he needs you right now, you do. You’ve been turning this pacification deal over in your head for the last few days, and you think it all comes down to the fact that there’s no one besides you that he trusts. You have zero qualms about providing a little extra brotherly affection if that’s what he needs to keep his head. You will be the goddamned cuddlebuddy champ of the fucking brolympics if that’s what it takes.

The problem is that sometimes things get a little intense. When he really starts to lose his shit, it’s like this hindbrain instinct kicks in and you get all handsy. It works, there’s no denying that. You aren’t sure exactly why, but touching him, his face in particular, seems to have this incredibly calming effect. Maybe it’s something hardwired into troll physiology, because Karkat did something very similar to John and basically stopped that freakout right in its tracks. It’s just, well, the only word that comes to mind is intimate. And you could even deal with all that awkwardness if it wasn’t for the fact that when it’s happening, you straight up cease to care.

When that switch flips in your brain you don’t give a single, solitary shit that you’re crawling all up in Bro’s personal space. You’re exactly where you’re meant to be. Yesterday, when you had your fingers tangled in his hair and his hands on your waist, your entire universe narrowed down to that moment. The busted engine rattle of that purr you can’t seem to help, the rhythmic in and out of his breathing, the way his fingers curled against your sides. It felt safe and right and it scares the hell out of you. You’re worried that trolls aren’t programmed for familial affection, that wires are getting crossed and it’s mucking everything up.

Under any other circumstances you’d take a step back, get some distance, and clear your head. Except that isn’t an option now because Bro needs you in a very literal way, and you aren’t going to fucking bail on him just because you’re a little uncomfortable. Especially now that you know what’s causing it.

And hell, that’s another thing. Bro’s psychic. You aren’t sure why you’re having such a hard time wrapping your brain around that concept, especially considering magical powers are kinda par for the course with this lot. You certainly used to suspect he might be a fucking mind-reader when you were a kid, so it really shouldn’t surprise you now. Although you are pitifully glad that all Radio Bro is getting at the moment is static, because if he was tapped in to your emotions you might actually curl into a tiny ball of shame and spontaneously combust. Then again, maybe he could explain it to you, because at this point you aren’t even sure what’s going on with your own feelings, beyond your brain being a big, fuzzy ball of alarm and confusion.

It’s obviously weird troll shit. It has to be. There is absolutely no other possible explanation for your issues. Like the fact that you are feeling overprotective to a frankly ridiculous degree. You have never in your life been so instantly infuriated as you were when Aranea mind-jacked Bro. If you hadn’t been so concerned for him, there’s no doubt in your mind that you would have done something drastic.

There’s also the fact that you melt like hot butter every time Bro touches you, and it’s only getting worse.

Or the fact that you want to curl against him at night so badly that keeping a respectable distance is causing you legitimate physical pain.

Fucking hell, time for a mental change of subject, because the more you think about Bro the more it ties your guts in knots and you just can’t deal right now. There are plenty of other very important things that you should be thinking about. The most notable of which would be, y’know, rebuilding civilization. At least until everyone dies. Okay shit, that was depressing, your brain is fired— pick up
your last paycheck at the desk, we won’t miss you.

You’re so wrapped up in your own head that you almost trip over your feet when Bro touches the back of your neck, *jesus fuck*. Your breath hitches and you don’t quite manage to bite down on a chirp, which is embarrassing as hell even if you aren’t sure why it happens. Christ, you never realized how many noises trolls make until you became one. It’s an enormous overreaction because the touch is brief, he was only trying to get your attention, and now you can feel him looking at you sidelong.

He doesn’t take the golden opportunity you just gave him to tease you. Instead, all he says is, “We’ve stopped.”

He’s right. You can’t see too well from where you are, but it looks like there’s a break in the trees ahead. “Let’s go see what’s up,” you say. The two of you were on the ass end of the troll train, so almost everyone else is there by the time you make your way up to the front of your little caravan. You’re about to ask John what’s up, but you stop in your tracks.

It’s a lake. Huge, pristine and deep blue, ringed by towering trees and you suddenly wish you had your camera. You might not be the biggest fan of nature, but wow. “I feel like I just stepped into a postcard,” you say, and Bro snorts.

“It’s pretty, isn’t it?” John says, a little wistful. “Kinda reminds me of home.”

He’s right. Not Texas obviously, but Earth. This new planet of yours is a lot like Earth: the sky, the trees, the sun. Maybe it’s some small recompense for losing your humanity. Sorry about the troll parts, but hey! At least the trees look familiar.

You pivot on your heel and take a look over your ragged little posse as the stragglers catch up. Everyone looks like shit, frankly. Tired and dirty from trudging through the backwoods for days, and you know what? That’s bullshit. “Okay, executive decision time,” you call, raising your voice so everyone can hear you. “We’re stopping for the day. It’s a good place to set up camp, and I don’t know about the rest of you, but I am downright rank. So I’m gonna go drop myself in that lake and try to remember what being clean is like.”

You don’t give anyone time to argue and march straight down to the shore, because yeah, it’s probably a waste of time, but it seems like a waste of time everyone needs. Bro is sort of a barometer for the general group state of mind, and if that’s anything to go on everyone could use a day to dick around in a lake. Plus you weren’t kidding about being rank; trolls don’t really get stinky like humans do, but you feel like you’re covered in sixteen layers of grime and that just isn’t gonna fly.

You peel off your clothes, and for one second you consider going buck-ass naked, but you keep the boxers because there are ladies present and you weren’t raised in a barn. Your naked shoulders are probably giving everyone enough to swoon over as it is. You drop your shades on top of the pile because if you lose them in the lake you’re gonna be pissed, make a note to try and wash out the bloodstains a la Cronus later, and go plunging into the holy fuck ice cold water, shit shit shit.

You dunk your head and surface, trying to remind your body how to breathe around all that freezing hell-water, and you don’t even know if this is normal because this is the first time you’ve been in a lake in your life. Everyone else is still standing at the treeline, like no one is sure what to do with your nonsense, and it occurs to you that you don’t even know if trolls swim. Well, obviously the ones with gills do, but do they need salt water?

A beat passes in which you decide that you’re going to be pissed if no one else joins you, and then John lets out a whoop and goes charging towards the lake, almost falling flat on his face as he
hurriedly hops out of his pants. See, you can always rely on John to do something stupid and childish with you, what are friends for? Once he’s stripped down, John does a literal flying cannonball and sprays icy water all over you before surfacing and looking ridiculously pleased with himself.

That seems to be some sort of signal, because everyone is coming down the beach now, albeit with slightly less enthusiasm than John. Except for Meenah, holy shit you don’t think you’ve ever seen someone move that fast. Then John splashes you, and obviously that is nothing short of a declaration of war. You splash him back, and before you know it you devolve into a pair of ten year-olds, culminating in your ultimate victory when you manage to clamber up on his shoulders and give him the mother of all dunks.

“Truce!” he croaks as he comes up, hanging off your neck and coughing. “Oh god I think I swallowed half the lake.”

“You started it,” you point out. Which is both true and a perfectly valid justification for the can of unmitigated watery whoopass you just opened on him.

John sticks his tongue out at you in a breathtaking display of maturity, then calls towards the shore, “Come on, Karkat!”

Karkat is still fully clothed, standing well away from the water’s edge. “If you think I am stepping one foot into that bottomless deathtrap, you are sorely mistaken.”

John rolls his eyes and releases you. “Why, can’t you swim?”

“Of course I can’t swim, you gibbering moron. Does it look like I have gills to you?”

John grins like Karkat just told him it was Christmas morning and all the presents were for him. “I’ll teach you!” he says, swimming the short distance back and clambering out of the water. Karkat holds up his hands like he’s warding off a dangerous predator, taking a reluctant step back.

“I don’t want to—stop touching me!” Karkat howls, “EGBERT STOP TRYING TO TAKE MY SHIRT OFF YOU ARE DEPRAVED.”

You snicker to yourself and wish Karkat good luck, because there is no way he is going to win this one. Although, now that you’re paying attention, it looks like anyone without gills seems to be sticking to the shallows. You guess teaching kids to swim wasn’t a thing with trolls, although from what you know of their weird hemocaste bullshit, maybe going into the water wasn’t such a good idea for the land-bound types.

You leave Karkat to his fate. You scan the shore and spot Bro and Dirk standing near the water, talking. You’re kind of relieved to see it, actually. Aside from that awkwardly tense first encounter, they’ve seemed to be mostly ignoring each other. Not that you can blame them, it’s probably weird as hell, but you’re still glad to see them having a conversation of their own volition.

You swim closer. “You guys coming in or what?” Their heads both swing toward you in eerie unison, and seeing them standing side by side makes it obvious that Dirk is like a rough, slightly unfinished version of Bro. Still a little too skinny and a little too short, but in a few years you probably won’t be able to tell them apart.

Dirk kills their creeper twin vibe when he shakes his head. “Nah. Not a fan of the water. I’ll wash up a bit later.”

It occurs to you that his version of Earth was some kind of apocalyptic waterworld, so you guess you can’t blame him. You raise your eyebrows at Bro, because you know he doesn’t have any such
hangups. The two of you practically lived at that shitty public pool in the summer, when it got so hot that your little air conditioner rolled over and surrendered like a Frenchman on the eve of battle. The place was always jam-packed with screaming kids and there was more chlorine than water, but it was better than lying on the kitchen floor because it was the coolest spot in the house and trying not to die.

Bro hesitates for a second like he’s actually considering saying no, before giving in with a loose shrug and a ‘why not’.

You practice your dead man’s float while Bro strips down and plunges into the lake. You think you hear him swear under his breath, and bite down on a grin, rolling over and floating on your back. “You remember that pool at the park?”

He chuckles. “You mean the one they kept throwing us out of because we were breaking the rules?”

Oh man, you’d almost forgotten about that. “That was the day we kept thrashing everyone at chicken fight, right?” You’d spent most of the day riding around on Bro’s shoulders and man, the lifeguard had been pissed, especially because you’d kept climbing the fence back in and the place was so packed he didn’t catch you until you’d owned seven more losers. That was ages ago, you must have been what? Ten?

“I’m pretty sure we still hold the unofficial Texas chicken fight championship title,” he says.

You snort. “You gotta admit they were so outmatched it was practically cheating.”

“All’s fair in love and chicken fights, kid.” He gives you a speculative look that you aren’t sure you like. “Bet I could still carry you, no problem.”

Oh, fuck no. “Dude, I’m like twice the size I was when I was ten, you can’t—” Bro completely ignores you, diving under the water and he wouldn’t.

He would. The fucker comes up right between your legs and grabs you before you can twist away, heaving you out of the water and you scrabble for his horns to keep your balance. “God fucking damn it, Bro.”

He rolls his shoulders and almost unseats you, and you clutch his horns harder, edges digging into your palms, and kick him in the ribs. “Hey, stop groping my rack,” he says. “They’re not goddamn handlebars.”

You’re half-tempted to yank on them, but you aren’t sure how much that might hurt, so instead you take a second to find your balance and let go. “You realize now that I’m up here we have to offer someone a righteous beatdown.”

“Yup.”

“Hey Egbert!” you call, because most of the trolls are either underwater or extremely wary of it, and you don’t even know where Jade got to. John looks up from trying to peel a wide-eyed Karkat off his person, and you say, “Chicken fight, bro. Let’s do this.”

John grins, and makes another attempt to pry Karkat off his torso. “C’mon Karkat, we’ve been challenged!”

Karkat snarls, but the effect is kinda lost with him clinging to John like a wet, miserable kitten. “Why would I want to fight a cluckbeast? You people are insane.”
Bro snorts a soft laugh as John rolls his eyes and explains, “You don’t actually fight a chicken, Karkat. You sit on my shoulders, and then you and Dave try to knock each other into the water.”

Karkat looks between you and John like he’s the last bastion of sanity in a sea of crazy. “And why exactly would we do that?”

“Because it’s fun!”

“Fun,” Karkat repeats flatly. “You expect me to engage in some sort of bizarre aquatic bloodsport that has a fair chance of ending with my drowned and bloated corpse, and you call that fun.”

John huffs softly. “Don’t be stupid, I’m not going to let you drown.” Karkat doesn’t look like he’s buying what John is selling, at which point John whips out the big guns and gives Karkat the biggest, widest puppy-dog eyes in the history of emotional blackmail. “’Mon, please?”

“Jesus,” Bro mutters. “That is one lethal set of highbeams.”

“Tell me about it.” John could be such a manipulative little shit when he put his mind to it. “Hey, wait.” You flick Bro’s ear and he swats at you. “Does that mean all I had to do was make Bambi eyes at you to get my way? Are you telling me that a lifetime of wearing undeniably rad shades handicapped my ability to turn you into a giant sucker?” That was just criminally unfair. Imagine all the opportunities to get away with things, tragically wasted.

“Nope, I am one hundred percent immune to your bullshit.” He lowers you both until the water comes up to his chin, and it feels strangely warm after air on wet skin. “You were a screaming goddamn nightmare of a baby, and that pretty much murdered any and all goodwill I might have had towards you. Beating your ass regularly was completely justified revenge.” You don’t bother to reply, instead you just grind your heel into his ribs until he shoves your foot away.

“Fine!” Karkat explodes, caving in like the giant sucker he is. “Just stop looking at me like that, I’m going to have nightmares as it is.” He heaves an enormous, put upon sigh. “Let’s get this over with.”

Watching Karkat struggle to get on John’s shoulders has to be the most entertaining thing you’ve ever witnessed. He won’t let go of John long enough for John to sink low enough to help, despite the fact that they’re shallow enough that Karkat could stand just fine if he wasn’t being a big baby. Eventually John compromises by hunching forward a bit and letting Karkat climb his back. There’s a lot of slipping and flailing and Karkat screeching like an angry pterodactyl before they finally get situated.

“This is gonna be a massacre,” Bro says, and you agree. Which isn’t to say that Karkat’s not a competent fighter, because he is, but he is way out of his element here. You do notice that despite their difficulty, Karkat went out of his way to avoid grabbing John’s horns entirely. Or touching his head at all, really. You wonder if that’s rude or something.


“Yeah, yeah.” Karkat squints at you suspiciously, like this is all some kind of evil conspiracy to drown him. “So I just have to push Dave into the water?”

You smirk. “If you can.” Bro shifts his grip on your legs, locking his hands over your thighs as you hook your ankles behind his back. You tilt this way and that, testing your stability and yeah, you got this. “Okay, let’s do this.”

Karkat holds up better than you expected, through a combination of sheer determination and John’s frankly ridiculous upper body strength. Eventually though, your superior technique wins the day and
You successfully manage to knock Karkat into the drink. Bro offers you a congratulatory fistbump while John fishes an angry, spluttering Karkat out of the water. “I hate all three of you,” he snarls, clinging to John, who’s doing a really terrible job pretending not to be amused.

“Kinky,” you say, because he can’t give you an opening like that and expect you not to take it. Honestly now.

“I meant that platonically and you know it!” He sucks in a breath like he’s about to get a really good rant going and chokes on nothing instead. John bites down on a grin and rearranges his hold, patting Karkat on the back until the coughing fit subsides. “I would rather cram a venomous needlebeast up my nook,” he croaks, “than go anywhere near your bulge.”

Bro whistles. “Harsh dude. I think you just got a ‘not if you were the last man on Earth.’”

“Oh, okay,” John says before you can drum up a really good retort about being a choice cut of man-meat. Spoilsport. “I’m gonna get Karkat out of the water—”

“About fucking time!”

“—before he kills me.”

You are really, really tempted to point out that the water probably isn’t any deeper than Karkat’s neck, but you doubt he’d hear you over his bitching. Who knows, maybe he just likes riding around on John like a koala clinging to its mother. Speaking of which, your ass is getting kinda numb. “Yo Bro, lemme down.”

Bro releases your legs and after a bit of maneuvering you slide down his back, hissing a little when you drop back into the water. Then something grabs your fucking foot, and you squawk in alarm and wrap yourself around Bro like you’re climbing a jungle gym because what the actual fuck.

Before your imagination can take off too far into the territory of grabby lake-monsters, Rose surfaces like a goddamned crocodile, smug smile painted on her stupid lips. “Not funny, Rose,” you grumble from behind the safety of Bro’s shoulder. “Not. Funny.”

“I don’t know about that,” she says airily, not sorry in the least. “Your brother seems amused.”

As soon as she says it, you feel a kind of rumbling chuckle through Bro’s back more than you hear it. Which is right about the time you realize that there’s a whole lot of skin on skin contact, and you don’t really want to let go, which means you definitely should. You peel away from him and give Rose your best unimpressed look. God save you from snarky broads and asshole brothers. “How’re you liking the gills?” Bro asks.

Her ear fins perk up in a way that’s actually kind of cute. “They’re very fascinating and seem to operate without any conscious input, just like breathing air. The sensation will take some getting used to, considering the cessation of lung operation feels a little alarming for someone unused to it. Overall, I think I’m going to enjoy them.” Rose glances at something over your shoulder and smirks. “If you gentlemen will excuse me,” she says, sliding back under the water with scarcely a ripple.

You turn to see what she was looking at, and realize that Kanaya had gotten a bit bolder than the others, wading almost chest deep. Something that she is probably going to shortly regret.

“I like that kid,” Bro says, and you turn back to him with some sort of snarky comment about ambushes and genetics, but it dies on your lips when you realize he’s smiling. He actually looks happy, the near-constant line of tension in his shoulders relaxed. You are a fucking genius. This was clearly the best idea you have ever had, which is saying a lot because you are the goddamned Mozart.
of good ideas. Then Bro smirks at you and says, “You screamed like a little girl,” and you instantly revise your opinion.

He’s such a shit. “Did not.”

“Did so.”

“Did not.”

“Did so.” Bro suddenly lunges for you, grabbing you in a headlock you can’t eel out of because of your stupid fucking horns. So you jab your finger into the one spot just under his ribs where he’s ticklish as hell, which earns you a yelp and sweet, sweet freedom. You swim a few strokes away, and when you pull up and look at him, you realize you’ve made a serious tactical error. “So that’s how it’s going to be;” he says, and you are so, so screwed.

You don’t even try and argue your way out of this one, you just turn and bolt for shore as fast as you can possibly swim, like getting out of the water is somehow going to save you from a fate worse than death. You’re up on your feet, barely out of the water and for a second you think you’re going to make it, but then Bro snags your ankle and drops you like a stone. You try to scramble to your feet, but he sits on your legs, pinning your lower half in an inch of icy water.

He leans over you menacingly and you shove at his chest, trying to push him away with about zero effect. “Come on Bro, we’re all adults here,” you say, trying to squirm out from under him, but the fucker is heavy and you’re mired in wet sand.

Your brother is a merciless asshole. He attacks your sides and you fucking screech, “Oh god Bro, stop, stop!” And then you’re laughing too hard to talk, reflexively trying to curl up and protect your middle, but you can’t, and his hands are everywhere and no matter how hard you try you can’t keep him from sneaking in an opening and fucking hell, you can’t breathe.

Just when you think you’re going to suffocate he finally relents, and you flop back onto the sand with little breathless giggles that almost hurt. You try to glare at him, but Bro looks so fucking pleased with himself you can’t even be mad. “You’re such a shithead,” you wheeze. “Taking advantage of a man’s weaknesses. That’s low, Bro.”

He shrugs carelessly. “Your fault.” Then he rolls off of your legs, flopping onto his back beside you. You should move, because you’re still half in the water and kind of uncomfortable, but Bro’s knuckles are barely brushing the back of your hand, and that tiny point of contact keeps you rooted to the spot. You’re fighting the urge to hold his hand. It would be stupid and sappy and he doesn’t need you right now, there’s no reason to, but your fingers twitch with the urge to crawl over callused palms and tangle with his.

You are sixteen years old and you want to hold hands with your brother. Seriously, what is wrong with you?

You push yourself upright, glancing over at Bro. His eyes are closed, posture relaxed, and he’s seemingly unconcerned with having his ass end in the water. Seeing him so calm and at ease after a week of steadily building tension is doing strange, fluttery things to your insides. It’s a weird cocktail of affection mixed with a proprietary sort of pleasure. Like you’re happy that he’s happy, and you don’t remember ever being so invested in his emotional state before.

It’s strange. Everything about your relationship is completely off-kilter, and you don’t know how to fix it. Which isn’t to say that things are bad, really. In fact it’s actually kinda nice when you aren’t stressing about it. Kind of like someone moved all your furniture, and you’re too busy trying to put
everything back the way it was to notice that you’re actually happy with the new arrangement. Wait no, that was a shitty analogy. The point is that you obviously need a little distance because you’re thinking in circles.

You get to your feet, doing your best to wipe the sand off your everything. It doesn’t really help. “Hey, I’m gonna go check on John, make sure Karkat—” You don’t get to finish because Bro snags your wrist lightning-quick and yanks you back down, hooking an arm around your chest and pulling you close. You don’t move for a startled second, caught in an uncomfortable half-sitting position. “What,” you say, less of a question and more a general statement of bewilderment.

Bro doesn’t answer, just moves his arm back behind his head. He’d probably let you go if you tried again, but after a minute you slide down until you’re laying flat, head resting on his chest. There are a lot of questions you want to ask, but in the end you don’t say anything, instead pretending to be very fascinated by the clouds.

Eventually you give up the pretense and close your eyes, more interested in the steady rise and fall of his breathing. It’s rhythmic for the most part, two seconds in, two seconds out. Sometimes it hitches or stalls, and sometimes it trips a little strangely, a quiet, drawn out stutter that you find yourself listening for. It takes you longer than it should to recognize it for an almost-purr, like an engine that won’t quite turn over.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

It's still tough being Bro.

Chapter Notes

I LIVE.

Sorry for the ridiculous wait, college was busting my ass and I'm basically terrible. Things should pick up now that I have sweet, sweet free time. As an apology, please enjoy this very self-indulgent chapter! Oh man is that another ship in the tags what's the deal with that?

Once again beta'd by complexQuanta, who is largely responsible for the chapter getting done this century.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Aw, well isn’t this cute.”

“I’m fucking adorable,” you say on reflex, stalling for time while your brain boots up. Sarcasm, it informs you. Egbert’s voice and gleeful sarcasm, and you’re distantly aware that you should be annoyed, but it’s hard to be when all you can smell is Dave.

You crack your eyes, and— oh. That’s why you can’t feel your arm. Sometime during the night Dave must have cuddled up to you, and now he’s sleeping flush against your side with his head tucked in the hollow of your shoulder. His horn is digging uncomfortably into your collarbone, but you can’t really bring yourself to care.

“I wish I had a camera,” John says brightly, and you suddenly hate him for existing, particularly for existing in this precise spot at this exact moment. Still, he can’t honestly expect to beat you at your own game. If he thinks he’s going to ruffle your feathers with a little petty vengeance, he’s got another thing coming.

"Yeah, yeah, twerp. Whaddya want?" You need to stretch, but you don't want to dislodge Dave, who seems determined to snooze through the conversation. Kid always did sleep like a rock when he wanted to.

"You guys need to get up," Egbert tells you, idiot grin fading when he realizes you aren’t gonna rise to the bait. "We're going to be leaving soon."

"Okay then, wake-up call delivered—" You're silenced before you can tell him to fuck off, Dave's hand creeping up and splaying awkwardly over your face.

"No," he mumbles in that sleep-fogged, I-am-not-actually-awake way. "Shoosh." And then he starts
purring, and you can't help but stare because that's the first time you've heard him do that outside of some instance where he's trying to keep you from killing someone.

"Okay wow," John says, and his voice startles you a bit. You'd almost forgotten about him. "That really is cute." He sounds kind of surprised.

"Don't you have other people to roll out of bed?" you ask, a touch softer because Dave is vibrating against your side like a motor, and you really don't want to wake him up just yet. "Scram." John glances between you and Dave, then just kind of scrunches his face at you like he tastes something sour and walks off.

Dave's rumbling is starting to die down, coming in fits and starts now. You nudge his hand off your face, and in a flicker of tired affection you bury your nose in his hair and just breathe. You hadn't realized quite how aware of his scent you are. You can't even place it really, he doesn't smell like anything in particular. He just smells like Dave, which is something you're apparently primed to find very... comforting. Still, you can't stay here and laze around all day, as appealing as that sounds. You allow one more small indulgence, pressing a kiss to the top of Dave's head before giving him a nudge. "Hey, kid. Time to get up."

Dave snorts a little and stirs, lifting his head a bit, then craning his neck to look at you. "Oh," he says, soft and sleepy and apparently not awake enough yet to remember to be embarrassed. "Hi."

You can't help the smile that tugs at your lips. "Hi."

Dave accepts your greeting with a sharp-toothed yawn before settling back down and wriggling a little bit closer in an obvious attempt to go back to sleep. Hell, you'd probably let him get away with it under other circumstances, because you're comfortable and Dave's cute when he's braindead tired, but if you don't turn up soon, someone's going to come looking for you again. "Oh no you don't," you say, bouncing your shoulder a bit. "We gotta get moving soon. No going back to sleep you lazy little shit."

"Fuck you," Dave grumbles, shoving himself upright with what appears to be a monumental effort. He looks back at you, and you can actually see the instant his brain catches up. His eyes go a little wide, and you wait for him to put some distance between you, to get up and busy himself with rolling up his sleeping bag, anything to pretend that nope, cuddling was not a thing that just happened. He doesn't though. He just stares at you for a second before looking away and rubbing his eyes. "We don't usually leave so early, what's the deal?"

Huh. That was new. Although maybe after yesterday you'd just completely murdered his embarrassment threshold when it comes to snuggling. Because as much as both of you had tried to pretend otherwise, that was essentially what it was. The whole thing is a little mystifying, because you've never been all that inclined towards physical affection, and now you're suddenly eating it up like some sort of affection starved idiot. Which doesn't really jive with your crash-course on troll behavior, so you're not sure you can blame it on that. "Well, we did stop pretty early yesterday. Got lost time to make up for."

"I know Jake and Aradia are probably sick of waiting for us, but it was kind of necessary." He looks at you sidelong. "You feel better, don't you?"

You do feel better, the swell of irritation that's been your constant companion lately all but gone. The improved mood of the group as a whole had done a lot to take some of that nebulous pressure off of you. "Did you know that would happen?"

Dave shrugs. "Nah, but I figured it couldn't hurt." He peels himself out of his sleeping bag and
stretches. You're relieved at feeling better, for Dave's sake as much as your own. That kid has been worried sick about you, and knowing the why behind it really hasn't helped much.

In fact, that's why you'd sought out Dirk yesterday. Nice kid, good head on his shoulders, and not as much like you at sixteen as you were worried he'd be. Your conversation had been short, but illuminating, and it turns out he isn't getting the whammy as badly as you are. The two of you figure it's because he's younger, which means his abilities might be less developed. So whereas you're getting a full dose of crazy, he's only getting part. You suppose you could ask Aranea if you wanted to know for certain, but frankly you aren't eager to put yourself in her general vicinity any time soon. Maybe not ever. The sensation of being trapped in your own body while someone else was rummaging around in your fucking mind was—it was awful. And invasive, and frankly you don't trust yourself not to snap her in half. Besides, you're both fairly confident about your theory. You hope this Aradia girl will be able to help you get a handle on things. It's nice to know why you're losing control, but it'll be better when it stops.

Your life has turned into a hell of a circus. You shake your head and chuck a shoe at Dave. "Let's get a move on."

* * *

You made good time today. About noonish the forest had thinned out enough that you weren't constantly climbing over underbrush, which made things exponentially less annoying. Dirk estimates you'll be there in another two days or so, and Rufioh left to go give Aradia and Jake an update on your progress. You're pretty sure you aren't the only one who'll be glad to have this little nature trek behind you. Camp's been set up in a relatively clear area, and you've parked yourself on a fallen log, close enough to keep an eye on things and far enough that you don't feel crowded. Dave's sitting beside you, but he's watching his friends, all parked around a nearby fire. You nudge him with your elbow. "Go on, I don't need a babysitter constantly."

Dave starts guiltily. "I'm not babysitting you—"

"I know, I know," you say, cutting him off before he can really get going. "What I'm saying is go hang out with your friends. I'm fine." You can practically sense his reluctance, and you give him a little shove. "Seriously kid, go. I promise to call if I feel any impending shit-flipping."

Dave slides off the log, frowning at you. "Okay, but—"

"Get outta my hair." You don't actually want him out of your hair, but you've been monopolizing his time and that's not really fair.

Dave sighs, casting a doubtful glance in your direction before loping off and parking himself between John and Rose. The separation sits uncomfortably, like it always does when he isn't in your immediate vicinity, and it occurs to you that you are way too fucking invested in having that kid around. It's a little screwed up, even for you.

You watch them idly, because you aren't tired yet and you don't have anything better to do. Eventually Dave stops sending looks in your direction every thirty seconds, although you still catch him checking up on you from time to time. Right now he's lying with his head in Rose's lap, hands dancing animatedly as he tells a story you can't hear while Rose weaves tiny, ridiculous little braids into his hair. Dave doesn't seem to mind, and you feel a completely irrational stab of jealousy. Jesus fucking christ, get a grip. He's not your goddamn property.

"Hey, this seat taken?" You look up to find Rose's mother standing nearby, and either the woman is ninja-quiet or you were very distracted. She smiles and gestures to your log.
You figured this conversation was going to happen sooner or later. "Help yourself."

She settles down next to you, and you notice that someone has alchemized her a decent pair of hiking boots. Handy contraption. "We haven't really been properly introduced." She thrusts a hand at you. "I'm Roxy." She pauses and amends, "The elder."

You shake her hand. She has a good, strong grip. "Bro."

She smiles at you and rests her elbows on her knees, watching the kids around the fire for a minute. "Being around all these kids is making me feel old," she says.

You snort. No kidding. You'd never felt like an old man until every other living person was at least a decade younger than you. "Welcome to the geriatrics club."

Roxy laughs. "Just gonna have to get used to it, I guess."

She lapses into silence again, and despite the fact that you don't know this woman, it isn't uncomfortable. "Rose is a good kid," you say after a minute. "I like her." It's true. You find her a little unsettling sometimes, maybe, but she's growing on you quick.

That statement earns you a thousand-watt grin. "She is, isn't she? God only knows how she turned out so well, I was a pretty terrible mother, all things considered." The way she says it is light, but you don't think she's joking.

"You 'n me both," you say. You did your best by Dave, but you don't think you were ever really cut out to be a parent. You were too goddamned weird to raise a kid up right. Dave is a better person than you'll ever be, and you know that has more to do with him than it does with his upbringing.

"I suppose that's the best we can hope for, as parents. That your kids turn out alright in spite of your many screw-ups and failings." She shifts a bit, kicking her legs out, and now that you look at her, you realize that's where Dave gets his looks from. It isn't instantly obvious because of the gender disparity, but they've got the same build, and there's a certain familiarity in the shape of her face and the line of her nose. It's a strange realization, because while you knew on an intellectual level that this woman was Dave's mother, it hadn't really sunk in until just now.

"He looks like you," you say, because you can't help but wonder if she's noticed. The puzzled look she gives you makes you think she hasn't. "Dave," you clarify, nodding your head towards the kids. Dave and Rose look like siblings, and you and Dave have always looked vaguely related, but Roxy actually looks like his mother. The resemblance is a lot stronger than it is with Rose.

"Huh." Her face pinches in a thoughtful frown as she studies Dave. "He does. I hadn't realized." She looks back at you. "It's strange, isn't it?"

You don't ask her to clarify, because you know exactly what she means. "Ain't that the truth."

Silence falls again just as laughter erupts from the kids by the fire. Dave is happy and smiling, and as irrationally territorial as you've been over him lately, you're glad to see it. Poor kid has been so worried about you, and you haven't been doing much to reassure him.

Roxy sighs. "We sure made some beautiful babies, didn't we?"

As much as you try to avoid actively thinking about it, that's a point you really can't argue. "Yeah." The air between you is a little heavy, a little maudlin, and maybe you're not the only one having trouble coming to terms with the fact that your little shit isn't really so little anymore. "Pretty much guaranteed with these prime genetics," you say in an effort to lift the mood, offering your fist. Roxy
laughs, and you try not to think about how you're fistbumping a woman you've only just met over
the attractiveness of your children.

Life is really fucking weird.

It seems to have the intended effect, because Roxy's mood seems to instantly lift. She shoots you a
quick wink and says a little too loudly, "Oh, have you met Rose's girlfriend?" She doesn't give you a
chance to respond, just goes plowing on. "What a babe, hot damn."

"Um," comes a startled voice to your left.

You look over and there's the babe in question, looking a little wide-eyed and embarrassed, and you
bite down on a grin. You can see her struggling for the proper response to being called a babe by her
girlfriend's mom, before settling on a polite, "Thank you, Ms. Lalonde."

Roxy beams at her, "You're welcome, Kanaya dear."

Kanaya goes scurrying off towards the fire and Rose, which you guess is where she was going when
she overheard Roxy. "And so polite, too," she finishes with a happy sigh.

"She could have done worse," you agree. You've barely exchanged two words with Kanaya, but she
seems like a nice kid. Most of them do, really, in their own ways.

"What about Dave?"

"Is he a babe?" you ask. "Because I think we've already established that."

"Is he seeing anyone," she says. "Come on, I'm trying to live vicariously through all of these teenage
romances, throw me a bone. Gimme the gossip."

The surge of jealousy you feel at the suggestion hits like a knife to the gut, so sharp that it steals your
breath for a moment, and it's all you can answer without snarling. "Nope." Okay, there's something
undeniably fucked in your head. You know that things have been a little strange with you and Dave,
but this territorial possessiveness has got to stop. It's completely irrational, and you've been giving it a
little leeway because you figure you're still getting accustomed to all the bullshit your new species is
bringing with it, but this is starting to get out of hand.

If Roxy notices your reaction, she doesn't comment. Instead she just sighs and says, "Pity." You
consider telling her what Rose had told you, but the whole thing leaves a sour feeling in your
stomach, and Rose had asked you to keep it to yourself anyway.

The two of you chat for a while longer about mostly inconsequential things, before Roxy wanders
off with a wave and a theatrical yawn. You decide that if you had to have magical test tube babies
with someone, she's a pretty okay choice. It surprises you really, how many of these people you're
starting to like. You've never been all that adept at getting along with people, mostly because you
never particularly cared to. But these people are important to Dave, and you suppose that's what
makes the difference. That, and everyone seems to be as big an oddball as you are in their individual
ways.

Now that Roxy's not around to distract you, your attention settles back on Dave like a compass
orienting north. You really need to put a little distance between the two of you, for his sake. He looks
over like he can read your thoughts, and it's all you can do to stay where you are and give him a
careless wave.

Dave smiles a little and climbs to his feet. You can't help but be pleased that he's coming back, and
you realize this might be worse than you thought. There’s something about your interactions with Dave that feel a little dangerously dependent, and you resist the thought on impulse, because you haven’t had to depend on anyone since you decided to opt your ass out of foster care.

“Was that Rose’s mom you were talking to?” he asks, planting himself in the spot she’d just vacated. The mini-braids are gone, but they’ve left his hair sticking out at odd angles.

“Yep.”

Dave has mastered the art of the verbal eye-roll. “And?”

“And we had an amicable conversation, you nosy little shit.” You reach over and start smoothing down his hair a bit, and Dave just leans into your hand a little and doesn’t complain. If you’d done something like this before, he’d have swatted you away and grumbled about not being five. Funny how things change.

“A conversation about what?” he persists.

You shake your head and scoot closer so you can reach more easily. “Being the only two adults in a sea of teenagers.” You tackle a particularly stubborn flip, and Dave sighs a little and tilts flush against your side.

“Dude, you’re only an adult on a technicality,” he argues. “Spring-loaded smuppet traps aren’t exactly the hallmark of a grown-ass man.”

You grin, because Dave swearing a blue streak under a mountain of plush rump was easily the best part of any given day. “I had to keep you on your toes, didn’t I?” Man, some of those traps were downright inspired. You’re a goddamn genius.

Dave grumbles but doesn’t argue. His hair seems more or less tamed and you should probably stop, but it’s kind of relaxing and he doesn’t seem to mind, so you keep at it, working methodically around his horns. The texture is different than it used to be. Dave always had this baby-fine hair that he never really grew out of, but now it’s thicker and feels almost like fur, except not quite. You run your thumb over the short hairs near his temples, and you realize he’s purring again.

Purr might not be the right word for it since you’ve never heard a cat that sounded quite like that, but you don’t know what else to call it. It’s kind of like someone’s shaking a tin can stuffed with bees and gravel, and you’re pretty sure that logically you shouldn’t find it as soothing as you do. Although you suppose soothing is probably the point.

“Hey,” Dave says abruptly, voice a little rusty as the purr stutters and stops. He straightens up and you take your arm back, already missing the warmth against your side.

You swear you never used to be so tactile. “What’s up?”

Dave swings a leg over the log, straddling it so he can face you. His eyebrows are pinched in a tiny frown. “How does it work?”

You think you know what he’s asking, and you aren’t sure you want to answer, so you smirk a bit and deflect, “I thought we had that conversation when you were seven or something.”

He kicks you in the shin. “That’s not what I meant and you know it.” He pauses, and fidgets a little like he always does when he’s working up to something. “When you’re freaking out and I uh,” he gestures vaguely in the direction of your face. “How does that work?”
Well, shit. Sometimes you hate being right. “Wouldn’t Karkat be a better person to ask? Seems like he’s the resident expert on crazy.”

“If you think I’m opening myself up for a lecture, you’re nuts. Asking Karkat about that kinda stuff is like slapping on a meatsuit and diving into a pit of starving wolves. Except instead of tearing you to shreds they rant about incomprehensible quadrant crap and force you to watch terrible troll romcoms, and in the end you wish they would have just eaten you.” He crosses his arms, and it looks like he’s going to be stubborn about this. “C’mon Bro, seriously.”

You relent, because once Dave decides to dig his heels in over something, getting him to drop it is next to impossible. “It’s kinda like—” You aren’t really sure how to explain it. Hell, you’re pretty sure you don’t even understand it, not even after having gone through it twice. When Dave touches you like that, you belong to him. For that moment in time, he owns you completely, and whatever shitstorm has started in your head can’t stand up to that. It’s like he disconnects you from the rest of the world, and it’s, well. It’s pretty fucking intense. Except you can’t tell him any of that because it’ll freak him right out, but you don’t want to lie to him either.

Dave’s watching you expectantly, so you shrug and say, “It’s calming.” Which is absolutely true. You’re finding his company calming in general, but when he touches your face it’s like a concentrated dose of—you almost want to call it contentment. Except there’s this paradoxical intensity that should be the opposite of relaxing and fuck. You really have no idea.

“Well, yeah, obviously,” Dave says, kicking you again without any real force. “But how?”

“Shit kid, I don’t know. It’s like getting sucker punched with so many feelings that you forget what set you off.” That’s not a completely terrible description, but Dave is frowning again and you cast around for something to say that doesn’t amount to, ‘it feels like drunken infatuation.’ You really doubt Dave will appreciate the analogy.

You can’t think of anything, so you reach for Dave, who goes perfectly still the instant your hands come up. You touch his face like he had yours, hands along his jawline and claw tips curled just under his ears, like going through the motions is going to help you explain it. You don’t expect Dave to do anything more than look at you like you’re crazy, or swat your hands away. You definitely don’t expect him to go boneless and heavy in your grasp with an unsteady trill that stops your breath.

It really hadn’t occurred to you that it would have any effect. Experimentally, you shift your grip a little and run your thumbs along his jaw. He makes that sound again, and it fucking does things to you, sends a frisson of foreign want sparking along your nerves like needle pricks. Dave’s breathing is stuttery and erratic, but some instinct assures you it isn’t a bad thing, and you catch yourself leaning towards him without any clear idea what you plan to do.

You lock up halfway, because what the fuck are you doing? You suck in a breath and hold it to steady yourself; you refuse to get swept up in whatever this is. Reluctantly, you let go of Dave, and he wobbles a little at the abrupt loss of support. “Jesus fucking christ,” he manages, dazed, and resisting the urge to touch him again is fucking painful. “No wonder that works.” His shades have slipped and he looks up at you over the top of them, a little wide-eyed.

The two of you stare at each other, and in a moment of numbing clarity every jumbled emotion sorts and slots neatly into place.

You’re in love with him.

You half expect good sense to come storming in and argue the thought down, but it doesn’t. You
hadn’t realized what was happening, because you’ve always loved Dave, that’s a universal fucking constant, and in the middle of everything else you hadn’t recognized the sideways shift for what it was. Somehow, you went and fell ass over teakettle for your baby brother when you weren’t looking.

There is so much wrong with that you don’t even know where to start.

“Bro?” Dave’s voice cuts across your thoughts. It’s a little too precise, like he’s trying to sound normal and not quite succeeding.

“Didn’t realize that would happen.” Okay, time to compartmentalize, you can’t be thinking about wildly inappropriate feelings right now because Dave will pick right up on that shit and that’s the last thing you want. “Sorry.”

“No, uh,” Dave clears his throat a bit. “It’s cool, no big.” He taps a thumb rapidly against the log, tension written in the line of his shoulders, and you figure you’ve got maybe fifteen seconds before he turns tail and fucking bails. “Oh damn, I almost forgot that I promised Jade that I’d help her with something, I should probably go before she comes looking for me. Don’t let her fool you with the sweet act, that girl is terrifying as hell.”

Wow, not even fifteen seconds. You must have really knocked the kid off balance, considering he usually makes some effort not to look like he’s lying through his teeth. “Well shit, better not keep your girlfriend waiting.” Dave’s already sliding off the log, and he visibly falters at your words. You immediately regret saying it, because it’s not like you can blame him for being a little freaked out. Way to be an asshole.

He recovers quickly, shrugging with exaggerated carelessness. “Are you kidding? The ladies would be downright devastated if I shacked up with Jade, it’d be chaos in the streets, women running riot in protest. I’ve got a responsibility to maintain the peace. Gotta keep hope alive, Bro.”

You snort. “I know the Strider charm is a powerful force, but try to dial it back a little, if only for the good of the people.”

The corner of his mouth ticks up. “No promises, it’s not like all this awesome comes with an off switch.” He starts to go, then pauses, turning back to you and adding quietly, “I’ll be with Jade if anything comes up.”

He trots off without waiting for a reply, but the words make you feel a little better. You figure that was his roundabout way of saying that even though he’s making a temporary retreat, he’ll still be there if you need him. And honestly, you probably need the space as much as he does, because you have some hard thinking to do.

You abandon your log, because even though walking is all you’ve been doing all damned day, you’re too restless to just sit. For a few minutes you don’t think of much at all, turning all of your attention to your steps as you move away from camp. It’s only when you look back and can’t see the light of the fires anymore that you slow a bit and take your earlier realization off the shelf for examination, hoping that it’ll make more sense with a little distance.

In reality, you’re hoping that it was just a moment of punch-drunk idiocy. There’s really no denying that some of your interactions with Dave are a lot more intimate than they should be, and that your relationship with him is, in the strictest sense, a romantic one by troll standards, even if it was born of necessity. It’s not unrealistic to assume that you just got a little caught up in the moment.

Right. Totally logical, and also complete bullshit. You’ve never been big on self-denial, and now that
you’re actually looking at the last week though an objective lens there’s really no denying that you’re completely fucking twitterpated over the kid. You could try to blame it on your new biology, and you might even have a point, but in the end the how and why doesn’t really make a difference because you’re already a goner.

A fact that makes a few other things click into place, and you stop abruptly because you’re a fucking idiot. The reason you’ve been so irritated with John is because you’re jealous. And because he’s an annoying little twerp, but mostly jealousy. You’ve always been a bit on the territorial side to begin with—which you’re willing to bet money that your newfound aggression isn’t helping— and thanks to Rose’s insinuation that he’d be shacking up with Dave, you’ve been viewing John as, what? Competition? Jesus.

Thinking about Rose reminds you of her prediction about your future love life, and you can’t help but wonder if she was talking about Dave. Except she couldn’t have been, because Dave has been chronically uncomfortable at being reminded that what you’re doing also happens to be a romantic thing, and he’s made it pretty clear that he’s going to bail the instant it stops being an issue.

Part of you hopes that it’ll never stop being an issue, because you’re a selfish dick.

Maybe it means that you’ll get over Dave and find someone else, except the instant rush of abject distress that slams you at the thought makes you doubt it. She was probably just wrong, you don’t think predicting the future is an exact science. Not that it matters, because Dave is never going to find out. You may not be able to control your feelings, but you can damn well control your actions.

What a fucking mess. You sigh and turn back the way you came. You’ll need to force yourself to back off and put a cork in your crazy. If Dave thinks you’ve got yourself under control, then he won’t feel obligated to look out for you, and that’ll be for the best. You’ll keep your feelings under lock and key. Dave will go about his life, blissfully unaware. And nothing has to change.

Chapter End Notes

There was a question in the comments, so I wanted to say: don’t worry! This is still pale BroDave.

One of the things I really wanted to do with this fic was emphasize the romantic aspect of pale romance. I can see how it might be getting a bit confusing, particularly because neither Bro nor Dave have the mental frame of reference that a born troll would, so they’re still likely to apply human concepts where they don’t necessarily fit. Which makes them both pretty terrible narrators where quadrant clarity is concerned.

I apologize for any confusion, and I hope this clears things up!
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

John’s hate is *totally* platonic.

Chapter Notes

This chapter brought to you by *tacticalTempest*, who was kind enough to inform me that the beginning of the chapter was not the crime against humanity that I thought it was, and that I should stop being dumb and just finish it.

There’s a very small chance that you may not have properly appreciated the enormity of your situation until just now. You’ve finally reached the site of your— what did Rose call it? Settlement, right. Your new settlement. Which is good, great even! It’s been a long couple of weeks and everyone’s exhausted, so they definitely deserve the chance to rest. And it seems like a good spot, although you really don’t know much about what would make a place good for that sort of thing.

It’s just that, well, looking around at everyone you realize that you’ve been so busy freaking out about being a troll that you sort of forgot how serious the situation is. You have nothing. No running water or permanent shelter, no food you didn’t get from the alchemiter. No *toilets*. The alchemiter is the only resource you have, and all it really does is take your situation from ‘hopeless’ to ‘probably doable’. Maybe if you still had your collective stash of grist, but apparently the game decided to leave you with only a tiny fraction, and that’s going to go fast if you aren’t careful.

All of which is why you’re sitting in a small circle with Dave, Karkat, Kankri, Jane and Dirk, trying to come up with some kind of survival plan. You’ve got a notepad balanced on your knee, and the only two things scribbled on it so far are the headings ‘food’ and ‘shelter’. Which you’re pretty sure are the two most important things! You’d all die pretty quick without food. Or at least eventually, you’re not really sure how long trolls can go without food and you don’t really want to find out. And it’s not like you can live in tents forever. Well, you guess you could, but that would probably be pretty awful.

So, food first, because the sooner you stop spending your grist on things you can find or make, the better. “Does anyone know how to hunt?” you ask hopefully, because Jade knows tons about gardening, but that’s not going to be much help in the short term.

“Well, Karkat says instantly. “She’s always hunted her own food.” He pauses for a second, nose scrunching a bit as he considers something. “And Eridan probably. He was responsible for keeping Feferi’s lusus fed.” He sounds reluctant, like he’s not sure he should mention it.

Oooh, right, Eridan killed a few of the trolls, didn’t he? You’re still not sure how comfortable you are with the fact that some of these people are basically murderers, but Karkat was super-adamant about giving everyone a chance to prove themselves. You’re pretty sure that’s mostly because Karkat has a not-so-secret gooey marshmallow center and he cares about everyone a lot, even if he won’t admit it. “Will they be okay to work together?”
“Yeah, the clusterfuck with Eridan was after—” he cuts off, scowling and rubbing his cheek. He was probably about to say ‘after Nepeta died’. Sometimes it’s easy to forget that Karkat lost most of his friends at one point, and you really want to give him a hug even though he’d get all grumpy about it. “They’ll be fine.”

“Okay, so Nepeta can be in charge of that.” You jot down her name, and then Eridan’s. You’re probably going to need more than two people, but you or Karkat can talk to Nepeta about it later. “Right, um.” What else?

“How about fishing?” Jane suggests, and you feel kinda dumb for not thinking of that because you can literally see the ocean from where you’re sitting.

“Shouldn’t we leave that to the people with gills?” Dave says, and yeah, that makes sense. They’d probably be way better at it than anyone else. You went fishing with your dad a couple of times and it had taken forever to catch anything.

The thought of your dad hits you with a pang of sadness, and you carefully shove the feeling aside. You don’t have time to be sad, people are counting on you.

Kankri clears his throat. “You realize that dividing tasks based on physical characteristics is only going to perpetuate the, quote “hemocaste bullshit” that you seem so intent on dismantling. Not to mention—”

Karkat growls. “Kankri.”

“—the idea is quite discriminatory when you consider—”

“Kankri!”

You don’t think you’ve ever seen anyone look quite so offended. “What do you need to say that’s so urgent that you felt the need to interrupt me? Quite rudely I might add.”

Karkat leans in close enough that he forces Kankri back a little. “If you don’t have anything useful to contribute, keep your flap shut or I will cut off your tongue and feed it to you.” Karkat vacates Kankri’s airspace and turns his attention back to you. “Just put down seatrolls for now and we’ll figure out specifics later. What’s next?”

“Well,” you hear Kankri mutter, “That was uncalled for.” You stifle a grin and add seatrolls to the list. Karkat and Kankri kind of remind you of squabbling siblings and it never stops being hilarious.

A thought occurs to you. Unless maybe it’s black? You still aren’t exactly sure what the difference between regular dislike and black romance is, except for uh, the sex part you guess? So you suppose it’s maybe thinking someone’s a tool, but also thinking they’re hot? You’re pretty sure you must be missing something because that sounds really dumb, and ugh. Trolls are confusing and now you’re wondering how sex even works for them and no, no now your traitorous brain is supplying mental images augh!

Dave jabs you in the arm. “Yo, nameless planet to Egbert.”

You feel yourself blush, even though it’s not like anyone could tell what you were thinking about. You shoot Dave a grateful look and say, “Sorry, got distracted.” You pretend to consult your notepad while you get your thoughts back in order. Stupid brain. “Um, shelter. Does anyone know anything about building stuff?” You look at Karkat, because hadn’t he mentioned something about trolls building their own houses?
Karkat shakes his head. “Unless you’re hiding a carpenter drone in that ridiculous hood of yours, I don’t think any of us are going to be any help.”

Jane twists to face Dirk. “What about you? You build things!”

Dirk holds up his hands and protests, “I build robots, not houses.” He glances around at the rest of you and shrugs. “I can give it a shot if there’s no better option, but it’s a bit outside my area of expertise.” You were actually a little worried that Dirk was going to turn out to be as big a douchebag as Bro, and you’re pretty glad that doesn’t seem to be the case. The last thing you need is two smug assholes running around.

Like just thinking about him is some kind of summoning spell, you hear the sound of footsteps and when you turn to look, sure enough, it’s the douchebag himself. Not that you should be surprised, considering you can’t pry Bro off of Dave with a crowbar most of the time. He walks up behind Dave and nudges him with a foot. “How’s it goin’, squirt?”

Dave leans back into Bro’s knees and looks up at him. It’s not exactly obvious, but he relaxes a little the instant they come in contact, and it’s not the first time you’ve noticed. It’s like he’s always a little more comfortable when they’re touching in some way, and you’re not sure why it bothers you, but it does. You really, honestly wanted to like Bro, because it’s obvious that Dave loves him a lot, but you just can’t. It’s like the dude is programmed to irritate you just by breathing. “Aside from some dumbass argument about whether making the seatrolls do the fishing is racist or some shit—”

You hear Kankri grumble under his breath, but you guess he took Karkat’s warning to heart because he doesn’t speak up.

“—things are going fine. Right now we’re trying to figure out which sucker is gonna get saddled with foreman duty because apparently everyone knows shit-all about putting together four walls and a roof.”

Bro’s eyebrows climb a bit, and he looks over at Karkat even though you’re the one running the meeting and says, “I used to work in construction.”

“Bullshit,” Dave says instantly. “You did not.”

Bro snorts. “This may come as a shock, but I didn’t miraculously spring into existence when you were five. I was alive for a whole twenty-three years before that, and I had to feed your fat baby ass somehow.”

Dave’s brows pinch together as he apparently tries to process the fact that his brother had done something other than run creepy puppet porn sites. Seriously, Bro is so weird, you don’t understand what Dave thinks is so great about the guy. “Didn’t you DJ?” he asks.

“Not until you were older. Pay wasn’t anywhere near steady enough, and for fuck’s sake.” He reaches down and gives Dave a solid thump on the forehead. “Do you honestly think I’d leave an infant alone at night? Gimme a little credit kid, jesus.”

“This coming from the man who kept swords in the appliances,” Dave mutters, rubbing his forehead. “Besides, I hear there are people out there that you give money to, and in return they’ll make sure the rugrats don’t run around licking the power outlets.”

“Even assuming there was someone I’d trust enough to look after you at night, there was still the fact that you refused to sleep unless you were in direct contact with my person.” Bro smiles a tiny bit. “Which was cute ‘n all, but it kinda made you a giant pain in the ass.”
“What, really?” Dave sounds surprised. “You never told me that.”

Bro shrugs loosely. “Guess it never came up.”

“While all this talk about Dave’s wigglerhood is fascinating, how about the two of you reminisce on your own time and we get back to the subject at hand before I expire of old age?” You shoot Karkat a suspicious look because he doesn’t sound half as annoyed as his words suggest. “You want the job, you got it.” Karkat glances at you and you swallow a sigh and scribble down Bro’s name.

He nods and says, “I’m gonna need a few strong guys.”

“I’ll help,” Dave volunteers, almost before Bro’s done talking and you feel momentarily betrayed. You’d kind of assumed he’d stick with you. “Not like I’m gonna be much good for anything else.”

“I said strong, not scrawny.”

Dave elbows Bro hard in the shin. “I will arm wrestle you right the fuck now.” Even you have to roll your eyes at that, because you might not like Bro but you have to admit the guy’s pretty ripped. Which isn’t to say Dave’s not strong, because he is! He’s just kinda wiry, where Bro’s pretty much solid muscle. You’re not entirely sure you could beat him in an arm-wrestling match, and you can definitely beat Dave.

Bro huffs a quiet almost-laugh. “Okay, okay, put your dick away. There are ladies present, you fucking degenerate.” They share a grin, and you realize you’ve never seen anyone else make Dave smile that much.

Ugh. This is so dumb.

“What do you think, Karkat?” you ask, maybe a little too loudly, but you just want to get this over with so you don’t have to keep looking at Bro’s stupid face.

“Equius, might as well put his freakish strength to practical use. And maybe Gamz—wait no, fuck.” Karkat drops his face into his hands and heaves a massive sigh. He doesn’t bother lifting his head and adds, “He’s going to strangle me with my own fucking guts for this, but take Sollux too.”

“Sollux? Isn’t he the computer guy?” That seems like kind of a weird choice.

Karkat lifts his head and gives you a spectacularly unimpressed look. “Yes Egbert, Sollux is ‘the computer guy’. He is also ‘the guy’ with psionic powers strong enough to hurl a giant fucking meteor three years through paradox space at approximately the speed of light. I had this completely irrational thought that being able to move large objects with his mind might be of some infinitesimal use in this particular situation.”

Haha, oops. You forgot that Sollux was responsible for the meteor thing. You have a hard time remembering what trolls have which powers sometimes, it gets kind of confusing. But that’s why you have Karkat! To remind you of these things as sarcastically as possible. You add the names to the list. “What about you, Kankri?”

“While I would never presume to volunteer another individual’s services without their express consent, which would be both deeply problematic and frankly appalling—” He shoots Karkat a pointed look and Karkat rolls his eyes hard enough that it looks almost painful. “—I would suggest asking Horuss, and perhaps Latula. I might also suggest Cronus, but due to certain… unfortunate events, I don’t believe he’s up to any strenuous physical activity at present.”

“Hey, quiet buster!” Jane jabs Kankri hard in the ribs, and he actually growls at her a little and scoots
closer to Karkat. Jane ignores it and continues, “Cronus is healing up just fine, and he’ll be right as rain in no time. It was an accident and there’s no need to keep harping on it.”

You’re kind of glad she said so, because you’ve seen Dirk talking to Cronus more than once since he flipped out, and you’re sure he feels terrible about what happened. Well, pretty sure anyway, he’s kind of hard to read. Like, maybe seventy-five percent sure.

“Well, shit,” Dirk says blandly, and you can’t tell if what Kankri said bothered him or not. “I do believe I may swoon.”

Jane crosses her arms with a huff. “Hush, you.” Everyone’s starting to look kinda cranky, especially Kankri.

Hehe. Cranky Kankri.

Anyway, you should probably wrap things up before anyone starts really bickering. “What about you guys?” You wave your notepad at Dirk and Jane.

“I’ll help,” Dirk says. “And I’ll see about Jake, but I’m guessing he’d rather be on Team Slaughter.”

You’re going to assume that means hunting. “Okay.” You finish scribbling everything down. “I guess that’s probably good for today, and we can start organizing stuff tomorrow.” It’s already getting kinda late, so you don’t think much more is getting done today.

“Whoa there,” Dave bumps your arm. “Forgetting something?”

“No?” You’re pretty sure you didn’t.

“So you’re telling me you’re not gonna donate that mangrit of yours to the worthy cause of getting us out of this shitty Survivor rerun?” He shakes his head and tsks. “It’s your call, but don’t blame me when you get voted off the island.”

Oh. Right. On one hand it makes you happy that Dave wants you to help because he’s your best bro and you’ve spent barely any time together. On the other hand, that means you’d not only have to put up with Bro, you’d have to put up with Bro bossing you around and there’s no way that wouldn’t be awful.

When you don’t immediately agree, Bro pipes up, “Looks like your buddy is on administrative duty. Cut him some slack, somebody’s gotta carry the clipboard around.”

Okay seriously, *fuck* that guy.

“Of course I’m going to help, Dave, don’t be dumb.”

"Awesome." Dave bumps shoulders with you and clambers to his feet. "Then I declare this court officially fucking adjourned, because I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm starving." He stretches so hard you hear something pop, and then he looks down at you. "Coming?"

You shake your head. Going with Dave meant going with Bro, and you've had enough of him today as it is. "Nah, I'm not hungry."

"Suit yourself," he says, sauntering off with Bro as his ever-present shadow.

Everyone else disperses pretty quick, and then it's just you and Karkat. "Ugh, he's such a tool!" you complain, flopping on your back.
Karkat settles beside you. "Which tool are we complaining about? There's so many to choose from."

"Bro."

Karkat hums thoughtfully. "Well, the name is pretty douchey, and he's a giant, infuriating moron, but I don't mind him much otherwise."

You shove yourself upright and stare at Karkat incredulously. "He almost killed you!" You figured if you could count on anyone to dislike Bro as much as you do, it'd be Karkat.

He shrugs. "That's more the fault of my own breathtaking stupidity, really." It's like you're in an episode of the Twilight Zone, and you're the only one who can tell what a giant douchenozzle Bro is. "Why, what's your problem with him?"

"He's a jerk!" Seriously, has no one else actually noticed?

"Oh, well, thank you for that detailed and illuminating explanation," Karkat says, throwing his hands up a bit like you're being unreasonable or something.

"Well, he is," you mutter, a little petulant. You're pretty sure you're totally allowed to not like someone for being a jerk.

"So am, I and yet you seem determined to put up with my sorry carcass."

"You're not a jerk!" Karkat snorts, and it really bothers you that he seems to be serious. "You're not. You're a little grumpy sometimes—" you pause, then amend, "Most of the time. But the biggest reason you get so grouchy is because you really care about everyone a lot, and I know we don't make it easy sometimes, but you're just. Not a jerk, okay?"

Karkat's staring at you, and okay maybe you went a little overboard, but he's always so casually down on himself and it's really upsetting because he's amazing. Karkat clears his throat a bit, very pointedly looking anywhere but at you, and you realize you embarrassed him. Not that you care, because you meant what you said. "Can we settle down friendship hour before I vomit? Yes? Good. This wasn't even about me, it was about your problem with Bro."

Ugh, you don't want to talk about Bro. "I don't know, he's a stupid smug jerk with a stupid smug face who's hogging all of Dave's attention—" Shit, you hadn't meant to say that part, it kind of makes you sound like a whiny baby. "I just really hate him," you finish lamely.

Karkat's eyebrows climb so high they look like they might vacate his face entirely and achieve flight. At first you think it's because of what you said about Dave, but then you realize you made a really, really bad choice of words. "Ugh Karkat, no! I didn't mean it like that I meant it in the normal way stop looking at me like that!" You bury your face in your hands and regret every life choice that led to this conversation.

"Right," Karkat says, sounding somewhere between amused and unconvinced. "So you're saying your hate is platonic?"

Relief floods you. "Yes! Exactly! Totally and one hundred percent platonic. So, um, are you hungry at all, we should probably go get some food and maybe touch base with Jade."

You shoot him a hopeful look, but Karkat doesn't even acknowledge your pitiful attempt to change the subject. Instead he gives you a contemplative look and asks, "Do you think he's attractive?"

"Karkaaaaat," you whine. You realize you kind of tossed a steak to a starving wolf with the
expectation that he wouldn't eat it. Because you're a dumb, stupid idiot. You're not getting out of this conversation until Karkat lets you. "Dude, I don't know. Do you mean objectively, or like, personally?"

Karkat doesn't answer, just stares at you expectantly.

Ugh, you can't believe you're having this conversation. "I guess so? I mean objectively he's a good-looking guy?" You can't really say he's not, because you might not like him but you do have eyes.

Karkat hums noncommittally, and you think this might be the longest you've ever seen him go without talking.

You fidget, pulling up some grass and shredding it. You don't want to think about this, and you definitely don't want to talk about it. You can't even think about your junk without getting uncomfortable, you sure as hell don't want to contemplate sleeping with anyone! Especially not Bro. "Can we just drop this please?" You sound kinda pitiful, but you don't really care.

"Okay," Karkat agrees, in a tone you're pretty sure means this conversation is just on hold. Whatever, you'll take what you can get. Maybe you'll get lucky and he'll forget about it? "Let's talk about Dave then."

You let yourself tip over onto the ground and officially give up on living. "I have a better idea. How about you just leave me here to die."

"You are so fucking dramatic," Karkat says, poking you in the back. "All I was going to say was that you shouldn't let your issues with Bro dictate whether or not you spend time with Dave."

You roll on your back and look up at him, because he's kind of got a point. "I know." You like to blame Bro, but it's your fault, really. It isn't like anyone's keeping you from hanging out with Dave just because Bro's around. And you really do kinda miss him. "So you're saying I should stop being dumb."

"Sure, that'll happen," Karkat says drily, and you smack him because rude. "I'm just telling you to stop being a fucking wiggler."

Yeah, that's probably something you should do. You are kind of being a brat about the Dave thing, even if it's just in your own head. "So," you say, because it is way past time for a change of subject. "Since we just had a horrible and embarrassing discussion about me, I think it's time to have one about you. Let's talk about your hypothetical love life!" You say hypothetical because otherwise that'll be like admitting that you do have some kind of weird hate thing for Bro which you definitely don't.

You expect Karkat to roll his eyes and grumble, but instead his expression shuts. "That'll be a short conversation. Oh look, it's already over." He sounds so bitter, and you realize you might be an asshole because Gamzee is still a touchy subject for him.

He starts to leave, and you scramble up after him and grab his arm. "Karkat, I'm sorry, I didn't think."

He doesn't immediately answer. Instead, he looks at you with this weirdly solemn expression, scanning your face like he's looking for something. You want to apologize again, but you kinda get the feeling you shouldn't, so you just wait.

Eventually Karkat sighs and tugs his arm out of your grasp, and you're ridiculously glad when he doesn't walk away. "That's nothing new," he grumbles.
You smile, a bit sheepish. Maybe someday you’ll stop accidentally putting your foot in your mouth. "It's part of my charm?"

Karkat's cheek twitches, and you're pretty sure you almost made him smile. "Charm is not the word I'd use, now stop grinning at me like an idiot and go find Dave before you pine yourself to death."

Whoa hold on. "I'm not pining." You just miss him a little, which is perfectly normal under the circumstances. "Now who's being dramatic?" First he thinks you have some kind of hate-on for Bro, and now he says you're pining. Talk about blowing things out of proportion, geeze.

Karkat throws his hands up with an exasperated sigh. "I give up, humans are obviously too stupid to function. How you ever became the dominant species on your planet is a cosmic fucking mystery."

"Hey!"

"Whatever, my point still stands." Karkat grabs you by the shoulders and steers you in the direction Dave went. "Go find Dave and do whatever doubtlessly moronic things you do, and stop being pitiful."

"Okay, okay! Sheesh." You twist around to look at him. "What about you?"

Karkat gives you a tiny shove. "I am going to stay here and enjoy five blissfully quiet, idiot-free minutes."

You take that as your cue and leave him to it. He deserves a little time to himself, really. Privacy is kind of hard to come by these days, and he's been working really hard.

You find Dave and his new permanent fixture sitting at one of the picnic tables you set up near the cooking fires. They were probably a waste of grist, but people were getting tired of sitting on the ground, and you figure you can move them inside once you actually have an inside.

They're sitting across from each other, Bro talking about something you can't hear from where you are. For a second you aren’t sure you should interrupt, but then you remember what Karkat said about letting Bro dictate the time you spend with Dave, so you walk over anyway and drop onto the bench beside him. "Hey, what're you guys up to?"

"We're trying to come up with a building plan," Dave says. There's half a sandwich on the table near his elbow, and he picks it up and hands it to you. "I say we, but it's really just Bro talking at me because I know less than jack shit about this stuff."

"We're trying to come up with a building plan," Dave says. There's half a sandwich on the table near his elbow, and he picks it up and hands it to you. "I say we, but it's really just Bro talking at me because I know less than jack shit about this stuff."

You stare at the sandwich, a little perplexed. "Dave?"

"Sup?"

"Why did you give me a sandwich?"

You're pretty sure you hear Bro snort, and Dave shakes his head. "Because you haven't eaten since the asscrack of dawn and I'm the best damn bro a dweeb like you could hope for. "

You're weirdly pleased that Dave apparently pays attention to your eating habits. And you are pretty hungry. "I guess I can't argue with that."

"Damn right you can't, now eat your sandwich and stop asking stupid questions."

Bro doesn't even bother to acknowledge you, just picks up where he left off. You roll your eyes and
take a bite of your ham and cheese, tuning him out as a thought occurs to you. Jade estimates you’ve
got a year, maybe a year and a half’s worth of grist, depending on how stingy you are with it. After
it’s gone, you’ll never have a ham sandwich again and the thought is weirdly upsetting. You’re not
particularly invested in ham sandwiches as a food item, it’s not like they’re your favorite or
something, but the realization that something as basic as that isn’t even going to be an option
anymore drives the reality of things a little closer to home.

You shake your head a little and try to pay attention to Bro. You really need to stop dwelling on
stupid, unchangeable things. “—considering we aren’t going to have access to any power tools, and
we want to keep the supply usage to a minimum, going the log cabin route would probably be our
best bet. They’re pretty simple really, kind of like a set of Lincoln Logs scaled up.”

"Lincoln what?" Dave asks, and wait, what do cabins have to do with presidents?

"Lincoln Logs," Bro repeats in a way that sounds a lot like, ‘you're kidding me, right?’ Dave shrugs.
Bro finally looks at you and you just mirror Dave's shrug because you have no idea what he's talking
about. This is probably why you should stop getting sidetracked.

Bro lifts his shades a bit and pinches the bridge of his nose with a very deep sigh. "God fuckin’ save
me from kids born after the advent of the internet." He rubs his face a bit and continues, "Whatever,
not important. The point is, they can be made with limited resources, they’re sturdy, and they hold up
in the cold better than you'd expect." That sounds pretty reasonable. It might even be kinda nice.
Y'know, rustic and cozy and stuff. Except you're pretty sure there's a big difference between building
regular houses and old-timey cabins. "Do you even know how to make something like that?"

"Nah, kid," Bro says, and you realize his accent gets thicker when he’s being sarcastic, which
somehow makes it doubly annoying. "I'm just blowing smoke here. I have no fuckin' idea what I'm
talking about."

Yeah, because it's totally unreasonable for you to make sure the guy responsible for one of your most
important, basic needs knows what he's doing. "It's like I don't want to have to worry that a roof is
gonna cave in and kill everyone in their sleep, weird, right?"

Dave interjects before Bro can respond. "Hey, can we tone down the bitchiness a little? Jesus." You
feel kinda bad. Not for asking a reasonable question, but for bickering with Bro in front of Dave.

"My company used to get a ton of contracts from wilderness nuts, so yeah, I've worked on a few.
Satisfied? Or would you like a copy of my resume? How about some references?" He leans forward
and steeple his hands. "Please Egbert, tell me how I can best set your mind at ease. I know you have
a lot of options, and the last thing I'd want is for you to doubt my fucking qualifications."

Dave jerks in a way that makes you think he just kicked Bro under the table. "Will you stop being
such a dick?" It might just be your imagination, but he sounds a little uncomfortable.

Bro doesn't reply, the muscles in his jaw going tight for a second. "The biggest problem is going to
be green wood," he continues stiffly, and you feel you won that one, if only because Dave sided
with you. "Air-drying logs properly takes years, and I'm pretty sure no one wants to wait that long.
But if you build with green ones, they're going to shrink as they dry, which means cracks and drafts
are going to be an issue. They'll probably need to be patched regularly, and it ain't gonna look pretty.
We also might be able to put up interior walls and insulate them with something, but that'll be a long-
term project.”

Okay, you have to admit that he does sound like he knows what he's talking about. Which is good
and all, but it probably would have been more satisfying if he didn't. "How long do you think it'll
"take?" you ask, very diplomatically and without any rudeness at all, because someone has to be a mature adult about things and it's obviously not gonna be Bro.

He crosses his arms and considers your question. "With a crew of eight, assuming people pick things up quick and no one turns out to be a colossal fuckup, maybe two weeks to a month? Could run longer if we hit any setbacks."

That's not too bad, really! If he’s right that means you could have between twelve and twenty-four buildings up by this time next year. Okay well, you might not be able to work over the winter much, but that's still pretty good. Assuming two people to a house, that'd be seventeen houses and maybe some public buildings you guess? Either way, unless you run into problems everyone could be properly housed within a year.

"So I was thinking," Dave says, "That maybe we should start with a building big enough to cram everyone into until the other stuff starts going up? Y'know, get everyone out of those shitty tents."

“I don’t think everyone’s going to be game for a close quarters sleepover, but that’s still a good idea.” Bro pushes himself up from the table. “I’m gonna track down Jade and see about getting some tools. You two round up the other flying monkeys and let everyone know that I expect them up at dawn so we can make good use of daylight.”

After Bro leaves you slump over the table with a groan. “Dawn? Is he serious?”

Dave pats you on the back with what you’re sure is completely false sympathy. “Oh yeah, he’s serious. And let me tell you from personal, painful experience that you definitely do not want to oversleep.”
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Karkat pushes Dave off a cliff.

Chapter Notes

I have literally no excuse for the delay, so I'll just remind folks that I'm still alive and leave you with this offering.

Many thanks to the lovely tacticalTempest for ferreting out my numerous flubs.

It's 4:02 in the morning and you're wide awake, staring up at nothing and listening to the steady in and out of Bro’s breathing. There's a foot between you that feels like a mile, and you can’t figure out why his behavior is upsetting you so much. It feels like he's avoiding you, even though you know he's not. In fact, he hasn't done anything remotely out of the ordinary since that weird thing a few nights ago. He's been acting exactly like he always used to, and maybe the fact that he’s acting so ordinary is what's so fucking weird.

You should be glad. Getting Bro back to normal is kind of the idea. All of this snuggly shit was only supposed to be a temporary measure, and it's good that he seems to be getting a better handle on himself and doesn't need you hovering over him in constant fear that he's going to flip his lid at any given moment.

It's good, so why is it making you feel so shitty?

It hadn't escaped your notice that Bro suddenly bounced back to normal after that… thing. Whatever it was. No wonder he'd had such a hard time putting it into words, you're still not quite sure what happened there, and you've primarily dealt with that by trying to ignore it. It was strange and it happened, and it's just another item to add to the steadily growing list of weird troll shit your life has become.

And okay, you're going to be honest and admit that you've been kind of enjoying the closeness, so having it taken away abruptly was a little jarring.

God, you're being such a little bitch about the whole thing. Bro seems calmer and that's good. The end. Except when he's in the same place as John, in which case it's a countdown until another dumbass verbal slapfight. Seriously, you have no idea what the malfunction is with those two, but it's really starting to get on your nerves. Playing referee seems like something you should be doing, because it's your brother and best friend, but at the same time it feels really fucking uncomfortable for reasons you can't place. Like you're edging into territory you don't want to be in, and it doesn't make any sense. Not that it would be a problem in the first place if they would stop pulling each other's pigtails.
Okay, fuck it. You’re not getting back to sleep, and the longer you lay here, the more likely you are to cave in to the urge to cuddle or something equally embarrassing. You crawl out of your sleeping bag and the air changes instantly, because Bro has always been a light sleeper. "Dave?" he asks, around a yawn.

"Just restless," you tell him, which is true. "You've still got two hours, go back to sleep."

Bro grunts and you slip out of the tent into the frigid morning air. John seems to think it's somewhere around early spring, and you're all inclined to believe him because magical weatherman seems to be part of his power set, although you don't remember spring ever being this fucking cold. You're a desert creature, you aren't built for this temperate climate nonsense. The camp is dead quiet because you’re the only idiot dumb enough to be up at this hour, and you’re already kind of regretting leaving the warmth of your sleeping bag.

At least you can see. Troll night vision isn’t the puke-green you’ve always associated with the idea. Everything looks a little too oversaturated during the day, but it’s not all that different from what you’re used to, and you’d gotten accustomed pretty quick. At night though, the effect ramps up to eleven and colors become so sharp and vibrant that it feels like you’re seeing things on a scale humans never had access to. Like those little violet wildflowers all over the damn place. At night they almost look like tiny spots of purple light, and it’s actually really pretty in a ‘whoa stars under my feet that’s disorienting’ kinda way.

The sound of footsteps catches your attention, and you see Karkat coming out of the tent-maze. You’re not sure what he’s doing up, but you’re willing to bet it has something to do with sharing a tent with a creepy-fuck murder clown. Frankly, you don’t know how he gets any sleep ever with that dude in strangling distance, but you guess it has something to do with the history they have. You wave him over when he notices you.

"What the fuck are you doing up at this unholy hour?" he grumbles when he’s close enough for you to hear, but he has the presence of mind to keep his voice low.

"Couldn't sleep," you say with a shrug. Bro has you so off-kilter that for a second you’re tempted to ask Karkat about it, but that is just plain crazy. He'd probably try to convince you it's some kind of quadrant thing when it's not, because Karkat is a troll and has always been a troll, and he doesn't understand how familial relationships work. Karkat huffs like he doesn't quite believe you, which you guess is fair because the dude lived with you for three years, and sleeping was never something you had a lot of trouble with. He doesn't argue though, just jerks his head away from camp and says, "Come on then."

You follow him because you have nothing better to do. Karkat leads you to the cliffside over the beach, and for a minute the two of you just stand there, watching the roll of inky black water as it laps against the sand. It’s windier up here than it is back at camp, and you cross your arms to try and stave off some of the biting chill. It’s Karkat that eventually breaks the silence. "Since you're up, make yourself useful and check that cave down there."

You look over the edge, but all you see is the beach, some forty feet below. "What cave?"

Karkat gestures impatiently. "There's something that looks like a cave in the cliffside, and I thought it would be a good idea to check it out." You raise a brow at him, and he stares defiantly back. You're the undisputed master of the staredown however, and after a second he heaves an explosive sigh and adds, "I just need to make sure there aren't any flying, flesh-eating cave beasts living under our feet, okay?"

Considering what you know of his planet, the concern doesn't actually seem all that unreasonable.
On the other hand, you haven't seen anything bigger than those wannabe squirrels. You shrug. Might as well do something useful since you're up. "Sure, man. Wanna come with me? Could be romantic. You, me, a couple of," you lift your shades and give him your best eyebrow waggle, "flesh-eating monsters."

Karkat just rolls his eyes, and you kinda miss the days where he got all explosively embarrassed over your flirting. "I don't need you carrying me around like a sack of human root vegetables, thanks. Just check it out."

"Fine, fine, you're the boss. But don't blame me when you regret missing out on a good time." You don't bother waiting for his reply, and hop over the edge.

There's a rush of wind in your ears, and it takes you a split second to realize that you're not flying at all.

You're falling.

There's a beat of gut-wrench panic, then you bounce off the jagged edge of the cliffside, and you don't think much more than Jesus fuck, I'm going to die before the ground slams into you with enough force that you forget how to breathe.

You lay there for a moment, dazed, and it's Karkat's bellowing that brings you back to your senses, along with the white-hot bloom of pain in your ankle. "—swear to fucking god if this is some kind of joke I will remove your intestines and strangle you with them."

"Love you too, Karkat." Your voice comes out wheezy, and you're not even sure he heard you for a moment.

Then he calls down, "Are you okay?"

You take a minute to catalogue. You're not dead, which is great, but it hurts to breathe, and if the brutal throbbing in your ankle is any indication, it's probably broken. Other than that your mouth is full of grit and you feel like someone ran you through the spin cycle with a truckload of broken glass, but you think you'll live. You manage to call back, a little louder, "I'm okay, but I don't think I can walk." At the moment even sitting upright sounds like a pretty tall order.

You hear a string of curses, and then, "Hold on, I'll get help!" You close your eyes and focus on breathing, but not too deep because that makes your ribs hurt.

You fell. You're not sure how or why, but the instant you'd jumped off the cliffside, you'd discovered that the ability to fly was gone. Like someone had ripped out your wings, but you hadn't noticed until you tried to use them. You wonder what that means for the rest of your abilities. You hadn't actively tried to use your time powers because you had no reason to, but if you can't fly anymore, maybe that means the rest of it is gone too.

You're not really sure how you feel about it.

Luckily, the sound of approaching footsteps saves you from having to think about it too hard. You can't see them coming from your angle, but you're a little relieved when Bro kneels next to you. You summon a reasonably unpained, "Sup."

His shades are sitting on his head and the look he gives you is a little incredulous, like he has no idea what to do with your feigned nonchalance. Then he snorts and gives you a once over, asking, "You okay, kid?"
He sounds strained, and you realize that Karkat had probably woken him up with some kind of declaration like *Dave fell off a cliff.* You muster a careless, “Eh, little banged up, no big.” You’re about to say more, but then Bro’s touching your face, wiping away some blood with his thumb, and instead of words all you manage is a soft chirp because it’s the first time he’s really touched you in days.

It probably speaks to how fucked up things are that it makes you glad you fell.

A soft cough reminds you that you aren’t alone, and then Jane shuffles into your line of sight, looking concerned. “I need to make sure everything’s okay.” She says it apologetically, like she’s interrupting something.

You kind of wish she’d go away, but at the same time you guess it would probably be a good idea to know if you’re bleeding from your spleen or something. “Lay it on me, doc,” you say with a lot more enthusiasm than you feel.

Jane crouches beside Bro, but before she can touch you he snatches her wrist away and snarls, tight and warning. It’s knee-jerk protective instinct, you think, and it does something alarmingly squishy to your insides. Or maybe that’s just the hemorrhaging.

Luckily Jane is smart enough to go still, to not provoke him. You lay a hand on Bro’s arm and say, “She’s just trying to help.”

Bro sucks in a breath and releases her with a clipped, “Sorry.”

Jane smiles at him, and you don’t really know her all that well yet, but there’s a kind of understanding in it that makes you a little uncomfortable. She reaches for you again, saying, “I’m going to check for injuries.” It’s not a question, but she still waits for Bro’s small nod before placing her hands on your chest.

Her power is warm, kinda like you downed a cup of hot cocoa and can still feel the heat of it. You focus on the sensation and not on the fact that her powers seem to be working just fine. It’s not long before she sits back on her heels and says, “You have some minor lacerations on your face and hands, but bruised ribs and a sprained ankle seem to be the worst of it. I’ll have you right as rain in a jiffy!” Jane waits for Bro’s permission before she touches you again, but this time there’s no warm sensation. All you feel is the rock jabbing into your back, and after a second she sits back with a baffled frown.

Understanding dawns. “It’s not working, is it?” you ask. You can’t fly and Jane can’t heal, and you’d be willing to bet money at this point that you two aren’t the only ones who are losing your powers.

You can see the moment when she realizes what your fall probably means. Her eyes go a little wide, because yeah, your time travel abilities weren’t really going to be in demand anyway, but losing your healer? That’s a kick in the balls. She takes it like a champ though, shooting you a smile. “Well, it’s lucky none of your injuries are serious then!” Jane gets to her feet, brushing the sand off her knees and says to Bro, “You’ll have to carry him back, in that case.”

Whoa now, there is no way you’re letting anyone cart you around like an invalid. You push yourself upright and *wow,* sudden movements are not okay, check. “Look,” you manage, when the pain in your ribs subsides, “I can walk fine, it’s just a sprain.”

The look Jane gives you is a little terrifying, and you kind of see the resemblance to Jade suddenly. “You’re not walking on that ankle, mister! Not until we get you a splint, and even then I expect you
to take it easy.”

You shoot Bro an appealing look, but you’re not sure why you expected him to be on your side because the asshole doesn’t even let you argue, just hooks an arm under your knees and scoops you up in a princess carry because it’s not like the situation was embarrassing enough, oh no. He couldn’t even give you the dignity of a piggy back ride, the ass. You thump him on the chest on principle, but he just smirks a bit and adjusts his grip. He’s lucky you’re too distracted by the pain to really put up a fight.

Now that you’re not laying on the ground, you can see Karkat hovering nearby, expression cycling through guilt, concern, and fury at a rate that’s almost impressive, and you can’t resist the urge to poke him. “Dude, I can’t believe you made me jump off a cliff.”

Kaboom. “How was I supposed to know that you’d spontaneously lost the ability to fly?” Karkat screeches. “I am not in fact in possession of any psychic and/or precognitive skills, so you can shove it up your wastechute, Strider.” He goes storming off, muttering under his breath, and hey, at least he’s too mad to feel guilty now.

Bro starts after him, and you can’t really ignore the fact that he’s carrying you anymore. You should be irritated, but you can’t really hold onto it. Instead you’re sort of weirdly happy, and after a brief internal battle you give up and rest your head on his shoulder.

You think maybe you dozed off a little, because the next thing you know he’s setting you down at one of the picnic tables, and you can’t help but panic a little because now that he knows you’re okay that distance is going to come back and you can't deal with that, you can't. You don't know what the fuck has happened to you but it's not like it's about to unhappen anytime soon, and you guess maybe it's time to deal with the fact that you've turned into a clingy little shit.

Or maybe that's just the concussion speaking.

Bro crouches down in front of you, crossing his arms over his knees, and you bite the inside of your lip and force yourself to ignore any and all Bro-related crises. "You okay?"

He's not asking about your injuries, because Bro's not an idiot. Truth is, you're not really sure if you're okay. It's weird, but the idea of losing your powers hadn't occurred to you, really, although you guess it kind of makes sense. It's not like your powers are something you should really use, even if they are still kicking around.

You shrug. "I'll live."

You'll adapt. You've gotten pretty good at that by now.

Bro gives you a look that you can't really read, before dropping his shades back on his nose and you guess that's it. Emergency over, Bro's going to go back to being Bro, and you're not gonna do anything about it because you still can't even figure out why it upsets you.

Jane throws together a makeshift splint from some sticks she found in the trees, and you're kind of impressed. Just because her powers allowed her to heal people didn't necessarily mean she'd know how to do non-magical first aid. It takes a while, and by the time she gets the thing in place around your ankle, the sun is already coming up.

She plops on the bench beside you with a sigh as you examine her handiwork. "Nice. Where'd you learn to do this?"

Jane smiles at you. "Oh, I took some outdoor survival classes before..." she waves a hand vaguely, because it's probably weird to say 'before the world ended'. 
"Handy," you say, because you really don't want to think about how much trouble you're going to be in without healing powers or a doctor of some kind.

The two of you lapse into silence for a minute, before Jane says, "You're lucky, you know."

That makes you snort, because you aren't feeling particularly lucky at the moment, but you guess she's not wrong. "Yeah, coulda cracked my head like an overripe melon."

"No— well, yes, but that's not what I meant." She twists in her seat, and you follow her gaze to where Bro has his head stuck in John and Jade's tent. You can't hear what's being said from here, but you'd bet money it's bitchy. "I meant him."

Your stomach does a weird flippy knot thing that you really don't like. You want to deflect but all you can muster is a shrug because you know you're lucky, you just wish it wasn't so complicated. The look she gives you is alarmingly knowing, and you aren't giving her the chance to talk about that, no way, so you blurt, "Losing our powers, huh?"

Smooth, Strider.

Despite your terrible delivery, it seems to have the desired effect of distracting Jane from dangerous topics. She frowns. "It is pretty unsettling."

You shrug. Yeah, unsettling is probably as good a word as any. "We'll be fine. I mean, your ability to zap people back to health would have been nice to have around, but for the most part, I don't think we need them." You kind of surprise yourself by believing it. "We had them so that we could fight a battle that's over now, y'know?"

You can't say you'd miss the dead Daves, although you're pretty sure you're gonna miss the flying. Not as much as John is going to though, and you crane your neck to look over at where he's crawling out of his tent like a mindless sleep-zombie. You wonder if he knows yet. Probably not, and he's taking this whole troll thing so hard you kinda hope the universe or whatever just leaves him alone for a while. He deserves it.

Jane nods a bit. "You might be right." She's quiet for a moment before giving your arm a pat. "I think I'm going to go back to sleep for a bit. Stay off that leg, okay?"

You offer her a lazy salute. "You got it, doc."

As soon as Jane's gone, John deposits himself in the spot she vacated, and you say, "I'm popular today."

John's hair is sticking up at all sorts of weird angles and he shoots you an amused look. "Only today?"

You lean back against the edge of the table. "Well shit, John, of course I'm popular all the time but I was shooting for humility dude."

He rolls his eyes, about to snap back a weak retort you're sure, but then he pauses, giving you a once over with a concerned little wrinkle between his eyes. "You okay?"

"Don't start crying on me man, I'm indestructible." John frowns and you sigh, relenting. "Sprained ankle and some bruises, no big."

"How did you fall off a cliff?" he asks, and yeah, you guess that would be the question, wouldn't it. You almost tell him Karkat pushed you, but since Karkat isn't actually around to rage at you for it,
you go with the truth. "Found out I can't fly any more the hard way."

John instantly goes levitating an inch off his seat, and you don't miss the relief on his face. He drops back down with a soft plop. "You can't?"

"Nope." You try to be matter-of-fact about it. Getting all upset over things isn't going to bring your powers back. "Jane can't heal anymore either, which is why I still look like ground beef."

"It's just a few scratches, you don't look like— wait what? She can't?" John worries his lip, concerned. "That's... not good."

You're pretty sure he's thinking of Cronus, because if Jane's powers had died a little sooner, you'd already be one man short. Cronus might be obnoxious, but he didn't exactly deserve a permanent case of dead for it. "We'll make do, man."

Your reassurance doesn't do anything to rid John of the concerned frown. "Yeah, I know. It's just a lot, you know? This doesn't feel like much of a reward, and I'm worried we're gonna screw it up." He doesn't look at you, just stares at his feet. "There's so much to do, and no one knows what they're doing, especially not me. I don't even have any useful skills."

Yeah, that's a concern you understand. You ignore the pain in your ribs and bump shoulders with him. "Neither do I, man. Neither does Karkat, or half of this sorry group, really. We'll learn. I mean, we've already done the impossible, Egbert, what's a little survival compared to that?"

When John looks at you, he's still frowning, but it's thoughtful. "Yeah, when you put it like that, it's kind of hard to argue. I guess it's just weird, all of our problems are so basic now, like what we're going to eat, and where we're going to sleep."

It seems almost trivial, after everything you've been through. "Luckily we've got a hell of a friendleader."

John beams at you. "Co-friendleader! Don't forget about Karkat and Jane! And I guess Kankri, but so far he's been kind of useless." He glances around like he's afraid Kankri is going to appear from thin air just to hassle him. Given what you know about the guy, that's probably a pretty valid concern.

The two of you sit for a minute, shoulder to shoulder, before John sighs heavily. "I should probably go. Unlike some people I didn't throw myself off a cliff to get out of work."

You snort. "You've seen right through my plan, Egbert. While you're off slaving away, I'll be living the good life right here, pampered hand and foot, drinking lemonade and laughing at your misfortune."

"Yeah, I pretty much figure that's how it's going to go." John stands and stretches, then leans down to give your head an awkward hug. "Try not to fall off any more cliffs, okay? I'm not sure how we'd live without you."

You shove him off and resist the urge to smile. "Like I'd do anything that might result in the tragic loss of the only cool thing in your life. Get out of here before Bro comes looking."

When John's gone and you're the only one left, you glance around. There's a bit of movement, mostly Bro and John rousing some of the others, but no one's near enough to be paying any attention to you. Once you're sure there's no one to see, you take a deep breath and pull your time tables from your sylladex. They levitate a little drunkenly for one moment, two, before they clatter to the dirt and lie there, like so much inanimate plastic.
You guess that tells you all you need to know.

Chapter End Notes

If you're curious, I have a bit of a writing update on tumblr [here](https://example.com).

Works inspired by this one: [Noisy Pantsless Insomnia](https://example.com) by [complexQuanta](https://example.com)

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