A Lullaby For Gods

by SociopathicArchangel

Summary

Five gods rent a flat in Manhattan. That sounded like the start of a bad joke.

In which Loki Silvertongue is not the only lost god who falls to a world that isn’t his own.
A Young God Stands in His Bedroom

He enters the flat just in time for something to shatter. It’s followed by Jade’s loud, indignant, “John!” and a door slams open as wind races past it, rushes down the stairs, passes him and slips out the still-open front door, carrying the sound of laughter with it.

Loki doesn’t sigh. He does close the door behind him.

One of the doors in the hallway opens and the landlady pokes her head out. She looks up, then turns to him. She smiles. He gives a small one back.

Jade is cursing upstairs.

“No more prank?”

There’s a shriek.

“Yes,” he says. “Although I am quite curious as to what he’s done this time to warrant such a response.”

Mrs. Harrison chuckles. “As long as you paint or repair the walls if he’s done anything to them.”

“Then I hope it will not come to that,” Loki says, “Since John will perhaps…see it fit to give the décor his own brand of improvement.”

The old lady makes a face.

Loki inclines his head slightly before making his way up the stairs. The door to his flat is open, and from where he is, he can see something sticky and pink splattered all over the carpet. Jade is still yelling.

John is definitely cleaning the mess up when he gets home.

He pauses by the doorway to see Jade sitting on the floor with her hair, ears, shoulders and arms covered in whatever the pink goo her brother has created is. Rose is beside her, gloves on, trying to take out as much of the mess as possible.

Jade’s aforementioned ears – the dog ones – flick back as she hisses when Rose accidentally pulls out her hair along with the pink goo.

Rose sighs, puts the goo and hair in the plastic bag beside her, and looks up at Loki. She inclines her head politely. “Welcome back, Loki.”

Jade looks up too, her annoyed expression clearing up for a moment as she gives a little wave. “Heya,” she says. She pulls a bit of hardened goo and takes her hair with it. She hisses again.

“I am going to kill him,” Jade says through clenched teeth as she tosses the gunk into the plastic. Rose hums. “It’ll be a Just death, it’ll stick,” Jade says.

“What did your brother do this time?” Loki finally asks, crossing his arms and leaning on the doorframe.

“Tripwire,” Jade says, “Connected to a bucket of…this –” she flaps her arms uselessly to indicate the sticky pink goo all over her shirt. Some of it drips to the carpet. Nobody but John is going to
clean that, Loki’s making sure of it. “— that was hung on the ceiling.”

Loki looks up. True enough, there’s an overturned bucket held only by a bunch of thick strings attached to a miniature pulley system.

“He calls it Tubby Custard,” Rose adds.

Jade snorts. Loki frowns, confused, but doesn’t pursue it.

“I think it’s just hot gum.”

“Where did he even find hot gum?” Jade seethes. She lets out a cry as another lock of hair comes away with the goo.

“Factories, I assume,” Rose says. “He has unlimited access to the city.”

“So do I,” Jade says. “I’m making sure he knows that.”

“Did the teletubbies puke in here or something.”

All of them turn to the hallway, where Dave stands with a plastic bag from one of 7-elevens around. Loki tracks the rapid movement of his eyes from behind his shades as he takes in the carpet, Jade and Rose and then the ceiling.

“Egbert?” he asks.

The girls nod.

“Hot gum,” Rose repeats.

“Ugh.” Dave’s nose scrunches up. “That’s nasty.”

“He is cleaning this up alone,” Loki says. The corner of Dave’s mouth lifts just very slightly.

“I’m making him pay.” Jade goes right back to seething. She crosses her arms, not caring about the mess on the sleeves. The shirt is ruined anyway.

Dave moves past Loki, giving him a small nod, and makes sure not to step on any of the gum on the floor. One puddle makes him stretch his legs too much and he almost imbalances, but he quickly moves his feet and he steadies. Loki still doesn’t move from the doorway.

“I’m going to go all around Earth and destroy everything that has to do with Ghostbusters.”

Dave’s head swivels to her direction. Rose is smiling. Loki lets out an amused huff, lips turning up. He does love Jade’s mean streak when she’s pushed.

“Aw, man, you’re gonna break his little nerdy ghostbusting heart,” Dave says. “Can you really look at that bucktootheed puppy face and kick it?”

“I will knock those buckteeth out at this point, I swear to god.”

Dave snickers. “I’m staying out of this.”

Rose hums again. “Neutral.”

They all turn to Loki. The god straightens and follows Dave’s example of maneuvering around the
gum puddles, except with much more grace than the younger man. He doesn’t imbalance even once.

“So long as he leaves me and mine out of it.”

Jade grins and raises an eyebrow. “And if he doesn’t?”

“He will be eating nothing but cake for a week.”

Rose’s head snaps up. Dave looks disgusted. Jade throws her head back and cackles.

“Dude.” Dave adjusts his sunglasses. His mouth twitches and his shoulders shake, trying to suppress a laugh. “Harsh.”

“It will be Betty Crocker.”

Jade laughs harder. It’s a good thing she’s near-immortal, or else she would have suffocated.

He had let go and he had fallen. Fallen and fallen and fallen for such a long time that he’d forgotten what breathing was like and if he even remembered how to do it. If he needed it. (It felt like he didn’t. He didn’t feel like he needed to see either when everything was just dark dark dark black black black empty nothingness this is where you belong in the empty in the nothing what are you doing here little princerling)

And then something had reached out. Tendrils. Tendrils of magic, faint, but he had known, in a small moment of lucidity, that whatever it led to, it was powerful. And it startled him so much in his nothingness-not-existence where everything was empty and there was nothing, that the mere presence of something had his instinct rearing, screaming DANGER and GET AWAY and he was pressed with a suffocating need to get somewhere safe that he thrashed. Clawed into his core, into his magic, into the something of nothing and willed himself to be somewhere very far away. As far away as he can from whatever it was that was surrounding him —

The concrete was hard as his spine slammed against it. Loki’s back arched and he let out a cry of pain, eyes screwing shut as everything crashed against his senses. The feeling of tiny pricks all over his exposed skin, over his face; the chill that was slowly seeping into the leather armor he was wearing; the horrible, horrible smell of too many things at once; his blood roaring in his ears from his head getting knocked on the ground; and pain, everywhere, all at once, his spine, his back, his limbs, all twisted in ways they shouldn’t be, and warmth pooling underneath him until he realized that the warmth was from his own blood.

He had stayed there until he passed out.

The next time he’d woken up, he had taken a few minutes to register that above him was Sky, below him was Ground, the drops of water falling on him was Rain and that it was cold.

The sky was the darker shade of blue of pre-dawn. He tried to move his limbs and found that they had righted themselves. There was still blood underneath him, but it was no longer warm and most of it had been washed away by the rain.

For the first time in years, Loki sat up. He took the time to observe his surroundings, Alley, and after a few minutes of struggling to stand, he settled for supporting his body weight on the wall beside him. He hobbled to the mouth of the alley and looked around, thanking the Norns that there was no one around to see him in such a state.
His memory was still a little fuzzy, still dredging itself up whatever void it’d decided to hole in when he was still floating in nothing, but he could identify that he was in a human city. Midgard.

Finding himself too tired to be displeased by his location, he racked up his brain on the best course of action. A pulse of magic helped him change his clothes, making his head spin for a moment, but he managed. He unsteadily walked under overhangs, still using walls to support himself, and found a hotel. Thankfully, he had enough magic to falsify a card and let the machine accept it. On a whim, he booked for a week, as it would be a hassle to continuously try to find shelter.

He collapsed on the bed of his room, not bothering to clean up or change his clothes. He didn’t wake up for at least three days.

Once he was functioning and his brain didn’t feel like it was stuck under tons of ice, he assessed his situation, trying very hard to keep his discomfort of being on Midgard from affecting his decision. Cloaking himself from Heimdall’s sight was done as soon as he had his magic properly returned, although the act had probably lost its intended effect since he’d been on Earth for more than 24 hours uncloaked. So far though, no one had come for him (no one will come for him, bastard son - ) and if he moved fast enough he might be able to evade further surveillance.

Midgard was also vast, and unfamiliar to Asgardians. It was, strategically speaking, the perfect place to hide.

And since his safety was his top priority – his only priority, as he still needed to sort the rest out – it would be more favorable for him to stay.

He did. Falsifying more information was easy enough, and he bounced from human to human who was kind enough to offer help to a bewildered stranger, taking advantage of said kindness, until he was able to settle himself in a small, but polished and furnished flat under a Mrs. Harrison. The first few months of not drawing attention to himself were easy, as he spent most of his time recovering the rest of his magic and learning everything he could about Midgard. History alone was a wide topic to cover.

And then, four months and thirteen days since Loki fell to Earth, he felt it.

Magic. Overwhelming, powerful magic that tainted the wind itself, making it suffocating for him to breathe for a few hours, but the humans hadn’t noticed. In fact, they seemed to be breathing better despite the polluted Manhattan air around them.

A few weeks later, the news even reported that the air was observed to have a large amount of pollution lifted from it, and the toxicity was lessened significantly. And if that didn’t raise alarm bells in Loki’s head, then the feeling of that powerful magic getting closer was.

It wasn’t in the general area, that much he knew. It was probably on another island, but it was moving, and it was moving fast. The magic around the air was condensing though. The effects still lasted, and it appeared to have bought the planet’s poisoned air some time before it turned deadly, several centuries at most, but the magic itself was gathering. It had been scattered from its source and now said source was recovering and moving.

Towards where Loki was. Scarily fast.

He couldn’t think of anyone in Asgard whom he personally knew that controlled the winds. Or even had magic this powerful enough to affect the air itself. Magic was not looked at in pleasant light in the Realm Eternal.
Was that it, then? Did the AllFather send someone with association to Asgard who knew magic, incredibly powerful magic, to hunt him down? Someone he didn’t know so that he had no idea how he might exploit their weaknesses?

He set up more cloaking and protection wards around the flat that night. It never hurt to be careful. There was a chance that the new mage had less experience than Loki, or that they weren’t here for him at all. Midgard was a loud little realm and attracted all kinds of trouble.

He debated moving cities for a while, but decided that the best move would be to stay put. He was as hidden as anyone in the Nine could – he was cloaked against Heimdall, for Odin’s sake – and if he moved, if he exposed himself or even showed the slightest action of running, he would draw attention to himself.

Two days later, the magic was definitely in the city. Loki stayed in his flat.

It was a week before he decided it wasn’t looking for him. It wasn’t even doing anything that remotely looked like it was scouring. It was just…moving. From place to place. Restless.

And he was also running out of food, and so as not to freak anyone out or alert it of his presence, he had to walk.

That was how he met John Egbert.

The boy had nearly barreled into him on his way back to his flat, and Loki confirmed that he was neither Asgardian nor after the god of mischief. For one, he was dressed in a ridiculous outfit that was blue all over and a very impractical windsock hoodie. He was also looking for people named Jade, Dave and Rose.

Loki had told him he knew none of them and brushed the boy aside.

“You felt like magic,” John had said. Loki stopped in his tracks. “I thought you might be them.”

For the next few days, John followed him around like a puppy, and Loki had threatened him with death several times if he wasn’t going to stop. John had blinked and laughed at the threats. When Loki tried to slam the door in his face, John turned into wind itself and let himself inside the flat anyway.

That was when the keeping-out wards got put up. John took to hanging outside his door, befriending the rest of the building’s inhabitants in the process, and hovering outside his window. When asked if he had anything better to do, John shrugged.

“Not really. I don’t know where the others are. I can’t feel them. And this isn’t my universe,” he’d said. Then adjusted his glasses. “At least I think it’s not. I mean, I definitely remember Earth being destroyed.”

That had piqued Loki’s interest. But John was still unwelcome. And still infuriatingly outside of his flat every time.

Whenever he went for a supply run (Oh, how the mighty have fallen. Once, he had gone out of his home to hunt, to conquer, and now he was getting out of his home to go to Walmart to pick up a box of tea, a carton of eggs, and a box of milk.), John tagged along. They attracted attention due to the boy’s ridiculous outfit, but after the first minutes of shock, everyone just gave them a wide berth.

John helped with the shopping, surprisingly. And looked at the cake boxes (Betty Crocker, Loki noted) like they were the most disgusting thing he’d ever laid his eyes on.
Eventually, shopping-helping turned to helping Loki out with several Midgardian things he didn’t quite get, like majority of the realm’s electronic appliances, clothing (the casual part of it), pop culture references and food. That microwaves were evil and that he needed to get a real oven was one of John’s first lessons.

Since the boy couldn’t quite help with a lot of stuff in the flat with the wards, a number of those were taken down (just the ones that kept him out, actually).

Loki couldn’t remember when John actually moved in. He figured it was sometime around his neighbors started calling the boy his little mutant brother (the black hair and mischievous disposition, apparently), and then his landlady said that he had to put the boy on the lease if he was sticking around.

The rest just fell into place after that.

Six months and twelve days after Loki fell, another burst of magic fell to Midgard. John disappeared for a while and returned with who he introduced to Loki as his twin sister, Jade.

(“Twin paradox sister, I think?”)

A month after that, the magic pulse was stronger, and this time the twins came back with another set of siblings. Dave and Rose.

(“Paradox ectobiological twin,” Rose said.

“Slime sister,” Dave said.)

They were curious children, all of whom harbored magic cores near parallel to his own. Dressed in childish outfits. And could fly. And had somehow claimed his flat for their own. Loki had been too busy being fascinated by them to notice that they camped out in his living room every night, and that John’s presence during shopping runs had turned to four adolescents following him to Walmart.

Mrs. Harrison, once again, pointed out the lease.

Still, there was something to be gained here. This much magic in these children who happened to fall under his roof – if he were to be friends with them, should the need arise, they could aid him. They seemed to be loyal.

When they were asked what sort of mages they were and where they had come from (Loki added them to the rent, it was only fair), John had made a face.

“M’not a mage,” he’d said, “I’m an Heir.”

Loki raised an eyebrow.

“It’s a title,” Rose explained. “Each of us have titles correlating to our class and aspect, which indicates what we can do as god tiers.”

It figured. Of course they were gods.

“I’m an Heir of Breath,” John said. Loki’s mind worked out the implications. That explained the magic in the wind when he fell to Earth.

“Witch of Space.”

“Knight of Time.”
“I am a Seer of Light.”

“We’re from…another universe, you might say,” Jade said. “Another reality. This is definitely not our earth. It feels different. We’re out of place, but…at the same time not.”

Loki’d seen stranger. And the concept of other realities wasn’t foreign to him. A lot of books on magic had proposed the theory of travelling to other realities by complex spells.

“What about you, what are you?” Dave asked, straight-faced.


Dave’s eyes widened behind his shades – Loki could see it clearly. His vision wasn’t as weak as humans’ tended to be – and Dave leaned back slightly. The god grinned. At least someone recognized him.

“Shit.”

Five gods rent a flat in Manhattan. That sounded like the start of a bad joke.

John does clean out the gum out of the carpet. Nobody helps him.

The next morning, Dave stomps out of the bathroom without a shirt, holding a dryer in one hand with chocolate powdered milk all over his face. He doesn’t have his shades when he stomps into the kitchen, where Rose and Loki are making breakfast since it was their turn.

John grins, rising out of his chair while Dave throws the dryer at him. John turns to wind before it can hit him, of course, and escapes through the open windows, cackling.

Jade chooses this moment to enter the kitchen, freshly dressed, looking smug as all hell.

Dave is still glaring at where Egbert was. He straightens after a moment and tries to wipe the powder off of him.

“Ghostbusters goes?” Jade asks as she opens the fridge, not even looking at Dave.

He makes a small angry noise and gives a stiff nod. “Ghostbusters goes.”

Well, if the Avengers suddenly find themselves on a mission to find where all of the missing Ghostbusters merchandise have gone, Loki isn’t interfering as long as neither Dave or Jade get caught.

Tony Stark stares at the reports on the screen. The team – Avengers, whatever, they’d just gotten together to stop that one insane Amo-something lady who had a thing for Thor and they didn’t really have a time to argue about group names – had been called in when S.H.I.E.L.D got massive readings of energy from all over the globe, too fast to be caught by teams of agents who were arriving via quinjet. By the time the agents had gotten there, there was another energy spike across the world and there was nothing they could find to indicate what had caused it.

So the Avengers (minus Thor; Asgard business) were assembled to see if they could catch whatever
it was. They couldn’t. It moved way too fast.

When the team had been brought in for debriefing, the damage caused by the energy spikes was…

“You’re serious, right?” Tony turns to Nick Fury, who is living up to his name as he tries to drill into Tony’s head with his single eye.

Clint is snickering. Even Steve looks like he wants to laugh.

For some reason, the Avengers had unknowingly assembled to stop the global destruction of Ghostbusters DVDs and several other merch. And failed, of course.

The last time Loki had gone together with them on an excursion, it was when they’d all complained about camping in the living room and fighting each other for the couch, and so to remedy this, they all went out to buy beds. Since none of the children were familiar with this Manhattan, Loki had taken them out, provided they didn’t wear their ridiculous pajamas. They were more than happy to comply.

Jade still wore a black and blue dress that had stars on it. But it was a step down from god tier clothes. (Also, Loki was fond of dressing to impress. Jade being his favorite started early on.)

They’d gotten the beds after four hours walking around the mall and for the first time in history, Loki felt the incredible strain of being a parent. A parent to god-children. One of whom would suddenly start talking and not stop, another who would laugh at the strangest things ever, another who wanted to make a house at the pet shop, and the last who was thankfully the voice of reason out of all of them.

“We might take some time to wind down from…everything we’ve been through. Overstimulation when you’re used to so little can make one’s mental state a bit frazzled,” Rose had said. Loki’d understood that. So he let them be.

Except when they got home, they were arguing about rooms again.

The flat only had one guest room, and it would not fit four beds, and nobody wanted to be roommates with John Egbert when he was overexcited about being alive and being on Earth and was in the mood for pranks.

Loki rented the other unit. With permission, Jade renovated.

As for other outside walks, they’d relegated chores. The upside of having four new wards was that Loki no longer had to go shopping himself. So supply run was usually down to Rose and Jade, because if Dave did it, there would be an overabundance of apple juice; if it was John, they wouldn’t have anything to do with Betty Crocker. Frankly, the boys were useless.

Every now and then, Loki went to the library to borrow books. A few weeks into the kids staying at his flat, Rose started coming with.

Today, though, everybody’s decided to come with him. It’s been nine months since Loki fell, about five since John arrived, three since Jade and two since Dave and Rose. Everyone still isn’t very good with dealing with Earth, mostly due to culture shock (“How do they not have sylladexes?”), and every now and then, everyone looks at the sky like they’re expecting something to fall out of it. For different reasons, of course.
Also, there is the fact that a month ago, Amora had come with a Chitauri army that arrived via Tesseract. They were lucky enough to not have their flat destroyed. (Also, Loki had a hard time telling all of them to stay down, because so much was going wrong.)

Everyone’s jumpy. The kids might have abandonment issues. So Loki doesn’t fault them for following him in an honest-to-god line to the library.

They’re mostly quiet, thankfully. He makes his way to the now-familiar history section and pulls out a few books. Rose is in her usual beanbag seat by the kid’s section no one really uses. Jade is browsing the books and has chosen to sit in front of a shelf, a dog book opened to a page of a huge white hound; she looks wistful and the ears on top of her head are drooping. Dave has a stack of magazines and newspapers and goes over to sit beside his sister, claiming a red beanbag. John is still browsing.

A moment later, Jade grabs a bright green bean bag and sits beside the fair-haired siblings.

After half an hour, John claims the blue one and grabs one of Dave’s magazines.

Dave carefully kicks a dark green beanbag towards Loki’s direction. He ignores it.

Loki borrows one book on Egyptian art history, Rose borrows two on mythology and one on fantasy fiction and Dave tries to borrow the entire plethora of magazines and newspapers he’s chosen. He’s not allowed. He settles for one of those ‘year in review’ books.

They go for lunch in a little café. They make a spectacle of themselves when Dave suddenly transitions from talking to ranting to rapping and then Jade starts drumming beats on the table. John sings a tune and Rose harmonizes. Loki leans his head on the glass of the window they’re seated beside and looks at the sky as it starts to rain. The kids don’t stop singing.

He wonders where in the time of being really angry to really tired did he resign himself to the fate of living and putting up with these self-made gods, but he’s not complaining. They’re decent kids, and they have no qualms with trickery or magic. And they would be an advantage to his side.

The library outings become frequent since then. Loki does not have to call them, since everyone keeps a schedule of when he goes there and they get themselves ready and tag along. Somewhere along the way, it starts to be a ritual. At exactly three in the afternoon on a Thursday, all of them go to the library and read until dinner. Afterwards, there’s a fight to see if they eat out or have dinner at home. (The fight mostly consists of rock-paper-scissors, winner getting three. With Loki constantly conjuring credit cards, they didn’t have to worry about money.)

Dave Strider reads and reads and reads. Magazines, newspapers, almanacs, Guinness record books, year books, and every now and then he reads one or two of Loki’s chosen history books or asks for the cliff notes version of it.

“This universe’s timeline is different,” he says. “I can feel it. I just want to know everything about it. And – it’s 2012. My Earth didn’t get to live beyond 2009. I wanna know.”

So he reads. And he thinks it’s a little rad that mutants take on a whole new meaning in this universe other than just a few extra appendages, or a lack of melanin, or different eye color (or blood color, he thinks and tries not to dwell on it), and that they aren’t as despised as he’d expected them to be. He finds the Avengers a little funny, because – okay, as far as ridiculous outfits go, god tier pajamas were definitely topnotch, but at least they were comfy.
He reads articles about the New York invasion, about survivor accounts, about the super friends and the heartwarming stories of family being separated and thought dead and reunions.

(And he tries not to think that what these people have gone through is nothing compared to what he and his friends have. Nothing compared to being thirteen and watching as meteors rained down the sky and knowing that there was nothing you could do but save yourself. That everyone in your city was doomed. Nothing compared to the Reckoning destroying your entire planet. Nothing compared to years and years and years of jumping around time until you didn’t know what came first and what came after. Nothing compared to never getting to say goodbye to your parents and meeting a version of them that wasn’t really them. Nothing compared to seeing your friends die over and over again and remembering. Nothing compared to universes destroyed and scratched and put together wrong left and right. Nothing nothing nothing –

Dave Strider tries not to be selfish. But he’s tired. And he’s angry. And he’s lost in a new universe that isn’t his home and will never be his home and he doesn’t know what to do. He doesn’t know how to be angry. His Bro never taught him. His Bro taught him how to not to be anything other than a warrior raised for a battlefield.)

He finds that he doesn’t quite care if he’s a little careless with his sunglasses as long as he’s in the flat. He’s had doubts that Loki’s had super-vision for a while, and when it was confirmed, there wasn’t really anything to be done about it. His friends have seen more than red eyes. (Like him, bleeding on the floor, dying, fighting, crying, being a generally pathetic mess who couldn’t keep himself from flinching whenever he opened the fridge or the oven or the cupboard, jumping around puppets, crying over a dead brother-father who he didn’t love but didn’t hate.)

He watches the news and doesn’t ask whenever Loki keeps to the house whenever there’s news of Thor being on Earth, or if the Trickster god feels his presence. Dave knows a thing or two about fathers you could never please. About brothers who shone so bright that you didn’t notice you were drowning in their shadow until you couldn’t breathe.

(None of them asked either, but during the first few times that they got confused, Rose had whispered that Thor is Loki’s brother. The god confirmed in a short, clipped “Yes.”)

He tries to make himself comfortable and he finds fun and laughs when he wants to because he knows how important that is now. He still catches himself putting on that blank face, but when he feels like laughing his head off at something, he doesn’t hesitate. This world is safe as it can be. This is a world without the Game. This is a new life.

Dave Strider is working hard on being happy.

John Egbert doesn’t sleep so much nowadays.

He doesn’t need to. He hasn’t needed to for a very long time. The day he died on that quest bed was the last time he had ever needed sleep. (And if he thanks Vriska for making his demise as painless as possible, nobody needs to know.)

But it’s not so much as he doesn’t need to as much as he also doesn’t want to. Because if he does, then he can see it – can see the Condesce arriving in her ship while his friends fall over and kill each other, can see Jade getting crushed by her own tower, can see Dave getting stabbed twice, can see Karkat falling in the lava, can see Terezi and Gamzee choke and claw at each other, can see Rose die saying goodbye to her mother, can see Roxy cry because she feels so, so alone, can see Dirk blame
himself for everything that has happened.

And John – John has messed up so much. Terezi had instructed him on what to change, and he did that, but somewhere along the way of it actually working and going well, Vriska alive and Gamzee subdued and everyone good and well on the meteor and on the way to fighting Lord English and Jack Noir and the Batterwitch, they’d hit a rip and suddenly everything was blinding and he was falling, falling, falling and then scattering into the wind he really was, right before he hit the ground.

Suddenly Earth was well again. It was around him. It was dirty and it was hot, but it was Earth.

But it wasn’t his Earth. He was lucky enough to follow instinct and hone in on the nearest point of magic at that time, which turned out to be the God of Mischief who was now their sort-of guardian.

He doesn’t know where the others are and is thankful that Dave, Jade and Rose are here with him. He’s thankful Loki is letting them stay. To be fair, he was quite desperate and clingy when he first fell around here.

He notices that Dave is trying to catch up where this Earth was different and where they’d left it off since it’s been years since 2009. He reads along when he’s bored. He thinks that with just a few alterations, this would have been where their Earth was.

This Earth is fascinating, and he’s glad that the Ghostbusters still exist in this universe, but is bummed that he’d pissed his friends enough that they wiped out every single one (he checked and then sulked) of its merchandise. He figures he had it coming. But he was getting restless. He could only pace and look at the sky waiting for something, anything, to fall out of it (the Condescension, the Reckoning, Lord English, Jack Noir) before he got stir crazy and decided to relieve stress by setting up a few good pranks.

That was a perk of living with Loki. God of Mischief, and John’s new hero next to Colonel Sassacre, and he was totally fine with playing a good joke or two.

Sometimes John thinks Loki is as lost as he is. That’s okay. At least they were all lost together. He had a feeling the others were lost too. None of them belonged to this world. This was just a tiny safehouse for them.

The whole Amora deal freaked him out for a while (the Condescension, the Condescension, the Condescension is here) and he’d turned to wind the moment the others, and a few civilians they’d run into, were safe. He didn’t materialize for about two days. Then Jade dragged him to their living room and distracted him with the Avengers. She liked Iron Man. He liked the Hulk. Dave shrugged. Rose said she would have cheered for Amora if the Enchantress hadn’t destroyed the buildings near them, so if Loki was an Avenger then he’d be her favorite. Loki snorted. (And John is so onto the ‘secret’ lessons he’s giving Rose. He just knows it. Two magic-loving nerds nerding it out. He loves them both.)

John sometimes goes out at nights, flying unseen throughout the skies of New York, just taking everything in. Sometimes he doesn’t return for days, although he makes sure that everyone knows he’s going to a…it’s definitely not a roadtrip, but it’s a worldwide travel for days on end. Not everyone can fly around unseen like him. Loki still loves his seclusion. So they don’t push.

He doesn’t tell them he’s been around Stark tower more than three times. Jade would love the place.

Rose Lalonde sees.
It’s hard not to; it’s her job, it’s her title. But being on this new Earth has made things overwhelming.

She can see it – Light, Fortune, Fate – all around them; around everyone whom they pass on the streets; around their neighbors; around the children that run and stick their hands into unsuspecting pockets. So much light, swirling in and out and around their heads. Some have had Fortune smile on them, others have not.

Where in the meteor, the only thing she could do was sense and see which course of action would bring out the most favorable result, here on this new Earth, she can see fortune itself on the beings that inhabit it. She thinks it is because of the Game – she was a necessary asset in order for their sessions to strategize, but it couldn’t be giving her everyone’s fate-reading because that wasn’t necessary. But as a Seer, it should be in her capacity, and now that they were out, here it was.

Sometimes she understands why Loki likes to hole himself up in their flat.

It’s a small mercy that she can only sense her companions’ fates, Loki’s included. That may be something afforded to gods – to creatures so long lived and with so wide a range that anything and everything could affect their fortunes. She stays in the house and only goes out when necessary, and preferably with her friends.

None of them have been very smiled-upon by fate. All of them had lost something – them in the game, and Loki somewhere sometime he does not want to say. Rose does not press. Rose will not press. Above all, she understands the pang of loss.

Loki is a curious creature, and she knows he is not lying when he claims he is the God of Mischief. That comes with other titles, she has read that much – God of Lies, of Deceit; Bringer of Ragnarok; Mother of Monsters; God of Fire. But also, it comes with another side to the coin – God of Life, of Mind; Bringer of Beginnings; Bringer of Fate. A deciding factor for the scales of Fortune to tip. He is, in his own way, their counterpart in this universe – they brought the end of the universe with them and were tasked to birth a new one; he is to be the bringer of Ragnarok, the cleansing of everything before the universe starts all over again, or the one to ensure it is never brought back, or even that it never comes to pass.

If there is anything Rose has learned from the Game, it is that fate is never set, not for as long as people pull their own strings.

Loki hasn’t had much favor in that department, for everyone seems to want to pull his strings for him, and maybe that is the source of the heavy cloud of drowning around him. They all have that same cloud around them. Jade hides it with her smile. John hides it with his pranks. Dave hides it behind his aviators and that mask which has been crafted from birth. Rose goes about her day and avoids it as much as possible. She does not talk about her mother, she does not talk about Kanaya, she does not talk about the friends she misses dearly and the hope that she will see them again. (If they landed here and found each other, what were the odds of everyone being able to find themselves as well?)

Loki is like her. He doesn’t talk either, but there is that somber gait to him, that hint that he might have once walked like a prince, but was now nothing more than a runaway, scarred by too much and wary of too many. Rose sees the purple lights, numerous, swarming him whenever they watch the news and he catches sight of Thor.

When, one night, she catches him watching the late news about another attack taken care of by the Avengers, she asks him why. She doesn’t expect him to answer, of course. But she knows Loki can sense her ability to see and knows that even if both of them didn’t want secrets out in the open, she would know. She could see. It is not something she can turn off unless she wanted to be blinded, and
even then, Terezi was a powerful seer despite her lack of sight.

“He is my brother and at the same time, he is not,” Loki says. He doesn’t turn to her. “I loved him.”

Rose looks down. “I still do.”

The purple swirls of betrayal pulse and brighten. And then they’re joined by gold. By blue. So much blue that it drowns out the rest of it. The heavy cloud lifts for a moment, and then it settles again.

Rose nods and doesn’t pry. At the very least she knows that Loki is fiercely loyal, until you give him a reason not to be.

She doesn’t sleep well either. More than once she’s caught John flying out, restless, and she doesn’t call him out on it or tell the others. It is his choice to tell. She knows the restlessness and she knows that they’re all unable to sleep for the same reason. John was also there with her when they found their parents dead.

(She hopes she never meets Jack Noir again. For both their sakes.)

Their resident Trickster is also on the no-sleep bandwagon, so she asks if he would be willing to give magic lessons.

He gets this look in his eyes that she reads as suspicion, sadness, laced with curiosity, and a childish, childish hope. Rose almost reaches out and tells him she’s being very sincere, because she knows that look of rejection everywhere. (Remembers it from the time she was mocked by her peers due to her love for the uncanny, the occult, the fantastical and the magical. And then she mistook her mother’s actions for mockery as well. She tries not to think about that.)

To her surprise, he agrees.

So they practice. Initially, of course, Loki asks her what she already knows and discusses theory. She shows him her knitting needles, conjures fire and fires a few shots that break a few glasses.

“Wands are often poor conductors of seiðr.” He says as he inspects her knitting needles. “Mostly because magic isn’t so much as a thing to be control, but more of a part of one’s make-up. Using a funnel would be most ineffective in using a waterfall to put out a fire.”

He doesn’t sound condescending. Nor does he look it. He is stating facts and Rose is glad that she will also find no mockery here. “Take John Egbert, for example. His seiðr is more attuned to wind, and according to him, it took him a while to master it – involving a lot of threats to his life – and that is understandable. It was necessity that allowed him to learn, and he did so wonderfully. But the core principle is that you are magic. John is as one with the wind as it is with him. That is why he can so easily become it.”

Rose considers this. “So should I wish it, I can become light?”

“John is an Heir of Breath. To my understanding, an Heir becomes. It is easier for him. You are a Seer.” He does that small smile that he gets when something genuinely fascinates him. “And you have seen plenty, Rose Lalonde. Your wands are not conduits, they are fetters.” He tilts his head, and in the dim light, Rose thinks the green of his irises glow. “You have seen far beyond anyone should.”

Rose’s breath hitches as she thinks Grimdark. Maybe it is still festering under her skin. Come to think of it, she doesn’t know how they got rid of it, and she’s been wielding magic ever since the Game started and broke the rules of reality as she knew it.
You are magic.

DNA codes can hardly be rewritten once they’ve been woven into your blood and flesh.

“I can feel it,” Loki says. He’s turned away towards the window. “It is a powerful, powerful thing. Wherever did you find it?”

Rose licks her lips and draws in a breath.

“Sometimes magic can be enhanced, if it does not clash with your own seiðr,” Loki says, “Like a new limb.”

She exhales shakily. “I was desperate.” Rose doesn’t look up. He doesn’t say anything. “And angry. He killed my mother.”

Loki doesn’t answer. She notices he’s rather still.

Then he nods. He turns back to her and continues to discuss theory like they hadn’t talked about anything else at all. He says that most of her magic is instinctual (like the rest of them), and that is good. Instinct is a good place to learn from. But most of instinct is also to destroy and to protect. Fight or flight.

He teaches her a few spells and begins her with runework. By the end of the week, she knows how to heal scrapes and burns. It’s rather useful.

Jade Harley can feel the turn of this Earth, the plates so very slowly shifting and breathing, can feel the soothing of the wound of its pollution whenever her brother spreads his magic to the winds, can feel all of the eyes of so many other creatures in space on it, and it feels wrong.

It’s not home. It will never be home. But Jade doesn’t have anywhere to go. (And wasn’t that ironic, that she could go literally anywhere. She lives and breathes and is Space itself, and somehow that’s not enough for her to run run run.)

She doesn’t want to be fickle, she really doesn’t, but she’s grown up in an island all by herself, and then suddenly she was with her friends, and then they were ripped from her, again and again and again and suddenly she’s back on Earth, with so many people, but none of them are the ones she’s looking for and she doesn’t like it. Doesn’t like being surrounded by so many strangers when the ones she wants to be with are either dead or not here.

She doesn’t want to be ungrateful, but she just misses everybody.

She misses Becquerel, and that’s a little funny because they’re one now. But she misses his companionship, she misses playing with him. She misses her guns and she misses her gardens and she misses her science experiments in her labs and god, she just wants to go home.

But her Earth is destroyed. Maybe this was a consolation from the Game, since they’d wrecked it as best as they can. (Three or maybe even four sessions converging, and that was never supposed to happen. But then everyone on every session was very eager to raise their middle fingers to the sky too, so maybe their inherent stubbornness helped with that. She doesn’t regret it. She just regrets they’re not here and there’s nothing she can do about it.)

They’re all out of place here. It’s not their universe, and there are niches shaped like them but not
quite. Like a shirt that’s just a size smaller. It doesn’t quite fit, or it does if you force it, but it’s uncomfortable.

She tries her best though. She tries to fit in here. She gets a bit of fun choosing from her alchemized dresses stored in her sylladex and looking rather fabulous. (She’d seen Loki’s approving smile. If people were going to stare, she was going to make it worth their while.) She reads gardening books and wishes their flat had a backyard, but it doesn’t, so she just buys a few pots and sets them out on the window sill. She pauses by pet stores and thinks about Becquerel, but there’s a warmth in her chest that reminds her he’s not quite gone, and that just like before, he was always going to be there. Bec’s always been there for her.

She buys herself a flute and relearns her way around it. She walks around the city, even if it’s by herself, to see the land she knows as well as herself. She feels its every shift and breath with her heartbeat, she’s entitled to at least walking around to see it herself. It takes her a while to get her bearings on where everything is, but after a few weeks of walking, she’s confident enough to teleport from one street to the one across it, from one building to another, and then from Manhattan to Chicago and then back to their apartment.

Once, she goes down at night to fetch herself a glass of milk and finds Loki and Rose on the couch both drawing sigils in the air, leaving light in the wake of their fingers and forming beautiful runes. Rose’s were violet and Loki’s were green.

She stops by the stairs, but they don’t appear to be bothered by her presence. Rose offers her a small smile and Loki nods in acknowledgement. Figuring this isn’t the weirdest thing she’s seen in her life, she makes her way to the kitchen, gets her glass milk and then returns to the living room.

Rose is still drawing, although Loki has paused and is looking at her runes. Rose draws a circle, and then looks at Loki. He nods. She draws a line and then –

Jade nearly drops the glass of milk. Rose isn’t on the couch anymore. The violet runework has disappeared too, at the same time she did.

Loki smiles at the where Rose was sitting and then erases his own runework with a flick of his hand. “Good,” he says.

“This isn’t permanent, is it?” There’s Rose’s voice where she was just sitting a few seconds ago. Jade feels for her presence and is relieved to find that Rose’s coordinates have remained unchanged.

“It is not. Although I think we will have that lesson for another night. You have exhausted your seiðr enough.” Loki is drawing sigils in green light again, over the spot where Rose had sat. When he’s finished, Rose flickers back into existence again. Jade mouths a small, “Whoa.”

Rose yawns and nods. “I do feel tired.”

Jade takes a gulp from her glass and asks, “Was that an invisibility spell?”

Rose smiles and nods. “It was,” Loki says. “One of the basic cloaking practices for young magic workers.”

“I had asked for lessons,” Rose says. “I saw an opportunity to learn from the greatest sorcerer in all of the nine and took it.”

“You’ve been reading.” Loki gives her a look Jade can’t quite read, but Rose seems confident.

The god doesn’t remove his gaze from her for a while before turning away and leaning back into the couch. Jade makes a note to not read Norse mythology without Loki’s permission. That stuff was probably like the tabloid gossip of Asgard.

Rose turns to Jade. “You know, he is also very skilled in skywalking.”

Loki gives her another look, but there’s no venom behind it. He looks away after a second.

“Skywalking?” Jade asks.


She’ll have to get on reading up on what Yggdrasil is. Loki hasn’t reacted. Must be a go-zone with reading.

Jade’s ears perk up with the mention of realms and galaxies though. The most she’s teleported has been planet to planet, and even then it takes concentration. Galaxies and Realms in a few steps? That sounded handy and fun.

“Skywalking is to me what manipulating space is for you, Jade,” Loki says.

“He is labelled Sky Walker,” Rose adds.

Jade blinks. “Isn’t that – ”

“Where do you think the name Luke Skywalker is from?”

Jade mouths another “Whoa.” And then follows it with a “Loki Sky-Walker. Oh.” She turns to the god, who looks a little amused but tired.

Rose looks at him too. He levels it with a glare that softens after a minute.

“Can you teach me?” Jade asks. Rose grins.

Loki sighs. Still, he nods.

Jade turns to Rose this time. “Rose, you just took my childhood and made it more awesome.”

Loki is the son of none and the brother of (Thor) nobody.

He is a monster, a liar, a fugitive, and an unwanted son.

Although, somehow, his new charges beg to differ.

Loki sits at the dinner table and nobody screams or yells when the apples suddenly sprout legs and run. They all jump; Dave leans back until his back is pressed against his chair, Rose’s eyes go wide and looks fascinated by the tiny legs, Jade immediately starts chasing one and once she catches it, she cooes over how cute it is, and John is beside himself with excitement, yelling, “How did you do that?!?”

Nobody tells him his magic is out of place, or that it is abhorrent, or deceitful, or evil, or disgraceful. They think it magnificent and wonderful. Spectacular. Something to be shared and reveled with. If
he has any doubt of the seiðr that flows through their veins, it is moments like this that he convinces him that he is among people who love magic as much as he does. Who are magic themselves.

It’s…it suspends his sense of normality, for a little while. But then John pulls pranks and nobody hates him for it, Dave reads and nobody berates him for such ‘effeminate behavior’, Rose asks him to teach her magic and Jade asks him to teach her to skywalk. What Asgard loathes and despises, they embrace.

He thinks they would never fit there. Neither would he. But they fit here, in this little self-made home of theirs that’s a pretty little flat in Manhattan.

He likes it more than he thinks he should.

To them, he is not a monster. They say they’ve seen worse. Rose says she’s been one. They’re not in a position to judge.

(“I planned the eradication of an entire race.”

“You planned,” Dave says. “We wiped out our own planet.”

“By accident,” John says.

“But people died.” Dave shrugs. “All you did was plan. We actually executed and we didn’t even plan squat.”

Rose helpfully says, “I’ve had real demons under my skin.”)

To them, he is not a liar. Mostly for lack of trying, because there is a Seer under their roof. Lying sort of loses its intended effect when said Seeing isn’t even a learned art one can merely cloak themselves from, but an innate ability as natural as breathing itself. He doesn’t lie because he doesn’t need to.

Rose does not need to pry, she never does. She just sees, and Loki is helpless against it. It chafes against him, enrages him sometimes, but Lalonde doesn’t pry. She never does and she never will.

Shes doesn’t tell and she asks if she wants to know. Lalonde respects him. And he’s thankful for that.

To them, he is not a fugitive. He’s just someone who needs a safehouse. A sanctuary. One day he will tell them, because there is no point in keeping secrets when it is bare to see, but it is his story to tell and Rose does not give it out if he does not speak of it. But one day. One day he’ll explain. And he hopes they don’t turn their faces away like his not-friends.

(“It’s like we’re all on witness protection program,” Dave says.

John sits up. “Hey, aren’t we sort of fugitives to the Batterwitch too?”)

To them, he is not an unwanted son. He is someone who deserves better than what he has lived through. Whether or not the rejection is his fault does not matter.

(“We don’t really have fathers in the…conventional way,” Rose says.

“I was on an island, alone for most of my life,” Jade says.

“Actually, I think the only one who had a normal relationship with his dad is John,” Dave says. “I know a thing or two about shitty bros…dads. I am never calling him that to his face. Oh my god. But technically, he’s my dad. That is a weird fucking thought to have. I never want to think about that again. Jegus.”
To Rose and Jade, he is a teacher. To John, he is a fellow prankster. To Dave, he is a fellow wayward.

To them, he is a guardian, a survivor, a friend.

It shouldn’t matter, because Loki doesn’t have friends. Except it does matter.

It matters because they know he’s magic and it doesn’t make him less of a person, they know he’s not here for a good reason and it doesn’t make him less of a friend, they know he’s done bad things and it doesn’t make him a monster, they know he’s a disappointment and it doesn’t drive them away.

It drives him insane. But he doesn’t kick them out of the house.

Dave suggests they make a support group. John chucks the couch’s throw pillow at his head and says, “We already are a support group.”

Five gods rent a flat in Manhattan. It ends up being a makeshift support network.
It’s almost New Year’s and they’ve settled quite nicely on their new planet. Rose finds a job at the library easily because she’s befriended the librarian from all the times they’ve all spent there. Dave finds a job DJing at a nice club downtown. Jade starts walking pets. John mostly works in a joke shop and does magic tricks on the street sometimes. Loki, surprisingly, works in an animal shelter.

They stop paying via conjured credit cards and actually start paying with real money, especially since they liked their landlady. Once, Loki makes a dragon out of a broken chandelier Jade picked up from an antique store. It was supposed to be thrown out.

They sell it for several thousand dollars. It’s not overpriced. It’s underpriced. It was crafted by the greatest sorcerer in existence – that means a lot. (It’s Dave who starts ranting. Everyone just looks really pleased with themselves when the cash comes. There are still bits of the chandelier lying around for another toy.)

Their jobs let them spend more time outside. John rests the pranks for a while, to everyone’s joy; Dave starts browsing through music shops; Jade comes home with a lot more stories of the pets she’d walked; Rose obliges showing magic more; Loki doesn’t look at the magazines and the news on the Avengers as much as he did.

“Dude, you taught Rose magic?” Dave turns to Loki, putting his best ‘kicked puppy’ expression with the resting poker face in the way. “That is unfair, I want.”

John raises a hand. Jade slaps it down. “No, you’re going to use it to prank us all.”

“Yeah, no-go for John. But Jade and me, heck yeah.”

From the couch, Loki says, “I am already teaching Jade to skywalk.”

Dave straightens in the loveseat, not leaning anymore. “Okay, wait, what – when did that happen? When did Jade and Rose sign up for kickass magic lessons while I’m up trying to fight my boredom like the ten-ton snarling beast of death that it is?”

“You were reading,” Rose says.

“I still think I should have gotten a head’s up about the impromptu Hogwarts sessions.”

“Wands are apparently bad conduits for magic,” his sister says. Loki’s lips twitch up like the proud teacher he is. This is so unfair.

Dave sniffs. “Yeah, turntables are the way to go.”

“We’re just learning things that are already gifted to us by our god tier state,” Rose says. “I’ve always had an affinity for and a fixation with magic, and I gorged that in the game. Jade has a natural ability for teleportation and is being taught how to take that to the next level, which is skywalking.”

“Oh. Damn, man. I don’t want time-travelling shenanigans again.”

“Indeed. That is rather risky,” Loki says. “But if you still have seidr in your veins, I see no reason why you will not be able to learn an easy healing spell or be able to put up a shield. It will take longer than your sister’s, but it can be learned in time.”
“Hell yes, man. You’re talking to the knight of it.”

New Year’s comes. There are no attacks. They stay up to watch the fireworks. John suggests going to the top of the Avengers Tower to get the best view. It’s quickly shot down.

“But – come on.”

With the frequency of his kicked-puppy expression showing up, they’ve mostly become immune to it and simultaneously repeat the “No”.

He pouts, but then laughs a few seconds later. They agree on choosing another tall building that doesn’t have superheroes that might shoot them the moment they are seen.

The rest of the month rolls in. New York gets attacked every other week by supervillains and the five of them stop freaking out about it and just shrug at it instead, making sure that their flat and everyone in it is safe. That sort of spreads the rumor that, if the city is under attack, the safest place is the flat just three blocks west from a Starbucks. The rumor turns into a bit of an urban legend, and then a lived experience – as by the end of January, they’ve got people hiding out in the flat when the latest baddie of the week attacks.

The pair of siblings on the floor under them set up a little snack stall. Mrs. Harrison starts selling meals as well. John does tricks to entertain people and gets coins and dollars thrown into a tophat that’s set in front of him while the others tend to children. Loki mostly stays out of the way, but he oversees that chaos doesn’t break out in the flat. It is their building after all. It wouldn’t do to have them steal things in the thick of the moment, or to break things in fights and hurt others.

Everyone is safe and the flat’s residents are earning extra cash. It’s win-win.

Mrs. Harrison actually manages to expand the building as some people want to move in. They get bigger floor space when Jade offers to help with the renovation, mixing space magic with Loki’s workings. John revels in the new, extremely spacious common room while Dave goes on a tangent about this being all Dr. Who-ish, with the bigger-in-the-inside thing, and wouldn’t Tony Stark lose his shit over this. Holy hell, this was hella cooler than the Iron Man suit, because red and gold was such an overrated color scheme anyway, he’d know, and – oh crap, sorry Jade, no he takes it back. He loves Iron Man. Iron Man is the best. Don’t start first-guardianing him now.

February arrives. The Safehouse, as everyone in the area has taken to calling it, is still going strong, and Mrs. Harrison has bought the neighboring building; Jade and Loki have taken care of the renovations there, so now they have a huge new building with a tiny infirmary. They evade most inspections with Loki’s cloaking spells.

By March, everyone in town thinks that they’re mutants. Dave bristles for the first few days but he eventually just shrugs at this. He buys new turntables and a new memory stick for his camera. Rose and John come along – Rose buying several balls of yarn while John buys a baby grand piano for the hell of it.

Jade buys their flat’s rooftop and makes a garden. Everyone just shrugs. They’ve heard odder.

Loki decides to join the splurging and orders several books online. The crates arrive several days later and fills the new bookshelves in his room and the living room.

The word of them being mutants continues to go around town. It’s actually not so bad. Nobody gives them weird looks, or hateful ones, or hunts them down. Whenever the Safehouse is in use during an attack, a few kids ask them if they’re going to join the Avengers. Loki does that somehow-still-
elegant snort, John does an awkward laugh, Jade giggles, Rose gives the kids a small smile and Dave, as always, goes on a long tangent on how no, they probably wouldn’t, because they wouldn’t fit in anyways, and how they’re just fine working in the Safehouse, without responsibilities and not having to answer to the government. Because the government’s always hiding something and stuff like that and that’s the sort of junk the Batterwitch pulled. (The last part was more to himself.)

By April, word of the Safehouse and the ‘mutants’ who live there spreads. By the thirteenth of April, Rose is out on her job in the library, Loki is out on some trip he hasn’t given out the details of, Jade is out walking pets and John is in the joke shop he works in. Dave Strider is at home, because he doesn’t have a gig today or tonight.

By the thirteenth of April, Dave Strider finds Tony Stark in front of the Safehouse’s main door.

Tony Stark immediately gives the file that is handed to him a shifty look, mostly because ‘The Safehouse’ is such a cliché name and the word ‘mutants’ is used more than ten times in the first page. The first thing he wants to say is, “Are you sure this isn’t a hate crime?” and the next is, “Are you telling me you want me to stop a bunch of people who only want to help keep people safe whenever the city is under attack? Because that’s the stinkiest pile of hypocritical BS I’ve ever smelled.”

But Tony doesn’t say any of those, because Nick Fury is drilling a hole into his forehead with the stare he’s giving. And, well, as much as Tony loves pissing people off, Nick Fury especially, the Director of S.H.I.E.L.D looks like he can read Tony’s thoughts and is genuinely murderous.

“Oookay then, I’ll just – ” he shrugs, lifts the folder in his hand and turns towards the door, “– give this a read.”

The Director is thankfully really busy with some other job or two he isn’t disclosing to any of the Avengers (except maybe Natashalie and Barton, because that’s how it works, with this shifty agency and Nick Fury and the wondertwo) and doesn’t pursue him, so he manages to get out of the room, get out of S.H.I.E.L.D headquarters, and get back to his tower without anything exciting going on.

He lets JARVIS read it to him by scanning the pages one by one, and by the time the AI finishes, Tony is convinced that this is indeed a hate mission and the stinkiest pile of hypocritical BS he’s ever smelled. Firstly, because S.H.I.E.L.D doesn’t have a lot of info on the ‘mutants’ other than there are five of them, all young adults; they are mutants; they live in the Safehouse and protect it from harm whenever the city is in danger, just like anyone would try and protect their home when it is under attack, and that they’ve used their home – which is probably the second safest place in America, next to the Stark Tower, excuse you – as a fallout shelter for civilians for the past few months now. They don’t get paid for it, and they don’t turn anyone away if they don’t have money or whatever else, and they certainly aren’t hurting anyone.

Tony sees a bunch of people who are, by normal societal standards, weird, and have decided to become friends, live in one place, and help people to the best of their abilities.

Which is also sort of what the Avengers do.

Apparently, S.H.I.E.L.D doesn’t see the same thing. (See, this is why he makes JARVIS regularly scan their systems. It’s this sort of bull he absolutely cannot stand. Protect the Earth, his foot, what was up with the Phase II weapons then. They were still in motion.)

The few long-range pictures that the files have aren’t exactly magazine material, but enough to give
him a basic image of what the five mutants of the Safehouse look like. There are three with black hair and are probably related. The tallest one looks like the elder brother and the other two are of the same height, same eye shapes, and even the same buck-toothed smile. Twins, he thinks. He’s never seen pairs of eyes bluer or greener than the ones on these three before.

The other two also look like they’re related, with their blonde hair, height, and controlled expressions. He can almost swear the girl has violet eyes.

He calls Nick and says he’s not taking the mission, hanging up before the yelling can start. He burns the file too.

Life goes on. He makes JARVIS monitor his calls in case S.H.I.E.L.D wants to call, rejects everything that has to do with the Safehouse, and goes on missions with the Avengers. They defeat the freak of the week, go out for pizza or bowling night, get back home to the tower and sleep. Sometimes Pepper scolds him if he gets too wasted outside, but Bruce and Steve always make sure he doesn’t get into trouble.

The kids in the Safehouse aren’t reported to have turned feral or whatever, just like S.H.I.E.L.D feared, and which was why they wanted them detained in the first place. The weirdest news he’s ever gotten about them is from Steve, who loves going to the park to jog and paint (ugh), and he said that the kid with black hair and blue eyes and buck teeth was a really good magician, and can somehow bend the wind to his will. And has occasionally levitated off the ground to impress kids. When Tony asked what the kid was doing in the park anyway, Steve says he looked like he was doing tricks for money, with a top hat to have the money tossed into and all.

The kid was busking.

For heaven’s sake, that wasn’t something malicious for secret government agencies to be alarmed about.

“But wait, you’re telling me he really levitated? Like, no anti-gravs on his shoes or anything?”

Steve frowns at him. “I don’t know what those are.”

“You know, like – ” Tony gestures with his hands “ – like the things on my suit’s feet. Only no light. Or hell, even repulsors? None of that?”

Steve is still frowning, but he does answer. “No. I didn’t see anything under his shoes. No…anti-gravs or repulsors, or whatever you call them.” He looks like the words taste odd in his mouth.

“Although he did start glowing a faint blue. And then he disappeared.”

Tony blinks. “What?”

“He disappeared completely.” Steve shrugs in that ‘I don’t understand the future’ way of his. “And there was this really strong gust of wind afterwards.”

If Steve’s supersoldier formula did anything for his hearing, then he could probably hear the wires and gears whirring in Tony’s head. A few were short-circuiting with the thoughts of the impossible, but he pushes those aside because Tony Stark’s brain does not short-circuit, no.

Invisibility barrier, perhaps. And anti-gravity technology on the boy’s clothes, perhaps. Or maybe that was the kid’s mutation, the invisibility thing, maybe it was like Susan Storm’s thing. Anti-gravity mutation is possible, but how even? That was definitely something he’d like to get into a lab to study on.
But you know, still nothing secret government agencies should be alarmed about. The kid wasn’t
doing anything wrong.

Tony tells Steve to keep him updated if anything interesting shows up at the park.

Everything else goes on like it normal does. March finally rolls in, they still save the city from power-hungry megalomaniacs every now and then, Thor pops in for a visit every now and then too, everyone still goes for bowling night, it’s awesome.

One incident though, nearly has Tony dying of a heart attack, because the big bad chosen by the
universe’s Russian roulette to terrorize their city is attacking the streets. While Pepper was on her way home. And oh hey, wasn’t it a coincidence, the attack starts right on the street where she is.

The entire battle is a haze. The Avengers assemble, Tony’s comments are at a minimum because the only thing his brain can think about is Pepper Pepper Pepper where’s Pepper oh god where’s Pepper, they defeat the bad guy and Tony doesn’t even stay for them to get arrested and taken into S.H.I.E.L.D custody. He flies off, having JARVIS scan for Pepper’s location. When JARVIS can’t pinpoint her, informing Tony that there seems to be an error whenever JARVIS gets even close to locating Pepper, Tony feels like screaming. He makes another round in the city, and then he remembers – what’s the safest place in Manhattan?

Smart, smart Pepper, who knew exactly what to do in a crisis. Where else would she go to but the nearest and safest place she could be? The street attacked was near to the Safehouse too, so of course.

He flies over it just in time to see the main door open below him, and then lets the camera zoom in as the young man with blonde hair, wearing aviators and carrying a...weird sword of sorts...in one hand, steps out, stance rigid and ready to attack anything that’s going to jump out of places.

Tony thinks he moves like Natasha.

The young man scans the area for any danger, then very slightly tilts his head up. Maybe he sees
Tony, maybe he doesn’t, Tony can’t tell. He doesn’t think the angle’s enough, so maybe the kid’s just checking if there’s any monsters or robots on the rooftops of the nearby buildings. The kid turns around back to the Safehouse and nods. A few seconds later, people start walking out.

There’s a lot more people than Tony initially thought would fit in the building. The crowd that spills out of the building takes more than fifteen minutes to finally finish exit the house. Hell, Tony thinks the entirety of New York city crowded there, which has him frowning again, because that was logically impossible. Sure, the building wasn’t small, but it wasn’t the size of an arena either.

“Sir, Ms. Potts has been located.”

That snaps him out of his line of thought and lets JARVIS zoom in on Pepper, who is standing near the stairs to the Safehouse’s door, looking safe and sound. Beside her, there’s the two black-haired and green-eyed kids. The girl is talking to Pepper while the other looks like he’s checking that the crowd isn’t going to get nuts.

Tony lets out a breath.

(Of course, Stark Tower is still the safest place in America. The Safehouse is the second.)

Later, Pepper tells him all about the Safehouse, and Tony just listens, basking in the fact that Pepper is right in front of him and Pepper is safe. She tells him that the inside of the building is much more spacious and larger than it appears on the outside, which Tony asks her to elaborate on (“Is it ‘due to
the lack of furniture spacious’ or ‘Dr. Who bigger on the inside spacious?’”) and then frowns in confusion when she says that yes, it is ‘Dr. Who bigger on the inside spacious’.

They argue about it for a little bit, making them halt their dinner, but they get past it. Tony is still not convinced, but he lets Pepper continue.

There are a lot of people who live in the Safehouse. There’s a few citizens who have moved in there ever since they found out that if they wanted a house that didn’t get destroyed in the middle of an attack and was as safe as safe could be (Tony gets offended and Pepper tells him to shush), they should just live in the Safehouse. There are also the original tenants who are a funny little family of sorts. There’s the landlady, Mrs. Harrison, who is a sweet old woman who can cow anyone with her words. There are the Palmer siblings who cook the best things Pepper has ever tasted, although they can be a little weird because the younger one has a weird sense of normality and the older one seems to abhor the color yellow (but doesn’t really mind blondes because it’s not like they could change genetics – he just hates yellow on things, specifically his things). They are good with kids. There are also the five ‘mutants’ who live in the second floor, and who Pepper has made friends with.

The tall one with green eyes isn’t related to the other black-haired kids like Tony initially suspected, but is somewhat like their group’s responsible older brother figure. (Tony thinks Steve, and then snorts.) Pepper says she thinks his name is Luke, as that’s what she’s heard the other residents of the Safehouse call him. He mostly works with the other kid, Rose, in tending to the crowd and making sure nobody starts fights in the Safehouse out of nervousness.

The other two kids with black hair and glasses and buckteeth are twins, John and Jade. John does tricks to entertain children and sometimes his sister joins him. Jade apparently has legitimate dog ears on her skull. (“It’s her mutation, I think?” Pepper says.) She also likes animals a lot.

There’s Dave – the kid Tony saw with the sword and aviators outside the Safehouse – and Rose. Rose helps Luke with crowd control. Dave tends to wounds.

Pepper says they’re good kids.

And Tony thinks they are too – anyone who keeps Pepper safe is good in Tony’s book. But S.H.I.E.L.D wouldn’t think you are a good kid if you had the ability to turn invisible, or if you had dog ears, or if you could somehow heal wounds with a touch, or calm people down with a few words. Even if you helped, as long as you were different, you were a threat.

Also, they’ve apparently got a physics-defying house. What’s not to be interested in?

So on thirteenth of April, he visits the Safehouse, and is opened the door by none other than Dave Strider.

Palmer #1 had volunteered to get the door, but he and his brother were on a neck-to-neck race in Mario Kart, and Dave’s money was on him, so Dave’s the one who gets up, goes to the front, and opens their nice mahogany piece that had the inside face of it carved with protective sigils.

Standing right outside is Tony Stark.

Dave’s free hand twitches, itching for Caledscratch stored in his sylladex. His first thought is to catalogue where everyone is – Rose in the library, Jade downtown New York, John in the joke shop, Loki probably somewhere in the Bermuda triangle, the Palmers in the common room, and Mrs. Harrison yelling at Palmer #2 to beat his brother already at Mario Kart so Dave can be slightly poorer
than he was before.

His second thought is, *Oh shit.*

His third thought is, *Would Mrs. Harrison mind if the porch got stained with blood because I instinctively beheaded someone right now?*

His fourth thought is, *She probably would.*

And it’s a good thing he didn’t act on his instinct to just take Caledscratch out and swing, because yes, Mrs. Harrison would have minded the blood on the porch, and she would be infinitely more of a problem than S.H.I.E.L.D ever would be.

So he just lets his hand itch and puts on his best poker face that’s always on anyway and says, “Can I help you?”

Stark raises an eyebrow, like he’s unimpressed that Dave isn’t foaming at the mouth and gushing all over his shoes because Iron Man is at his front porch. Celebrities.

“Maybe,” Stark says, then his grins that million-dollar smile that would have gotten any journalist, except Dave’s not a journalist, so it doesn’t work. Bully for him.

Dave glances back quickly at the direction of the common room, trying to seem nonchalant and not threatened. He mostly succeeds, and if it were Natasha Romanov on the front step, she would have noticed, but it’s Tony Stark, so Dave definitely succeeds.

“Uh huh. Listen, I’ve got a bet on Mario Kart going on right now and I’m pretty sure number one’s gonna beat his brother any time now…” He glances back towards the common room again just in time for Palmer #1 to yell, “Oh! Suck it!”

Dave can hear the cashier sound effect in his head as he grins. Palmer #2 and Mrs. Harrison both groan.

“Aaand there you go. So uh, I’m in a hurry. If we could make this quick and you could be off of our front porch?” Dave knows it’s rude, but Dave’s never been very polite. And he wants Stark to know exactly what he wants, which is the Avengers not snooping into his tiny, thankfully still stable life.

Stark just chuckles though. Dave mentally yells at Loki to get his ass down here so he could charmspeak their way out of this.

“Yeah, sure. So, I’m Iron Man,” Stark says and pauses for a little while, as if waiting for a response to that, but finding none, he continues, “And I thought I’d check out the neighborhood for a little bit. Especially since I heard this was a popular place to hide out when the world is ending.”

Ah. Well. Dave supposes Stark can play at his game too. He shrugs.

“It is,” he says. “And?”

He can see the nearly-imperceptible falter of Stark’s smug look. If his bro hadn’t trained him early on the art of masking facial expressions, he wouldn’t have noticed.

“Look, a while back, some friends of mine took shelter here,” Stark says, “I just wanted to know exactly how safe it was, because we both know, that this being New York, it’s going to happen again.”
Dave lets the corner of his lips turn up, just a bit. He’s read enough newspapers, and he knows what Stark is aiming for, and he has an idea of what Stark is actually here for. “Checking up on the mutants, then?” he says.

The superhero doesn’t bother to hide his wince. “Tacky,” Stark says, “But that’s what everyone calls it nowadays. So can I come in or not? If you refuse, I’m still going to set up surveillance around here.”

You can try. Dave thinks. Stark can definitely try, but that’s as far as he’ll ever get. Dave lets him in anyway, because he’s clearly not going away. Stark immediately heads for the nearest source of noise – which is the common room where the Palmers and Mrs. Harrison are. Dave closes the door and follows behind him.

The Palmers are playing a new game again, but they’re silent this time. None of the trash talking thrown at each other from earlier, and instead just looking like they’re focused, although Dave can see both of them looking at Tony when he enters the room and then #1’s eyes staying just a bit longer on the superhero.

#1 glances at Dave briefly, expression serious, before turning his focus back to the game.

Rose had once said, that from what she could see, the twins were some sort of psychics. Not mutation-psychic – as in, scientifically generated telepathy, telekinesis, and whatever – but occult-psychic. As in, see-glimpses-of-the-future-psychic, see-a-bit-of-your-life-psychic, read-your-aura-psychic, Alternian-troll-psychic, game-psychic, SBURB-psychic. Seer psychic.

Maybe not both of them regarding the Seer psychic thing. They certainly saw some level of the past and the future, but #1’s was stronger. More fit to be a Seer. A Seer of Void, maybe, Rose had said. But the other was more suited to be a Knight – his path was more suited to be a Knight. A Knight of Light.

Dave shudders. He prays no one in this universe ever has to play the game. He prays #2 never has to be a Knight, or a Light player, because Knights almost always fail, almost always have to sacrifice the people they love, or themselves, and Light players almost always succumb into the darkness.

#2’s way too sweet for that.

#1 knows what Tony Stark wants with them.

“As you can see – ” Dave motions towards the television and the game console. #2 is mashing the buttons a bit harder than usual. He probably knows too. “ – these two are locked in a no-familial-relationship-acknowledging, fatal and epic struggle of beating each other at Mario Kart.”

On cue, #1 slams his cart into #2’s, sending Yoshi into a spin. Princess Peach gains the lead. #1 cackles as he drives his way down Rainbow Road.

“Dude, low blow,” Dave whispers. #1 just grins while #2 glares at him.

“Who’s the visitor, Dave?” Mrs. Harrison says, eyes still watching the television and very pointedly not looking at Stark. “We’re out of open spaces if you want to rent.”

Tony balks. Dave feels a surge of pride welling up his chest and he very much wants to pick Mrs. Harrison up in a hug and whirl her around. He loves her so much. Sort of like The Mayor. God, he misses The Mayor.
“Nah, he’s not here to see if we got any openings,” Dave says. “Just wanted to take a look at the place. You know how the tabloids make it look like we’re a tourist spot. Damn rude and inconsiderate if you ask me. Like we’re a monkey circus just sitting at the edge of town, flashing neon signs in the middle of a dumbass catastrophe without a single care in the world –”

“Yes, it is rather infuriating,” #2 interrupts him. Dave doesn’t mind. His well-hidden nervousness was making his metaphors become either non-existent or slowly spiral into nonsense. “Just last week we had actual tourists bring cameras around here.”

Well, that was true.

“Really?” Tony asks.

#1 hums and nods. “Kevin had to get the door at that time,” he says and motions towards his brother. “It was awkward.”

“And they didn’t even turn off the flash of their cameras. I’m rather light-sensitive. It was rude.”

Dave winces sympathetically as he grabs a pillow off the floor, sets it beside #2 and plops down on it, cross-legged. “Oh man, I hear ya.”

“How does your sister get by without sunglasses every day?” #2 asks. On screen, #1 has defeated him, but he doesn’t groan. He just turns to Dave like this is normal conversation and doing a very good job at ignoring Stark. Everyone is doing a good job at it, really, and Dave loves them for it.

Nothing to make someone attention-expectant more uncomfortable than giving them as less attention as possible.

“I don’t know. Witchcraft, probably,” he says. #1 giggles, #2 nods, Mrs. Harrison smiles and Tony Stark thinks Dave Strider is joking.

“I suppose I should invest in eyewear, but I think I’d look rather ridiculous,” #2 says.

“Aww, hell no. Kev, you’d rock the shit out of Ray Bans,” Dave says. “Honest. Or we can get Luke to customize shit for you, he’s good at that.”

“Can we have tarts for that discussion?” #1 asks, as it is a well-known fact around the Safehouse that Loki likes tarts, but Kevin doesn’t. #1 likes tarts too, and so he and Loki get along, and they get into lengthy fights with #2 about the merits of the pastry. Mrs. Harrison referees.

#2 slaps his arm. “Shut up.”

Tony Stark shifts awkwardly from where he’s standing.

Mrs. Harrison gets up from the couch and straightens out her skirt. “Well, if you’re here to look at the place, dear,” she says as she walks towards Tony, “I’d be happy to give you a tour. The boys can clean up and get us snacks afterward.” She looks at the Palmers at the last part, and the siblings nod.

The landlady leads Tony out of the room and into the hallway, beginning to talk about the layout of the building and how they were just a humble little apartment, really. They got expanded after a while, but they didn’t do anything harmful.

As soon as they’re out of earshot, the Palmers turn to Dave sharply and say, in unison, “He needs to get out.”
“I know, dudes, I know. Chill.” Dave brings up his hands in surrender. “He wouldn’t leave us alone if I tried to force him off the porch anyway, and even if his surveillance can’t get inside the house, it’d be annoying if we were around town and things kept watching us. I mean, that’s Tony Stark. Dude’s name is on like, 98% of the appliances around town. You think he wouldn’t have put a back door there that can make it keep an eye on us wherever we go?”

“That is a problem,” #1 says as #2 sighs. “And while we would certainly be involved in the surveillance – all of us probably will be – I imagine it would be harder on you and your friends, Dave.”

“We’re not exactly blatant ‘mutants’,” #2 says. “You, however – not to be offensive about physical appearance, of course – if there’s anything the rumors about our building are spreading, it’s that there are, specifically, five mutants. Your description is part of that.”

“It’s okay, the others are away,” Dave says. “I was worried about that too.”

“Rose and the others are at their jobs. They’ll be back this afternoon,” #1 reminds him.

“Loki’s in buckass nowhere,” Dave says. “He’s good for now.”

“We’ll just have to get Stark out before the others get here,” #1 says. “We might actually need Loki around here for that.”

“Charmspeak,” #2 says, “Or whatever.”

“Charmspeak,” Dave says. “Easier to refer to his silvertongue majicks or whatev. You guys can’t psychically influence him, can you?”

“We just See, Dave. Or perhaps a certain level of convincing via words, but mainly, we See,” #1 says.

“Damn.” Dave puts an elbow on his knee and rests his cheek in the palm of his hand. “I hope Mrs. Harrison manages to get him out.”

“Mmm,” #1 says. Then he straightens and brightens. “I say…” He grins. “Do you happen to know where to find any alcohol around here?”

Dave Strider does, in fact, know where to find alcohol around here.

The tenant on the third floor, five doors from the stairs, will wonder about why his liquor cabinet is empty the next day, but that’s not for anyone in this story to worry about.

#2 bakes the treats (no tarts), #1 sets up the dining room, and Dave calls the others to explain the situation to them, and that, just in case their plan fails, to not come home to the Safehouse for the night. He gets Loki’s voicemail, but he leaves a message there anywhere.

Mrs. Harrison returns with Tony after two hours, and the man looks a little awed about the interior size of their building, and a little tired. Mostly he’s high on the fascination of a space that defies the rules of natural physics, and that’s dangerous.
Before Mrs. Harrison can complain about the booze set out on the table, #1 gently pulls her to the side to explain the plan to her. Stark just goes straight to the table, of course. If he hears, he’s not showing it, and if he doesn’t, then it’s probably #2 doing a psychic thing that he’s denied being capable of doing so many times before.

Dave, in general, doesn’t drink, because it reminds him of when Rose fell off the wagon and when he told her he was disappointed in her (and he will always be guilty of that), and it might tempt his sister to take up a drinking habit again when she’s trying very hard to avoid it. Bro didn’t raise him to drink either, and even discouraged the habit. Bro didn’t drink as well, or if he did, he never showed it to Dave. Dave suspects this may be because of Rose’s – and ectobiologically, his – mother, who drank a lot, and the possibility that Bro might have known Mom Lalonde.

Possibly, they were friends. Possibly, something more, but that’s not important. But possibly, they were friends, and Mom Lalonde had a drinking problem, and Bro probably tried to get her to stop, and she probably was able to, for a while, especially since Bro didn’t drink. And then she fell off the wagon a few years after Rose came on a meteor. Bro probably never got rid of his disapproval of alcohol.

Dave offers the bottle to Stark anyway, and he thinks it’ll be nasty – sweets and vodka on his tongue – and he’ll probably be weepy or funny or talkative about the game, but the important thing is that Stark will be as wasted as he is, and nobody gets hurt.

Loki arrives, surprisingly. It’s at ten in the evening when he arrives. #1 is passed out on the floor, Stark is on the couch, #2 is barely awake, and Dave is struggling with his tears and his drowsiness. Mrs. Harrison has agreed since earlier to stay out of the room. Dave and Kevin are staying vigil, making sure that Stark, in fact, does not move from his place and try to snoop around the building, in case he was faking shitfacedness.

That’s sort of impossible though, given that most of his bloodstream was alcohol, but still.

The TV remote jumps off of the coffee table when Kevin hiccups, and Dave giggles. Kevin puts a finger to his lips and nearly keels forward as he slurs out, “Sshhhhhhhhhhhhh.” Dave giggles harder.

“I tooold you ya had telekni – telenini – telekenini – something…about movin’ stuff.” He says. “Seen trolls do it.”

“Not a droll,” Kevin says, “Not droll.”


“Trolls are gods?”

Dave snickers and snorts. “Ssssome are, I guess. Godtier.”

“Shit.”

Dave laughs again. “Y’know, you could be godtier too, I guess. Rose says. Rose can See too, see.” Giggle. “Seetoosee. ‘Nyway. Like – ye would’a been destined to play the game, I guess, if we didn’t come here? I’unno. Would’a been a Knight, like me. Knight of Light. I’mma Knight of Time. Knight of sssshit. Can’t do anything right.”
Kevin’s mouth has formed a little ‘o’. They drag out a syllable too. “So that’s why I keep seein’ red stuff around you.”

“You see red stuff?”

“Mmm.”

“Shit.”

“Not really. It’s nice.”

“Not nice. Dead Daves.”

“Mmm.”

Kevin extends the bottle of…something towards him. Dave’s eyesight is blurry. His aviators are skewed on the bridge of his nose and he can barely see. He grabs the neck of the bottle anyway.

There’s a series of rapt footsteps and a sigh as Loki enters the room, Mrs. Harrison behind him. She stops by the doorway. Dave and Kevin turn towards them.

“It would be beneficial if you stopped now, Strider, Palmer,” Loki says as he takes the bottle out of Dave’s hand. Dave’s hand tries to follow its direction, of course, but it’s placed out of his reach, and he mourns the loss of it with a pathetic little whine.

“Oh hush,” Loki says. He puts two fingers on each of their foreheads and then draws a sigil in the air, muttering a spell. Within the next breath, the alcohol in Dave’s system clears and it feels like the wind is ripped out of his throat.

Dave gasps. Kevin chokes. Loki helps them sit straight and lean against the foot of the empty loveseat as they gather their breaths.


“You are welcome. Nasty bit of a morning that would have been,” Loki says. He plucks Dave’s sunglasses off of his nose and produces a handkerchief, quite possibly out of thin air, to wipe them down. Dave wipes his cheeks and eyes with the sleeve of his raglan. They’re wet.

Kevin, who is back to being Palmer #2 in Dave’s head, hisses, “Fuck. That was unpleasant.”

Dave is still wiping his cheeks and sniffing, nose clogged with snot. “You couldn’t have taken out the runny nose too?”

“No, you’ll have to deal with that on your own,” Loki says as he stands. He extends Dave’s aviators back to him and the human takes it. He wipes across his eyes again before he replaces the eyewear back on the bridge of his nose.

“Dude, how weepy was I?” he asks Palmer #2.

“Very,” #2 says. “My advice would be to never get drunk again.”

“Okay,” Dave says. “Alright, well. Let’s forget about what happened and deal with this.”

Loki walks over to where Palmer #1 is passed out on the floor and does the same alcohol-coma reviving spell he did with the other two. #1 coughs and rasps as he regains his breath and struggles to stand up. #2 goes over to help him.
When he’s able to speak, he looks at Loki and mutters, “Oh hey, you’re back.”

“So this is Tony Stark?” Loki motions to the only remaining comatose figure in the room.

“Yeah,” Dave says, moving to stand beside him.

Loki hums. “Less glamorous than on television.”

Dave snorts. “Definitely a more massive ego, though. TV doesn’t do it justice. God, you should have heard him talk when he was first drunk.”

“He got more weepy afterwards,” #1 says, now standing with the help of his brother.

“None of the other Avengers seem to be in the area,” Loki says, “If there were, it would have been very foolish to get drunk, Strider.”

“Sorry, I panicked a little. Also looked around when he first came, and there didn’t seem to be anyone. Not even a car. I think he had his car parked somewhere and walked here.”

“Not on official business, then,” Loki says. “Stark seems more foolhardy than the rest of them. He was here on his own choice.”

“He did mention having friends who ducked in here during an attack,” Dave says.

“Potts, I think,” #1 says. “Pepper Potts. We saw her on TV a couple of times. I think I remember her staying her during an attack.”

“That’s sorta sweet, I guess, if he wasn’t just using it as an excuse.” #2 shrugs.

“What do you think we should do with him?” Dave asks.

Loki eyes Tony’s passed out form with distaste. “What was your first thought?”

Dave grimaces. “Decapitation, really.”

The corner of Loki’s lips turn up. “Not bad.”

“Hey.”

“Memory wipe, then.” Loki crouches down, presses a finger to Stark’s head, and then starts drawing a sigil. “And then we can bring him back to his tower.”

“There’s security there, definitely.”

“It can be easily fooled. You can call the others back now,” Loki says as he finishes up on the sigil. It pulses blue and disappears from sight. Then Loki picks Tony up and slings him on his shoulder like a sack of alcoholicly-comatose potatoes.

And then he takes a step and disappears.

Dave digs around the couch for his phone and finds it under the couch instead. He calls the others to get back home. They arrive in about ten minutes.

The next morning, Tony Stark wakes up with a massive hangover. He doesn’t remember what he
did last night, so he asks JARVIS to replay footage. The AI dutifully shows him the video of him getting drunk for no reason he can remember. But it’s there, and people drink to forget their problems anyway, so he actually succeeded. It was probably Fury calling about the Safehouse again, and Tony probably got pissed and refused and then decided to drink and then couldn’t stop. That happened sometimes.
Steve Rogers: Make Friends

Steve Rogers hasn’t gotten a hang of the future yet. There are places that he might have once been familiar with, but have now been replaced with shiny glass and metal buildings: landmarks that have been destroyed and never rebuilt, only plowed over and covered in cement; pubs that have been turned into bookshops. There are faces that might have once been familiar but can now only be seen on monochromatic history textbooks. There are things that he might have loved to see come into creation, but never got the chance to and now he doesn’t understand them.

There’s too much of everything and too little of him.

The other Avengers have been helping, Tony and Bruce especially. Tony is a bit of a pain to deal with, but he means well, underneath all that. Bruce is just made out of goodness and sunshine, until he’s not.

Steve’s given a place in Stark tower, but he refuses it despite Tony’s incessant whining. He wants to adjust to the world at his own pace, and being in the same room with someone who’s practically built the future, well…it’s too much.

In his dingy little apartment that is the only thing he can afford, because people would be surprised at how little Captain America is actually paid, he tries to catch up to the world.

Sometimes he finds it fascinating, sometimes he finds it overwhelming.

When it does become overwhelming to the point where it frustrates him, he takes out his sketchbooks and starts to draw. Sometimes, it’s a canvas and he takes out the acrylics. Sometimes, it’s watercolor paper and watercolors.

Sometimes Steve goes to the park and brings his stuff with him so he can wind down, pull away from the enormity of everything around him. In the park, at least, he can more or less pretend that he is not in the wrong time, and that there is still some place where he is not being forced to fit into a slot that he has long since outgrown. Square pegs for circular holes.

The park is where he first sees the boy. Overtime, that eventually becomes The Boy, but first, it’s just Steve Rogers seeing a random kid with black hair and blue eyes, wearing glasses and a smile so bright with two front teeth too wide that he almost looks comical. The kid is dressed in a blue shirt, a jacket that’s a lighter shade than the shirt and pants that are a darker shade than both. Yellow sneakers. Comical.

The Boy is standing on the edge of the fountain when Steve walks over to the benches situated near it, ready to set up his easel. At first, the kid’s not doing anything remarkable, and Steve sets up his canvas, takes out his pencils and tubes, and he doesn’t notice the top hat on the ground.

He starts sketching, and a few people pass by, and he doesn’t pay it mind until he notices the gasps of awe that are coming from the direction of the fountain. He turns his attention there.

The Boy is wearing a temp disguise, and he’s making a rose disappear from one hand and reappear in the other, even though his sleeves are rolled up to his elbows. Once, he crushes the flower and lets the petals fall down into the fountain. Then he keeps that hand open, shows his other hand to the crowd in a flourish to let them see he’s not hiding anything, fists it, blows on it, and when he opens it, the rose is there. He steps aside and gestures to the fountain; there are no rose petals there.

Children gasp and adults clap politely. Then the boy throws the rose in the air and makes a motion
with his hand. The rose blows into the direction that the boy is gesturing towards. He moves his hand in the opposite direction. The rose follows.

He keeps the rose steady in the air, and with his free hand, he gestures towards one of the dolls that a little girl in his audience is holding. The doll starts to float up in the air, joining the rose. He lifts a finger and makes a circular motion. The rose and the doll start to orbit.

The crowd starts whispering amongst themselves, and the little girl whom the doll belongs to is too mesmerized to mourn her loss. The Boy starts pointing to random objects and levitating them in the air: a hat, a leaf, another flower, a ball, a coin. Somebody lifts up a can of soda and he levitates that too, adding it to the ever increasing group of objects orbiting around all of them.

The crowd claps and tosses coins into what Steve now notices is a top hat. The Boy takes a bow, and one by one, the objects floating above them cease their motion and go back to where they belonged to or are neatly sorted into the trash.

The little girl who owns the doll holds out her toy in front of her face in awe. She grins and waddles over to the top hat to deposit a dollar bill into it. The Boy gives her a grateful look.

When the crowd has finished being generous, The Boy hops off of the fountain, picks up the top hat by its rim, takes another bow, and then the gentle breeze that is blowing gets slightly stronger. He starts to levitate off of the ground, bowing to his audience at the right, and then at the left, until he is completely over their heads. He takes off his temp disguise, tosses it into the hat and laughs as blue light wraps around him for a millisecond, and in the next millisecond – in the time it takes for Steve Rogers to blink – The Boy is gone.

He is often there whenever Steve visits the park again, performing his magic tricks, levitating things and sometimes flying off of the ground himself. Steve has heard and read about mutants in this day and age. Sometimes, they are like him, products of a scientific research meant to further the defenses of the nation. Sometimes, they are sort of like him, products of a scientific research that went wrong.

Often, they are mistreated and looked down upon.

The Boy doesn’t appear to worry about that. He shows his abilities in public to gain a few bills in his pocket, and Steve finds that he respects that. Better the kid use his skills for good than to be the next baddie of the week. Steve thinks he’d be hard to take down too, especially since Steve sort of knows him, and anyone who could disappear and reappear at will could prove quite a challenge.

Once, Steve paints him – smiling without the temp mask on, in all his bucktoothed and mischievous glory. Steve hopes to befriend the kid one day, but he wouldn’t be too bummed out if he didn’t.

Tony mentions the Safehouse over a movie marathon initiated by Clint (they managed to drag Steve along because team building). When he recognizes Tony’s description of one of the mutants, he mentions The Boy – his busking habits and his magic tricks. Tony gets his thinking face on and Steve can practically hear a few screws falling off from overexertion.

Nothing comes of it, and frankly, Steve doesn’t mind. If it was a mission from S.H.I.E.L.D, they might be interested in recruiting the mutants of the Safehouse into the Avengers, and that was useful (on the other hand, if they were interested in detaining the mutants because they were perceived threats…Tony hadn’t taken the idea of S.H.I.E.L.D checking up on the Safehouse very well, and Steve was putting trust on that; Tony was a teammate).

He continues his jogs in the early morning, relishing his few hours of freedom when nobody’s around to recognize him, asking for photographs and signatures. He fulfills missions and leads his
team. He goes down to the park to paint.

One day, he goes down to the park bringing his sketchbook, a few charcoal sticks, and a watercolor set. The Boy isn’t at the fountain, so he doesn’t sit by there, instead finding a spot by the little grassy slope that led to the pond. There were ducks there. They quacked obnoxiously at parkgoers every now and then.

Steve sketches a few of the ducks, quick studies of people walking around, before deciding to do a watercolor of the pond. He hears a loud splash, an indignant yell, and then the series of harassed squawks from the ducks.

When he looks up, he stops from his painting, looking at The Boy, very drenched from his impromptu dive into the pond. His glasses are not on his face, and quite possibly have joined the rest of the missing objects that have decided to take up residence in the bed of the pond, getting cozy with the mud. Steve winces in sympathy.

The Boy, still in a ridiculous blue-color-schemed getup, flaps his arms uselessly to get the water off. In one hand, he’s holding a leash that’s connected to a rowdy little dog that’s splashing about the pond, wagging its tail and yipping playfully.

“Buster!” The Boy whines, trying to shake off the water.

“See, this is why you leave the dog walking to me,” somebody says. Steve turns towards the girl that’s marching pond towards the pond. She looks just like the boy, except for the high shade of green of her eyes and the…dog ears on top of her head. Clip-ons? She whistles sharply. “Here, Buster!”

The Boy lets go of the leash and Buster splashes his way out of the pond and over to her, she giggles as the puppy stands up, laying his wet paws on her jeans.

“Aww, buddy, you’re wet all over now,” she says.

From the pond, The Boy yells, “I’m wet too!”

“Get out of there so I can do something about it.”

The Boy scrunches up his face the entire time he wades out of the water. He holds up his arms up sideways.

The girl – Steve wonders if he should capitalize that – rolls her eyes before snapping her fingers. Steve blinks before he processes what he’s just seen happened:

The boy was wet, soaking even, and muddied, and then the girl snapped her fingers and suddenly all the moisture and the mud were standing right beside him - not standing per se, but they were positioned so that they looked like they were still clinging onto a solid body even though they were removed from the body itself. It was like an afterimage. Like one of those photo-editing softwares Clint had shown him, where you can just superimpose things and move the superimposition around the way you wished it. It was like that. Like the water and the mud were a layer above and somebody decided to drag it to the side.

But then by the next second, gravity remembered its function and all the water and the mud fell into a puddle on the ground.

The Boy, now perfectly dry, shivers.
“You’re getting seriously good,” he says, “I mean, not to sound ungrateful, but you could have teleported my skin off my body too.”

“I’m getting seriously good,” the girl acknowledges rather smugly, “And that’s why your skin is still attached to you.”

The Boy shivers again. Or shudders, more appropriately.

Two more teenagers walk over to them, both looking very amused. The one in the aviators looks at The Boy and says in a disappointed tone, “Aw, Egbert’s dry now. I wanted to take a picture.”

“Fuck you, Strider.”

“Well, I wasn’t the one who decided to audition for the lead role in Swan Lake, was I?”

The Boy, now with the identification Egbert, punches Strider in the shoulder, while yelling that even though he’d only seen the Barbie movie version of Swan Lake, nobody actually took a face-first dive into a pond while being dragged by a dog, and this pond didn’t have swans, it had ducks.

“Oh the other hand, Jade’s getting scary good with teleporting tricky things,” Egbert says, motioning to the girl whom Steve suspects is his twin sister.

The second girl, blonde and looking a lot like Strider, also probably the boy’s twin sister, looks around the park carefully. “That’s good, but, we are at a park.”

“Eh, everyone probably knows us from the Safehouse.” Strider shrugs. “I mean, the entirety of New York’s been there at some point.”

“Yeah, it is kind of surprising we’re not on blogs or tabloids yet,” Jade says.

Egbert shudders. “Ah, don’t jinx it.”

“I’ve never checked any blogs or new outlets,” the blonde girl says, “And with our work, we’ve only ever watched the television.”

“Well, fuck,” Strider says, “I hope to hell we’re not on any blogs. Did they at least get good photos?”

Egbert kicks Strider’s shin this time, the boy evading nimbly with a grace Steve has seen in well-trained assassins.

Buster yips from where he’s nudging Jade’s calf with his head. The girl bends down and smooths over his wet fur, doing the same thing she did to Egbert. The dog perks up when he feels he’s no longer wet and licks her hand.

Egbert gives Buster a half-hearted glare. “Tell Palmer his dog’s getting kicked out of the house.”

“Hey, no, man, you’re not kicking any dog out of the house, especially not Palmer number two’s,” Strider says. Then he whistles and bends slightly to pat his thighs, calling Buster, “Here boy.”

The dog bounds over to him easily and he scoops the little Jack Russell Terrier up. Buster yips and Strider chuckles, a small smile breaking on his face that Steve thinks definitely suits him. He should smile more. “Why would you kick little Buster out the house?”

“Not to mention it’s Kevin you will be answering to, John,” the blonde girl says.

John Egbert massages the space under his eyes, clearly feeling the absence of his glasses. “I want my
glasses back,” he says, “I can’t see anything. And I will be telling on Buster today.”

“Palmer will laugh at you. Both Palmers, actually,” Strider says.

Steve watches all of them walk away from the pond, still talking, Strider, with Buster still comfortably settled in his arms, somehow pulls his phone out once to text someone while Egbert tries to steal it. He tries to recruit the help of Jade once, but she only laughs. The blonde girl looks fond and exasperated of all of them.

Steve goes back to his watercolor when they’re out of sight, but his work is hurried. More of a study than an actual painting. He packs up his things and heads back to the tower.

He doesn’t know why it actually matters, but it does, and it feels like he’s got something so very precious and very important in his hands, when all he’s got is really a few names, and only one appears to be full enough to actually have some meaning.

John Egbert.

When he hears that Pepper had once been in the middle of an attack, his concern immediately flares, but Pepper waves it off and explains that she’d ducked into the Safehouse.

Steve’s only heard it from Tony, and he’d given sparse descriptions, but that should be the place where John Egbert resided in. Tony gets this funny look on his face when Pepper mentions the incident, like he’d forgotten to do something, but he shrugs it off and lets it clear, still not interested in it like he’d declared so before.

“I kind of see him at the park, doing tricks for money,” Steve explains, “And a few weeks ago, I saw him and his friends. They look like two sets of twins?”

Pepper nods. “John and Jade, Dave and Rose.”

Tony snorts. “Seriously?”

Pepper elbows him.

They’re in the kitchen, just the three of them. Steve had been meaning to talk to Tony about the Safehouse, and he’d only just managed to catch him in the kitchen when he popped by the tower at eleven in the morning (and Steve really wanted to talk to him about his drinking habits). He was lucky that Pepper had a day off (Steve did believe in miracles), as she appeared to have more information than him. Barton and Romanov were on a mission, somewhere. Bruce was sleeping. Thor was in Asgard. It was the perfect timing, especially since Tony was against S.H.I.E.L.D getting their hands on the Safehouse inhabitants.

Pepper explains the Safehouse to him in the same way she explained it to Tony (judging by how the man had skipped out on it and decided to pour himself a glass of whiskey for breakfast before Pepper told him to pour it down the drain without even looking at him, and he decided to just get poptarts), from the way the house seemed to be bigger on the inside, how the inhabitants shared the work whenever there was an invasion, and how nearly everyone in New York knew what it was or at least knew about it.

According to Pepper, the Safehouse inhabitants that actually participate in the safehousing bit are the landlady, the elder-brother-figure who looked a lot like Jade and John, and three sets of twins.
Steve frowns. “Three?”

“There’s two more siblings who make snacks for everyone when there’s an attack. We never know how long we get holed up there after all.”

“It’s a fallout shelter,” Tony says, still crunching a poptart.

“So that’s why S.H.I.E.L.D wants to recruit them?” Steve asks, remembering Tony’s mentions of it.

The inventor scoffs and waves his half-eaten poptart around. “If only. They kind of want to put the little guys in cells so they can make sure they don’t decide that their ancient magics would be better off in achieving world domination instead of building the most unsuspecting bunker in the middle of the city.”

Ah. That’s why Tony is so against it.

That seems to be news to Pepper too. She turns to Tony, frowning. “What?”

Tony puts his hands up, one hand with his index and thumb holding his poptart carefully while the rest of the digits are splayed out. “Hey, don’t look at me. I was only given the file and I refused. Burnt it.”

“Good,” Pepper says, and decides to get herself breakfast. She looks like she’s mentally composing her gently yet very, very threatening lecture to Nick Fury about how you leave people who just trying to help the fuck alone.

He meets Jade Harley while he’s on a morning run. He’d just gotten back from a stressful mission the other day, the sort that makes him question S.H.I.E.L.D’s motives and if the world and freedom he’d been fighting for all those years ago really was achieved, and when he runs out of punching bags he tends to run from dawn to clear morning, when the sun’s already high up and the light’s bright and hot.

There’s very few parkgoers around this time, but he’s not surprised to see at least five of them just walking around and stretching their legs.

He is surprised that when he’s slowing down to a jog, an entire pack of mismatched dogs runs past him, tongues out and eyes comically widened as they race ahead of him. He slows to a walk, amused, and a few minutes later, Jade Harley is running past, telling the dogs to slow down.

He recognizes the dog ears almost immediately, and then her face when the dogs curve and Jade follows. In the lead of the pack is mischievous little Buster, looking like he’s having the time of his life.

Then Buster halts and darts back, cutting through the pack, and the rest of the dogs follow, suddenly stopping and turning back, running straight towards Jade.

Jade skids to a stop too, and Buster jumps on her. She yelps as she catches him and falls down to the ground. Buster licks her face and she giggles. Her dog ears flick.

Steve wonders if those really are clip-ons.

The other dogs are gathering around her now, tails wagging happily as they watch her sit up, and she
has trouble trying to pat all of their heads. They try to move in closer to lick at her face and this just makes it harder for her to move.

Steve makes his way over. If there was ever a good time to talk to one of the Safehouse mutants, it was now.

“Are they all yours?” he asks.

Jade turns to him and her dog ears perk up – really not clip-ons – before she adjusts her glasses and smiles. “No, only this one.” She pets a scraggily-looking wolfhound that was next to her. “They’re my neighbors’ dogs, I just take them out for a run every morning before I stop for bread and coffee.”

The dogs look at him warily before the wolfhound breaks away from Jade to step just a tiny bit closer to Steve. It sniffs him. Then decides he’s not so bad and nudges his leg, asking to be pet.

Steve looks to Jade. “Can I?”

“Rover’s a terrible guard dog. He’s too friendly,” Jade says, “Yeah, you can pet him.”

Steve kneels down slowly so as not to scare Rover and softly pats the dog’s head. Rover’s tail starts wagging again and he licks Steve’s hand. The soldier chuckles.

A minute later, Buster is running towards him, pushing a wet nose to his face.

“Buster!” Jade cries out. She runs a hand through her hair and sighs. “Sorry, he’s a little energetic. Buster, don’t lick his face.”

Steve’s cheek is coated in saliva before Jade has managed to run over and gently pry the terrier from him. Steve just laughs, wiping his cheek down.

“Sorry,” Jade says.

“No, it’s okay.” Steve looks at Buster, who is overjoyed to meet him, and at Rover, and at the rest of the pack, all still wary but no longer seeing him as a threat.

Dogs were always refreshing to meet. Nowadays, most people flocked over to him to ask about what it was like being frozen for years, what it was like to fight the war – and Steve can’t tell them that it’s not as glorious or as heroic as the books make it sound; it’s starvation and sleep deprivation and no showers and lice and bone-deep exhaustion and the temptation to put a bullet in your own head just so you can get some decent sleep. It’s watching friends never fall back in line, it’s watching good captains run into battlefields to save their men, it’s endless screaming for loved ones and shivering in trenches knowing you’ll die alone.

Dogs don’t do that. They meet you and if they are eager, they are eager simply because they are happy you exist. Not because you’re a glorified hero who doesn’t know the first thing to do with a fucking phone.

When Steve looks back at this time, years from now, he will think that maybe this is the reason why he doesn’t shy away from Jade Harley’s presence when they first meet. She asks for no autographs, and she smiles at him simply because she is glad to meet him and she is glad that somebody loves dogs as much as she does (and if Steve looks hard enough, he sees war in her eyes too, buried so so deep, that anyone who isn’t looking would never find it), and he will think this is why he joins her for bread and coffee that morning, in a simple family-owned café run by two college-age siblings and their no-nonsense older brother.
It’s Steve allowed to just be a person instead of a celebrity, with a dog-eared mutant, and pack of eleven dogs.

It’s a good day.

This is Steve Roger’s schedule, provided Captain America’s doesn’t mess it up: Mondays through Thursdays, he goes to the park in the afternoons. John Egbert is there performing tricks. They never talk. Steve only watches. There’s something calming in having all eyes not on him and being a spectator to something so fun.

On Friday mornings, he jogs in the park with Jade and her dogs, and then afterwards they go for bread and coffee at Sunny’s, the little café that’s a few blocks from the Safehouse.

He never tells any of his team that he’s hanging around the Safehouse mutants. If Tony was right about S.H.I.E.L.D’s intentions, well. He doesn’t think Jade or John or any of them deserve to be locked up.

He doesn’t quite understand why he’s so taken by them. He thinks maybe it’s the novelty – they seem like they’re made of magic, and people always gravitate towards magic (at least until they realize it’s real and freak out and point fingers and scream, except for people like Steve who have seen weirder). But Steve’s always been able to shrug off novelty eventually, and Jade doesn’t flaunt it around, and John only does it to earn money.

Maybe it’s because they’re different. Different as in, they don’t belong, like square pegs in circle holes, and they’re still here and they’re living and they’re thriving. Kind of like Steve, except Steve’s not sure about the living and thriving part. People gravitate towards people like themselves too.

“Do you ever feel like you’re out of place in the world?” he blurts out one morning, when it’s raining outside and Jade didn’t walk the dogs but they agreed to meet up at Sunny’s after a few text messages. He immediately tries to back up and swallow his words back, but then he turns to Jade and her eyes look so inexplicably old and tired and sad.

She nods and drinks her coffee and says, “Yeah.”

And Steve learns that he doesn’t know enough about her and the Safehouse. And he thinks maybe the fact that they’ve got so many things alike is why he gravitates towards these young mutants.

They linger a little longer at the coffee shop, both in pauses of comfortable silence and conversations punctuated by hearty laughter when they talk about dogs and the daily hassles of life. When the clock shows it’s fifteen past ten, Steve offers to walk her home.

Jade blinks and she looks around. “Uh.” She starts to stammer. “I don’t think that’s really a good idea…” She trails off, and the sentence sounds more like a question instead of a statement.

Steve opens his mouth to tell her it’s okay if she doesn’t want him to when he notices that there’s a kid at a table across them pointing excitedly at him while the boy’s mother is holding her child’s arm, trying to shush him. Steve doesn’t have to strain his hearing to make out the excited, “That’s Captain America!”

His stomach nearly plummets down. It’s late. There’s a lot of people at Sunny’s already. Of course some people would recognize him here, it’s not like he doesn’t save New York from villains every week or so.
Whereas the staff of Sunny had only given him an intense minute-long stare when he first came in to make sure that he was a friend of Jade’s and was indeed Captain America (even though they didn’t say it out loud, Steve could practically hear them thinking it), customers tended to stop and stare and point and crowd. And Steve wasn’t against fans, but he just…he needed space.

Jade’s dog ears perk up and then she turns, following his line of sight. Her shoulders relax when she sees the little boy. When she turns back to him, she offers him a small smile.

“Actually,” she says, “Yeah, you can walk me home. Just – the residents of the Safehouse aren’t very…”

“I get it,” he says, “It’s kind of hard not to hear about the Safehouse when nearly the entirety of New York’s been there.”

“Only a good third,” Jade says. She pays first, since it was her turn to pay for the food, before they make their way over to where their umbrellas are placed to retrieve them.

Steve reaches the door first and he opens it. Jade steps out and opens her umbrella before raising it high so he can duck under it and open his own umbrella. When they’re both set, Jade leads the way to the Safehouse.

“I should probably just teleport us there,” Jade mumbles, “So you have no idea which way to take. But then you might get lost? Or maybe Iron Man will drop from the sky to raid our flat because I mojo’ed you there.”

Steve tries not to snort unelegantly. He still ends up chuckling, letting the truth that’s been looming since the coffee shop settle into his chest. “I’m Captain America,” he says.

Jade nods. “I’m Jade Harley.”

“Most people take that differently.”

“You’re a soldier,” she says. Soldier, not super hero. “And you protect those who can’t protect themselves.”

Steve stares at the ground as they walk. “Yeah, I guess I do.”

“I do that too, except I didn’t go to military camp, and it usually involves a lot of green stuff and space magic,” Jade says. She looks up for a while as she thinks. “I can shoot a gun.”

Steve turns to her. “You’re – what, thirteen?”

“Twenty,” Jade says with a cheeky grin, and Steve lets his surprise show.

“Twenty?”

“Mmm. You’re – what, twenty two?”

Steve makes a disapproving noise. Jade laughs.

“It’s a thing with the…ah, mutation,” Jade says the word carefully, with a little laugh attached to it. She says it like a secret. “It’s like the ears and tail,” she says, “But no telling.”

“Me or you?”

“Me,” she says, “For you, you’re not telling anyone you walked me to the Safehouse.”
Steve nods. Then, “Has anyone been to the Safehouse? Any of the Avengers?”

“If there have been, I haven’t been home for any of them.” Jade shrugs. “I have a day job too.”

The Safehouse is an unassuming building. From the outside, Steve can imagine the inside to be just like his own building – not Stark tower – with its small, close quarters, and the cigar stains on the carpet, and the occasional noise from the neighbors.

But when the door opens, he gets a glimpse of clean tiled floors, and a very, very nice chandelier, and an even nicer carpet with well-polished stairway rails, and basically it looks like a mansion from the inside, and Steve’s head can’t even wrap around how it fits inside the small building.

The girl who opens the door is young and blonde and she has violet eyes and she appears to be glowing in the dim lighting of the overcast sky and Steve thinks he’s had too many weird things to process today.

She studies him intently before turning to Jade.

Jade grins at her. “Rose, I’d like you to meet Steve Rogers.”

Steve Rogers, not Captain America. Steve loves the fact that he can breathe around Jade Harley.

“Steve, this is Rose Lalonde,” Jade continues, “One of my flatmates.”

Rose smiles at him and extends a hand. “A pleasure to meet you, Mister Rogers,” she says, and in the chill of the rain, her hands are warm. “Thank you for walking Jade home.”

“Steve’s fine,” he says, “And, my pleasure.”

Rose’s smile grows wider as they let go of each other’s hand. “Will you be staying for lunch? It’s almost noon after all, and the Safehouse is quite large. A tour will be a while.”

And suddenly Rose’s smile appears too sharp and full of mischief and while not enough warning bells are going off inside Steve’s head for it to be DANGER DANGER, enough of it’s going off to be well this is just shifty and I’ll probably get home with one extra head than I started with.

So he tilts his head down politely and declines. Rose nods, looking amused and contented, like Steve passed something, and then she says, “Perhaps another time then.”

From the inside, there’s a very loud thud. Jade tries to see around Rose while the blonde doesn’t even look startled. Then there’s a shriek, “Egbert!” and then successive sounds of porcelain breaking and more yelling.

“We should probably break that up,” Jade says. She turns to Steve. “Thanks for walking me home.”

“No problem,” Steve says. He waits until Jade and Rose are inside the house, and listens to the cacophony of the Safehouse for a little while. Then he smiles to himself and starts his own way back to his flat.

He doesn’t tell anyone about his visit to the Safehouse.

“I like Captain America,” says John Egbert while he’s chewing on a piece of toast.
Mrs. Harrison looks at him disapprovingly but doesn’t say anything. John swallows his toast, sets the rest of it down and empties his glass of orange juice before he continues speaking. “He always comes to watch my magic shows. I don’t know if he knows I know he’s watching.”

“I’m too sleep-deprived to deal with that sentence,” Palmer #1 says. Jade pauses as she chews off a piece of bacon. She should really stop referring to them like that. Dave’s terms were rubbing off on her.

“He hasn’t shown any inclination to visit the Safehouse,” Rose says, “So far.”

It’d only been a month since the whole Tony Stark incident. Loki and Dave had taken care of that—well, Dave latched onto the first weakness he’d seen which was Stark’s alcoholism and had gotten flat-out wasted in the effort, but the situation was handled.

And then John had reported seeing a familiar dude in the park, frequenting his shows, and then a trip to the grocer’s and passing by the magazine rack had him snapping his fingers and saying, “Aha!”

So they tried to go to the park together and see what would happen if Steve Rogers saw them together. They’d acted on the assumption that he was on a surveillance mission. It wasn’t that farfetched since Tony’s sudden arrival at the Safehouse.

So far, all of them had agreed on a few things – they were not interested in being recruited by the Avengers, they were not interested on being *lab rats* for whoever held the Avengers, they were not interested in being pegged and treated as threats by the Avengers. And if they had to act a little paranoid about it, well, Sburb didn’t teach them nothing.

It was a coincidence, really, that earlier that morning, Jade Harley had run into Steve. And she didn’t think it was on purpose that he was there. He certainly had no way of knowing she walked the Safehouse dogs every morning, and she hadn’t even seen him jogging there at that time before.

On impulse, she’d invited him over to Sunny’s, just to try and discreetly get a few answers out of him. What she’d gotten was that he really didn’t plan to be there that morning and that he knew less than Tony had known about the Safehouse.

When asked by the Safehouse residents whether she thought his knowledge and curiosity was safe, Jade said yes.

“Buster likes him,” she had pointed out, and Kevin had nodded approvingly.

“He’s seen John do his windy thing,” Dave says, and Jade rejoins them at their current train of thought, steamrolling over breakfast and the implications of an Avenger being interested in their little extravagant bunker made up of magic and stubbornness and humans and psychics and gods. “He’s seen Jade do her spacey thing. He’s seen her ears and didn’t freak out. He’s seen Palmer’s *dog.*”

“And you will cease your mutterings about my dog if you don’t want to be fed to him, Strider.” Kevin doesn’t even look up from his plate. Lying on the floor, by Kevin’s feet, Buster yips happily.

“Tony Stark visited because he was worried about Pepper Potts’ safety,” Loki says, finally. He’s been silent so far. Jade turns to him. He’s already finished his plate and is leaned back on his chair, relaxed. Royal and collected. “Or was operating under the guise of it. As unlikely as it seems, he really was trying to see the credibility of the Safehouse, especially since Miss Potts has taken shelter here.”

“So what’s Cap America’s deal,” Dave finishes his thought. “He likes the magic shows?”
“He strikes me more as a man of science and deep-seated religious faith,” Rose says.

“You went to the museum,” Dave points out.

“Research.”

“Cheating.”

“Even doctors research their patients’ previous experiences.”

“You know, we could probably set you up in college around here,” Dave says. Jade pops a cut of meat into her mouth and chews, setting down her utensils to listen. “You wanna be a psychologist, there’s a shit ton of villains that the Avengers have caught that you’d have a field day with.”

Rose looks down at her plate thoughtfully, slowly turning her fork over and over until a prong nearly wears a hole in the porcelain. “Perhaps I should,” she says, then, louder, “Perhaps I should, this is Earth, after all.”

Jade watches Rose’s fork. She thinks about the dogs, and the pets stores and the animal shelters. She thinks about watching Iron Man’s suit flying around, she thinks about the complexity of Stark Tower’s systems, she thinks about the machineries the big bads bring around every other Thursday. She wonders if it’s too far away to double major in engineering and veterinary medicine.

None of them have ever thought about pursuing paths forward. Only ever to blend in. Never about the future. The future’s too blurry to make out, and Sburb’s always taught them to focus on what their hands are holding because if they fuck this up, they fuck everything up.

“Did we even finish high school, I don’t remember,” John says. “I really don’t.”

“Paperwork is easy to fake,” Rose says.

“I can go to college, yeah,” Jade says. Veterinary medicine and engineering. She’ll sweettalk her way around it if the college people don’t let her. “It sounds fun.”

“You never finished your studies?” Loki asks.

“No, the game kinda destroyed every single school when it rained blood on our parade,” Dave says. “So, no. We’re pretty good at alchemizing shit though. And at fighting. And managing our aspects. But calculus? Fuck.”

“Roxy was good at programming,” Rose says, and Jade doesn’t miss the look Dave shoots his sister over his glasses, the motion registering in Jade’s internal radar. If she squints, she can imagine red irises glaring at Rose. Nobody ever says their parent-siblings’ names. It’s like an unspoken rule.

“Apocalypse situations give you a lot of free time,” Dave says, stiff.

Loki studies the exchange quietly. Everyone else pretends to be more interested in their own food.

Jade clears her throat. “So, Steve Rogers,” she says, getting them back on topic. “I don’t think he wants anything from us.”

“We’ll have to make sure,” John says. He turns to Loki, who turns to Jade. Jade nods.

“I invited him, Friday morning. I told him maybe he’d like to run with the dogs, because they seem to like him, and he looked like he could use a running partner.”
John makes a funny face as he looks at her. “Isn’t he like, ninety something?”

Jade flips him off. He laughs.

“But you believe he honestly does not have any ill intentions towards the Safehouse, Jade?” Loki asks.

Jade holds his gaze, green eyes brighter than her own, raw with power, before turning to stare at the wall across her. There are tiny little black ants, crawling on that wall, and every foot they move, Jade feels exactly by how much distance they move it and the coordinates of their position. She knows space. She doesn’t know heart. But Steve Rogers is one of those people she feels wear their hearts on their sleeves and the truth in their eyes.

“He doesn’t like being called Captain America outside of a mission, you know,” Jade says, “I can see it. He looked so happy when I didn’t seem to recognize him, and only ever addressed him as Steve. Captain America is a superhero. An icon. Somebody perfect. Steve Rogers is somebody fucked up and just wants to live his life, and whose identity isn’t confined to a name he didn’t want.”

Loki inclines his head. Jade knows he understands what she’s trying to say.

“Yeah,” she says, “I think he means no harm.”

When she said that, it wasn’t a go-signal for everybody to bare their teeth at him. And surprisingly, the first one to show canines without actually showing canines is Rose, who looks smug as all hell as she closes the door behind her. The rain is pouring outside, and so Steve won’t hear them when Jade hisses, “What was that for?”

“Confirmation,” Rose says.

“Couldn’t you just See?”

“Oh, I could, but I always like hearing them say it,” Rose says. From the kitchen, there’s another crash. John cackles, the Palmers simultaneously groan, and Dave starts to go on a tangent about the sanctity of apple juice and threats to shop nothing but Betty Crocker for a week, as if Mrs. Harrison would ever let him.

Jade sighs. It’s a good thing Loki is still at the animal shelter. She’s not really sure if he would have egged Rose on or had pity on Steve.

“He really is a good guy, you know,” Jade says as they both make their way to the kitchen. “We left Sunny’s because some kid recognized him as Captain America.”

Something in Rose’s eyes dim. Her mouth sets into a stiff line.

It doesn’t take much to break up the fight. Rose grabs her brother, who is easily pliable when he is focusing on his words, and makes him sit on a stool in the corner. The Palmers are happy enough to get out of the kitchen and start up the PS4. Jade slaps John on the head and gives him a stern talking to about children starving somewhere and how any sort of food should not be wasted even for pranks. Dave’s hair is still shining with apple juice and edible glitter, but he’s quieted down.

When Jade finishes her lecture and John looks sheepish, Dave pipes up, “Dude, I still cannot fucking believe. I trusted you to be better than that.”
“Alright, before this goes off into another block of aerial text, you’re going to go take a shower and John’s going to clean up his mess. And hopefully he finishes before Mrs. Harrison gets back from the grocery store.” Jade puts her hands on her hips and the decision is final.

Dave goes, still muttering. Rose has a hand on his shoulder to push him forward whenever he looks like he wants to stop and confront Egbert again.

“So how was breakfast?” asks John as he wipes down the kitchen counter. Glitter gets permanently lodged into the spaces between the tiles. Jade wrinkles her nose and snaps her fingers, and the glitter finds itself in the bottom of the garbage can.

“Nothing special.”

“Really? You took longer than usual,” he says, then grins at her, “Did the cap sweettalk you or something?”

Jade gives him a stern look. “John.”

John laughs, and it’s high and clear and genuine and Jade relaxes. “Sorry, it’s just – he’s a good friend, right?”

“He’s a great friend and he’s a good man,” she says, “And he doesn’t like being called Captain America outside of work, how many times do I have to tell you.”

John nods. “Sorry about that too,” he says, “He still keeps on coming to my shows, you know. We never talk but, he’s getting better. At…adjusting, I guess. He looked worse than us when I first saw him at the park. He wasn’t even drawing. He was staring into nothing.”

“He was frozen, right?”

“For seventy years, give or take.” John finishes up the wiping and wrings out the rag in the sink. Apple juice and glitter rain down on the smooth porcelain. He runs the cloth through water and wrings it again so that it’s not too wet, then goes back to the counter to give it another wiping.

“Was anyone he knew even alive when he woke up?” Jade grabs the stool from the corner to sit on it.

John pauses in his work, and then shrugs and continues. “I don’t know.” Another pause, but this time he doesn’t stop working. “We were lucky.”

Jade nods and swallows down the bile threatening to rise up her throat. “Yeah,” she says, and her voice is shaking. “Yeah, we were.”
“How many Starbucks branches is it necessary for one city to have?” Loki asks as Dave sets down the paper bag that still has steam escaping from it.

They're really lucky that some of their refugees are Starbucks employees. Coffee's usually free, and that's good, especially since someone has introduced their resident god of mischief to it. Dave loves Mrs. Harrison, he really does, but her coffee addiction hadn’t need to be shared with scary-powerful sorcerers who could giggle and bust out a transistor outside.

Not that Loki giggled. Then again, Dave had never seen him drunk.

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“There’s a hundred and sixty four in Chicago.”

“Do you moonlight for stats or something?” Dave looks at her and then gives the Starbucks logo of his cup a shifty look.

“You want me to tell you the number of 7-11’s?”

He takes a sip. Well, it’s not bad coffee. “No. I think I’ll pass the horror of mass corporations.” He waves a hand. “Batterwitch flashbacks.”

“Ah.”

“Yeah, well, Betty Crocker is still a thing here,” John says, finally, finally getting past through the door with Palmer #1 and getting his coffee. He pokes in the straw and slurps it noisily.

“You realize you are related to Betty Crocker, yes?” Rose says, “To the Batterwitch, anyway. To some extent.” She waits until everyone’s sorted out their mess before retrieving her own drink. She does that thing where she sniffs it elegantly before sitting down. John slurps again, just to be petty. Dave chuckles.

“I’m disowning her,” John says.

“Jane Crocker is your biological mother, and you’ve known her as your Nanna, and she is the Batterwitch’s granddaughter.”

“Isn’t the troll princess the Batterwitch’s daughter? Descendant?” Dave asks. He sits on the floor, leaning back on the couch. “Does that mean John’s like, part troll?”

“Hey, how about we don’t argue weird genetics right now?” John sits down and then kicks Dave, or at least tries to, because Dave dodges and does a roll so that he ends up on the other end of the couch and leans back on it. John flips him off.

“That’s cheap, John,” Dave says. The Heir of Breath flicks a finger at his direction and sends a gust of wind towards him, mainly directed at his head, strong enough to mess up his perfectly styled hair, instead making it stick up and be a poor imitation of Dirk’s own shock of white-blond locks.

Dave takes a sip of his coffee, calmly. John looks properly smug and turns to the television.

It’s another segment of Tony Stark (because when is the man not on TV around here, really) regarding a few loose ends about his weapons dealing, etc., etc., and a few minutes of discussing the future of sharing the clean energy tech of the arc reactor – it’s been rehashed so many times on television that Dave’s nearly gotten the lines memorized, because the news outlets all play the same footage.

They’d all been monitoring the news since Tony showed up at the Safehouse, and Dave had been assigned to surveillance duty because it was convenient (Loki suddenly blips to buckass nowhere, Rose is neck-deep in magic studies and trying to weigh the options of college versus self-education, Jade has to distract Cap – Steve Rogers, and John is…still in the wind. Literally, sometimes. The rest of the Safehouse people had been out of the question, because this entire mutant thing is their problem and their problem alone. No need to bring the others into this. And so Dave, the only person who appeared to have his shit together, had been put on surveillance duty. So far his only problem is the balding man in the fancy suit who wears dark glasses following him - and whenever they all went out together, them - around, probably trying to be discreet, but Dave is Dave fucking Strider and his Bro raised him better than that).
The next part of the segment shows the robots that were sprawling the city just last Friday. One of the damn things had tried to crawl towards the Safehouse while the magical barriers were still being activated and Rose had to shoot the thing with a blast of magic that had the intensity of a small exploding star. Thankfully, the barrier was already up by the time the ball of light made impact with the robotic spider, mostly because Loki’d realized they were fucked in half a second, and the only damage done was a huge crater in the middle of the street, a pool of black slag, and scorch marks on the surrounding buildings. Loki had looked really proud at Rose for that feat (and then everyone decided to build a sparring room, because Mrs. Harrison yelled at them for days when they tried to spar inside the living room).

The robots had caused a lot of trouble for the Avengers, especially since they were programmed like cockroaches, not dying even when you cut off the head. The near-entirety of New York had stayed inside the Safehouse for close to seven hours and the dude who had an obsession with dogs who lived in the fourth level had adopted ten new strays, because it’s a rule that everyone, cats and dogs included, are welcome at the Safehouse (once, Buster had jumped on Dave, causing Dave to land on his ass and be sieged by dogs. His aviators had fallen down and been trampled by the lot. The guy had bought him a new pair; Dave liked him).

The report for the damage is given, which isn’t as huge as Dave had thought it would be: the death count is only two, and the injured count only in the low twenties, not even with serious, life-threatening injuries. The few people who are being interviewed look rather chipper for what they’d been put through. Probably because they’d reached the point where they didn’t even care anymore, which, same. Dave takes huge gulps of his coffee again before swirling it around out of habit.

“It’s just a matter of knowing where to go, these days,” one Susan Trillis says on the screen, dark circles under her eyes from lack of sleep, but otherwise unharmed. “You know the roads well enough and you drive to the Safehouse as soon as you learn of the attack. They can’t even touch the building. You’re perfectly safe inside.”

Everyone stops playing with their sleeves, stops whispering and swirling their coffees at the last part of her sentence. They stare at the screen, watching as the next clip from another New Yorker plays.

Dave is the first one to resume moving his coffee cup around. He glances at Loki, who is still looking at the screen, face carefully blank. His coffee is still in his lap.

“Should we be worried?” Dave asks.

The next two clips are of children, talking about how their parents had drove to the Safehouse and how it was like a really cool fortress.

“It’s…good that we are helping people,” Rose says. “The merits of attention are still debatable.”

“But it’s expected,” John says. He drains his coffee and leans forward to place it on the coffee table. “I mean, what did we think was going to happen?”

“That people were going to leave us alone, as thanks for saving their asses?” Dave says, tone slightly sharp.

“The people are gracious enough,” Rose says, “The media is just doing their jobs.”

“Fuck their jobs,” John mutters.

Jade frowns at the screen. “It’s uncomfortable.”

“Attacks might be focused on the Safehouse,” Loki says, still with that calm Dave’s only ever seen
in his fucked up family, “Depending on what the next failure’s goal is.”

“So we up the shields?”

“It would be easier to make them only let in humans.” Loki carefully brings his coffee up to his lips. “But monsters come in all skins and voices.”

“Barriers would have to be strengthened and we should keep our guards up,” Rose says, “And we might actually have to fight when it comes to it.”

Dave tries not to flinch. He succeeds. Instead he carefully clenches a fist and then unclenches it, one finger at a time, staring at his hand as he does so. Jade’s frown is more pronounced when he glances at her. The Palmers are silent from where they’re sitting. Palmer #1 is staring at the screen intently, which is now showing an image of the Avengers.

“By the way, Mister Agent Man is getting braver,” Dave says.

“We’ll strengthen the anti-surveillance spells outside as well,” Rose says.

“And if they get inside?”

“They won’t.” Rose turns towards the Palmers and they share a smile, #1 shrugging as he takes his eyes off the television screen for a moment.

They all watch the rest of the news in silence, and Dave plays with the rest of his coffee until it grows cold.

The only reason Rose hadn’t noticed it at first was because it was barely there. In a tangled mass of lights that had her putting effort to clear her vision, the very faint red thread isn’t present when she first sees Steve Rogers on the news, because the colors don’t really show up on recorded media. It’s not present when she first sees him in the park. It is, however, floating innocently and faintly, when she sees him in front of the Safehouse doorstep after he walks Jade home one rainy morning.

The next time she sees Steve Rogers is when she goes on a grocery run with Jade and they meet up with the good captain so they could all shop together, and so Rose could bait him a little more in her ‘psychiatrist voice’, as her brother calls it. Jade had put up a half-hearted fight, but meetings about the surveillance that Dave’s been keeping an eye on and the ever-growing publicity of the Safehouse had made her yield, even if she’d been guilty over it.

The red thread is definitely noticeable, and Rose pays attention to it during the first few minutes of their meet-up, mostly because instead of swirling around Steve like the rest of the lights and colors of Fortune, it drifts and leads someplace – far away, Rose thinks, as she watches the thing phase through solid objects and lead outside the supermarket, out of the building and out of the city. Then Rose focuses and clears her vision and subtly drops questions for Steve to answer.

He picks up on it, several times, and Rose smiles whenever he does so, but she doesn’t stop, because she knows that he knows it’s in her right to question his motivations for befriending Jade and see if he has any interest, malicious or otherwise, towards the Safehouse.

This time they get home via Jade’s teleportation, because it’s already night and they’re out late, and Dave’s texting really long messages about how Mrs. Harrison has already cannibalized John because everyone is starving, and Steve has to gather himself for a few minutes so he doesn’t puke from the
space-travel disorientation.

When the captain has brushed off the temporary-displacement-sickness and the girls are about to ring the doorbell, John Egbert appears in a flash of blue light, most likely from turning into wind and seeping through the cracks of the doorway and immediately moves to cower behind his sister.

“Save me, Jade!”

Jade blinks, glasses slipping a bit down her nose as her brother grabs her shoulders and tries to hide behind her. “What – ”

The door opens and several dogs burst out. John yelps and tries to run, only to be pounced on by the mutts and licked to death. Jade laughs at him.

Dave, still holding the door open, smugly grins. “Enjoy being dog food, Egbert.”

John is about to say something but Rover tries to kiss him. He leans back instead.

From inside the house, there’s a distinct, “Strider, if my dogs aren’t complete when they get back inside, you’re going to be their next meal.”

“No problem, Mr. G, they’ll be whole and complete when this door closes, I promise.”

Rose raises an eyebrow at her brother when he turns to her. “Starvation?” she asks.

“I’ll have you know we have lost Palmer #2,” Dave says. He puts a hand to his chest and dips his head. “It was a tragic death, but he’s going to be remembered for the rest of time. That little blonde psychic Mario Kart loser will be forever immortalized in shitty jpeg artifacts and golden-beated sick fires.”

“Fuck you, Strider!”

Jade loses it as soon as she hears Kevin yell. From the corner of Rose’s eye, she sees Steve Rogers shift from one foot to another, awkward but not fully uncomfortable. The red thread suddenly flickers into view, looped with a length of color for longing, and then disappears.

They should invite Rogers inside, she thinks, just to see what his reaction would be, but as interesting an experiment that was, it’s too early. And too risky. He’s a good man but he isn’t invested in the Safehouse enough. He is invested in Jade, because they’re friends, but – not enough, Rose decides.

So instead she steers the conversation so that John can finally be freed from his doggy captors and be given access to the showers inside the house again, and so that she and Jade can get inside.

“We would invite you in, but…” she trails off, leaving it to him to mentally supply it with it’s not a good time; it’s a mess; our flatmates are fucking idiots and it’s embarrassing if you see them – or I don’t trust you enough to be inside yet, wait for a bit and show me you’re trustworthy by saying no and letting us set boundaries.

Steve Rogers politely nods and says that he doesn’t want to intrude, and that maybe it would be best for them to get inside before another one of their flatmates got eaten. She nods, smiling, letting him know he passed, and he and Jade exchange their goodbyes.

When they all get inside, dogs included, and Steve Rogers starts to walk back to his home, Jade sighs and runs her hands over her face.
“Fuck, I’m too guilty for this,” she says into her palms, groceries placed on the floor and forgotten, voice muffled.

“I don’t think he thinks you consider him untrustworthy,” Rose says, “I think he knows that we have every right to be wary, and he respects us for it.”

“Which is?” Jade lifts her head. John has already flown up to their room to take his shower and Dave is herding the dogs into the living room.

“Which is good, because that means he’s a good person,” Rose says. “He understands.”

Jade smiles. She straightens before picking up the bags of groceries and making her way to the kitchen.

Rose turns back to the door for a bit, thinking about the merits of having Captain America as an ally. She thinks about the red thread that led to somewhere, far away, and thinks that it’s good that Jade’s found such a good friend.

Rose is baiting America, and as much as Dave trusts her to know what she is doing, he still checks the windows after his sister and Jade have gone to give the groceries to Mrs. H. There’s no sign of Steve Rogers anywhere.

No sign of Mister Agent Man either. Dave had gone through the trouble of grabbing the man’s discarded receipt from when he was staking Dave out at Sunny’s. The people working there had been more than happy to help once he’d explained his situation. They’re regular refugees at the Safehouse anyway, and he just didn’t mention that the person stalking him was from SHIELD, instead saying it was from a dubious source, and he really needed anything that the man left behind in the café. Anything at all, as long as he touched it.

From a selection of a used spoon, teacup, saucer, chair, tablecloth and a receipt, Dave chose receipt.

He’d given it to Loki, because it was the god who told him that if he wanted to ward everyone from the agent, he’d have to get anything with the man’s DNA on it.

“You’re not going to make him turn pink and start singing Disney songs, are you?” he’d asked.

Loki’d turned slowly towards him and blinked in the same speed.

“Oh, just – you know. That would seriously alert me to if he was around.”

“A personal alert would be a good charm. He’s only stalked you out so far.”

“Because you, Jade and John disappear and Rose works in the library. Record logs and cameras are at the library, and it’d be easy to get him if he was there on a daily basis. I’m the easiest target. I move around.”

So Loki did his magic thing on Mister Agent Man, that no matter how much he tried to get close, he would only get close enough for his eyes to look elsewhere and his focus to be averted. Dave tossed in a shirt he didn’t like anymore and Loki added a charm that would make Dave and Dave alone hear a specific sound that would alert him to Mister Agent Man’s arrival.

“Just be sure to avoid being in a place with windchimes. You will get confused,” Loki’d added.
“Uh huh. This can be reversed, right? Windchime PTSD is something I want to avoid.”

From what Mrs. Harrison, the Palmers and the newly-briefed Mr. G (he’d earned the briefing after he shot a freaky bat-spider-goop thing three weeks ago, when Jade was rescuing three children and a dog outside) had told him, Mister Agent Man had not approached the Safehouse directly nor had he been spotted outside. No other shifty agents have been spotted either. The Palmers confirmed that there were no SHIELD goons dressed up as civilians.

Once Dave’s satisfied that there’s no one watching them outside, he joins everyone else in the kitchen. Dinner’s already being served, and some of the others are in the living room. Only Palmer #2 and Mr. G are in the kitchen.

“Where’s Buster?” Mr. G immediately asks.

“Isn’t he with Jade?” Dave grabs a plate and starts to pile sausages onto his plate when he notices that Palmer #2 and Mr. G are just staring at him. He matches their stare and mentally catalogues where he saw Buster go. He went inside the house. Dave is sure he went inside the house.

Palmer #2 starts snickering.

Dave flips them both off with the hand not holding the plate. “Not funny.”

“You’re too paranoid, Strider,” Mr. G says. “Luke – Loki says he’s got the spell down, yeah?”

“Yeah, but it’s not like SHIELD doesn’t have access to uncommon stuff right? For all we know, they got a mage.”

“Then they’d be part of the Avengers if that was the case.”

Dave pauses. “Point.”

“Your friends can defend themselves if push comes to shove. SHIELD doesn’t know about you or your abilities,” Mr. G says, stirring his coffee. Mr. G never makes eye contact, Dave notices. And though Rose says he’s not psychic, he’s scarily good at reading people. But the whole no-eye-contact thing makes it easier to talk to him. Dave likes talking to Mr. G. “SHIELD doesn’t harm civilians.”

“What about #1 and #2?” Dave asks. “It’s not like SHIELD’s going to accept ‘human with psychic abilities’ as wholly human. They’ll scribble mutant quicker than they’ll slap handcuffs.”

“Then we’ll run,” Palmer #2 says, shrugging. “Honestly, Strider. You’re winding yourself up over nothing.”

Dave thinks of the meticulousness and the preciseness that timetravelling calls for and chuckles. He waves a hand in response before claiming the rest of his food and walking to the living room. He can feel Palmer #2 and Mr. G’s stares at the back of his head. He doesn’t look back.

He builds a routine over the next few weeks: first thing in the morning, he flashsteps all over the Safehouse, checking for bugs or for nosy agents; then he cleans himself, gets dressed, and goes to work if he has a gig that day. If he doesn’t, then he takes to looking at the news to see if there’s anything he suspicious, like a sudden rise of villains that is probably pattern for something more, or any hidden message that SHIELD likes to send to its government buddies or whatever (or news of
grey-skinned aliens found, or of a bunch of weird kids dropping out of nowhere suddenly, or a red battleship staining the sky somewhere).

He spars with his sister in the newly-built training room whenever he can. Jade teaches him how to shoot a gun. Mr. G takes over when she’s not around.

On weekends, he jogs after his flashstep-checkup, and trains in the sparring room in the afternoons. It’s easier when training is scheduled instead of waiting on edge every single hour of the day, waiting for Bro to come out of nowhere and just swing at him.

(And Dave thinks, when his eyes are hurting from reading articles and he’s caught himself looking over his shoulder, that maybe he’s never gotten rid of that paranoia.)

On one afternoon where everyone has work and he doesn’t, he goes to the training room and takes stock of his artillery in his sylladex. This universe doesn’t have any sylladex tech, but Jade’s well-versed enough in the engineering that she’s able to fix any problems.

He has several swords, including the Legendary Piece of Shit, a bunch of other trinkets and one fucking smuppet that he immediately sets on fire. Fuck sentimentality, those things scarred him.

He has to get the fire extinguisher though, because he burnt the damn thing in the middle of the training court.

He leaves the fire extinguisher and gets back to counting his swords.

The rest of the stuff in his sylladex that he doesn’t really need, he puts in a pile to be put in his drawers. He decides to captcha a pistol. Even if he’s not too good at guns yet, he might need it, and preparedness is always crucial for survival.

He disassembles the gun, counts the bullets, assembles it. Then he disassembles it again. Counts the bullets. He pauses and looks back to the pile of ashes and soot that a few feet away from him, and the fire extinguisher beside him.

He thinks about the smuppet. He thinks about what he’s doing. He thinks about Bro.

A few minutes later, he’s ducking his head and wiping tears from his eyes, because he’s so fucking confused as to what he is doing. He’s not even sure anymore. This new earth is supposed to be a sanctuary for them – he’s supposed to earn back the life he lost (and maybe, never had, because what the fuck did his brother even raise him for if not the goddamn game), not look over his shoulder every now and then and act like a soldier going to war. He’s finished his war.

(He’s never finished his war and the realization of that makes him choke on a sob out loud. Mortified, he quickly wipes his eyes and puts his aviators back on.)

He gathers himself up and captchalettes whatever weapons he needs. He leaves the useless pile on the floor and stands up, intent on getting the broom to sweep up the ashes of the burnt smuppet.

When he looks up and sees the doorway, Palmer #1 is standing there. He’s even got his purple sweater with the white moon on it.

Dave freezes.

They stare at each other for a minute, and Dave can see the swirls of light in Palmer #1’s eyes. They’re too bright. And Palmer’s eyes look unfocused.
“I thought you had school today,” Dave says.

“No, my professor for today’s subject is sick,” Palmer #1 says.

They’re both back to staring at each other again. The silence is so thick, Dave can feel it pushing his aviators down.

He rights his glasses back up.

“So – ”

“I was here for exactly thirty minutes and twenty four seconds,” Palmer then quickly adds, “And counting.”

“Fuck, you’re a little high on psychic shit right now, aren’t you?”

Palmer smiles. His eyes are very bright.

“Does it bother you? The psychic episodes?” Dave asks.

“What does your sister do?”

“She Sees all the time,” Dave says, “It’s integral to being a Seer.”

“To being a fully realized Seer. I think my brother mentioned that you said that she said I was supposed to be a Seer too.”

“If this universe had a game.”

Palmer tilts his head. He doesn’t say anything. Dave knows he wants to. He knows how people look like when they want to spare their friends the bad news.

“You don’t have to be so wound up, Dave,” Palmer #1 says, “You don’t have to count your weapons.”

“If SHIELD comes looking for us – ”

“If SHIELD comes looking for you, New York will not let them take you. Have you ever thought about that?”

Dave closes his mouth. Palmer #1 looks at him for a while longer before speaking again. “You and your friends have saved this city more times than you can count. The only reason the death toll isn’t in thousands during invasions is because you and friends decided to use your flat as a bunker. You didn’t have to do that.” His look turns soft. “You did anyway.”

Dave looks down for moment. “It was the right thing to do.”

“It wasn’t because it was right. It was just that you inherently knew that you could help and you chose to do it. Just because you could.” Palmer rights his head and smiles. “You sound like a hero to me.”

“I’m not a hero,” is Dave’s immediate reply.

Palmer hums. “For once, Dave,” he says, “Put some trust in the people you save. Trust them to save you. Trust them to be able to stand up for you too.” He looks like he wants to walk over to Dave, but doesn’t. He raises an arm, then slowly drops it. He sighs. “Trust your friends. Trust us.”
Dave looks up.

“The battlefield isn’t uneven anymore, Dave. And you’re not a soldier, you’re just a kid.”

Dave stares at Palmer #1. He stares and stares. Palmer smiles before slowly walking away. And once he’s gone Dave fucking cries, because a soldier is practically all his brother raised him to be, and no one’s ever told him he’s more than that before.

This morning, Cecil wakes up and smiles as he stares at the ceiling. Today is going to be a fun day. It will be a little exhausting pushing at the spell Loki has put – the one where Mister Agent Man can never exactly focus on any of them – so he can get close, but Cecil does not want to make an impression. He just wants to talk. And maybe plant a suggestion in Mister Agent Man’s head. By the time he leaves, perhaps the spell will kick in again full force so that Mister Agent Man can’t exactly remember the entirety of their conversation, but just have a vague impression of it.

Recording devices. Mm, Cecil is a good pickpocket.

Today, Dave has a gig. He hasn’t had a gig in a few days. That’s mostly why Cecil has decided today is a good day to move. And, the arrangement of the universe appears to allow it – or, maybe not allow, but if there’s any good time to do something about their current problem, it was now, and Cecil is an opportunist.

He has Kevin help him break into Dave’s room (ah, windows and telekinetically-inclined brothers) and he steals an aviator, a pair of jeans and a shirt; the red-sleeved raglan with the record that Dave is so fond of – and even had several shirts of. Better to make things convincing, even if Mister Agent Man isn’t going to remember. A good con is in the details.

“Do you know how to use a hair iron?” Cecil asks his brother.

Kevin shakes his head.

“Huh. I actually thought you did. Your hair’s not as curly as mine.”

Kevin sighs. “Ceece. You know twins can have differences, right?”

“Mm. I’m going to go find Mrs. Harrison.”

“Try Grahambell.”

Cecil wrinkles his nose while Kevin snickers. “You know he doesn’t like that nickname.”

“What? Strider came up with it. It’s funny.”

It turns out Mr. G does know how to use a hair iron. The man straightens out Cecil’s hair and doesn’t ask what he’s going to do, and instead asks why he’s the one to do it.

“My hair’s the same shade as Dave’s. Kev’s is a little darker.”

“Ah.”

It’s fortunate that he’s about the same height and body structure as Dave, and the shirt and jeans fit perfectly.
He puts on the aviators and spreads his arms in a flourish.

“How do I look?”

“Don’t smile,” Mr. G says.

Afterwards, Kevin does a little makeup on him to make it a little more convincing.

“Show me how you walk,” Mr. G says. Cecil does his best to imitate Dave’s graceful, confident stride from one end of the room to the other.

“Not that fancy,” Mr. G says. “You move like – like ghosts in a B-rated movie do – ”

“Is that a compliment?” Kevin asks.

“I’ll take it,” Cecil says.

Mr. G continues like he hasn’t been interrupted. “Dave moves graceful, but not airy. He moves solid. Like when he punches you, you know it’s going to hurt, but he’s going to look fabulous while doing it.” Mr. G crosses his arms and looks down at the floor in thought. “Do you ever watch documentaries – nature documentaries, I mean. BBC? National Geograpic?”

“Yeah,” the siblings say.

“Do you see when the predator, be it a lion or a tiger or a lynx or a panther, moves? It’s speed and power and beauty all coiled into muscles. And when they run, they’re not running like they’re going to dissipate into air from their softness, they run like a bullet, hard and fast and deadly, and when they hit, they hit. And you know that whatever’s going to get trapped by those claws is dead.”

Cecil nods.

“That’s how Strider moves,” Mr. G says, “Hell, that’s how Winters – that’s how Loki moves. But Loki can switch between B-rated movie ghost to terrifying predator in the savannah.”

“How did you not go straight into literature instead of criminal profiler?” Kevin mutters. Cecil elbows him harshly, getting an “Ow!” from him.

“Limit the swing of your arm by a few centimeters. Loosen the curl of your fingers,” Mr. G instructs, “When you step, stretch your leg full and land on the balls of your feet – not the heel. Toes and ball. Have you ever danced?”

Kevin raises a hand.

“How about martial arts?”

“Um,” Cecil says. Kevin raises a hand again.

“That’s okay, you’re passable.”

Cecil steps out of the house, headphones and ipod with him, when he feels that it is just time for Mister Agent Man to be at a little coffee shop where he sends encrypted messages to his superiors from his phone. By that time, Mr. G has given him a few more reminders, before he fixes the aviators on his face, schools his expression and steps out the house in Dave Strider’s gait.

“Why loosen the curl of his fingers?” he hears Kevin ask from the door that’s still partially open.
“Dave Strider’s hands do not naturally curl into fists like your brother’s. They’re always halfway open, like he’s ready to drop a weapon in them anytime. It takes a few precious milliseconds to uncurl a hand.”

“Oh.”

Mr. G has reassured them time and again that he isn’t psychic. He’s scary good at reading people though, and for times like these, the skill is incredibly useful. Cecil runs through the tips in his head and reconciles them with his memories of how Dave moves. He thinks soldier, he thinks warrior, he thinks brother, he thinks…Dave.

He doesn’t know exactly what Dave has been through (but he knows Dave is from Out There, because since the first time Cecil has laid his eyes on the children and Loki, he has felt that they are not from Here, and although they’ll most likely never say where they are from other than they’re not from New York or from here, Cecil knows, and Kevin knows, and to some extent, Graham knows), but he can guess, and he can guess it is ugly and something no one should ever be put through. This is why Dave Strider walks like he’s ready to march into a battlefield. This is why he has his hands ready to receive weapons. This is why he moves with an elegance of a coiled snake.

Cecil allows the corners of his lips to turn up and he puts his headphones on and turns up the song – the beats are heavy and steady at 110 per minute, and he loves it – and he leisurely strolls for a while until he finds the coffee shop Mister Agent Man is in. It’s far away enough from the Safehouse that any of the residents who would be looking for him wouldn’t be too alarmed, but close enough that should anything happen, Mister Agent Man can spring into action.

He finds Mister Agent Man sitting in a corner, right next to a window. If anything goes sideways, he can just jump through the glass. If anything big happens in the Safehouse, he’ll see the smoke in the sky. He’s out of the way from prying eyes. It’s tactical.

Cecil grins, a perfect mirror image of Dave.

He turns off his music, pulls off his headphones, waits for Mister Agent Man to finish his call and for the waitress to drop off his coffee before he walks over and slides into the chair across him. He leans back, stretches his legs, and sets them apart enough for him to be comfortably balanced, and then places his left arm on the armrest, the right on the table.

The agent looks confused, clearly trying to focus on something that his eyes can see but his mind completely rejects. Cecil chuckles before slipping into his con and pushing at the psychic influence of the spell. He adjusts his voice so it sounds like Dave’s.

“Hey.”

The agent startles and his hand twitches, like he wants to reach his gun.

“Figured I’d make your work easy for you. You’ve been tailing us for days after all,” Cecil says.

The agent schools his expression and leans back on the chair, a show of confidence and calm. Cecil can taste the confusion and the panic and the adrenaline off of him. Maybe this is why Kevin loves baiting people so much. Then again, his weaker Sight could account for it. Maybe he needed to bait harder to get results.

“What’s your name?” the agent asks.

“Pretty sure that’s bullshit because S.H.I.E.L.D’s already done their fieldwork, but I’ll humor you,”
Cecil says. The hand on the table starts tracing the edge of the box of napkins. “I’m thinking the ones who are attempting first contact should be extending the olive branch though. In respect to bad alien movies, and the whole ‘we come in peace’ routine.”

Cecil lowers the psychic pushing, allowing Loki’s spell to gently filter, and uses another psychic drive. “What's your name?” His voice is low and soothing and airy, and absolutely anyone who hears what he says does what he wants. Scientifically proven from when he was little kid and he and Kevin messed with people for fun. Kevin calls it his Briny Depths voice; that was a fun time.

“Phil Coulson,” the man says. He looks a little dazed.

Cecil leans forward and puts his hands together, Dave Strider act back in place, all red confidence and no psychic drive. “Well, Phil Coulson. This is what I want you to do.”

When Dave Strider comes home that day with a plastic bag of ramen packets and a bottle of apple juice, he walks into the living room where the television’s on, and watching the airing show is Palmer #2, Mr. G and…Dave Strider.

“Shit – ”

“Calm down,” says – Palmer #1? Fucking Hell? Before his brain can calculate for dead Daves and time travelling and the fucking game and everything in between. “I just had something to do.”

“That involved cosplaying me?”

“What can I say, I like you.” Palmer #1 grins and takes off his aviators. Then he wipes off the make up on his face. “Seriously. You’ll thank me when you don’t see Mister Agent Man for a few days or even ever again.”

“Is that my shirt? That is my shirt, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it is,” Palmer #1 says, “Don’t worry, I’ll launder it.”

“Fucking hell. What did you do? What the fucking fuck.”

“Well, it was good time to talk to Agent Coul – ”

“No, fuck that. You got him off my back, thank you. I meant what did you fucking do to look like me, did you – ” Dave wheezes. He needs to breath. “ – pull a magic spell or something, was Loki involved, did you do weird science stuff with Jade or dark magics with Rose, what.”

“Dude, it’s your shirt and pants,” Palmer #2 says, blinking at him with a weird look on his face, like Dave's the weird one even though his brother is dressed up as him. “And aviators,” he adds. “Bit of make-up and coaching from Mister G.”

“Just that?”

“Just that,” Palmer #2 says.

“Okay,” Dave says. He puts a hand on the doorframe to steady himself. “Okay. I – I need a drink. Or an entire week’s sleep. You don’t put a guy through the wringer without telling him first, man. You just don’t. That’s fucking cruel as all Alternia’s bullshit. Y'all should’ve told me.”
Somebody starts snickering. Mr. G, from the couch, kicks Palmer #2 – who is sitting on the floor – lightly.

Dave starts to turn back towards the stairs, but then he stops to point accusingly at Palmer #1, while staring at the floor and trying not to look at his copycat. “My stuff. They better be in great condition when I get them back.”

Palmer #1 grins wider.

Mr. G asks, “What did you even tell Coulson?”

Cecil says, “False lead.”

Chapter End Notes

HAPPY HOMESTUCK DAY!
There was a time when humanity used to fawn over deities and write ridiculous stories and offer their children to them. Not that those were ever needed, but bloodshed was always a symbol of power. The more your people were willing to shed blood for you, the more revered you were supposed to be. Which is probably why Asgard is the way it is. Honestly, Loki doesn’t understand it.

Nowadays, humans fawn over illustrated cats in phone games and coffee. Mrs. Harrison says as much, and then proceeds to lecture him on how there were plenty of types of coffee. So much it makes his head spin.

“Do they have coffee where you’re from, dear?”

*Where you’re from.*

None of the Midgardians ever need to ask. He is *Loki*; humans have stories, and he knows that stories of him and Thor are some of the most circulated, but still, he appreciates that none of them actually walk up to him and ask if he really was from Asgard, or to confirm a few things.

He still doesn’t know how they’re so accepting. From what he’s garnered from a few months of walking around Midgard – Earth, *Earth* – is that skeptics abound.

“No,” Loki says, “The only things they find beneficial to grow there is alcohol.”

Mrs. Harrison makes a face. “Somehow, that sounds unpleasant.”

Loki blinks. Then smiles. Well, he’s not the only one who thinks so, apparently.

There’s two pairs of rapt footsteps and Loki easily identifies them. Seconds later, the older Palmer is in the kitchen and hovering over the island, where the numerous mugs of coffee that Mrs. Harrison has prepared are set. He looks over all of them before spotting what Mrs. Harrison had called a *latte*.

“Be careful, dear,” Mrs. Harrison says, not even looking towards him, as she’s still setting down the empty pot on the island. The last brew she made was the easiest, she’d told Loki. It was *black*.

Kevin extends his arm and almost bumps into the other mugs, but plucks the latte up and sniffs it. He grins.

Cecil enters the kitchen and stops by the doorway. “Ooh! Ground?”

“Always,” Mrs. Harrison says, looking up and smiling. “I never touch the instant stuff.”

Both Palmers shudder in unison. Loki makes a note to ask Mrs. Harrison about it if it makes the wondertwins (the name a courtesy of John, who had been ignoring the fact that he is a twin, and so are Dave and Rose) disgusted.
“Expresso!” Cecil pumps a fist in the air before running over to the island. His brother picks up the drink and hands it over to him.

Loki watches as they simultaneously sniff, let out a satisfied sigh, blow on their drinks and take a sip. A bit of milk clings to Kevin’s mouth.

Loki picks up the mug of black coffee and gently presses his fingertips to the porcelain. The coffee finds itself at just the right temperature. When he takes a sip, he makes a face. He swallows anyway.

“What is that?” Cecil asks.

“Black,” Mrs. Harrison says.

That earns him twin looks of pity.

“Ooh, bad,” Cecil says, “Sweet things are easier to drink when it’s your first time trying coffee.”

“You want a latte?” Kevin hands over his mug in an offer to share. Cecil slaps his arm gently.

“Hygiene, you dork.”

“I brush my teeth!”

“No, you – ” Cecil sighs and forces his brother to lower his arm. “It’s a drink. Do you know how easily that mixes with saliva – ”

“Listen, you hypochondriac – ”

“Boys, aren’t you late for school?” Mrs. Harrison asks, smiling.

Both Palmers stop bickering and turn to her, suddenly realizing that they are, in fact, late.

Cecil fidgets. “Um, the coffee.”

“Oh, love, give them here. I’ll put them in cups.”

The Palmers nervously move to lean on a counter as Mrs. Harrison picks out coffee cups from the nearest cupboard. There’s an entire box of them there, coffee cups and covers and everything, clearly from this being a regular occurrence. Loki wonders exactly how long the Palmers have been here; how long they have been setting up this little makeshift family with the landlady until Loki and the god-children intruded.

“Loki.” Cecil has an arm like he’d been about to grab the god’s sleeve and tug when Loki turns.

“Can you take us to school?”

Loki tilts his head down with a curious look on his face, an invitation for Cecil to explain.

“As you know, we’re kinda late,” Kevin says.

Cecil’s actually trying to twist his own fingers in a show of nervousness. “And…you can skywalk, and Jade’s not here, so…um.”

“Take them, dear boy, it’ll be a second,” Mrs. Harrison says. She hands Loki the paper bag with the coffee cups. “You’ve been to their college when Rose and Jade were visiting.”

Before he can even say anything – not that he’s planning on refusing, because, really, he needs to
stretch his legs and Mrs. Harrison is very hard to say no to – Mrs. Harrison is pushing him towards the Palmers, who are righting the straps of their bags. He doesn’t sigh. He very much wants to.

“Do not be sick,” Loki warns them. Both of them nod.

He places his hands on their shoulders and takes a step; they move with him –

In the next second, they are right in front of the college building. A few people whip their heads at their direction. Someone squawks and falls into the fountain they’d been sitting on the edge of.

“Thanks, Loki,” Cecil whispers the last part, as it’s been a rule that he is to be addressed by his alias when there are others around. Cecil though, whenever he’s thanking Loki, always calls him by name. It’s new. The thanking, and the thanking by name. They never thanked him. His acquaintances on Mid – Earth always do.

Kevin takes the paper bag from him and takes out his coffee cup, his name neatly scrawled on its side. He hands the bag to Cecil so his brother can take his cup.

“What will we have today?” Kevin asks.

Loki accepts the bag as Cecil hands it over to him. It’s still heavy. “No,” he says, “I suspect it’s why Mrs. Harrison has chosen today to educate me further on caffeine.”

Kevin giggles.

Loki lifts the bag and sees one more cup. When he pulls it out, there’s his name scrawled on the side, still Loki, with the word macchiato beneath.

“Good choice,” Cecil says.

The bell rings. All three of them look up and a few students behind them grumble as they start to make their way inside. Loki lowers the coffee cup back into the bag before they can see his name.

“Thanks again!” Kevin calls out as he and Cecil turn to get inside the building, both waving enthusiastically.

Loki watches them disappear inside before he smiles to himself and turns back. He’s in Sunny’s on his next step, and the girl behind the counter isn’t even surprised to see him.

“Hey, Mister Winters,” she greets, grinning.

“What will we have today?”

“Scones, please. Mrs. Harrison is fond of them,” he says. “And…a bit of cake, I suppose. That one.” He points to the black and white cake that proclaims itself made of Oreos. He’d liked the biscuits.

Sunny rings him the total and he hands over his card – an actual one. He’s been making good on actually paying with money. When she hands him his bag, she smiles and says, “Thank you and have a good day, Mister Winters.”

Loki smiles back. Thank you. There it is again. Humans were always so quick to thank.

When he gets back home, Mrs. Harrison has just finished the dishes, although the mugs of coffee are
still steaming on the counter.

“You brought scones!” she says, ecstatic. “Oh, dear heart, you’re precious. Thank you!”

“The Palmers did say it was best to sample sweets first,” he says, “Perhaps these will make up for more disagreeable coffees.”

“These will do nicely,” Mrs. Harrison says.

Loki places them on the island. Mrs. Harrison grabs a stool and sits, watching as he decides to sample one of the coffees on the island. He pulls out the macchiato from the bag and uncovers it. Takes a sip. It’s nice.

He sets it down, picks up a scone and takes a bite, then hovers a hand over the numerous mugs, trying to choose.

When Mrs. Harrison asks him if John is going to be put on the lease if he’s staying, he says that he doesn’t even know the boy. She snorts unelegantly and says, “Well, he looks like he wants to stick around, and while you can entertain friends, if they’re going to be living here, I’d appreciate it if we put it on paper, young man.”

And Loki blinks because this little Midgardian woman actually has the nerve to talk to a (former) prince of Asgard that way. He bristles when he catches himself using the title, of course, and that’s the only reason he agrees to talk with his visitor, to prove that he is not a prince of Asgard, and if he is not a prince of Asgard then…

Well then, his landlady has every right to talk to him like that. She has authority over the building anyway.

When he somehow adopts three other kids, he doesn’t even argue with her and says, “Yes, they’re leasing.”

When they propose renovations to her, she asks, with a raised eyebrow, “Is it safe?”

He says yes. Jade explains, casually mentioning her space-bending capabilities. Mrs. Harrison nods and says, “Just show me the finished rooms. I’ll have to make sure it’s up to code when we have inspections.”

Everyone just stares at the closed door when she leaves. Rose says, “Well, that went better than expected.”

Loki is of the opinion that if anyone in this building holds the title unflappable, it’s not him or Dave Strider, it’s Elizabeth F. Harrison.

The neighbors – their first neighbors, not post-expansion neighbors – give them shifty looks and start whispering about ‘mutants’. Dave had a very adverse reaction, but after a few google searches and trips to the library, he’d learned that apparently, this realm and universe had humans who had evolved past the usual genetic code and developed unnatural abilities. Another way the word mutant can also be applied is in terms of physiology. Exempli gratia, Dave Strider’s red eyes and Rose Lalonde’s violet ones.

Loki thinks they are a bit like mages, like him, seen odd by the society they had grown up in.
While a good part of the world had accepted them, a good part also opposed them, calling them abominations.

Once, they’d caught one of these neighbors in Mrs. Harrison’s kitchen (not *their* kitchen, not yet), saying that he didn’t feel safe with these *mutants* in the building. She’d glared at him over her cup of tea and said, “Young man, I’d like you to kindly get out of my house now.”

Dave had looked at her like she’d hung the moon for days.

When they decide to ward up the house after they notice that New York is a magnet for narcissistic geniuses who either have their sanities dancing on the edge of a cliff or are just really, really ambitious, they get Mrs. Harrison’s permission. She gives them the floor plan.

She congratulates them on a job well done when their building is untouched despite it being in the line of fire. She makes them cookies and hot chocolate. John weeps over the fact that it’s not cake.

It happens again and again and again, and soon the other residents of the building notice that their home is unscathed, even when the other buildings are fried to crisps when they get hit by fire or are rocked in the explosion a few meters away. Rumors spread.

They get their first refugees in a week. It’s a little girl with her even littler brother in her arms, yelling, “Help! Help!”, running down the street.

To everyone’s surprise, she’s not just running down the street, she’s running *towards* their building. Jade is the first to point it out, and when John goes up to the window to stand by her, he disappears in a flash of blue and a gust of wind, reappearing right beside the little girl and taking her in his arms, shooting up into the air when the metallic spider-dog-alligator thing on her heels stabs a very sharp leg onto where she’d been standing a few seconds ago.

Loki feels his hand twitch.

The spider-dog-alligator thing rears its ugly, many-eyed, fur-and-scale covered head to screech at John, who sticks his tongue out at it while the children in his arms shiver. It tries to jump.

Loki takes one step and is suddenly outside, drop-kicking the goddamn thing into the opposite building. John immediately flies towards their own building, just in time for the door to smack loudly as Jade slams it open. The boy hits the floor back first and rolls, having flown too fast.

But the children are safe.

The children aren’t the only ones in the area, and the few people hiding in the shadows of the nearby buildings sprint to the door of the building as fast as they can. A few of the slower ones catch the attention of some of the unholy machineries and Loki pulls out daggers from his pocket space, feeling the hilts of the blades he hasn’t held in a while and throws them rapidfire towards the things. They drop quickly.

That’s how they spend the rest of the attack, with the Safehouse door open, and the five of them – him, John, Jade, Dave and Rose – at the steps of it, ready to take in anyone who needed shelter and to fight off whatever needed to be fought off.

It turns out the kids who had run towards them were set on getting to the building, as opposed to just suddenly deciding while they were being chased by a death robot to duck to the little flat. Their parents – very much dead – had told them, before they were very much dead, to go to a certain address, because they would be safe there. According to their parents, their coworkers lived in the building, and apparently a few mutants who lived there did things to the building that rendered it invincible.
Loki had sat quietly through the entire discussion and watched when the girl cried, while her little brother stared blankly at the floor. Mrs. Harrison had stayed with the kids until they’d both calmed down enough that something could be done about their situation.

Afterwards she tells all of them that they did a good job. Plenty of the refugees are still in the building, too fearful to go out, and Mrs. Harrison doesn’t shoo them out, although the front door is now closed to keep the cold out.

Loki feels something in his gut, a sense of pleasure, as he sees the humans in the room, all alive because of what they did. Someone tugs on his pants and when he looks down, it’s the little brother they first saved.

The child puts a hand to his chin and angles it outward, a sign that Jade later explains to Loki means Thank you.

When they build the Safehouse, living up to the urban legend that New York seems to have made for them, Mrs. Harrison is always present in the drafting plans, because it’s her building after all. They get new people in, all of them paranoid from villain attacks, and Mrs. Harrison welcomes them.

When the building is finished, they build the Safehouse itself – the people that run it. Mrs. Harrison stops making them pay rent, because they’re responsible for the internal expansion of the building thanks to Loki and Jade, and the whole protection bit had been a joint effort.

She doesn’t ask when actual introductions are made – that he is Loki, god of mischief, and that the children are gods in their own right too, from something called a game that they choose not to disclose, because it’s inconsequential to their working relationship. She only nods and accepts and introduces herself, and she barely bats an eyelash whenever magic is demonstrated around the house.

They get themselves a common living room and kitchen on the first floor, and whenever something has to be discussed, Mrs. Harrison’s usually around, a silent overseer, even though the position of captain has been delegated to Loki by default. They share grocery and utility expenses. They look out for nosy Avengers and S.H.I.E.L.D agents and somehow make it their mission and vision to protect anything that lives under their roof, be it humans or animals.

And Mrs. Harrison is always there, telling them it’s a job well done, and bringing in cookies and tea. And coffee.

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When Loki meets the Palmers, it goes like this:

John is outside is flat, leaning against the door and Loki has just opened it to tell him off. Cecil, or Palmer #1, as he would be soon nicknamed, opens the door of his flat and walks down the hallway, looking asleep on his feet. He is wearing black pajamas with prints of eyeballs on them and a dull grey-purple sweater that’s rolled up to his sleeves. He has a stack of papers in his hands.

When he spots John, he stares, and stares long enough for it to be uncomfortable that John and Loki actually stop arguing to stare back. Cecil, who still looks like he was better off snoring, blinks blearily and says, “Wow.” Then, “That is one fucked up life. I’m too sleep-deprived for this.”

Then he yawns, raising his head in the process, and when he opens his eyes, he’s looking at Loki and he nearly drops his papers. Loki focuses on the startled squeak he makes. “Holy shit,” Cecil says, “Um…”
Loki frowns at him, confused and...just wanting for Cecil to go away so he can continue his argument with Egbert.

“I’m just...” Cecil points back to his flat and then awkwardly scratches his head and turns back. He looks at them one last time before he goes inside and closes the door behind to a very confused, “I thought you were going to get that thing faxed.”

“Yeah, I was going to, just – nothing. There’s something weird. Don’t go out.”

“Is there a realtor outside?”

“What? No. There’s – weird timelines. Weird...experiences.”

“You’re one to talk.”

“Oh, shut up and take photos of these. I’ll send them to Dana by email instead.”

That had pretty much ended John and Loki’s discussion for the day, since it was too weird to pick up after that.

The second time they meet, it’s not even Cecil, but Kevin, who is a carbon copy of his brother except for the more tamed hair. John is already rooming with Loki, and they’ve both just come back from a supply run, and they’re wet from the rain outside.

Kevin is in black pajamas with prints of yellow triangles on them with a yellow-vested white-sleeved sweater, and when he sees them on the welcome mat from where he is on the stairs, he nearly drops the books he’s carrying.

John and Loki look up. John says, “Oh hey, it’s you.”

Kevin is looking at them like he wants to run, but when John speaks, he turns confused. “I’m sorry, have we met?”

“Oh.” John says, “That one time – when you were like, half-asleep?”

“What?” Kevin asks, and Loki takes the time to actually observe his face to notice the very minor differences between him and his brother. Honestly, they should have known that the most obvious indicator of the Palmer’s difference was their fashion sense.

Before John can say anything, Kevin’s eyes brighten, like he’s seeing something of interest. “Right,” he says, adjusting the books in his arms. “I’ll just be, um, going.” He turns back up the way he went before stopping and saying, “You might want to try those scratch cards.”

John perks up and yells, “Psychic!” as Kevin retreats and happily chatters about telling Loki so.

When they meet both, it’s midnight and it’s John who answers the door, grumbling. Loki is on the sofa, still reading.

Cecil looks like he really needs a good night sleep, but his eyes, although tired, are bright with swirling lights. Loki can see blue, pink and purple from where he is. In the dark patches left when the lights move, Loki thinks he can see a partial view of stars.

“You again,” John says, pointing out the obvious due to fatigue.

“Don’t worry, John Egbert,” Cecil says, voice airy. Loki raises an eyebrow at how it echoes despite the surroundings. John flinches and takes a step back, suddenly wary. He has never told either
Palmer sibling his name. “Your friends will be here soon.”

“What?”

“I see Space and Time and Light,” Cecil says, “And Heart and Void and Hope and Life. I see children spilling their blood on their crests and I see them ascend. I see children playing at becoming gods – ”

Cecil stops speaking when someone barrels right into his side, wrapping arms around him. John blinks. Loki’s other eyebrow joins the first. Cecil is in a purple sweater with a white moon-eye. Kevin, in a yellow one with an orange sun-eye.


“There’s two of you?” John asks, processing, then, “Oh, twins! Sorry. Wait, he was saying something about…that sounded like aspects – ”

“Don’t worry about it.” Kevin smiles uneasily. Cecil, in his arms, blinks, and when Loki looks at him, the lights in his eyes are gone. He looks like he’s waking up from something.

“Hhnngh. Kevin…”

“Ceece! We’re going to bed. We have work to do tomorrow.” To John: “Sorry, again, for disturbing you.” He starts to drag his brother away and then, “You know, I’d pick the red toaster instead of the blue one. You’re right, the blue looks a little shifty like they dropped it during delivery.”

John makes a strangled noise of excitement, another ‘I told you so!’ at the tip of his tongue that he doesn’t really get to vocalize because he’s spazzing out too much. The Palmers disappear from their doorway as Kevin carries his brother back to their flat.

Loki stares at the emptied hallway. Völvur. How interesting.

When he meets the rest of John’s friends, he takes note: Space and Time and Light, and has a little revelation at their dinner table.

“Witch of Space.”

“Knight of Time.”

“I am a Seer of Light.”

Another völva. How curious. He wonders if the building is some sort of secret holy temple. Three of them in such a space, and not even planned.

Cecil had listed off others though, and Loki keeps them in mind for future reference.

When Rose meets them, another chance meeting in the hallway, it’s ‘the awkward stare-off to end all awkward stare-offs’, in the words of her brother. Neither Palmer actually looks like they want to flee this time, but is instead staring at all of them, and then fixating on Rose, mesmerized.

Then the three of them gather by the window and whisper at each other, to the confusion and curiosity of everyone else. Loki catches bits of the conversation: “…it like? Having them under your skin?” “I don’t remember much but…powerful.” “How long were you all in the void?” “We – we were?” “Yeah, I can see it – ”
When they’re done, they part with smiles, before Kevin again gives one last advice, going: “Not today. Go tomorrow. There’s going to be a sale tomorrow.”

They go to the store anyway, just to see prices.

When they come back tomorrow there’s a huge 80% drop in prices and they’re absolutely gleeful.

When they get their first refugees, the brothers don’t come down until evening. They’re carrying trays and plates with them, and they silently pass them around. The refugees give them thankful looks.

When they run out, Mrs. Harrison points them to her kitchen.

Cecil puts a hand on her arm and lowers his head. “Sorry we took a while, Mrs. Harrison. We only had one oven.”

“If you’d told me you were baking, Cecil, I could have lent you my kitchen,” she says, then motions for them to get going. They end up cooking for the entire building, and for Loki and the children when they get back inside the house.

The children are ravenous. The Palmers look like they’re worried that Mrs. Harrison would be eaten out of house and home, but she waves them, saying, “They did good, they deserve it.”

She smiles at them. “You two did good too, boys. Job well done.”

Twin smiles look back at her. “Thank you, Mrs. H.”

For the next few attacks, they do the same thing, making sure everyone has food (although eventually they had to make their money back because feeding a third of New York was hard) and knowing who had what allergies.

John, although not allergic, was very ambivalent towards cake.

Cecil had given him a look of disbelief for three full seconds before walking out to the front and yelling, “Who wants cake?”

They talk. It’s hard not to, when these two were on kitchen duty during the attacks. Eventually, Cecil starts pulling Loki aside (which will never be not weird, but Cecil’s always been straightforward, which is better than beating around the bush, it’s just that anyone who’s ever talked to Loki back on Asgard either treated him with respect from his rank, or prejudice from him being a seiðmaðr) and tells him, eyes bright from Sight fugue, “There’s going to be an attack today. But thunder will arrive.”

And it’s a warning for him to stay out of sight as possible when ushering people inside if he doesn’t want Thor to see him.

It helps that the twins just know that they’re not from here. Not just New York, but from this reality, from this realm, from this universe. And they were both incredibly accepting about it.

Actually, they ask the twins this, and it gets them laughter and Kevin saying, “We would have to be so narcissistic if we believe we’re the only universe in existence.”

John throws his head back and laughs.

Any questions they had about this universe were answered happily, as the Palmers had somehow
become their guidebook. When they build the Safehouse and establish the people participating, it is unanimous decision to bring the twins in, because it would be stupid to not let the resident psychics in the effort.

It helps that Kevin constantly gives them advice on when sales and coupons are being given out.

Loki may have been a magic-user, but he was still learning the magics of the kitchen. Jade knows how to cook, mostly from raising herself for majority of her life; John knows how to bake a bit; Dave knows how to make a mean pancake and cook ramen.

Graham shows him how to work with fish.

Fish on Earth are starkly different from those of Asgard. For one, less monstrous and more scaley. And Loki, who is used to jumping into lakes to save Thor from being drowned by his latest conquest, is quite surprised when Graham takes all of them on a fishing trip one day. The kids all bring their swimwear. John tries to catch fish with his bare hands.

Graham shows Loki how to set up the entire thing – from the bait and fishing rod and the sitting down and waiting. It’s…relaxing. It’s something that he feels slots right in to how he usually does things, dangling a reward for prey to lunge at, and waiting, and then reeling them in before the realization that they’ve been had hits them. Asgard always did value charging headfirst. Waiting had no place in their battles. From Loki’s experience, waiting had saved more lives and garnered more victories.

Rose is busy reading a guide on the local fishes of the lake while Loki and Graham sit on their recliners on the edge of the dock. Jade is sitting cross-legged in midair, hovering over the lake, with her fishing rod in her hands, hook sunk deep in the water. Every now and then, she reels in a fish and teleports it in the cooler right beside Rose. Then she moves to the next spot where she knows a fish is currently staying at. Knowing exact coordinates had its advantages.

Mrs. Harrison is talking with Kevin, who is grilling the fish they’ve caught so far, while Cecil is asleep right beside his brother.

Neither he nor Graham talk as they wait for their fish, and when Loki catches one sizeable fish, Graham grins at him. (And suddenly Loki remembers being young, presenting his mother with his first illusions, and remembers how she’d praised him. He remembers showing his father, but not quite catching Odin’s attention, because Thor had brought in scabbed knees and a very busted staff – the telltale signs of a warrior in the making.) It makes Loki chuckle, because all he did was catch a fucking fish, and it’s not even the type he regularly has to stun and injure because some musclehead thought it was a good idea to wrestle with it when it was as big as ten men and had three rows of sharp teeth in its expandable jaw.

When they get home, and everyone else is too tired from swimming or teleporting all over the place, Graham shows him how to scale and gut the fish, how to remove its internal organs, how to clean it, how to slice it just so; tells him about all the ways it can be cooked. It’s a cooking lesson he hadn’t thought about receiving, but Graham has a way of being inconspicuous, and he shares this knowledge simply because he wants to share this knowledge. Because fishing is something he loves and he wants other people to know about it. It brings Loki back to his early days, when sorcery was everything to him, and he wanted to share it with Thor and his friends, until he figured out that Thor and his friends weren’t interested and found it ergi, and thereafter Loki instead learned to smile blandly and tell them that what he was up to today was nothing interesting.
Everything about Graham is like looking into a mirror, and it unnerves him. Rose had told him about this, of course, that Graham was the equivalent of a human mirror. It’s fascinating and disturbing to see it in action.

He thinks Graham can sense it too, but the man is keeping silent, instead continuing his task and showing Loki how to fry the fish. When they finish, they make a small meal, and Loki feels some accomplishment from the fish he knows he’s caught, cleaned and cooked.

Professor Graham aka Alexander Graham Bell aka Graham Crackers aka I-Am-Not-A-Psychic-For-The-Last-Goddamn-Time aka Mr. G arrives at the Safehouse not looking for a Safehouse but a flat. An honest to goodness flat. It’s not that everyone thinks that the Safehouse is famous enough that anyone who rents is looking for a bunker, but Mr. G arrived when everyone who rents was looking for a bunker.

(It should be noted that the above nicknames for Graham are not of Loki’s devising, but John Egbert’s and Dave Strider’s.)

He’s not from New York. That explains it.

Upon seeing him, however, all three Völvur agree that he gets to stay.

“Is he psychic too?” Jade asks.

All three of them share a smile that says, we know something you don’t, and by this point, everyone’s too used to it to question. Also, everybody loves them too much and knows they’re not going to spill even if they were bribed.

“Ask him if he likes dogs,” Cecil says.

Jade does. He perks up almost immediately.

He’s deadly good with a gun, even though he has shoulder troubles. And once, he shoots a bat-spider-goop thing, the latest uninspired laboratory mishap the villain of the week dished out, with a flare gun while Jade saves three children and a dog. They learn quickly that the goop things are combustible. Rose and Loki ready their fire while Mrs. Harrison discourages other residents who decide to make Molotov cocktails.

(“Those are dangerous. Do you know how to shoot a flare gun? I’d think those were better.”)

(For future reference to any aspiring New-York-city-dominator, Mrs. Harrison knows how to shoot a flare gun. She knows how to shoot.)

When Graham starts to unconsciously copy speech patterns and body language, Loki gives him a look and spends a few days observing him. Rose says it’s just “Empathy,” and leaves it at that.

“Exactly what does that mean?” Loki asks, “Anybody can have empathy.”

“True empathy. Not as in feeling sorry for someone if you were in their shoes. I mean he can truly figuratively put himself in their shoes. He can…his thinking can assimilate,” Rose says. “He was a teacher at the FBI. And is currently a consultant. Criminal Profiler.”

Graham takes to the whole ‘New York under siege on a weekly basis’ and ‘We are magical people
running a bunker thing’ very well. In fact, every time animals duck in for shelter during attacks, he attends to them. He ends up adopting several of the dogs. As for the cats, Cecil gets one. The rest just decide to pop in when there’s an attack and get lost when there’s none. Cats were apparently like that.

Mr. G observes all of them long enough that he actually feels a little uncomfortable about what he sees. Kevin confronts him and Loki and the children eavesdrop. They hear him hiss: “Never in my life do I want to see child soldiers. Fucking hell. World’s dark enough.” And then, “Also…uh, Winters reeks of daddy issues. Is that – is – I should shut up, shouldn’t I? They’re fucking eavesdropping.”

And then Kevin laughs, loud and boisterous. He and Mr. G keep in touch with whatever Mr. G’s observations are, which, since this is Graham, are scarily close to the truth, and he figures out that they’re not exactly mutants, but something else. He doesn’t know what, but something else.

Graham sees Thor on the television once and it clicks. On the next attack, he asks Loki, “Is Thor your brother?”

Loki doesn’t answer, but that’s enough of a confirmation for Graham. Loki decides then and there that humans are strangely talented. Or at least, this one is.

He’s earned his right to be part of the Safehouse crew since he shot that first bat thing, and his unnaturally keen abilities for observation make him indispensable for weeding out any agent of S.H.I.E.L.D that might be posing as a resident in the Safehouse. They brief him and make him join the War Council.

He spends the entire meeting drinking, but agrees. Also, he’s got a liver of steel.

Within his first week of being a part of crew he weeds out three agents that are posing as residents in the surrounding buildings. Thankfully, there’s still none inside, and anyone who even tries to get near is immediately spotted. S.H.I.E.L.D is good. A natural empath is better.

He also is good at cooking fish. And taking care of the dogs. And putting up with all of the Safehouse’s bullshit with a straight face.
The House of Bets and Strings

Chapter Notes

[me aggressively hanging on to the 'fun without plot' tag]

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Safehouse has a betting pool. It is singlehandedly the stupidest thing in existence.

(“Now I know that is an exaggeration.”

“Would you let a man monologue, Egbert, jegus, it’s like nobody even knows the benefits of a good talking-to to yourself anymore.”

“A good what?”)

The reasons for that are these: a) there’s two natural psychics in the house, one of which is a would-be Seer b) there is an actual Seer in the house, a Seer of Light, therefore Seer of Fortune, Luck, Fate, anything that spins in those million-dollar-stake game shows c) the greatest sorcerer in all the nine realms of this universe and quite possibly in other universes hitherto existing is also in the house (“I don’t think –” “I know what ‘hitherto’ means.”) d) an expert behavioral analyst – who is actually a rare natural empath even though he cringes at the term – is also in the house. The last one doesn’t really bet though, unless you give him a reason to, or if he’s just really, really invested in whatever you’re betting on.

(“Hey, Mister G, why are you so invested in cooking shows?”

“The same reason why Strider is invested in Little Miss Texas.”)

So to bet on outcomes is often a lost cause when three out of nine of the crew can see the future as easy as breathing, one can do the same if he’d tried, and the other could just observe, deduce and predict the outcome. Fortunately for everyone, their regular refugees didn’t know that and are more than willing to bet. Their official betting pool master has half of New York’s phone number in their phone.

There is only so much boredom to be put up with during lazy days, which is surprising, considering they all live in a place that’s constantly under attack. Mr. G had said that oftentimes, people who have adapted to fast-paced living and dangerous situations found it hard to adjust to slow lifestyles, and displayed restlessness, paranoia, and depression.

John had coughed discreetly.

So, betting pool it was.

Half the time, everyone lost their money to the Fortunetellers Club, because some people just bet against them on principle (there are...some people disinclined to make their acquaintance despite taking refuge in the Safehouse), some bet against them on the off chance they were wrong (the Safehouse crew itself) or just dis not know they were the Fortunetellers Club, because that name had been coined by resident Heir of Breath, John Egbert, as appears to be the running trend. Also, it was hilarious.
Currently, the enormous blackboard is hung in the common room, artfully decorated with little sketches and calligraphy by their betting pool master, and has several categories, which includes: *Winner of the latest X Factor, Winner of Cutthroat Kitchen’s latest episode, What the Red String™ is* and one category that's glamoured to be shown in another language entirely, and is only readable to ten people in the house, nine of which are the Safehouse crew, the remaining one being the betting pool master who didn’t really give a shit because they're an expert at minding their own business.

All in all, the betting pool tally board had about thirty categories, and a total of a 152 participants, 89 of which are Safehouse residents and the remaining 63 are refugees who only drop in during every villain attack but keep contact with the pool master.

Running winner of several of the bets is the Fortunetellers Club, and Rose spends much of her money on knitting supplies and obscure spell ingredients.

For the *Red String™* category, nobody had really bet on it except for the Palmers, Rose Lalonde and Luke Winters (or known to close friends as Loki Silvertongue: God of Chaos; Mischief; Fire; Shit-eating grins when he's particularly amused by the reaction of humans who fell prey to his brand of humor; Cats; Self-determination; Daddy Issues; and lately, Coffee).

Nobody really even understands what the whole ‘red string’ thing is, but Rose had explained it to the Safehouse crew that she had seen a strange red string attached to Steve Rogers months ago.

She could see colorful lights all over people, of course; if she actually tried to *look* instead of just clearing her vision, she could do so on a daily basis. Except these lights swirled around the people they belonged to, because it was a part of them, and was intrinsic to them, and belonged to them, and therefore only moved in their vicinity. Besides, lights were not synonymous to strings.

This one had most definitely been a *string*, and it led to somewhere far, far away from Steve Rogers. And as time had gone by, it had gained thickness and brightness, like a neon sign still wanting attention and screaming at Rose, “*Look at me!*”, even when she tried to clear what her brother called her *Color Vision™*.

The resulting discussion had been held between Loki - whom Rose looked up to as a mentor, teacher and fellow magic and psychology enthusiast - Rose, and the Palmer brothers.

Research and ancient text excavation had been conducted for the past few months, resulting in many great theories (“Are you patronizing me?”) from the Silvertongue-Lalonde corner. Palmer #2 pulled up a Wikipedia page and pointed to it.

So now, after months of Rose observing if the red string had any effects on Steve Rogers and taking notes, as well as performing experiments like trying to pull the string, since as a Hero of Light, she could actually hold it because it had something to do with fate, the red string betters are ready to see who's right.

Red strings do not have outcomes, see. It’s just tied to a thing, like a plastic, imitation yo-yo that had fallen off the shipping boat and floated up to the sorry beach of the nearest island, and had been used only for five minutes before somebody yo-yoed it up a tree branch and it got stuck there.

In a week, Rose is to make a trip to try and see what the string really is and where it’s attached to. Documents are in place, and her first speed-dial is Loki, the second is Dave and the third is John, in case she needs the wind to aid her. At the moment, Rose just really wants to watch the latest episode of The Bachelor. She has money riding on this.

The one betting category that is unreadable to everyone on Earth save for ten people is actually just
written in John’s lowercase handwriting using blue chalk and says, in plain English,

what loki does when he goes on a world trip

but it’s glamoured so it looks like ancient runes, but is a writing system Loki designed when he was three centuries old and bored out of his mind.

The topic has been on debate for a while, because sometimes Loki fucks off to who knows where and doing who knows what, so everybody'd had theories, argued, and decided to set up a betting pool. Pool master had adjusted their glasses and gave everyone looks that said you’re all fucking idiots but wrote down the bets anyway.

Loki, upon seeing the thing, had stared at it for eight minutes and twelve seconds before shaking his head and saying, “Nobody is going to win.”

That had not stopped them.

Currently the bets are:

**Sightseeing**

Jade H.

**Research**

Rose L.

Will G.

**Pranking people**

John E.

**Road trip**

Elizabeth H.

Dave S.

**BUNKER**

Cecil P.

Kevin P.

At the very bottom of the area designated to this category, there is one sentence written by the pool master:

If nobody does in fact win, all winnings go to Loki by default.

The only clue that has been offered is Loki’s amused smile upon the announcement of Rose’s upcoming trip, that at least one theory will be proven right. Tensions are currently high regarding this
topic, but for now, The Bachelor.

Another thing that exists in the Safehouse that is second to being the stupidest thing in existence is that anyone still insists on playing Rock, Paper, Scissors with the Fortunetellers Club. For fuck’s sake, if they can predict when the next disastrous weapons testing for the local air base is going to take place, they can fucking predict when you throw paper.

(“And for the last time, John, wind is not a part of the game!”

“Hurricanes can blow rocks away, I’m pretty sure that counts for something.”)

It’s still done. Of course.

They hold tournaments during attacks.

There’s a chart for who keeps guard duty during attacks, and that person is excused from the games, instead taking their place by the comfy little seat by the window. Once conversations about the betting pool are settled, somebody starts a game of rock, paper, scissors; pairing everyone off. Winners go up against winners. Losers sit in the background and sulk. At stake is an entire cave of gold, courtesy of the local chaos god, who is of course, the reigning champion so far, because like the smartass that he is, even if he’s on guard duty, he still plays.

One other thing that exists that is less stupid is bake-offs. John absolutely despises bake-offs, but he still joins them anyway, because growing up with cake teaches you plenty of things about baking. Occasionally, Dave joins, and he’s no award-winning pastry chef, but at least his food is edible. (“Um.” “Not a word, Harley.”)

Judges are usually the Palmers.

This doesn’t happen quite as often, but when it does, it’s an absolute blast. They utilize the training room and clear out the area to make room for the ovens and the other supplies, and carrying things isn’t a problem with Jade’s teleportation skills, which is also good practice for her. Dave keeps time, because he might not be able to time-travel freely, but knowing the flow of time is still his heartbeat. Occasionally, they let Loki sabotage things (“We should never have let him watch cooking shows, I swear to – G! G, you’re to blame for this.” “I didn’t tie him down to watch the shows he just comes into the living room when they’re on.”).

The betting pool gets a few more categories when it’s rock-paper-scissors tournaments and bake-offs. When there’s too many bets, pool master Saphrel pulls out another blackboard out of who knows where and writes them down. Their supply of colored chalk doesn’t seem to run out either. (“Maybe they’re related to Terezi?” “…nah.”)

On very, very lazy days, when everyone they know is inside the Safehouse and the Avengers are taking care of the ruckus outside and everyone’s gathered in the indoor pool and the assigned guard is calmly looking out the window, kids gather around Loki to hear his stories. He does voices and makes figures out of green fire, light somehow bending around him to add atmosphere to his stories. He tells tales of adventure and of warriors, and when Rose can wheedle it out of him, tales of young mages who, despite how much everyone else dislikes mages because they are cowards who hide behind their stealth and trickery and magic, single-handedly slay hydras and cyclops and dragons and save armies.

Sometimes he tells tales of dragons whose families were unrightfully slain, monsters whose homes were unjustly raided, all for the glory and honor of warriors. He’s quieter when he tells these stories, and the space around him is always a little colder. The children love him though, and somehow he
manages to finish his stories, even though he sits on the rooftop for hours on end afterwards.

(“You know, that’s really stupid,” one kid says, when Loki’s telling one of his mage stories again.

“What is?” he asks, pausing with his hands in midair, a figure of a cloaked sorcerer standing between an army of warriors and a dragon burning in green flames in the space between his hands.

“Why they don’t like mages. I mean, they make the battles easier,” the kid says. She crosses her arms and wrinkles her nose. “And they kill a lot more enemies and save more people. Just seems to me like the warriors are stupid doo-doo heads.”

Very eloquent. Another kid beside her furiously nods. “Yeah! And magic is cool!” The boy’s gapped teeth make it hard for him to enunciate his words, but he tries. “And sometimes – sometimes you gotta sneak up on an enemy, ya know?”

“And use your brain!” another one pipes up from the back.

“Yeah, and use your brain! That way, you win a lot faster and a lot awesomer.”

“I don’t think that’s a word,” Loki says, a smile tugging on his lips, a little amused and a little self-loathing and a little awed. The faith of children is always something that rocks people off their feet.

“I think the warriors are just jealous ‘cause they don’ave cool magic powers,” another little girl, this one in pigtails, says, sneering into the air when she says ‘jealous’. There’s a chorus of ‘oohs’ from the little crowd, and then loud yells of “Tha’s right!”

“I mean, swords are cool and all, but if I could do magic too, that would be cooler.”

“Yeah, yeah. Like, you just gotta do hand-wavey things and bam!”

“I wanna kill a dragon by myself!”

“But it’s gotta be an evil dragon, see. You can’t go around killin’ innocent dragons.”

“Yeah, s’gotta be an evil dragon. One that eats nasty children.”

“Like Ben?”

“Hey!”

“Hey, I got an idea! What about magicked weapons and stuff? Like Dave’s sword! It appears outta nowhere.”

From across the room, Dave’s head swivels.

“Oooh, I wanna turn into the wind! Like John.”

“Okay, yeah, but Jade can like, shrink an elephant to the size of an ant.”

“Guys, guys, magicked weapons. I’m talking about a flaming sword.”

For some reason, Mrs. Harrison blinks rapidly at that. She’s sitting on a loveseat and knitting something, right across where Loki and the children are sitting on the carpet. Loki doesn’t miss it when she pauses and sits straight.

“You’re a mage, right?”
The question is directed at Loki. He turns towards the back of the crowd, to the girl who is a little older than the rest of the kids gathered. He recognizes her – he’s the one who drop-kicked ugly little hybrid that was chasing after her and her brother, on the first day he ever tried to save any Midgardian – any human – that he didn’t know.

Children. It was always children with him.

Her name is Kristina; her little brother is Alfred. They’d beeb lucky enough to have relatives in the city that were able to take them in after they were orphaned. Every now and then, even during normal days, they'd stop by the Safehouse.

“Sorcerer would be more appropriate,” Loki says.

Alfred, right beside Kristina, smiles and sits up straighter, trying to look taller than the rest of the kids sitting around him. He gestures with his hands, and Loki’s been learning enough sign language to know what it means.

_I want to be a s-o-r-c-e-r-e-r._

Kristina laughs at her brother and ruffles his hair. He pouts and bats her hand away, but he’s smiling.

“Ooh, what’s he said?” one kid turns to them.

“He wants to be a sorcerer,” Loki says.

“I wanna be too!”

“Mister Winters! Mister Winters! Can you teach us the hand-talk thing?”

“You mean _sign language_, Shiela. My cousin does it too.”

“Yeah, that.”

“Shh, let him finish the story first.”

Loki pretends to sigh before moving his hands again, letting the green fire between his fingers roar as he lets the little figures he’s made move. The children hush immediately, attention turning towards his show. When he’s done, none of them want to move out of the building, despite their parents’ insistence.)

On very lazy days like these, on the other side of the room, far enough that Loki’s stories and his audience are a murmur, college students try to get Rose to read their fortunes for them. She gives them amused looks, of course, asking them exactly why they think that, and they say that word on the street is that she is some kind of oracle. When she asks them whether or not they believe it, a few would shrug and say, “It wouldn’t hurt, right?”

Rose hums and turns to Kevin, who is lying down face-first on the couch while Cecil is working on a few audio files on his laptop.

Kevin groans and spits out some local tidbit about when the coffee shop is going to have a sale, when the mall’s going to have an 80% drop in discount, and when to apply for scholarships. There’s a frantic typing into phones so the students remember the date. It’s amusing, really.

(They usually get asked, “What is he, is he like…” while the students give Kevin fascinated looks.

Rose just smiles at them and says, “He’s a discount oracle, you can say.”
And Cecil would snicker while Kevin would throw a pillow at Rose, missing wildly because he’s still not looking up from where his face is buried in the couch, mumbling, “Take that back, Lalonde.”

If they still try to press her, Rose’s eyes glow, Seer fugue overtaking, and the kids would get more than they bargained for and a sense of getting their entire life story laid out before them, with a few truths they’ve been so eager to deny pointed out and shoved in their faces.

Jade takes care of animals with Mr. G in another room. Occasionally, a child wanders in, just having finished listening to Loki. They always ask permission before petting the animals because Jade has set that rule. Some dogs didn’t respond to humans well, especially when they just came running from a war zone. Her advantage with handling them is that she is immune to rabies and had ‘dog-speak’.

Dave, well, Dave keeps time and tries not to get paranoid.

Mrs. H knits and occasionally passes around coffee.

It’s a good life.

Since Rose has volunteered for Steve Rogers duty and they’ve actually built an acquaintance from constant interaction of Rose accompanying Steve and Jade for supply runs and little city trips, she tells him of her upcoming trip when the three of them are out watching a movie.

(As Kevin is keeping an eye on PR for her. According to several blogs who have spotted them and even have photos to prove it, the Avengers and the Safehouse might just be thinking about working together. That of course, had prompted questions of whether the Safehouse wasn’t working together with the Avengers before, which led to a lot of speculation but Rose hadn’t thought that they were all important enough to remember.

Reddit is blowing up with pictures every day, and once, Kevin had calmly informed her, while he was sitting in his ‘swively-chair’, sipping Starbucks with his feet up on his desk, that they’d just narrowly avoided a bullet ever since Rose started tagging along Jade and Steve.

“Shippers are everywhere, and while the notion of people being so in love with love is cute, the media hounding Jade and Steve is not cute,” Kevin had said.

There were a few brave reporters who tried to get to them, of course, key word being tried, because Rose could sense them a mile away and artfully steered her friends away. She told them about it after the first three times, and so whenever Jade heard them coming, she knew to evade.)

She doesn’t tell him the details, only that she was going to be away, looking for colleges, and jokes that he better not think of taking advantage of the fact that Rose wasn’t there to keep an eye on him. He’d laughed and said he wouldn’t dream of it.

Rose observes as the red string connected to him pulses. Interesting.

Jade rolls her eyes and points out that she and Steve had been hanging out before Rose even tagged along for chaperone duty. Rose, to keep up the façade, asks whether Jade is sure she doesn’t want to go to college.

Jade’s ears flick down for a moment and Steve’s eyes track the movement, still fascinated even after months of seeing the things move.
“No,” she says, shrugs, “I think I’m fine with the Safehouse and everything for now.”

Rose nods. She warns both of them to stay away from reporters. Steve squeezes her shoulder when they arrive at the Safehouse doorstep and tells her to have a safe trip.

It’s touching, really, and Rose thinks that if anyone of the Avengers absolutely have to find out about the Safehouse, then Steve Rogers would have to be it. And the funny thing is that he doesn’t want to know about the Safehouse. If it’s inevitable, then it’s inevitable, but if they don’t want him to, then he doesn’t press. It’s perfect. It’s the reason why his phone number is in both Rose and Jade’s phones.

He’s a friend.

Rose hopes whatever is on the other end of the red string isn’t going to harm him.

It’s cold around here.

New York is hot and sun-glared, with it being a pollution hub and all, and the temperature had only miraculously dropped to enjoyable a while ago, but this place is cold.

Steve is wearing three jackets inside the hotel he’s staying in. It hadn’t been a quick mission, and had been more like a stake-out on some of the shiftier parts of the local government. Tony and Natasha are taking care of the government part. Steve and the others are there in case things get nasty. In the meantime, Tony hadn’t wanted to stay cooped up in whatever temporary camp S.H.I.E.L.D had planned to set up if it wasn’t fitted with a Jacuzzi. Also, it would make more sense if the Avengers publicized the fact that they were in town, just to show the people that they’re totally here because they’re negotiating and hadn’t gone snooping through records when nobody was looking. So, hotel courtesy of Tony Stark it was.

There’s a big possibility that S.H.I.E.L.D monitors Steve’s phone records, which is why he’s asked Tony for two phones, and one of them had a program that didn’t allow anyone else to tap into it, except for maybe JARVIS, but Steve trusted Tony enough to not use it against him. Besides, Tony was against S.H.I.E.L.D’s interest in the Safehouse anyway, with the possibility of them wanting to take the poor mutants and put them through tests without their permission. It might have been for the good of science, but when people say no, they mean no.

He takes a picture of the view outside his window and sends it to Jade, with a customary ‘wish you were here’. A few seconds later Jade sends him a ‘>:P’ and ‘you know I can just teleport there anytime, right?’

‘Avenger business’ he types back.

She asks him how it went, not asking for details, before eventually asking him how he is. He complains about the cold and its ridiculous timing, about Tony in general, because you can never run out of complaints about Tony, and talks about the beauty of the clear skies here.

Jade agrees. She loves the clear skies as much as he does.

He asks about Rose and her college-hunting; it’s been a while, after all. Jade tells him that she’s planning on branching out to other countries, and that Steve would be surprised with how much they can actually afford.
He asks about the Safehouse. She tells him that everyone is fine.

She talks about their new refugees – they’ve gotten a few more; some are formerly rich people who had thought their houses were state-of-the-art and therefore invincible and then got knocked off their high horses when their houses got blasted to pieces; some are homeless people; a few are mutants themselves – she talks about Luke and his now-constant following of children, she talks about ridiculous things like the betting pool and the rock-paper-scissors tournament and the bake-offs (Steve still has a hard time believing those, except he’s met the pool master once, when he and Jade and Rose were out, and the kid had gone, “Oh, yeah, we really do have a betting pool. And if you can bake, feel free to knock John Egbert onto his ass.”), and about the cool new thing they were trying out with making communication easier for everybody.

He figures Rose must have given her a go-signal that he didn’t have a hidden agenda with befriending her, because she’s been talking more about the Safehouse people as of late. Luke can do magic and is good with kids. Her brother John can control the wind. Rose can see things, whatever that meant, and is proficient with magic as well. Their landlady can shoot things. They have two psychics and one very good criminal profiler.

They talk for a while before Jade suddenly goes ‘hang on’ and goes away for about twenty minutes. When she comes back, it’s like this.

[gardenGnostic:]

um

is there anyone you left behind in new york that can protect the city?

Steve frowns a bit, thinking.

Yeah, there are a few SHIELD agents, and we left Dr. Banner in the tower. Why?

[gardenGnostic:]

cecil says there might be an attack two days from now

Your psychic friend?

[gardenGnostic:]

yeah!

its okay though! if we have to, we can try and help around

we already do it anyway

just focus on what you have to do there!! :D

Steve steels his jaw and thinks. Two days. They had two days to get back to New York. If he needed to, he could probably ask Jade to just teleport him and then he could deal with the explanations and the paperwork afterward. People needed to be protected.

His chat client pings.

[gardenGnostic:]

steve
He sighs. He knows that the Safehouse is tougher than anything Tony could ever make, but if the villain can’t find people around town, they’d probably focus their attacks on the Safehouse. And even if they didn’t, they’d lay waste to New York.

Be careful

[gardenGnostic:]

we will!! you too <3!

His door unlocks and he doesn’t even need to know that it’s Tony.

“Hey, Cap, you wanna come downstairs for movie night? I can guarantee you Natashalie and Clint are not picking.”

“Tony, how many days until we can wrap this thing up?” he asks, still looking at his phone.

“Uh, five, maybe six days? A week? Depends on how quick we can scour the entire place for evil genius labs and all that.” There’s footsteps padding over the carpet. Steve closes the client, turns off his phone and stuffs it in his pants. Tony is pouting childishly when he turns to him. “I’ll get JARVIS to check it.”

“Tony.”

Tony snorts and waves a hand. “I’m kidding. You got a friend with the Safehouse people, right? Don’t worry, I didn’t look through your phone, I just guessed. Pep’s pretty familiar with them too, actually. She’s got Happy driving her there when our latest nutcase hits the city.”

Steve supposes that’s fine. All of New York knows the Safehouse. It’s a miracle S.H.I.E.L.D hasn’t gotten close to them yet, although Coulson was reported to have found a lead.

“What’d they say?” Tony asks.

“I think you don’t believe in psychics,” Steve says.

Tony frowns. “Are we talking mutant-psychic or I-can-read-your-mind psychic?”

“I-can-see-the-future-psychic.”

Another snort. “Whatever. Hit me.”

“There’s going to be an attack in two days.”

Tony laughs. “Yeah, again, whatever. But I’ll try to wrap up the negotiations quick and fly over to New York. Fury can’t hold me here if I wanna bail.”

Steve blinks. “You – you believe me?”

“Not a word, but you believe your friend. And besides, the Safehouse’s been pretty helpful so far.” He shrugs. “Unless they’re the ones manufacturing the robots and are just playing this all for fun, which I highly doubt, because, again, they’re kids. Goddamn.”
Tony is a good person, Steve knows. Loudmouthed with no verbal filter and a very dubious moral compass, but he’s a good person. Steve sighs, relieved.

“Thank you, Tony.”

He’s met with a blinding grin. “You ever going to introduce me to your friend?”

“No.”

“Aww, Cap.”

“That is not my call.”

“Yeah, but come on.”

He doesn’t mention that Jade can teleport things with a snap of her fingers. Tony would curl up and cry.

Rose isn’t looking forward to calling the Safehouse and announcing that Cecil and Kevin had the right idea with what Loki was doing worldwide. He has an overwhelming amount of bunkers all over, each warded six ways to Sunday and masked with cloaking devices. Rose stays in these over the course of her journey, jumping from bunker to bunker and then flying out when she’s rested enough and no one can see her. She can’t ask Jade for help, because she can’t exactly pinpoint where the string leads. John can control the wind, but Rose can still fly, so there’s not exactly a lot he can contribute.

It’s exhausting. Luckily, she only ever has to fly at night, when it’s too dark for everyone to see unless they’re really looking for her. All she has to do is focus on the red string and make sure to stay in one of Loki’s cloaked safehouses when she gets too tired.

She takes pictures and sends them to everyone. It’s weird chatting without pesterchum.

She’s wrapped up in five layers of clothing when she finds the end of the red string. She knows this because it suddenly stops going into the distance and instead just goes down, down, down…

She does a quick invisibility working before following it.

Her ability to fly means she can just easily glide into places without making footsteps, and few hours of patient waiting lets her inside the building. She has to time her entrances perfectly, following the string and getting into places when people open doors.

The string leads to a very dark room. And the door isn’t opening.

Rose sits there for about sixteen hours, bored out of her mind, before deciding that no one is going to open the door for her. She pulls out her phone – also luckily cloaked – and texts Jade that she needs some help. Jade easily pinpoints Rose’s location, and Rose tells her to teleport her a few feet forward.

Jade tells her she’s not sure where Rose will end up, because she’s not physically there, but Rose tells her to risk it anyway.

It’s a few minutes before Rose is suddenly standing inside a very dark room, and her nose is almost touching the glass case.
There’s a man inside, and he appears to be…frozen. Cryogenic sleep, then? Rose’s memory horribly jolts back to Steve Rogers frozen under the ice and it’s that thought that brings her back to looking at the red string that is glowing strongly in the dark, enough that it shines an ominous red light around the place, enough that Rose can see the face of the sleeping man.

With a horrible lurch of her stomach, she realizes she’s looking at the face of James Buchanan Barnes. He hasn’t aged at all, and she thinks she knows why.

The red light of the string makes his face look like it’s coated in blood.

Rose wants to know. Wants to know what happened to him, and she opens her Sight immediately, seeing through brainwashing and torture and so much pain, but it’s not enough. Her curiosity is overwhelming. She wants to know exactly what they did to him, what he’s been doing through for the past seventy years and –

(she wants to do the exact same thing to whoever did this to him she can feel the horrorterrors underneath her skin why is she so angry why is she concerned steve rogers is her friend why is there blood and death and torture in this man’s fate)

Later, she thinks, breathing in and out. She pushes away memories of Jade being used by the Condescension from her mind. She pushes away memories of demons in her ribcage. She will find his files and learn about him, when this entire base is burnt to the ground.

She raises her phone up again and calls Loki.

Chapter End Notes

[groaning]

it's so weird without pesterchum
John is outside the recording studio carrying a bag of coffee from Mrs. H. A few of the students who’d recognized him had given him waves and were happy enough to point him towards the MC lab when he asked for the Palmers and Dave. Dave is guest starring in the sibling’s show today, because their usual music guys – their pool master and their pool master’s best friend – are out of town due to family problems. Nobody actually asked for specifics, although the Palmers still chattered and nobody really understood a word.

The Palmers had approached them with the pool master and their best friend, asking if they could provide for quick music. They’d happily volunteered, but were worried as to where they were going to get their instruments, save Jade, because Jade already had a flute. Their kickass pool master Sapphrel then brought them up to their room, where recording equipment and musical instruments were all over the place.

“Some of the stuff is Kev and Cecil’s,” they’d said, “But I had a bigger unit when we all first moved here, so we decided to just use my space for recording equipment.”

Then John had a tiny glorious moment of realization that the Palmers, the pool master, and mister best friend went to the same college, which explained why their pool master took the Safehouse’s weird shenanigans in stride.

After about a night of recording, Jade and John had provided flute and piano backing tracks with a bit of acoustic guitars from Loki (Mr. G had been teaching him). Dave is to go on the show live to man the soundboard.

Currently, it’s almost six o’clock, and Cecil is closing up his part of the show. Kevin is in the other room, going through last-minute revisions with a classmate for tomorrow’s broadcast while Dave looks like he’s having a great time by the soundboard.

John sits on the nice couch just a few feet away from the tables where Mass Communication students are milling about, occasionally swapping papers or tossing each other staplers without even looking. It’s kind of terrifying. He crosses and uncrosses his ankles repeatedly, bored and a little scared when one girl tosses a stapler over her shoulder and another catches it without having to look up from the

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
He and the others have had talks about getting back into school ever since the topic’s been brought up. Jade is the one who’s most seriously considering it, although that had been a little derailed since she’s been hanging out with Steve Rogers. John doesn’t know about the others, and Loki definitely doesn’t need to go to college, although he probably might just for kicks and giggles, but for John…

He looks around at the students, most of them having their sleeves rolled up and constantly muttering to themselves as they read over papers, dark circles under their eyes, empty coffee cups littering their desks – maybe he’s already got enough on his plate with the whole Safehouse thing?

He hasn’t even really finished middle school. He doesn’t think he can quite go straight to the pressure of college. He’s always thought about it, of course, especially when he catches Jade looking at websites or brochures during her free time, but somehow he can’t really imagine himself in college. Not here, anyway.

He’s always imagined himself graduating highschool and tossing his cap in the air, whooping along with (faceless, he can’t really remember anymore, in the haze of chatlogs and empty space and blood) classmates as the graduation march plays. He’s always imagined himself taking photos with his father. Always imagined driving around, applying for colleges, getting approved, and then hunting for apartments. Always imagined calling his dad maybe every night, talking about how school went.

He’s stuck in his thirteen-year-old body and he’s twenty and he’s not doing any of those things.

He looks back inside the booth, where Cecil is constantly moving on his swivel-chair and miraculously not making any noise. Cecil is seventeen.

John swallows thickly. There is a reason why he always thinks and thinks and thinks and never stops on one thought. If he does, everything comes crashing down on him. He looks down at the floor, eyes a little wide, and he’s suddenly back in the battlefield of Skaia, looking down at his sister’s dead body.

Six o’clock comes by quicker than he realizes, because one moment, he’s staring at the floor and the next, Cecil is saying, “Good night.”

The door of the recording studio opens and Dave lets the ending song play. John watches as Dave steps away from the soundboard and Cecil asks if he’s fine taking charge of the music again tomorrow.

Kevin’s getting out of the other room, carrying papers full of markings made by a yellow-orange glitter pen. John stands and grins, walking over to where his friends are, holding up the bag of coffee.

Cecil, who is about three words into the conversation with his brother and Dave, suddenly hones in on the scent of bean water. “John!”

“Hey guys! Mrs. H sent me to bring you these.”

“Sweet,” Dave says, grinning, just as eager to get out the coffee cup with his name on it. “God, I love that woman.”

John takes out his own once they’ve all gotten their assigned drinks. He lifts the cover off of it and blows on it gently, although it ends up being a miniature gale. His coffee’s at just the right temperature though. Meanwhile, Dave is still blowing away the steam of his coffee.
Cecil is just…straight up chugging it. John wonders exactly how he keeps his voice sound so nice.

After they’ve all cleaned up the studio and bid everyone goodbye, John calls Jade, who almost immediately pops in to teleport them back to the Safehouse.

John takes off his shoes as soon as they’re inside. He wants to feel the chill of the floor tonight.

There’s food in the kitchen and all five of them stack their plates before shuffling towards the noise in the living room. Kevin already looks dead on his feet and the sun’s just set. Poor kid. He seems to live with the rising and the setting of the sun. John smiles to himself as he stabs a sausage and takes a bite. Pretty good.

He starts hovering when the dogs start running from all over the house towards him. Buster is wagging his tail furiously, looking up at John and letting out a yip. John shushes him gently. “This is my food, Buster.”

Buster yips again. John chuckles.

The living room TV is on and Loki’s temporarily manning the betting pool chalkboard. Since everyone’s attention is on the screen, Loki has an entire couch to himself, and it’s a rare sight to see him sprawled out on it, especially with him pulling out sticks of Sapphrel’s colored chalk like it’s the most fascinating thing he’s ever laid his eyes on. He may have been getting by fine with adapting to earth, but some things are still a novelty to him.

John wonders if he should introduce Loki to silly string.

He watches Loki pull out alternating chalk sticks before pushing them back down, then pulling out the ones he hadn’t pulled out earlier, and pushing those down too.

Yeah, he should definitely introduce Loki to silly string.

John sits cross-legged in the air until he finishes eating. Directly below him, the dogs are gathered, all looking up and patiently staring at him. Nobody even gives him a weird look.

He flies into the kitchen to drop his plate in the sink, trying to remember if it’s his turn to do the dishes since Rose is out of town of the foreseeable future. Hah. Foreseeable future. Rose.

She’s called a few times and she’s said that she’s found something that they probably didn’t want to know, but she didn’t know if she was getting closer to the end of the red string. He hopes she is. She’s been away for a while.

He turns to the little chart pinned to the fridge. It’s a Wednesday. He’s not on sink duty.

He flies back to the living room and lets his toes touch the carpet, gradually lowering himself until his feet are on the floor. He curls his toes, letting them try and grip the carpet. It tickles. A dog runs over and licks his toes, leaving a wet stripe of saliva.

It’s Moxie, one of the newer dogs they’d taken in. Her tail is a stump from when her previous owner had cut it off. John’s chest clenches when he sees it trying to wag.

He bends down and gently pats her on the head. “Heya, Moxie.”

Moxie licks his face. He giggles.

“Can I carry you?” he asks. Jade’s always telling him that talking to dogs worked. They understood,
to some extent, she’d said. It's ridiculous, but sometimes he catches her, and occasionally, Mr. G, talking to them, so he’s been trying to do the same himself. So far, he doesn’t know how to understand them. He figures Jade can, and maybe Loki.

Moxie bounces forward until she can push her head against his chest. John laughs again, gently scoops her up and then takes to the air, where he sits cross-legged again, cradling the small dog and letting her rest on his lap. She seems to be enjoying being on higher ground than her friends, judging by her triumphant little bark. The other dogs bark jealously at her, and everyone looking at the television shushes them, although their eyes are still glued to the screen.

An hour and a half later, wads of cash are handed over while Loki makes adjustments to the betting pool board. John hasn’t bet anything on this one, so all he does is watch while people grumble and listen to Moxie’s breathing as she sleeps in his lap.

When everyone’s cleaned up and Mr. G is rounding up the dogs, John gently places Moxie back on the floor. She stirs, of course, and then stands up, confusedly looking up at him and her owner.

“Time to go to bed, Moxie,” Mr. G says. She turns to him, presses her head against his leg, before walking back to John and sitting down. Mr. G smiles and chuckles. “Okay, you can spend the night with John.”

Moxie yips and turns to John expectantly. John blinks and looks up at Mr. G. “Really?”

“Dogs are smarter than people give them credit for, Egbert,” he says. “Also, I think she likes the fact that you can fly. Humor her.”

Then he rounds up the rest of the dogs and has to chase Buster around before Jade takes pity on him because he almost loses his glasses.

John looks down at Moxie and sees her wagging her stump of a tail again. He sighs and picks her up.

He has a bed, and he has a hammock. He loves sleeping on the hammock and letting the wind rock him back and forth; loves that sense of movement even when he’s asleep, not that he sleeps too well these nights. Sometimes he sleeps too little or too much. At the beginning of all of this, he didn’t sleep at all, instead roaming the nights.

He still misses his dad, though he swears on the most expensive quickie-bake oven in existence that he’ll never admit to missing cake. His dad always baked cake. And honestly, John would do anything to see his dad bringing him cake again.

(His father is dead. And John never got to say goodbye or apologize, because right before he played that godforsaken game, he had to argue about the goddamn cake.)

He gets into the hammock carefully, and lets Moxie settle down beside him. She rolls over onto her back and snuggles into his side, looking up at the ceiling with the drawings made in luminescent ink. John makes a motion with his hand and the hammock moves slowly, side to side, not enough for John’s vision to blur.

Moxie doesn’t appear to be bothered by the motion.

John takes off his glasses and folds them up before letting a gust of wind toss them over to his bed. He keeps the hammock in a steady, slow movement, not enough to make Moxie sick, but enough to make them both fall asleep.
Loki is not familiar with the concept of homelessness.

Technically, he’d spent a while bouncing from place to place when he first came to Midgard – Earth, but homelessness was never a thing discussed in Asgard. The sight of people dressed in rags and dying of cold and begging for help on the streets was never something he’d seen in the Realm Eternal. That might have something to do with the honor culture there, that people would rather die in battle than go home a cripple and not be able to fight, and that families who lost their warriors would live on rewards from the king, for their fallen family member’s bravery.

Also, the fact that the few shamed warriors (and the occasional seiðmaðr who tried to help people but was shunned and humiliated for it) would opt to pitch themselves over the edge of the Bifrost rather than continue with a life of constant jeering.

New York is different. And from what he’d seen on his travels, Earth is different. Here, there are people who starve and die of cold on the streets, children who go around ducking under bridges and praying the things don’t collapse on them overnight, people who would beg and would accept being humiliated if it meant they could eat for another day.

Plenty of humans wanted to help them, but an equal number also wanted to make their lives more miserable.

He gets the concept of it when he sees the news of a bridge collapsing during a standard villain attack, and a few people who were too slow to run had gotten crushed in the rubble.

Even with the Safehouse standing, there are still people who got killed during attacks. Sometimes the roads they took got blocked or they were too slow on moving, but Loki and the others couldn’t do much about it, not without S.H.I.E.L.D getting on their case faster than they could explain, and even then, there were some people who utilized their services and still didn’t like them because they were mutants.

Funny, humans. At least they were still marginally better than Asgardians with their penchant for self-determination.

No homeless has ever tried to get in the Safehouse during an attack. Possibly because they thought that normally, people wouldn’t let them in houses if they asked for a drink, so what difference would it make if the city was under attack but – Loki remembers being young and wanting to help his brother even at the price of laughing and sneering; remembers being sick for three weeks because a spell taxed him but it was worth it to make sure Thor and Sif and the Warriors Three didn’t get blown to pieces; remembers John Egbert persistent outside his door and still smiling at him, asking for help, and thanking him wholeheartedly when he gave it.

He has an idea.

Mrs. Harrison works at the homeless shelter sometimes. Loki finds it a good enough doorway to start making connections, and make connections he does, especially when the children are fascinated by his magic tricks.

Like majority of New York, the workers at the shelter know him (and the kids, and in fact told him that he was welcome to stop by for a quick meal any day) and are very happy to have him volunteer. Graham’s cooking lessons are proving to be handy since that means he already has experience in
cooking and won’t fail too badly.

When he’s on breaks, he talks to the children, who are wary of him at first, but since he’d already demonstrated magic by moving plates and objects with very visible green light (and it made distributing food faster), plenty of the younger ones are quick to talk.

By the third week, he already has a following almost as big as the one he usually has during Safehouse storytime sessions. He ropes Graham and Jade into coming along one day to bring the dogs for the children to play with. Graham opts to stay in the kitchen while Jade makes sure the dogs aren’t being mauled by the more reckless kids and entertains questions about her ears.

(When Loki has to go back to work and it’s Graham’s break, the children make it known that they want more stories. Jade turns to Graham and says, “How about you, Mr. G, do you have stories?”

Loki has heard about people shutting down, but he’s never really seen people shutting down.

He laughs until he’s crying. When they get home, Graham hits him on the arm once, and Loki starts laughing so hard again that the children turn to each other with slightly panicked looks on their faces.)

He slowly brings the other kids to visit the shelter one by one. They’ve all got their share of stories that range from the absurd (like Dave suspecting John sent him a bottle of apple juice that really was piss and John tried to defend himself and say it really was apple juice) to the slightly more absurd but with an air of melancholy (“Once upon a time, four children played a game. They didn’t know what it was and just thought it was a regular old game. Now these children were young and unsure about what they felt and how they fit in the world at that time, and they only ever really thought about themselves. They didn’t even stop to think about how their actions would affect everything.”).

All in all, everyone is making good progress with befriending the homeless of New York City. Even the Palmers and the pool master (and their best friend) stop by when John invites them.

When Loki’s new friends all arrive at the Safehouse door, looking terrified but relieved, Loki eagerly ushers them in. A few people give the homeless’ ragged and dirty states disgusted looks, of course, but Mrs. Harrison gives them a glare that any sane person would hide under their bed at, so they’re left alone. The Palmers are more than happy to provide for food, Mrs. Harrison lets them use the showers and the pool master entertains a few of them by showing them around the enormous interior of the Safehouse.

Loki smiles. Connections make connections. He doesn’t mind having the entirety of New York under his roof, not when they need it. He highly doubts S.H.I.E.L.D will ever think of the beggars on the streets as the Safehouse’s trusted allies.

Their first honest-to-goodness mutant is a homeless five-year-old who can control water.

They discover this because when a fire-raging maniac is burning the rest of New York down, said kid’s brother Lester, and Lester’s friend Shaun, bring in the unconscious girl, claiming that she’d flung her arms around and the water under the bridge they’d been staying at had started moving in the direction she pointed her hands towards. Unfortunately, with the relentless heat from the fires outside, she’d passed out quickly.

“S.H.I.E.L.D is going to have a blast trying to refund the damage,” Dave says, “Wait – do they refund things?”
“Tony Stark refunds things,” Jade says. Meanwhile, John runs towards the door and disappears into wind to slip through the cracks, ignoring his sister calling out his name, presumably to go and try extinguish the fires before they turned New York into the world’s biggest pile of ash. The city could get an award for it, at least.

Mai, the little water-bending mutant, is currently laid out on a bed in the infirmary after being looked at by one of the doctors that had ducked into the Safehouse. One advantage of being the city bunker is that there’s no shortage of talents since they accept everyone in.

The air conditioners in the Safehouse are on full-blast and Loki puts up some cooling runes so that the front door and the walls wouldn’t be hot to the touch. Since nobody is in the mood to do bake-offs or rock-paper-scissor tournaments, Loki freezes the indoor pool with a few muttered words and air-drawn runes, while Jade momentarily pops downtown to grab a several skates.

Jade, it turns out, is a natural at skating (possibly from having the Land of Frost and Frogs for a planet; there must have been some skating involved at one point). Mrs. H’s pretty spry for her age and drags Mr. G on the ice to accompany her, because he’s passable as well.

When John comes back a little huffy and muttering something about fires and maniacs, a little kid hands him a pair of bright yellow skates and he confusedly wanders into the indoor pool to see it frozen.

Moxie, who has been trying to get onto the frozen pool without freezing her paws off (and failing, because she just stayed at the edge and whined while watching all the humans have fun) barks excitedly and bounds over to him, pushing her head against his leg.

He looks down at her, then back the pool-skating-rink and laughs. He picks her up and cheats, hovering just a bit over the ice and ‘skating’.

Dave and the Palmers, who all grew up in places that were practically hell on earth, all absolutely suck. Surprisingly, so does Loki.

“They don’t have skating rinks in Asgard?” John asks, Moxie happily wagging her tail stump as he holds her in his arms.

“They don’t have ice on Asgard,” Loki says, hanging onto the tables that people had put on the edge of the pool to act as rails. Then, in a smaller voice, “That’s on Jotunheim.”

John sober immediately.

On the other side of the pool, Dave is trying to regain his balance while muttering, “This is similar to rollerblading, this shouldn’t be hard!”

Cecil is holding onto the tables at the edge and making noises that sounded suspiciously like whimpers and the occasional cry for his mother. Kevin is on the ice, gliding slowly, knees bent awkwardly, but he’s getting the hang of moving.

John watches them trying to get away from the edge of the pool as best as they can. Sapphrel glides by once to grab Kevin’s arms, earning a shocked, “Whoa!” from him, but he lets the betting pool master just drag him around. It’s marginally better than flailing around trying not to fall.

Dave is half-crouched on the floor, one hand hovering over the ice. When he tries to stand, he nearly imbalances again and crouches right back down. Behind him, Cecil tries to push off from the table and flails around, legs shaking; when he tilts backwards and nearly falls, he shrieks: “I’ve never even seen snow until I came to this city; this is terrifying!”
Dave moves to stand, immediately bends back from the shift in weight, and falls on his ass.

Cecil starts calling for Sapphrel’s best friend who is on the other side of the pool. “Ruben! Ruben, Saph’s got Kevin, this is unfair.”

When Jade calls John out on gliding instead of actually skating, he floats up into the air, taking Moxie with him while his sister cries foul; he laughs before going into the infirmary to check up on Mai.

The fight outside finishes after a few hours. Firemen are called to put out the remaining fires, which aren’t too many since John got most of them; according to the news, a strong wind blew down and put out all of the fires in one go, until a few were reignited thanks to their villain. Thankfully, the Avengers had stepped in at this point and John had ducked inside the Safehouse again.

Once it’s safe, their refugees go home. Plenty of the homeless children stick around the infirmary, waiting for Mai. If they want to, they can sleep in the building, since the crew has decked out three enormous rooms for any of the homeless to stay in anytime they wanted. Plenty of them have stayed there for several nights before, but every now and then, they wander. They still visit the shelter.

Loki is sitting right beside Mai’s bed, leaning back on his chair.

“Does anyone else know about Mai’s abilities?” he asks.

Several children shake their heads. Lester makes a face.

John, with Moxie asleep in his lap as he sits on one of the infirmary beds, tilts his head curiously.

“People in suits find us sometimes. We hide, of course, but we knew a few more people who had, like, magic powers, and the men in suits always take them away. We never see them again,” Shaun says.

John turns to Jade, who turns to Dave, who turns to Loki. Loki looks out over the crowd of children before turning to Mai.


“Or Professor Xavier or something.” Dave shrugs, then snorts inelegantly.

“What do they want with mutants anyway?” John runs his fingers through Moxie’s fur. His glasses almost slide off his face as he keeps on staring at the ground, brow furrowed. “I mean, I get wanting to study them, but they’re children.”

Jade puts a hand to her mouth and tries to stifle her gasp. Dave looks away. Loki stiffens for a moment.

“They’re easy prey,” the trickster mutters under his breath. “Jade, does Steve Rogers ever mention anything about S.H.I.E.L.D’s treatment of mutants?”

She shakes her head.

He’s silent for a moment. “From what Cecil has told us when he went to deceive Coulson, S.H.I.E.L.D’s job is to make sure humanity isn’t threatened – not by extra-terrestrials or extra-dimensional, or even Earth’s own mutants. I suppose they think neutralizing the threat before it can start is a good thing to do. Or they’re studying them.”
“I don’t think kids wanna be poked and prodded within an inch of their life.” Dave crosses his arms.

“Maybe Mai can hide here for a while,” Lester says, standing and moving over to the bed where his little sister is sleeping. “I mean, the guys in suits can’t get in your building, right? You guys are still here. You’re mutants.” He pauses, studying them. “Even people who aren’t homeless and have powers are taken.”

John closes his eyes and the hand going through Moxie’s fur stops. Dave mutters, “Disgusting.” Jade’s ears flick down.

Loki looks at Mai’s sleeping face, then at her brother, and nods. “All of you can stay here for however long you like.”

Over the next few weeks, the numbers of their homeless refugees (and the homeless who decide to stay in the rooms with plenty of beds for them to sleep in, if they decide to stay the night) rise. Connections really build more connections, and anyone who sleeps under a bridge tells everyone else who sleeps under a bridge that there’s a place they can sleep in if they ever need it and a place to hide in when the city is under attack. Sadly, of course, since they’re not exactly that rich, they can’t feed everyone, but the homeless shelter exists for a reason.

Their mutant refugees increase too. Mostly, they’re homeless, but the ones who have been hiding their abilities start coming out when Loki brings the children in the training room and starts teaching them how to control their talents as best as they could, because really, mutant powers were cool until someone sets something on fire because they can’t control their emotions.

A support group easily builds, although Loki always warns them to be careful who they talked to outside, what with S.H.I.E.L.D looming overhead. And yes, their intentions could be good, but none of them could really risk it, especially when none of their friends who were apprehended ever came back.

It’s fascinating to see the children build their own circle of trust and Loki is often left thinking, If I had a group of friends consisting of seiðr-users when I was younger…

He abandons that thought as quickly as he picks it up.

Rose calls every now and then with news about her progress and he tells her about how the Safehouse is getting along, especially with the new developments. Rose chuckles and tells him about how even on Earth, difference is a thing that can get you alienated.

She tells him she’d love to talk to the children when she gets back, but for now, she’s somewhere in France chasing the end of a red string that doesn’t seem to end.

Dave cracks jokes about element-benders whenever he can, and John and Jade happily join in when the resident hydrokinetic and pyrokinetic are practicing. So far, Mai’s only burst three faucets out of anger. Rei, on the other hand, appears to have the miraculous talent to burn water, which amuses Strider to no end.

When the two aren’t practicing, they’re comparing notes with John and Jade. John is able to talk elements with them easily enough, but Jade has to explain that her magic comprises space and not just earth. When the idea clicks, the kids launch into enthusiastic fangirling/fanboying over her.

And really, Loki doesn’t like thinking about it, but if his childhood had involved practicing with
other seiðr-users and comparing notes and laughing with them and talking to older, more experienced sorcerers instead of being locked away in the palace for being the royal shame and having to study by himself and sneak off to ever get any experience, maybe –

There are plenty of maybes.

Loki shakes his head and decides not to pursue that train of thought.

Rose calls maybe twice a week, depending on whether or not she’s had proper sleep. They all agree to put her calls on loudspeak so everyone can hear and talk to her. It’s fascinating hearing her talking about the places she’s been to, and John wonders exactly where the end of the red string is.

She wins a few bets and the pool master holds onto her money for her. They ask her how she’s doing and she tells them that between trying to track down the end of the red string, she sightsees (as much as one can sightsee when flying at top speed) and eats.

John continues going to the park and busking. Once, he buys one of those things people use to strap babies to their chest and carries Moxie as he flies low-level around the city. People give him weird looks, but the tiny dog is absolutely ecstatic. John thinks she might have a thing for flying.

(A sudden image of Cassie meeting Moxie assaults his mind, and the image is so ridiculous he starts laughing until he cries.)

Steve Rogers meets Moxie in the park once, and he sees her stump of a tail and he gives the dog a gentle pat.

“What’s her name?” he asks.

“Moxie.”

“That’s a nice name.”

Moxie barks, happy and approving of this man. John thinks Jade might have been onto something when she was befriending Captain America.

Steve gets lucky during a fight, when John is on guard duty and looking outside the Safehouse while everyone else is inside playing rock-paper-scissors. The aircraft of their latest bad guy is visible from where John sits, and he sees it when a tiny figure in blue, holding something circular that just might be a shield is pushed off of the aircraft, flailing. Iron Man is nowhere to be seen, and Captain America is falling fast, fast, fast.

John bursts into a gust of wind that nearly tears their door off its hinges when he slips through the cracks and up into the air, reaching the Captain just in time. He doesn’t materialize, just lets the wind blow and cradle the good Captain as he slows the man’s descent, and he can sense Steve’s own surprise and hopes that the man’s merely thinking of how this feels like to plummet to your death. He doesn’t plummet though, only gets set to the ground very gently before the wind leaves him and returns back to the Safehouse, condensing back into John Egbert.

Life goes on. Rose calls. Jade walks the dogs. Dave goes to gigs. Loki disappears and comes back with an armful of books that look like they’re almost as old as he is.

Then one day, Rose calls and says she’s found something very interesting. He thinks he can feel the
wind crackle with grimdark energy.

Several days later, on the issue of making sure that everyone in their little mutant network is alright, Cecil drags a radio into the dining room with Kevin grinning behind him.

“I have an idea,” he says.

Chapter End Notes

[tap dances into room]
shhh everybody be patient i just wanna do this properly i have like ten thousand characters and sixteen SBURL sessions to juggle
in which rose fixes my pesterchum problem
dog therapy is a thing
and one big shoutout that's been planned for months but i didn't really think it would be
relevant to wtnv's current arc so hey i guess i really am psychic

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

EB: uhh.
EB: te s tin g?
TT: It's okay, ke e p go ing.
TT: I wa nt to see ho w it looks li ke on the sc reen.
EB: whoa my text looks wo nk y.
TT: There's s ti ll ple n t y of t wea kin g to be done.
TT: But otherwise, we're off to a good start.
EB: i think it already loo ks co o!l
EB: m a n i m iss c ha tti ng wi t h e very one.
EB: there's pr o bably jus t the f o u r of us n ow.
TT: We can let Loki and the others join in if they are interested.
TT: Although there's no need to use a chat client if we see each other face to face on a daily basis.
EB: yeah that would just be silly!
EB: oh, the glitchiness is gone.
TT: I fixed it.
TT: Thank you for indulging me, John.
EB: no problem :B

There is currently an entire evil base floating in the outer skirts of the solar system. If John had to
guess, he’d bet this place in space was what passed off as the furthest ring in this universe.

Loki isn’t in the Safehouse at the moment; probably making sure there are no loose ends.
They’d spent a few days in one of Loki’s bunkers in India while Rose and Loki did their magic on the guy with the metal arm. Kinda reminded John of Vriska, and he had to stop himself from laughing.

The Palmers had won the Red String bet – ah, yes, Wikipedia, such a trusty place to get information – and Rose and Loki had both been sulky about it; when pressed, they would not admit it. The twins had also been smug about being right about Loki having bunkers, and everyone had been ready to begrudgingly hand over their money when Loki said that building bunkers wasn’t the only thing he did while he was away. Cecil and Kevin had then proceeded to fiercely whisper to each other: “I thought you said that was what your visions revealed!” “It was. What about yours?”

All in all, it had been a wild two weeks.

Rose currently isn’t in the Safehouse as well, as she’s volunteered to look after the guy they’d rescued and she’d said that Steve Rogers regularly stopping by the house to walk Jade home was something she and her charge needed to avoid with James’ mind still in pieces. He’s functional, but his memories are still shot.

Jade had nodded sympathetically. John had fidgeted and didn’t notice he was floating, too busy remembering the hours spent disintegrating into air so that his mind-controlled sister wouldn’t catch him.

James had gone through the same thing Jade and Jane did, they’d said.

At least progress had been good enough that Rose had time to be bored and try and make a chat client. She’d made a rough guide to SBURB and sent it into the cosmos before, so John’s not surprised that with a little reading and a few videos here and there, she’d be able to make a working chat client.

John wonders if James helped. Maybe he should stop by or something.

“John, we got more radios,” Mr. G says when he walks into the kitchen, carrying a cooler filled with fish. He gives the oven John is crouching in front of a dubious look. “Is it cake?”

John wrinkles his nose. “No.”

“Thought a miracle wasn’t too much of a long shot. Cookies, then?”

“Yeah,” he says, “I was bored.”

“Mm. You won’t be for a few hours. We got more radios and we need you to distribute them,” Mr. G says.

“Can I do them tomorrow night?”

“Yeah, better under the cover of darkness and all that.” Mr. G opens the cooler and starts taking out the fish. It’ll be a great dinner tonight.

Moxie is behaved enough to simply lie down on John’s lap as he eats, leaning back on the couch with his eyes on the television.

They hadn’t had too bad a villain in a few days, only a few failures that were stopped before they could dish out the machines, which is good.

Afterwards, once the dishes are cleaned and the dogs are fed (and put to bed), everyone stays up to
watch the newest episode of a medical drama John forgets the name of. He hasn’t really been paying attention, and every now and then, he forgets where the plot is.

When his eyes droop for the fourth time, he excuses himself and flies up to his room. Moxie isn’t staying with him tonight, instead joining the rest of her doggy friends in Mr. G’s room. John collapses onto his bed and sighs. He closes his eyes and waits for his breathing to even out.

It doesn’t. Thirty minutes later, he wakes up and groans, unable to sleep. He moves over to his window to look out the city instead. There aren’t a lot of cars passing by their street.

He presses his fingers to the glass. His heart skips a beat, and for a moment, he thinks of storms brewing.

TG: this is actually impressive
TG: whatd you do
TT: I read a few guides.
TG: a few guides
TG: and you built a working chat client because you were bored outta your mind
TG: babysitting duties too easy or what
EB: i think it’s pretty good!
EB: how’s james?
TT: He’s doing well.
TT: He’s sleeping right now, actually.
TT: I was thinking of asking him if he knew anything about encrypting chat clients, but that’s not advisable right now.
TT: I don’t think it’s healthy to remind him of his previous line of work at this stage.
TT: We’ll have it encrypted by other means.
TT: I’m sorry, Jade.
GG: its okay! :)
GG: steves concerned about shield snooping into our conversations but he has two phones for now
GG: besides i think hes still just getting used to technology
TT: How is he?
GG: hes doing so well actually!!! :D
TG: wait youre givin him pop culture ed right
GG: kinda
“So like, how far is the radio signal supposed to reach? We don’t have a satellite dish and everything,” John says, watching Cecil tinker with the soundboard while the pool master – it’s kind of weird how plenty of them never got past that title for Cecil’s friend – is underneath the desk, connecting wires and taping their lengths together so they didn’t make a huge mess in the room. Pool master’s best friend is dragging in the fiberglass to corral what is going to be the Palmers’ makeshift studio.

“Loki’s got the entire thing set up,” Dave says, assembling the microphone together, “Not a satellite dish, obviously, but all of these things have runes on them. Look.” He holds up the condenser mic and tilts it so that its body glints under the light overhead. Glowing, green, marks shine on its body as he moves it. “It’s like insta-amplification.”

Outside, two more panels of fiberglass appear in a flash of green light, Jade holding onto them. “Ruben, I got more.”

It’s something short of a miracle that the makeshift radio studio fits in pool master Saph’s already-filled bedroom. Actually, it’s magic. Expansion runes can do a lot, as can redecorating. They just had to move all the instruments and their corresponding soundboards to the side.

John doesn’t know a thing about setting up equipment, so he’s on snack duty, which unfortunately means delivering snacks and not eating them. He’s already delivered the last tray of cookies into the room, freshly baked by Mrs. H.

Jade lets Ruben drag the fiberglass to position them accordingly, and then she bounds over to her brother to get two cookies. Her dog ears flick up happily as she bites into both of them at the same time.

John snorts. “Barbarian.”

“I’m hungry.”

Moxie bounds in, barking and looking like she’s running too fast to stop, but she skids to a halt just in front of the fiberglass Ruben has set up, before turning tail and running outside again. And then she returns a few seconds later, still at the same speed, stopping in front of the glass, and then running back out.

Jade laughs. “I love it when dogs do that. They’re so cute.”

“I’m actually worried she’s going to smash into the glass. Is she playing with Buster?”

“Yeah, she is,” Jade says.

John takes three cookies and stuffs them into his mouth. When he says, “I’m going to make sure she doesn’t trip down the stairs,” it doesn’t sound anything like it.
Jade rolls her eyes at him. “Now who’s the barbarian?”

Downstairs, Moxie and Buster are chasing each other, ducking under tables and leaping onto couches, nearly knocking a few things over. John watches them for a while, making sure to catch whatever they’ve tipped over so that it doesn’t smash itself on the floor, but he doesn’t interfere. It’s a few more minutes before both of the dogs calm down enough to lie on the floor.

John smiles. Dogs are so simple. So easily happy.

Moxie trots over to the kitchen to her water bowl and Buster follows after her. When they return, they’ve got Rover with them, and they all lie down on the carpet, tired. John floats over and Moxie wags her tail stump at him. Buster gives him a small yip. Rover stands to give his face a lick. He makes a disgusted noise that breaks off into a laugh as he wipes the drool off.

Dog therapy. It works. It’s totally something he needs to bring up with Rose regarding James.

Yeah, John should definitely visit.

cannibalAmygdala [CA] responded to memo.

CA: its called pesterchum.

CA: really.

CA: whats with the colors?

EB: it’s so that everyone can tell everyone apart!

EB: it’s easier that way.

CA: it’s like my eyes are seeing strobelights.

TG: aww yes

TG: party all up in the house mr g

CA: please stop

TG: did you seriously just say that

CA: youre right beside me on the couch right now strider

CA: i actually do know when my speech pattern changes

CA: bitch to shake off

CA: clings like leeches

CA: or sweat

CA: sweaty leeches

TG: dear god
EB: what’s that sound?

TG: i think its jade

EB: is she suffocating or something?

EB: oh.

EB: she’s laughing. don’t worry.

EB: false alarm.

James is staring at the dogs like they’re going to eat him. John can already tell this is a stellar idea. Rose is on her laptop, sitting on the couch, not at all worried that her charge is having a staredown with the four-legged friends John has convinced Jade to teleport. He would have done it himself, but he’s not sure his juju-acquired abilities are supposed to be used like that, not to mention he might have made an accident. God only knew how much he’d blame himself if anything happened to Moxie.

Jade is sitting right across James, trying to convince him the dogs aren’t going to hurt him. Rover licks his metal arm. James’ face scrunches up.

John barely holds in his snickers.

The man’s looking healthy. Not fresh-from-the-cryosleep-chamber healthy, but actually healthy-healthy. Rose says he’s been up and doing jogs with her ever since he’d decided she wasn’t going to try and take apart his head and brainwash him again.

They’d gone through his files together with him once he was awake and Loki and Rose had done whatever they could to help with his dissociation. Also once he’d calmed down and stopped trying to kill them out of self-preservation instinct. Aside from what’s in his files, history books and his name, everything else is a blank for the poor guy.

Maybe they’ll try to visit the Smithsonian. When Steve’s not around, preferably. James getting his memory back is good, but James getting his memories shoved into his head and getting nabbed by S.H.I.E.L.D for questioning is not going to help. Or, that’s just everyone’s paranoia regarding S.H.I.E.L.D talking.

“This little guy is Buster. He’s Kevin’s dog. Kevin is a friend back home,” Jade explains from where she’s sitting, giving Buster a rub on the head. Buster barks happily, tongue lolling and tail wagging.

John watches as James’ eyes soften.

“He’s an excitable one,” the man croaks, voice sounding so hoarse from what is possibly years of disuse. John doesn’t think his old brainwashers let him talk back much.

Jade smiles. “Yeah, he is. He has a habit of jumping on people.”

Moxie stands and runs over to where John is sitting and bumps her leg against his head softly. He chuckles and picks her up. She licks his face once she’s close enough to him.

James and Jade turn to look at him. If John focuses right, he thinks the corners of James’ lips are
“That’s Moxie,” Jade says, “John takes care of her sometimes.”

“What happened to her tail?” James asks.

Jade takes a while to answer. “Someone cut it off.”

James nods, slow. John tries not to look at the man’s metal arm.

Eventually, Moxie tries to wriggle out of John’s grasp and he puts her down. She flattens herself on the floor and starts crawling towards James, looking like a lot like a soldier crawling across enemy territory. The appropriateness makes John laugh. Even Rose looks up from where she’s tweaking the chat client to observe Moxie.

When the tiny dog finally makes her way to where James is sitting, she nudges his leg with a wet snout and then looks up at him.

James stares at her for a moment before raising his metal arm slowly and then gently placing it on her head. He moves it, hesitant, as he gives her rub.

Moxie looks up at him again, eyes bright, when he lifts his hand back. James moves so that his other hand, the human one, can touch Moxie’s fur, and John doesn’t think he’s imagining it when James’ eyes widen slightly in surprise.

How long has it been since James touched anything that wasn’t a potential weapon, or wasn’t blood leaking out of someone?

Moxie raises her head and licks his fingers.

“She likes you,” Jade says.

John gives Rose a glance. She is fixated on James, who is looking at Moxie like she’s something he’s never seen before.

“Yeah,” James whispers, “I like her too.”

gardenGnostic [GG] responded to memo.

GG: rose!!! :D

GG: i got good news :)

GG: you remember our pool masters bestfriend?

GG: what was his name…

TT: I remember him.

TT: I remember his name started with an R?

GG: yeah it was a nice name!

GG: like a stone or something?
“So how was James?” Mr. G asks when they’ve gotten the dogs back and they all flock towards him. He pets them all on the head and evades every single one of their licks. John doesn’t know how he does it.

“He likes them,” John says. Mr. G nods, approving.

“Can we maybe bring them back again sometime?” Jade asks as Rover makes his way back to her and she pets his head.

Then the dogs around Mr. G turn towards the staircase and start barking. Rover follows suit. John turns towards the staircase to see a small black shape looking down at the dogs condescendingly. With the light reflecting, Cecil’s cat looks like its eyes are glowing.

Mr. G sighs and whistles sharply. All the dogs stop barking and turn towards him, apologetic.

“Yeah, you can definitely bring them back to visit,” he says, “Dogs really are good for therapy.” He turns to John at that one. John cracks a grin.
“Maybe you can come too. We told James about everyone else here, although nothing about the whole Safehouse deal. Rose thinks we should reintroduce him to society slowly. He’s having a hard time catching up to modern stuff as it is.” Jade fidgets with the hem of her sleeve.

“As soon as Loki gives the go signal,” Mr. G says, exasperated, “I trust the guy, but his paranoia reeks.”

“So does yours,” John says, still grinning.

“Touché. And for that, you’re not eating anything I cook for two weeks, Egbert.”

“What!”

Jade laughs.

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aubergineTwilight [AT] responded to memo.

abendrotTriptych [AT] responded to memo.

AT: Hello!
AT: Hello!
GG: :D

EB: that was cool!

TG: theyre doing it on purpose

AT: Doing what on purpose?
AT: Doing what on purpose?

TG: i seriously hope thats not going to be annoying in the long run

TG: but my crossed fingers are not going to do much

AT: Killjoy.

TG: no im not i dont listen to those guys

EB: …okay i hear kevin and that’s definitely laughter and not suffocation.

GG: i dont get it :(

EB: me neither.

EB: but you learn to live with the obscurity when you’re around the great dave strider and the evermysterious palmer siblings.

EB: …kevin’s laughter got louder.

EB: …
EB: okay now i’m genuinely worried.

It’s 4:13 in the afternoon and everyone in the building is kind of panicking.

This is college, of course, so it’s not really that uncommon for a few students here and there to start screaming, maybe have a mental breakdown, or attempt to sacrifice a kidney to the founder’s statue in exchange for a passing grade.

But this is a different kind of panic. This is the sort that includes stampeding down stairs and screaming at the top of your lungs, and hearing someone yell because they lost their glasses, and getting pulled aside by your brother before you can get crushed by the rushing mob. This is the sort of panic that leaves you stranded on the fifth floor of your building, because the stairs are too tight with people from the upper floors for you and your friends to move. This is the sort of panic that has you looking out the window.

Maybe not the sort of panic that inspires bone-deep, artery-clogging worry, because psychic visions and all that spoil the excitement, but definitely the sort of panic that includes biting your lower lip because you’re thinking, what if.

It’s 4:13 in the afternoon. Cecil stares out the window at the missile approaching the college building. Kevin pulls out his phone, hits the third speed dial and says:

“Hey, Jade? There’s a missile headed towards our school.”

Chapter End Notes

trivia:
dogs lick creatures they deem trustworthy
sacrificing kidneys to uni founders' statues is a common occurrence
Tony: Be Confused

Chapter Notes

be warned that i can't write fight scenes. just imagine that everything plays out like an awesome movie.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This is the…forty-seventh – definitely forty-seventh, he’s a genius, he doesn’t miscount – time Tony has reviewed the footage. Judging by the low quality, it’s shakily shot from a cellphone by someone who was in another building. Too far away for it to be from the Safehouse, so maybe one of the buildings surrounding the university that was featured in the video.

It’s only a minute and twelve seconds long, with plenty of screaming in the background. Actually, Tony’s a little more amazed by the fact that someone managed to whip out their phone and start filming instead of running for their lives, but yeah, this was commonplace nowadays. Not to mention it’s damn useful.

The video shows a missile – one that wasn’t shot down or redirected by the S.H.I.E.L.D fighterplanes – heading towards the university building. There are several screams of ‘ohmygod’ in the background with a couple more incoherent noises, and these get louder with the missile getting nearer fast. Tony can’t see any of the fighterplanes in the footage – too far away to react quickly, then.

The missile closes the gap and then –

And then…it’s gone.

The footage cuts to static for a brief moment and then the missile is gone and the university building is left standing unharmed. There’s a few seconds of silence from the video, and then a cut-off ‘holy shi – ’ when the footage ends.

He’d made JARVIS put together whatever could be salvaged from the frames right before the static, and there were about two frames of the missile’s tip being outlined by green light, and then one frame of greenish pixels mixing in with the static before the video cuts out for a few seconds. All the other footage from the traffic cameras yielded the same result.

He’s not saying it is, but it might be, and scientific possibilities and all that…

They hadn’t been able to wrap up negotiations quickly enough to fly over to New York for Steve’s predicted attack. By the time they’d arrived, it’d been almost half a day after and everyone was cleaning up whatever had to be cleaned up. And then, of course, there was the news of the missile disappearing when it was just about to decimate one of the local colleges.

(It isn’t the only one of course, but it’s the one the news focused on because a) cellphone footage immediately uploaded to the internet catches fire fast and b) a university was almost destroyed and if it had been, it would have been thousands of students dead – and if Tony wasn’t thinking about S.H.I.E.L.D still using some of his old creations, it’s for a reason very similar to this.)
He has about two hours before the debriefing with S.H.I.E.L.D, and unfortunately for them, aside from jumping on the table, gesturing wildly at the frozen frames and screaming, “Teleportation is real and I want to know how!”, they’re not going to get any answers. Unless he can manage to talk to Steve regarding the whole prediction thing, but the guy had split the moment they’d arrived in New York to try and help with the clean-up, and then after that, hadn’t shown up in Stark Tower and wouldn’t answer any of Tony’s phone calls.

Steve’s probably at the Safehouse. Tony has about two hours and…nah. Two hours wouldn’t even be enough for all the questions he has. Maybe after the debriefing, or maybe he can just ask Steve himself. Cap is sure to show up at the meeting.

Fury is going to be so on this.

[Calling…Jade Harley]

“Steve! You just got back from your mission?”

“Yeah, I…listen, I’m so sorry – ”

“Don’t worry, silly. I told you. We’d help out any way we could.”

“I know, but just…” A sigh.

“We’re fine, Steve. Don’t worry.”

“I’ll try. And I heard that wasn’t the only missile you stopped.”

“You mean the one headed towards the college? That was all over the news, wasn’t it? Yeah, there was a lot more. I got that one in time because Kevin called me and said there was a missile headed towards their college.”

“Kevin?”

“Uh, I think you remember him being called Palmer #2.”

“The one that got eaten?”

“Wha – pfft.” A few seconds of laughter. “Yeah, the one that got eaten. His brother was the one that predicted the attack. Anyway, he called and luckily, I was able to stop the missile. I was busy teleporting several others that the S.H.I.E.L.D planes didn’t get to.”

“Where’d you teleport them?”

“I kinda teleported them all to outer space? Far, far away in outer space. Furthest ring kind of far away. There’s only one cellphone vid of disappearing missiles, but I’m guessing S.H.I.E.L.D can hack into traffic cams. Still, I wonder how the one who shot the video actually had time for it.”

“You’re okay though?”

“Yeah, I’m fine! I got a little tired after the entire thing, but after a few snacks, I was okay.”

“Good.” Pause. “You know S.H.I.E.L.D’s going to be all over this, right?”
“I was helping! That shouldn’t be a crime.”

“I know, Jade, but – S.H.I.E.L.D likes to make sure they’ve got everything under control, and I can’t blame them. Not when we’re dealing with aliens or villains with abilities from their mutations or just geniuses who fell off the mark. They’re just as paranoid as you are, I guess.”

“I guess. But I don’t think any one of us wants to be leashed.”

“Tell me about it. Sometimes they give us very questionable missions and it’s just…it tires me out.”

“I’m sorry, Steve.”

“Heh. It’s okay.”

“…hey, Steve?”

“Yes?”

“Do you know anything about S.H.I.E.L.D taking mutant children?”

“What? No. I haven’t heard anything about that. They’re taking mutant children? Where?”

“I don’t know exactly. We’re not even sure if it’s S.H.I.E.L.D or some other organization but mutant children are being taken.” Pause. “From what we’ve heard even some older people are being taken. Maybe being studied. Maybe being weaponized. We don’t know. That’s exactly what we’re trying to avoid, you know.”

“I…I’ll try to find out what I can. Are you sure your sources are reliable?”

“Our sources are children who have seen their mutant friends taken.”

“Oh…god….”

“I…sorry. That was sudden.”

“No, it’s…it’s alright. It’s definitely something I need to look into.”

“Thanks, Steve. Be careful, okay? S.H.I.E.L.D’s not going to like you snooping into their files.”

“They really won’t. You be careful too.”

“I can teleport. Don’t worry! Take care.”

“Take care, Jade.”

[End Call]

There is absolutely no reason for the Safehouse to be suspected of the missiles disappearing, but Steve worries anyway. He doesn’t let it show during the meeting, but knowing Natasha and Barton, they probably noticed. Hopefully they just chalk it down to him feeling guilty over the fact that the Avengers weren’t around to save New York and someone else had to take up the task. If Nat and Clint hadn’t already been assigned to watching the Safehouse. But since the Safehouse was considered a neutral presence and Nat and Clint’s skills were better used in other missions (ones that
Steve had either joined in or heard of for the past few months), that was not likely either.

Tony is thankfully not looking at him too, instead just explaining the few frames he was able to let JARVIS put together. The most prominent ones are from the cellphone video of the university missile, since those are the clearest. The ones from the traffic cameras are too blurry, and most of the time, the cameras were placed too low to get optimum shots, although they still had green pixels in their images if they caught the edges of the flashes of light.

“The green stuff’s maybe file corruption? Gamma radiation? I’d say file corruption because have you tried getting your photos corrupted? There’s nasty black, green and pink pixels all around.” Tony was nattering on and on while gesturing wildly at the projection of a bad photo of the glowing missile. There were huge parts covered in black, with green pixels scattered all over the photo.

Steve hadn’t told Tony about the Safehouse directly. Since Pepper was the only person connected to the Avengers that knew about the Safehouse personally (and also refused to talk about the Safehouse in the presence of anyone affiliated with S.H.I.E.L.D since she’d learned that they wanted to detain the kids to try and make sure they weren’t threats), she was also the only person he could talk to about the Safehouse and Jade. He dropped by the Avengers tower early in the morning on days where most of the team wasn’t around. Tony had gotten lucky that he owned the tower and often dropped in on their conversations.

So far, he’d shown no interest in approaching the Safehouse, or if he did, quickly changed his mind, so they both figured it was safe to talk around him. Besides, if Tony tried anything funny, Pepper was a force to be reckoned with. And if Tony really wanted to try anything funny, he would have done it already. He could mobilize maybe every single piece of Stark tech. He’d explained it to Steve one day, when he was bored enough to drag the captain into his laboratory. Every single one of the devices had a back door, just in case Tony needed to do something. Maybe set up surveillance for the world’s biggest manhunt for the world’s most dangerous criminal. So far, no one had climbed up that list yet.

Tony had put together his own conclusions, and so far, he’d come to mostly-correct ones. Steve hadn’t confirmed or denied any of his questions. At least his ‘disinterest’ in approaching the Safehouse was still standing.

“So missiles are launched, pop out of existence, and nobody knows where they are?” Clint has leaned forward with his arms folded on the table, looking at the photos pulled up in front of them and then to the packet in front of him that had reports from the surviving S.H.I.E.L.D pilots about missiles from the enemy battleship disappearing before it could hit them, thus effectively saving their lives and helping them take down the threat. Steve had felt pride for Jade there, but had quickly stamped down the feeling so that it wouldn’t show. There’d be plenty of time to be proud later, when no one is present to be suspicious.

Tony stops his spiel to turn to Clint.

“Kinda sounds like a science fiction movie, if you ask me,” Clint says.

“I’m not saying it’s teleportation,” Tony says, putting his hands together and inclining his head downwards. Bruce raises an eyebrow at him. “Buuuut….it’s most likely teleportation.”

Clint slams a hand on the table with a triumphant, “Hell yeah!”

“S.H.I.E.L.D hasn’t developed teleportation weapons,” Bruce says. He swivels his chair to fully face Tony and gestures towards him. “You haven’t developed teleportation weapons.”
“I know. I know, Bruce, which is why this is something I want to figure out. I want every single footage of the attack from street cameras and cellphones and everything. We have to have missed something. I want everything.” Tony flaps his arms around at the ‘everything’ part. Natasha snorts.

“Footage, Natashalie,” Tony points at her. “I know I already have next to everything. I, however, do not have a teleporter and I want one. I want to know whatever caused this – ” He jabs an accusing finger at the clearest photo of the missile covered in green light “ – and I want to replicate the effect.”

Steve wonders what his reaction would be if he knew it was a young girl who did that.

“Okay, not to blow up Stark’s already massive head,” Clint starts. Tony makes a face at him. “But if he hasn’t made teleport-tech yet, then it might be safe to say no one in New York has made teleport-tech yet. I mean, who are we going to ask – Hammer?”

Tony snickers.

“Teleport-tech?” Bruce asks.

Clint turns to Fury. “Can I copyright that?”

The Director ignores him.

“Definitely not Hammer,” Tony says.

“Maybe someone else then,” Natasha says, “Hammer was able to recruit Vanko.”

Tony frowns. The mood in the room sours.

Bruce breaks the silence. “So, maybe it’s not teleport-tech,” he says, “Have we considered mutants? I mean, that missile looked pretty close to the college. It was probably someone there.”

Oh no.

“The one near the college wasn’t the first missile to go missing,” Natasha says.

“Let’s look for the first and try to see the area then. Mutants work better if they’re close to their target, right?” Bruce asks.

Tony opens his mouth to say something but Bruce points to him and cuts him off. “If it is a mutant, you are not conducting experiments.”

“I wasn’t going to,” Tony says. “I was going to just talk to them.”

Steve should probably call Jade again. Just to tell her that the Caribbean was looking nice this time of year.

“A mutant that can teleport things out of existence,” Director Fury says, looking at the photos.

“How sure are we that it’s teleportation?” Steve asks, finally. He wonders if everyone is taking note of his silence or if they’re just chalking it up to not knowing what on earth teleportation is. Speaking of which: “What is that, anyway?” Better keep up the act.

Tony launches into an explanation involving big words. This, Steve doesn’t understand, and Nat takes pity on him and turns to the Director.

“He does have a point,” Natasha says, “If we don’t know where the missiles went, how can we be
“Sure it’s teleportation?” She turns to Stark. “How did you come to the conclusion of teleportation?”

Tony glances at the photos again. “I know you’re suggesting these things are just getting sucked into…whatever that green light is, but we’d probably be able to detect some disturbance in space. You’re suggesting something akin to a localized black hole.”

“Which consumes all light and everything else in the vicinity,” Bruce says, “That would be noticeable.”

“So for something so huge to just break down into nothing, that would definitely make noticeable signs,” Tony says, “Safe option says teleportation.”

“But there are still other possibilities,” Natasha says. She leans back in her seat and crosses her arms. “I do agree with Dr. Banner. If it’s not tech, it might be a mutant. We should check the areas where the missiles went missing.”

Steve runs through the report in his head. There were no missiles near the Safehouse.

“We’ll run a search,” the Director says, “Find our mystery mutant.”

“What are you going to do when you find them?” Steve asks, turning to the Director. He catches a glimpse of Tony stiffening. Natasha looks at him, and then at Fury. Bruce fidgets.

“We make sure they aren’t a threat to humanity, Captain,” Fury says, “Snapping things from place to place sounds like something that could be incredibly dangerous.”

“And if they aren’t a threat?”

“We might ask them a few questions,” he says, “I’m sure Stark has questions.”

Tony gladly takes control of the conversation – he goes on and on about physics and space and molecules disappearing and reappearing. Steve loses him about three words in.

He really wishes he could trust S.H.I.E.L.D with his friends’ safety. He’s a little disappointed that he feels like he can’t.

“So how’d your friend know about the attack?” Tony asks, when he’s managed to convince Steve to stay in the Tower for a while. It’s a good time to talk since the others are all back at their homes and resting, with the exception of Natasha and Clint, who probably slept at S.H.I.E.L.D. Tony doesn’t know where they go when they’re not at the tower or on missions.

“You know, your psychic friend?” Tony adds when Steve stares at the open box of pizza on the kitchen island. Tony offers him a beer. He shakes his head. Tony shrugs and opens it to drink it himself.

“They’re not psychic,” Steve says, “They do have a psychic friend.”

“How does a mutation like that even work?” Tony asks, “Being able to just…see days into the future. I mean, nothing is set in stone.”

“It’s not a mutation,” Steve says.

Tony snorts. He points to himself. “Atheist.” Then at Steve. “Christian. And you’re telling me you believe in psychics? I thought there was a whole stigma against mediums and magic-users with your shtick.”
Steve raises an eyebrow.

“Summer camp my parents signed me on once,” Tony says and makes a nonchalant gesture, “I got bored.”

“Howard sent you to bible camp?”

“I think he was just trying to make sure I was somewhere he could find me while making me as uncomfortable as possible,” Tony says, “Two birds with one stone and all that.”

Steve snorts. He finally picks up a slice of pizza and eats it while Tony drinks down the rest of his beer and settles beside him. They sit in silence for a while before Steve talks again.

“Thor exists, and he…well, maybe he’s not an all-knowing deity, but to some extent he’s a god,” Steve says, “And some people are born with innate abilities due to them being mutants. I can believe in that enough. And like you said, there was an Old Testament rule about mediums and magic-users, although I suppose that’s null now, along with other things. But the fact that it’s mentioned means it’s real. That’s why I wasn’t surprised by Thor’s existence.”

“The bible’s big on not worshipping other gods.”

“Yeah, but it also hints that they do have abilities and that they exist,” Steve says, “That still means they’re real.”

Tony chuckles. “You know, a lot of people who believe in Jesus would crucify you for saying that.”

“I believe they’re real. It doesn’t mean I worship them. Just like how I know Thor’s real. It doesn’t mean I worship him.”

“Oh, man.” Tony snorts and runs a hand over his face. “That is not something I needed to hear. That is an awkward concept.”

Steve chuckles. “Yeah, it is.”

“Mm.” Tony says. He goes to get another bottle of beer and then sits back down beside Steve. “So, psychic friend. Really think it’s not a mutation?”

“It’s what I’ve been told and…well, judging from the anecdotes that have been shared with me, it doesn’t seem to function like a mutation,” Steve says, “Like you’ve said – nothing is fixed, so how is a genetic modification able to pick up an event in a timestream?”

“Big words. Have you been watching movies?”

He and Jade had gone to the movies a few times. He shrugs.

“So, let’s say they’re really psychic,” Tony says, “Do you think they can help tell who our mystery teleportation culprit is?”

Steve keeps his face passive as he says, “Tony, I think the psychic who warned us about the attack just sees events. I’ve never been told they could specifically track down people.” He pauses. “I think you want a witch.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Tony says, “Also, it’s been awkward trying to answer questions about how I knew to tell S.H.I.E.L.D to keep an eye on New York and pass it off as a ‘bad feeling’. It’s a good thing I’ve always known to go with my gut.”
“And are confident enough to play off the whole thing as really just a bad feeling. Thanks for that, by the way.”

“Eh. We’re superheroes now. It’s our job.” Tony takes a sip of beer. “You ever going to introduce me to your friend, by the way? Even Pepper’s pretty tight-lipped about the Safehouse.”

“I think my friend will tell me when I can introduce you to them, Tony,” Steve says, “They’re paranoid with S.H.I.E.L.D being so vague about what they do to mutants.”

Tony winces. “You know, if it is a mutant behind the missing missiles, I would just ask questions, and maybe run a few tests, but I wouldn’t cut them open.” Steve watches as Tony’s free hand comes up to rub at his chest, fingers grazing the light of the arc reactor. The man doesn’t seem to be aware of the action, instead just looking past the island, and the box of pizza, and even then, farther. “I wouldn’t do that.”

Steve nods. “I know you wouldn’t, Tony,” he says, “But we’re not sure S.H.I.E.L.D wouldn’t.”

“I just realize you’ve never met Cecil.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, he’s – he’s the one that told me about New York getting attacked so I could warn you.”

“Oh, uh. Thank him? I mean, I got to warn Tony too, and he tried to wrap up our negotiations quickly, but he wasn’t able to, so he just called S.H.I.E.L.D and said he had a bad feeling. Or something. That’s what he told me.”

“It’s good that he did that. Cecil says you’re welcome…aaaand Kevin says not to believe the weather forecast and bring an umbrella the whole day tomorrow. Wear a coat if you can. Maybe boots if you wanna avoid puddles.”

“Kevin? The one that got eaten, right?”

Burst of laughter. “Yeah. I’m never going to get tired of that.”

“Kevin is…Cecil’s brother? I think Pepper mentioned something like that. He’s psychic too?”

“Yup! They’re both psychic, but it’s really funny because Cecil can warn us about bad visions but Kevin sees…visions about discounts or faulty items or misleading weather forecasts. Rose calls him the discount oracle.”

“That’s useful, at least.”

“Heh. It is!”

“Listen, um, we just had a debriefing a few hours ago and I think you need to know a few things. Can we go to Sunny’s tomorrow?”

“Sure, what time?”

“Does Kevin know when it’ll stop raining?”

“Hang on…no, he says, it’s a whole day storm. It’s going to start tonight at eleven, and it’ll end
tomorrow at ten in the evening.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. He’s really adamant about umbrellas, coats and boots.”

“It’s alright. That’s perfect, actually. Less eyes in the rain.”

“Mm-hmm. And you’ll be the only one to get wet since I can teleport.”

“That’s unfair!”

This is what happens:

DAY OF ATTACK; 6:12 a.m.

Jade Harley wakes up. She doesn’t know exactly why she’s awake, but she is, and it’s not the sort of waking up that one associates with early morning – the sort that involves being half-asleep and half-awake, but mostly just asleep. She’s alert and awake, and her ears are perked up, and there’s a distinct sense of…wrongness in the room. It’s not permeating, but it’s like there was something Wrong that just dropped in, and it left a mark. But it’s fading, and it’s fading fast.

The feeling of wrongness doesn’t feel dangerous though, it just feels out of place. Out of place does not immediately mean dangerous. There is a distinction.

And besides, that feeling of wrongness tickles a memory. A very far away memory, but it’s there.

Another sense of wrong is that she feels something on her desk that wasn’t there the night before. She’s well acquainted with her room, and it’s practically instinct now to just let her spacey-thing take over to scan the area and know if there’s anything out of place.

Maybe that’s what feels off, the fact that something was here and she didn’t sense it.

Further wardings, then. Maybe call for a War Council. Loki is home, right?

She turns over to face her desk, and there it is, the thing that wasn’t there the night before. She makes a gesture and the thing disappears in a flash of green light, then reappears in her hand. She spreads it out above her, squinting.

Then she clicks her tongue as she realizes she’s forgotten her glasses. She glances at them from where they’re on the desk, and they teleport onto her face. Better. She turns back to the paper and…it’s also dim. Jade blinks, and the paper is illuminated in green from the glow of her eyes. First Guardian-inherited powers are nifty.

The piece of paper she’s holding turns out to be a map. Or, more specifically, a shot of New York from Google Maps that’s printed out on a long bondpaper. Huh.

On the very top of the page, in the unprinted margin, the word MISSILES is written in dark green ink. And then there are thick red X’s all over the map, made in chalk.

Oh, right. Cecil had predicted that there would be an attack today. Maybe he’d gotten another vision, and then marked it out on paper…then maybe Loki had tried to give the map to Jade, but she was
already asleep? So he just skywalked in, left it on her desk and then went out? Probably. Nothing to worry about then, if that was the case.

Jade sits up and adjusts her glasses as she places the map on her lap, careful not to wipe the red chalk out. The light from her eyes shifts for a bit. She looks at the areas – they’re all accessible, of course, but if she’s going to help she’ll be seen, which means invisibility spell. Loki’s been teaching them magic, but Rose is the best at invisibility spells.

She squints at one of the marks. That’s – oh dear. That’s Cecil and Kevin’s college. And…the pool master’s best friend’s. She forgot his name again. The pool master had shifted programs, Jade remembers. Right after they’d gotten back from whatever family thing they had to take care of, they’d changed their course, so that means they’d be in the police academy instead of the college, and the academy isn’t marked.

There were a lot of missiles. She could probably ask for Loki and John’s help, except John doesn’t really know how to teleport things, only himself. Loki, then.

This was going to quite a day.

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**DAY OF ATTACK; 10:28 a.m.**

Loki is home, which is nice, and he’s tired enough to give up dressing up in layers (if he’s not in a trenchcoat, he’s in a leather jacket, even during hot days) that he’s just wearing a sweater and pants. Good for him, finally getting the hang of dressing up like he’s a native Midgardian. That’s the term, right?

The dogs greet him by attempting to pile on him, but since he’s built sturdier than humans, he doesn’t topple over, and instead just pats everyone on the head before going to wash his hands for breakfast. The Palmers (plus pool master and best friend) are at school already, but everyone else (save Rose, who is still with James) are at the Safehouse. Today is the predicted day of attack after all, and if they needed all hands on deck with most of the Avengers out of town, then it would be all hands on deck.

“We don’t need to draw it out and cause a fuss. We just need to get rid of the threat,” Loki says, “If we cause a fuss, heads will turn.”

“And not in the morbid way,” John mutters.

Dave snickers. Jade smiles.

“Did you leave me the map?” Jade asks.

Loki stops cutting up a pancake to turn to her. She motions towards the direction of her room.

“I woke up and found a map – well, a shot of New York from Google Maps printed on a long bondpaper – on my desk. It had the word MISSILES written on it, and then there were marks on it,” Jade said, “I think they’re where the missiles are going to hit.”

“I didn’t leave you a map,” Loki says, “And I wouldn’t skywalk into your room while you were sleeping.”

Jade shrugs. She goes through her sylladex and selects the map. It appears in her hand, folded. “The X marks are in chalk, so be careful not to get any on your food,” she says as she hands it over to
Loki. He nods and pushes his plate away as he opens the map up.

“Maybe it’s future Dave?” John asks.

Dave lifts a shoulder. “Well, I’m not sensing any loops that need to be closed.”

“It’s not Dave’s handwriting,” Loki says, “Although it is familiar.”

“Do you know whose it is?” Jade asks.

“I might. I’m not sure.”

Dave leans back in his seat. “This is getting serious then.”

“I’m not infallible, Strider,” Loki says, giving him a sigh. “I recognize it, I just need to know how it got here. And why its owner knows where the missiles are all going to hit, if that is the case.”

“It might be. We have to consider it. They’re missiles,” Jade says, “And one of them is headed towards the Palmers’ college.”

Loki stills. Dave and John turn to Jade. Even Mr. G, who is silently eating, pauses.

“I can teleport them all out to space,” Jade says, “Maybe the same place where I dropped that Hydra base.”

“That’d serve them right, actually,” John says.

“I just have to be invisible. I can do it,” Jade says.

Loki looks back down the map. He nods after a while. “Strider and Egbert will stay here. You and I are going out. If this map is correct, then it’ll be of help. Make another copy of this.” He folds it again and hands it back to Jade.

“You don’t think it’s a trap?” Dave asks.

“If I recognize the handwriting and it is who I suspect it is, I highly doubt it,” Loki says, “This place might be a homing beacon for völur.”

“Another psychic?”

“Wow,” John mutters.

“You humans have an affinity for breeding Seers,” Loki says, “Other than attempting to gain our trust, I don’t think there’s anything suspicious about leaving a map with predicted attack sites.” He pauses. “And perhaps we can use this to plant trust in places.”

“And we can use it to our advantage,” Dave says, “Might as well use what we get, right?”

Loki nods. “Rest, Jade. We’ll hear of when the attack starts soon enough. In a city this loud, news travels incredibly fast.”

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**DAY OF ATTACK; 2:02 p.m.**
“I know you’re there, Jade,” John says. Another vase tips over. He lunges a hand forward and wind rights the precious ceramic up before it can fall.

The dogs watch the vase, which appears to have moved by itself, with suspicion. Jade’s laugh comes from the empty space beside it.

Loki had woven an invisibility spell around her not less than ten minutes ago, ever since the news of fast-approaching aircrafts headed towards New York had interrupted a usual noontime show. The ships aren’t here yet, and S.H.I.E.L.D is already on the move, so Loki doesn’t want Jade tiring herself out with teleporting all over the city and both of them are still in the house. They’ll go out when the ships are close enough.

So instead, Jade is going around the Safehouse trying to tip over vases or precious objects while John is in the vicinity, just to see if he could catch them in time. The dogs are rather interested, although several of them had started ‘boof’ing already.

On cue, Buster boofs.

Jade giggles.

John keeps an eye around the room, focused. The entire Safehouse is strangely quiet, actually, except for the television in the common room that’s on so that Jade and Loki can know when to head out, and for Loki and Mr. G’s low voices in the kitchen, since Loki had pulled him aside to talk about the map once his copy had been given to him.

It’s like everyone’s just…waiting.

A picture frame starts to tilt. John launches from where he’s standing and grabs onto it to right it, then swats at empty air. He hits nothing. Jade’s laugh rapidly moves further away.

“Hey! I almost got you,” John says.

“But you didn’t,” Jade says, sounding like she’s on the other side of the room.

John bursts into wind and whips around the room, searching. The dogs bark at the sudden breeze, although Moxie wags her tail stump excitedly.

“Hey!” Jade squeals, “You’re cheating.”

John reforms right in front where she’s supposed to be. “Nope. Just using my windy powers.”

“Still cheating.”

“You have space powers too.”

“…okay I might have teleported once or twice.”

“Hah!” John laughs. Then he blinks and turns towards the window.

He tilts his head curiously.

“What is it?” Jade asks.

“Just a bad feeling,” John says, “I’ve been getting those lately. It’s like – you know, like there’s something out of place?”
“Yeah,” Jade says, “I felt that this morning too. When I got the map.”

“Do you think it’s dangerous?” John asks as he floats towards the window. He presses his fingertips on the glass. Storms.

“Not…really?” Jade says. Her voice gets closer, and John thinks she’s right beside him now. “It’s doesn’t feel dangerous. It just feels off, I guess.”

“Do you think it’s something more?” John asks. “Like…” He pauses, then. “The Condescension?”

Jade whips her head so fast John can feel the disturbance in the wind. “No,” she says. “She can’t follow us here. We don’t even know where here is.”

“It’s Earth,” John says, “It’s another timeline, maybe. When the game hasn’t been played yet.”

“There is no game. Rose said that. She can’t See anything about it.”

“There’s always a game,” John says, “It’s how the universe starts life again. It’s a story. It’s a fucking game. And it goes on and on and it never fucking stops.”

John closes his eyes and takes in a deep breath. He lets it out slowly and uncurls his fingers – he hadn’t even noticed he’d curled them into fists. “I’m sorry. I’m not usually like this,” he says.

There’s silence for a while. Then: “It’s okay,” Jade says, “…I nodded, but I forgot you couldn’t see me.”

John snorts before he dissolves into flat-out laughing.

DAY OF ATTACK; 3:14 p.m.

The good thing about spells made out of runes is that they can be tweaked, and so even though no one else can see Jade or Loki, they can see each other, and each of them have their phones and their copies of the missile map with them as they step out of the Safehouse. The aircrafts are close now, and the fighting with S.H.I.E.L.D planes has begun. People are already stopping by the Safehouse and John and the others are helping them in.

Loki and Jade decide to each take a half of the missile-teleporting work, dividing New York among themselves and keeping an eye out for whenever there are missiles that aren’t on the map.

Jade flies around rooftops idly as she watches S.H.I.E.L.D fighterplanes go up against the huge, ugly grey ships that are launching its own fighterplanes at them. They have discussed just getting rid of the ships themselves, but with S.H.I.E.L.D already on alert, it was best to just let them take down the enemy while the Safehouse crew made sure there weren’t any unnecessary damages.

Like three of their friends being blown up to bits.

S.H.I.E.L.D looks like they’ve got the fight so far, but Jade looks down at her map – Loki made it so that anything Jade is touching would turn invisible, which is why she’s trying hard not to actually land on any buildings – and refreshes her memory on her part of New York. One of the missiles is headed towards the animal shelter. Her ears flatten. Another is headed towards a bridge, probably one where the homeless kids used to sleep under.
DAY OF ATTACK; 4:04 p.m.

The first missile is launched. It’s headed towards an apartment building.

The thing is huge, and with the map Jade’s been given, it’s not that hard to calculate exactly where it’s going, when one of S.H.I.E.L.D’s planes evades it, but forgets that it’s headed towards a populated area.

Jade teleports right above the building it’s headed towards, and the sudden increase in screams near her disoriente her for a few seconds, her ears flicking back sharply. She forgets how some people take time before they can get to the Safehouse. Some even don’t manage to arrive. The Safehouse crew can protect those under their roof, but those still outside are fair game for collateral damage.

Jade concentrates and holds out a hand towards the missile. She’s shrunken planets down before. She can get rid of one little nuke.

The missile’s tip starts to glow in green, and then the green spreads – faster, faster – and there’s a blinding flash of green light –

The missile is gone.

The screams below Jade drop to stunned silence considerably, and Jade looks at her outstretched hand for a minute before a grin breaks out her face.

“What the fuck?” She hears someone yell below her, but she’s too busy grinning, elated. This felt good. She hasn’t used her powers so extensively in so long, and the last time she did, she was hellbent on capturing her brother – but nevermind that, this felt good. To be helping people.

And not only that, the map is right. That’s one missile in her area down.

There’s another flash of green in the distance. She looks towards it. Loki, then, down by one of the bridges marked on the map. That’s two.

“Holy fuck, did you see that?”

Jade takes in a deep breath as she turns her focus on the fight. She’s still got about twenty-seven missiles on her part to go. She has to keep watch.

S.H.I.E.L.D’s fighterplanes are getting shot down now. Jade shifts nervously and takes out her phone to dial Loki, who immediately answers.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, yeah,” Jade says, “I was just wondering if we could teleport the missiles hitting the S.H.I.E.L.D planes too? I mean, it’ll be a problem if they were all wiped out.”

Loki takes a few seconds to answer. “When you have time to, you can take them out, but your primary focus is to make sure none of the areas marked on the map are hit.”

Another missile disappears in a flash on Loki’s end.
“I should probably end the call now. Be careful.”

“Be careful as well.”

A S.H.I.E.L.D fighterplane flies fast towards one of the grey ships – a smaller nuke is fired at it, and it’s going too fast to swerve.

Jade holds out a hand again and snaps her fingers. The missile disappears – and reappears right under the grey ship’s hull, flying straight into it. There’s a loud explosion as the ship starts to list.

There’s frantic firing from the grey ship now. Three S.H.I.E.L.D fighterplanes intercept most of the missiles, but four of them are headed towards Jade’s area. She sees immediately where they’re headed towards: animal shelter, two residential buildings and a dance studio.

Oh. So that’s why there’s an area in the map where the missiles clustered closely. Whoops.

Jade flies over, wind whipping her hair back and she lets the nukes be covered in green light, disappearing in flashes one after another, her magic getting easier to channel with each burst, even with the size of the things she’s teleporting. Twenty-one missiles to go.

There’s an explosion as a S.H.I.E.L.D plane goes down. A missile whizzes past it. It’s headed towards Jade’s assigned bridge.

She snaps her fingers again. The projectile disappears from its trajectory and reappears to destroy the head of the grey ship instead. Twenty.

Her next targets are in succession again, three of them, failing to hit one S.H.I.E.L.D plane and instead moving towards one of the streets. Jade makes them all reappear to destroy one of the grey ships, enough to make it start falling down towards the city.

Jade blanches.

“Shit.”

Jade holds out her hands and sticks out her forefingers and thumbs, positioning them into a rectangle. She focuses as she brings her hands closer, the enemy battleship shrinking down in time with her fingers getting closer. As she shrinks it down, she moves her hands to the side, and the ship moves with it, in the direction of the harbor.

A few ways off, a S.H.I.E.L.D plane fires at an enemy plane. The enemy plane evades, and the missiles continue on their merry way towards –

Jade breaks her concentration and the falling enemy ship she’s shrinking stops getting smaller.

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**DAY OF ATTACK; 4:13 p.m.**

Jade already has a hand outstretched towards the university when she uses the other one to answer her phone. On the other line, Kevin sounds ridiculously calm as he says, “Hey, Jade? There’s a missile headed towards our school.”

In her anxiety, it takes a second later for the missile to be swallowed in green light, but she does it, and when it disappears, looking like it’s a hair’s width away from the university, the green flash is so
bright, Jade has to close her eyes.

When she opens them, she thinks she can see green sparks climbing the nearby buildings and the powerlines. She lowers her phone. The screen is black.

Sixteen.

Jade stuffs her phone in her pockets and takes a deep breath. She’s getting a little lightheaded, but she’s fine. She turns towards the harbor, the significantly smaller grey battleship is being slowly pushed towards it, although it’s not falling as fast as it should be, and instead moves like it’s being cradled. She frowns in confusion before she sees the moving sails of the nearby boats.

John. She grins as she focuses back on her task.

Two more evaded misfires from a S.H.I.E.L.D fighterplane. Jade adjusts her glasses and turns towards them. Sixteen more to go. She’s gone through tougher.

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**DAY OF ATTACK; 4:20 p.m.**

“Floor it. Floor it. Floor it!”

The car screeches as it pulls out of park and immediately drives into the road, joining the rest of the panicked population that’s driving down towards the Safehouse, completely ignoring traffic rules.

The Palmers have been in school during attacks before, but they’ve never had a missile stare them in the face, so it’s no surprise that the brothers are holding each other, and Cecil is yelling at Saph (not the pool master, because only the others forget Saph and Ruben’s names, which is funny, because most people forget Cecil and Kevin’s names, except for these two and the Safehouse crew) to go faster. The speedometer is already at seventy and rising.

Kevin sticks out a hand to brace against the car door when Saph suddenly swerves to the left, turning into an alley and crashing through a chainlink gate instead of continuing down the road.

“What are you doing?!”

Cecil’s not sure who’s yelling now, holding onto his brother as tightly as humanly possible, and Cecil’s always suspected he was slightly more than human, so it was probably impossibly tight. It’s a miracle Kevin hasn’t shoved him off.

Behind them, where the main road is, there’s an increase of screams, and then a suddenly flash of green light. Missile, then.

“*Fucker,*” Kevin hisses. “That was close.”

“Okay, Saph, I’m concerned about several things right now!” Ruben screams from where he’s flattened against the passenger seat, holding tightly onto the handle beside his car door.

“Like what?” Saph turns sharply again, and everyone leans to the right. Kevin hits the car with an “*Oof!*”

“Do you fucking know where we’re going?” Kevin yells.

“*Home!*”
“We’re crashing –” On cue, several trash cans go flying and nearly take out the thankfully silent siren on top of the car “– through the alley!”

“Missiles are going to hit the road. It’s congested in traffic right now.”

“And despite that, we’re going to get killed by trashcans.”

“We’re in a fucking police car, they’re somewhat sturdy.”

“Go back to the main road!”

Another swerve. This time it’s Cecil who hits the car door while Kevin awkwardly leans against him.


“No.”

They’re exiting an alley now, the road is miraculously clear of speeding cars, and the speedometer is reading ninety.

Kevin puts a hand to his head and winces before yelling, “Fuck. Stop!”

Saph hits the brakes immediately. Ruben flattens himself further against his seat and pushes his body sideways to avoid hitting the dashboard. Saph slams their hands beside the wheel to avoid hitting it.

A speeding red Prius passes in front of them the moment they stop.

Everyone breathes a sigh of relief.

“Hell,” Kevin mutters as he rights himself and sag against the backseat, hands still holding onto Cecil’s sweater.

“Okay, a car with a bunch of clairvoyants, and we’re still going to die,” Ruben says. Beside him, Saph mutters, “There’s just two and they’re in the backseat.”

Ruben points to them and says, “Shut it. We need to stop arguing and we need to get home. Use that lucky precognition of yours, Palmer.”

Cecil blinks blearily. “Which one?”

“Kevin. He’s the luck magnet. And you –” Ruben points to Saph. “What’s the quickest way home that doesn’t get us killed?”

Saph is silent for a moment. “Alley, one turn back,” they say, “They’re tight fits, but the squad car’s small enough to be able to drive through. It’ll chip paint of course.”

“We’ll go there then. Saph’s right. The main roads are going to be exposed to whatever falling debris that’s going to come out of the fight.” Ruben sighs. “Let’s just get home.”

Saph puts the car in reverse and makes one backwards turn until they’re facing the alley that’s supposed to be the fastest way back to the Safehouse. Kevin groans.

It’s certainly a tight fit, and there’s one dumpster, several trashcans, a couple of clotheslines with still-drying clothes and one chainlink fence. And another turn ahead.
“Through there?” Kevin asks.

Saph grins in the rearview mirror. “What’s the matter, Kevin? Never taken a shortcut before?”

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**DAY OF ATTACK; 4:25 p.m.**

Two more to go. Jade breathes heavily from where she’s hovering, trying incredibly hard not to touch her feet onto the building she’s directly above. Thankfully, there are only two missiles to go, and even if she’s getting a little tired, she’s still got enough mojo to take out two more nukes.

The S.H.I.E.L.D planes don’t look like they’re doing too hot though, and Jade’s been trying to help by rerouting misfires towards the enemy battleships. They’ve taken out two out of three so far, but the last one is doing incredible damage to the last of S.H.I.E.L.D’s force.

Another evaded missile. Jade swipes a hand to the side. The missile disappears and collides with the enemy battleship when it pops back into space. Jade laughs.

Her phone is still kaput, probably from the earlier burst of panic and power, so she can’t call Loki – she’s half-tempted to teleport the entire enemy battleship out of here, but then that would mean that S.H.I.E.L.D would be looking for her and wherever this battleship came from would also be looking for her. It was, like Loki said, best if they let both the enemy and S.H.I.E.L.D think that S.H.I.E.L.D defeated the adversary, and if they notice missiles disappearing, well, the enemy will think it’s the Avengers, and S.H.I.E.L.D will think they have an ally.

Anyway, one more missile to go. And Jade really wants to stop flying.

The battleship fires, a plane evades. Jade makes the projectile hit the ship again. She grins. She’s done.

She looks at one of the fighterplanes that’s managed to weave through the firefight and is getting closer to the battleship, blowing holes into its side.

Jade closes her eyes and teleports herself onto the fighterplane, nearly slipping, but she manages to hold onto it. The pilot looks up, startled, but he can’t see her, so he spends a few seconds being confused before turning back towards the battleship and firing again.

She rests her head against the glass that encases the pilot in the plane, breathing hard, and hoping the pilot doesn’t hear her. He probably doesn’t. She startles when there’s a hand on her shoulder.

Loki is crouching beside her, one hand holding onto one nook on the plane.

“You look like you’re about to faint,” he says.

“I haven’t teleported so many things in so long,” she says, “I’ve shrunken down planets, sure, but so many missiles towards so far away. It’s tiring. I didn’t have practice. Not the distance, at least.”

He looks at her curiously at that, and Jade remembers she hasn’t told him she’s still got their SBURB planets with her.

“We need to get out of here,” Loki says, “You’ve lent him invisibility long enough, but they’ll notice where the missiles are being fired from soon.”
Jade nods. In the next blink, she’s standing beside a street lined up with cars. She recognizes the area quickly. They’re near the Safehouse. She lists forward, but Loki catches her by the arm.

“Careful,” he says. Jade nods again, sleepy, and doesn’t protest when she’s being lifted from the ground. She buries her face in Loki’s neck – it’s cold – and feels him stiffen, but he lets her wrap her arms around him as he carries her.

Sometimes she forgets she’s still stuck in her thirteen-year-old body.

“You did well,” Loki says as he starts to walk. Jade nods. She’s so tired. But yeah, he’s right. She did great. The expending of power was sudden, which is probably why she’s so conked out, but she did great.

She lets Loki carry her home.

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**DAY OF ATTACK; 4:27 p.m.**

Dave, who is on guard duty, takes off his aviators in disbelief when he hears loud sirens getting closer towards the Safehouse. He watches the police car – and yup, there’s the sirens, although the blue one is busted – come to a screeching halt in front of the building, narrowly avoiding slamming into one of the other cars parked along the Safehouse by a hair’s width.

Seconds later, Palmers #1 and #2 come out of the backseat, and then Pool Master’s Best Friend comes out of the passenger seat. They all look like they’re about to hurl. Pool Master comes out of the driver’s seat after them, glancing once at the beat-up car before following their friends up to the front door.

“Oh, holy fuck,” Dave says.

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Chapter End Notes

can you tell that damage in superhero movies (especially evaded bullets/missiles/firepower) gives me anxiety
A Day in the Life of James Buchanan Barnes

Chapter Notes

sad buck man + dogs

The first thing James Barnes does when he wakes up every morning is remember.

It’s exactly what it sounds like. He sifts through memories and tries to say out loud what he remembers and knows to be true: he looks at the clock hung on the wall and recites the time; he is in India, he was used as a weapon by some Nazi organization that wiped his memories, he was born on March 10, 1917, he was in the Howling Commandos decades ago, he is alive right now because of cryostasis, the girl who is the only other person who stays in the bunker with him is named Rose Lalonde.

His name is James Buchanan Barnes.

Somehow, only very few of those ‘facts’ fit. Or feel like they fit.

He moves to massage the headache building on the bridge of his nose and startles when coldcoldcold

Oh, right. And he has a metal arm.

They’d told him that what they did to him on such short notice was wipe out the trigger of his brainwashing – they were using words, the one with the really green eyes said; James had never seen such green eyes before – words which, in a certain order, could easily make him pliant or whichever, because his brain was conditioned to respond to it that way. Further treatment needed time and study, because Loki didn’t really have experience mending a broken human mind, and Rose was a Seer (whatever that was), not a Sylph, as she’d put it.

She’d gone awfully silent after that.

So now he’s in India, and he rarely goes out (neither does Rose), because he’s not a very good speaker (he rarely talks, really) and having a huge metal arm with a stupid red star on it catches people’s attention. The great thing about their house is that no one else can see it and they completely ignore the stark empty space, like their eyes just naturally drift over it. On the very rare times James goes outside, he looks away from it too, attention sliding over it so easily that Rose has to guide him inside again.

He pads around the house barefoot. It’s cold in the mornings, but that chill is easily leeched by the heat outside once the sun’s come up.

He likes walking around the house. It’s quiet, and sometimes the simplest thing can trigger a memory. While Loki and Rose hadn’t been able to fully restore his memories (and that probably would have been bad, because decades’ worth of memories suddenly dumped on a person sounded horrifying), they’d given him history books and Hydra’s files so he could read up and recover them on his own pace. Easier and safer that way.

Every now and then, one of the buck-toothed kids drop by to bring him newspapers. Usually it’s the
girl with the…dog ears. Jade Harley, he thinks is her name? Recently the blue-eyed one had been visiting more often, bringing dogs. James’d liked the dogs well enough.

The one named Rover kept licking him.

Both of them (actually, counting Loki, three) had a habit of just being able to disappear in a flash of light. James had taken a while to adjust at first, but with reading the articles on the Avengers and mutants and everything, he’d figured the future is weird and he’d survive better if he just went with the flow.

Rose is helping at least, and so do the fuzzy memories of him being outside and watching as the world evolved (although mostly these memories consisted of him shooting/maiming/stabbing/braining/killing someone, and it’s not comforting that he feels a sort of detachment when these memories pop up, like they don’t quite feel like it’s him, like he’s outside his body and he’s just…watching as this happens).

There’s a newspaper on the desk beside the bookshelf. It has a sticky-note that says: good morning!!! :D

Jade, then. Bucky folds the note and puts it in the pocket of his pajamas. He’ll forget about it. He always does. He picks up the newspaper, finds a window to get some heat and light, and sits down to read.

Rose starts humming in the kitchen about thirty minutes later. She always moves so silently, something that had unnerved him at first, but then he’d noticed that all five of them, whoever they were that took him out of that Hydra base, moved quietly – unless it was John Egbert, and the boy particularly made an effort to make noises because he usually hovered and flew instead of walked.

He’d thought, Soldiers, and wondered why he thought that.

“James,” Rose calls out when the kitchen door opens. James thinks it’s for his benefit, although he’s not against the scent of food wafting through the air. “Breakfast is ready.”

He nods, folds his newspaper and leaves it in one of the squares of light made from the sunrise outside of the window.

He collects articles and photographs of things he recognizes. They’re all stuffed inside the top drawer of his dresser, and once that drawer’s full, he’s going to move on to the one below it, and then the one below it, and on and on until his desk drawers are filled with clippings. Once they are, he’s going to ask Rose for another desk.

He doesn’t pin them up. They make him uncomfortable. He doesn’t tell Rose about what he’s doing but she doesn’t ask when he hands back a magazine or a newspaper with a few squares missing.

He doesn’t look at them all the time either, but when he…starts to forget, he looks at them. His memories are delicate, and he has a hard time focusing on them and actually trying to focus on them just makes them harder to hold on to, and he gives himself a headache instead. Also, sometimes, he forgets what, where and who he is and just feels like he’s…floating.

He can be standing in his room, but somehow, he’s not. He can’t feel it. It’s like he’s just looking from outside a window, and whatever’s standing in the room is not really him. He even forgets it’s his room. It takes him a while to reconcile his space and time with his mind, and even then, it doesn’t
really feel right. It’s like he’s just going through the motions and waiting for all of this to play out, and once it does, he’s going to go home. Except there’s nothing for him to wait on, and there’s nothing that needs to play out, and he’s already home – well, what passes for it.

Looking at the photos doesn’t actually do anything for his dissociating, except for the fact that he’s dissociating while looking at the photos, but they remind him that he’s trying. So he keeps them.

He cuts out a photo of a dog from the newspaper – something about the tiny thing winning awards – and places it on top of a neat stack of clippings. Now that he’s looking at his top drawer, it does look like it’s five clippings away from being full. He’ll need to move on to the lower drawer soon.

He moves to close the top drawer and then stops, pulling it out to look at the monochrome photo of the dog again. The name of the breed sits at the tip of his tongue – and isn’t that pathetic, that his head is so broken he’s forgotten what dogs are called? He’ll ask John or Jade when they visit again, if they visit again. James won’t be surprised if they don’t, and he won’t be too bothered either.

He slides the drawer close and lies down on his bed until his vision blurs and his eyes cross from staring at the ceiling, unblinking. Then he goes out and wanders around the house, touching tables and trinkets on shelves, trying to name them all, feeling their surface with his human hand, and then with his metal one, trying to ignore the thoughts of sixty ways he could turn an object into a weapon, and instead just focusing on the difference of touching a thing with his real hand and the metal one. The metal one can barely feel anything, and if he wanted to, he could use it crush anything he can get between his fingers.

Except Rose would probably be mad at him for it. He finds he’s not too keen on that happening. So he doesn’t. He goes around the house, trying to ground himself, and he’s not really surprised when he still feels like he’s floating at the end of the day.

It’s been a while since the others have visited, and James really isn’t too surprised. Most of them are children after all – mutant, superpowered children, but children still, and a spy with a killcount higher than what most people recruited by shady agencies can rack up is something that screams danger.

Children go two ways – come running at danger expecting to come out unscathed and screaming in terror when it turns out danger is danger for a reason, or run as fast as their legs can carry them away from danger because they’ve been blessed with at least two working brain cells.

Rose might be a rare, third type: babysitting danger while fully equipped to kick its ass. James has seen those wickedly sharp knitting needles she carries with her, and has seen her write violet runes in the air and do magic.

When Rose receives a call from John, James does pause eating long enough to listen. Rose excuses herself to answer the call, and in a show of trust, she doesn’t get out of the room. James knows what she’s doing, trying to show him they’re not another Hydra hellbent on using him, trying to show him they’re not holding secret meetings or whatever, planning to dissect his brain and turn him into a machine again.

He appreciates it. Or feels like he should. Appreciation is protocol for something like this; he just wants to feel that appreciation in its fullest instead of feeling a duller, washed-out version of it. Maybe the real thing is underneath his skin. He just needs to claw it out.

“Hello, John.”
“Hiya!” Oh, the phone is on loudspeaker. “So, um, remember when we told you about the predicted attack in New York?”

“Mm-hmm. That should have been yesterday, yes?”

Another thing with these kids – they had psychics, apparently. With the weirdness of everything, James found it better to just accept revelations as they went. Fewer headaches that way.

“It was. And Jade’s phone is dead. I think she expended too much space magic plus First Guardian powers, and the burst of power killed it.”

“Really?” Rose raises an eyebrow. “I don’t recall that ever happening before.”

“Oh, she can get like that when she’s really bent on doing something.” John laughs for a bit. “I remember when she was still under the Batterwitch’s control – she was...I don’t know the word, grimbark? We used to have a joke term for it. But, yeah, she can get really scary with the First Guardian powers. Green sparks and everything.”

“Is she alright?”

“She fell asleep on the way home and wouldn’t let go of Loki – ”

A new, fainter voice comes from the background. It sounded like that one kid in shades that James had seen only once or twice. “We had fifteen minutes of awkward Norse god.”

Another burst of laughter from John. Rose smiles, amused.

“But we managed to get her off and got her food. She was okay right after.”

“That’s good,” Rose says

“She’s getting a new phone soon. She needed to call Steve, she said,” John says, “How’s James?”

James looks at the phone as Rose turns to him.

“Well, he’s eating breakfast now,” Rose says. “He can hear you.”

“Oh! How are you, James?”

James is silent for a moment before lifting a shoulder. He goes back to eating, finally.

Rose chuckles. “Shrug.”

“Ah, well, we’ll probably visit again soon, once we’re done cleaning up here and Jade’s got a new phone and contacted Captain America again.”

“We’ll be waiting,” Rose says.

“We’ll be bringing the dogs again!”

James finds something stirring in his chest at that. Excitement, maybe. Duller, paler, but it’s something. The dogs are good. The dogs are nice. The dogs are soft. He can show John and Jade that photo of the dog from the newspaper and ask them what it is. He’s never seen a dog like that with them.
“So, Steve showed up the house, and he looked like he’d run the distance from whatever airport he’d landed on to the Safehouse,” Jade says, “He didn’t come inside and we just talked, and I gave him the new number, and then he went to help with clean-up. I stayed at home because I was exhausted.”

James is currently sitting on the floor, and his legs are dead because about twelve dogs have decided they’re perfect for sleeping on. Moxie, John’s little…corgi? He thinks she’s a corgi. Moxie is sitting on his lap, content with him running his fingers – actual human fingers – through her fur.

John, from where he’s hovering cross-legged beside the couch where Jade and Rose are sitting and talking, looks at James at the name ‘Steve’, like it’s supposed to mean something to him. Nothing scratches at the walls of his mind, nothing twinges in his chest, nothing punches the air out of him in his gut. It’s just one empty syllable. He doesn’t know why John is looking at him like that.

“They got me to eat a lot – Mrs. H wouldn’t stop bringing in cookies and tea – and by the end of the first day, I thought, yeah, I can live like this,” Jade says.

“Next thing we know, you’ll be asking for belly rubs,” Rose says. Jade picks up a throw pillow and tosses it at her half-heartedly.

Only John and Jade had come to visit today, which was okay, because they brought dogs with them, although there were a lot more than they’d initially brought before. Rover still kept licking him, and was rather fixated on James’ metal arm.

There isn’t any dog like the one from the newspaper though. He’d looked over all of the dogs they’d brought – little Buster and Moxie, lick-happy Rover, quiet Winston, a few others that he recognized, but none of them looked like the big dog in the black and white photo, long-haired and floppy-eared.

He shows the photo to John, fishing it out of his pajama pocket. John floats over and takes a look at it, and when he gives James a questioning look, James asks, “What is it?”

“Oh. It’s a golden retriever,” John says, “Some of them can have really long fur and floppy ears, depending on who their parents are – some goldens can be crossbred with short-haired Labradors, see, so it makes a difference.”

“You…don’t have one?”

John shakes his head. “No, I don’t think we do, but if we ever find one, I promise I’ll bring it here,” he says. “They make really good friends, you know. Energetic. Playful. Smart. Very loyal.”

Now that – that hits something. Something feels like it’s swimming inside James’ head, and he blinks in surprise at it.

Loyalty. Huh.
EB: you know what we should introduce to james?
EB: the internet.
EB: memes.
GG: john we just started :)
TG: i can feel the strained quality to that emojis smile
TG: those little beady green eyes just staring at you through the screen
TG: end parenthesis pulled taut as far as the font size will reach
TG: ‘john fucking egbert why the fuck do we have to open this chat with memes’
TG: that smile promises death
EB: no, but hear me out.
EB: there’s nothing more informative than the internet.
EB: and there’s one thing that’s flooding the web that’s a way of communication by itself.
cannibalAmygdala [CA] responded to memo.
EB: memes
TT: Magnificent timing, Mr. G.
TG: oh my god
aubergineTwilight [AT] responded to memo.
abendrotTriptych [AT] responded to memo.
CA: …
AT: I feel like we missed something.
GG: john immediately typed ‘memes’ right after mr g joined the chat
TG: comedy gold
AT: Pffft.
EB: we were talking about how great it would be to introduce james to memes.
TT: Correction: John was talking about how he believed it would be appropriate to add memes to James’ history education.
AT: Does he even know how to navigate the internet?
EB: he probably does. he wasn’t in cyrosleep for years or anything.
EB: no offense to steve rogers.
EB: he probably used the internet for his spy stuff.

TT: His memories are spotty. He remembers in fragments, and sometimes he even forgets those fragments every now and then.

TT: Sometimes he’s lucky enough to remember. Sometimes lucky enough to forget.

AT: Tides.

TT: Yes.

AT: Ebbing and flowing.

TG: do you think he killed someone via memes

GG: dave that sounds kinda mean

TG: well he *was* a former spy and assassin

TG: hes the goddamn winter soldier

TG: killcount over fifty

TG: fucking unstoppable

TG: organizations crumblin in his wake and everything

TG: hes like the guy in movies that heroes and people who are about to be dead in 0.5 seconds gasp about

TG: known to turn anything he gets his hands on into a weapon

TG: hes probably killed someone with duct tape

TG: or a teddy bear

archimageChaos [AC] responded to memo.

TG: you gotta take into account that hes probably killed someone with memes before

AC: Well.

EB: unbelieeeeeeevable

GG: :DDD

TG: why the fuck does everybody keep poppin in right when someone says something shitspittingly stupid when taken out of context

TT: Hello, Loki.

AC: I see Strider is as eloquent as always.

AT: I think this is exactly why Mrs. H, Saph and Ruben never join us. :( 

GG: wait is pool master suspended from stealing a police car
EB: that’s kinda stupid if they are.

AT: Saph’s fine.

AT: They got a lecture on the whole thing but…

AT: They were all ‘No disrespect, sir, but I don’t think a good police officer would allow their friends to be crushed in a stampede or blown up by a missile’.

AT: They’re not wrong, so.

TG: the car looked pretty busted

AT: Because we drove through a godforsaken alley! >:(

GG: its good that they didnt get suspended :)

GG: i mean they were just trying to help you!!!

EB: they got incredibly lucky with switching programs though.

EB: if they weren’t in the police academy to steal a car, you two would have had to hitch a ride or run home.

EB: or stay in the college.

GG: wait why did they switch programs

AT: Huh.

AT: We never asked.

AT: We never asked.

AC: I’m actually also curious.

AC: As John said, it is highly favorable that they were out of your college building at that time.

TG: well since lokis curious that kinda means we need to know

AT: I don’t know why. People switch programs all the time.

AT: Yeah, and we stopped asking Saph ‘why’ a long time ago every time they made a decision that seemed to pop outta nowhere.

AT: They never actually expressed a desire to change programs until they just did.

AT: Maybe they just got tired.

AT: So we let it be. It’s not like it’s any of our business.

AT: And as for the lucky part, it’s commonplace.

GG: ???

AT: Whenever Saph makes a snap decision, it’s usually for an important reason.
AT: Or an important outcome.

AT: In conclusion:

AT: In conclusion:

AT: We have no idea.

AT: We have no idea.

AC: Has the pool master ever expressed precognitive tendencies?

AT: Half of our hometown has precognitive tendencies.

AT: But no, Saph never has shown signs of being psychic.

AT: Mr. G can pass for a psychic better than they can.

CA: For the last time, Palmer.

GG: your town has a lot of psychics???:o

AT: Sort of.

AT: Kind of.

AT: Not really.

AT: Not really.

TT: Do some of them see visions in dreams?

TT: In clouds of those dreams, perhaps?

GG: :O !!!!

AT: I mean…

AT: We don’t ask?

AT: That’s kind of personal.

AT: But they do start screaming at the sky sometimes.

TG: in dreams

AT: No, in real life.

AT: No, in real life.

TG: the fuck

CA: unless psychic abilities rub off

CA: maybe your friend is doing it unconsciously

CA: you said half your town is composed of psychics
AT: Maybe.
AT: Maybe.
TG: how many fucking psychics do we have in this house
TG: we should have a meeting with everyone in the safehouse and start asking
TG: i wanna know everyone who can read my mind
TG: this doesn't have to be awkward
AC: Rose, I do think we are being derailed.
TT: The objective of this memo is to discuss James Barnes’ recovery and what we can do to help it.
TT: I think we can all agree that I, John, Jade and Dave are not qualified to help a grown man with amnesia, much less a brainwashed assassin who’s mental state is in pieces.
GG: :(
EB: well…
TG: you were just suggesting memes egbert
TT: Cecil and Kevin are mass communication students.
TT: Also unqualified.
TT: Which leaves us with the adults.
EB: there has to be at least one psychiatrist in the safehouse.
TT: We can’t exactly just tell them we have the former Winter Soldier in one of Loki’s bunkers.
AC: Trust me when I say I am not a viable candidate for psychiatry either.
GG: :(((
TT: Mr. G?
CA: …
CA: Rose.
CA: I think this entire chat room is populated by fucked-up people.
CA: Who have no business trying to help other fucked-up people.
CA: Because they can’t even take care of their own problems.
TG: damn dude
CA: that said i think our best shot is elizabeth
TT: We’ll have to host a War Council, then.
TT: Since I’m in India, you are all there and…

TT: Loki, are you home right now?

AC: Yes, I am.

TT: So we will have to hold a War Council to ask Mrs. H if she has any advice for us.

TT: But aside from dog therapy – which, thank you, John, for suggesting that – what else does everyone think will help?

TT: That we can give to James?

GG: communication and socialization :D

GG: not too much of course but being alone sucks

GG: and its not a very good feeling being away from people for long periods of time

GG: you get lonely

TG: music probably

TG: the bunker must get quiet

CA: someone to talk to

CA: and im not talking about having a powwow

CA: im talking like

CA: psychiatric help

TG: we are so fucked in that department

EB: we can keep on bringing the dogs!

EB: maybe we’ll visit more often. james likes the dogs a lot.

EB: we can let him walk them. we’ll just go with him.

EB: also, just to clarify – we don’t have a golden retriever, right?

CA: no.

EB: james showed me this photo from a newspaper.

EB: it was a golden retriever.

EB: i think maybe he wants to see one.

AC: We can give him a dog.

GG: ooohhh!!!

AC: A puppy, of course.
AC: I think people who are invested in taking care of something tend to take care of themselves as well.

AC: If not for themselves, then for their companions.

AC: Are golden retrievers easy pets?

CA: They’re energetic.

CA: Since James stays in the bunker too much, from what I’ve been told, it might be good to have him walk dogs outside to stretch his legs.

CA: Walking dogs takes your mind off things too.

CA: Although it might be good for James and the dogs, or his future puppy - if you get him one - to be in open fields, so that the animals can go as free as they want while James doesn’t have to worry about people.

AC: I can take care of that.

AC: Perhaps a bit of travel every now and then will benefit James too.

AC: As long as it’s open space.

GG: i can find him a puppy!

GG: the animal shelter loki works in has a lot of them!!!

GG: theyre so cute :D

GG: but yeah i think theres at least one golden retriever puppy there

GG: rose when can james have a puppy

TT: As soon as you two can get it.

AC: After the meeting, perhaps.

GG: okay!!! :D

TT: Someone will have to frequently visit to help James though.

TT: I think you all know I have no experience with dogs.

GG: well take care of it dont worry!

GG: leave it to us

TT: So we’re to hold a meeting – when?

AC: Can you come home tomorrow?

TT: Someone has to be around James.

EB: but we’re all going to be at the meeting.

EB: unless we get someone who isn’t joining the war council to watch james.
TG: we dont tell the other safehouse tenants about anything

AT: Suggestion.

AT: Suggestion.

TG: shoot

AT: Saph.

AT: Saph.

TG: what

AT: And Ruben.

AT: And Ruben.

EB: whaaaaaaat?

AT: There’s nobody else who gets involved with this and doesn’t ask questions.

AT: Just pack them off with their college homework and the dogs and you’re set.

GG: ummm

GG: its not a bad idea?

GG: pool master never does ask questions

TG: pm might get killed

TG: james might be allergic to colored chalk or something

TG: who wants to bet pm and pmbestfriend might get killed

GG: dave!!! >:(

TG: im taking advantage of an opportunity

AC: They’re efficient enough.

AC: And true, they don’t ask questions.

EB: just send the dogs with them.

EB: if anything, they’ll stop james from snapping.

TT: He’s not a time bomb.

TT: He’s confused.

EB: he’s not familiar with who we’re about to send to him?

TT: He’ll be fine.

TT: Tell the pool master and their best friend.
AC: I’ll bring them by tomorrow.

TT: So we’ll hold a meeting, the pool master and their best friend will watch over the bunker, we’ll get James a dog once Jade and Loki have picked a puppy out – I think that concludes our chat session.

EB: so no memes?

GG: i swear to fucking god

John Egbert returns with a television – it’s sleeker than what James associates with ‘television’ in his spotty memories, but at the same time, he feels like this is what televisions should look like. More recent, muddied memories kicking in then. The green-eyed one is back, the one named Loki, showing Rose the satellite dish with several marking that glow green when the light hits them. Jade is proudly showing off two radios, which, to James’ surprise, look a bit more old-school than he was expecting.

The dogs are around too, and the one in the aviators is herding them since John and Jade are talking to Rose to explain their gifts.

There’s no golden retriever in the group, sadly. Although, James has gotten clippings from a local magazine (he’d gone out a few days ago) – he’d found dogs like Buster and Moxie, and he’s still on a mission to find photos of dogs similar to Rover and the others. It’s a good pastime.

A tiny little Chihuahua bites one of Dave’s pants, causing the boy to stop walking at the sudden tugging. When he looks down, the Chihuahua lets go and runs off to join the others, looking smug.

Dave pushes up his glasses before crouching down and tapping the little Chihuahua’s nose. “You think you’re clever, huh, Posie?”

Posie playfully bites Dave’s finger.

Ah, dogs. James takes note of Posie. He hasn’t found photos of Chihuahuas yet.

And then Rover comes over bouncing from behind Dave, hitting the boy’s back. Dave’s glasses slide down his nose on impact, although he catches them before they can drop to the floor.

It’s enough for James to catch a look of his eyes – white lashes, red irises.

It’s like a bucket of cold water. James blinks. Pauses. He’s never seen red eyes before. Or if he has, he can’t remember. It’s not malicious – it’s just appearances, but still. He’s never seen eyes that red before. They’re beautiful.

Dave has tensed though, having clearly caught him looking at his eyes. He turns around and pets Rover while telling the dog not to do that again. Rover just licks his face.

Something presses against James’ calf. He looks down. It’s Moxie, with a stuffed toy in her mouth. James doesn’t know where it came from. She probably had it with her when she got here or John had it and gave it to her when they arrived. When James doesn’t do anything, Moxie presses her forehead to his calf again and looks up at him, tail stump wagging.

“She wants to show you her toy.”

James turns towards Dave, who is petting Posie, half-turned away from him. “Don’t keep it too long
though, or she gets mad,” Dave says.

James turns to Moxie, slightly confused. Moxie steps a little closer.

He slowly crouches down, mimicking Dave from earlier, and as soon as he’s within her reach, Moxie almost shoves the stuffed toy in his face. James leans back slightly and takes the toy, very carefully.

Moxie yips and her tail stump wags harder.

The toy is a tiny little grey thing. It looks like a bear, although it’s very simple and it’s got small circles embroidered into its face for eyes. It’s been cleaned carefully, he can tell, and with almost no puncture marks on it, he can tell Moxie is very careful with it too.

Moxie presses a cold wet snout at the hand that’s holding the toy. Since it’s the human one, James almost flinches, caught off guard by the sensation of wet dog snout at around – it’s around seven in the morning.

“She wants a compliment,” Dave says.

James feels like laughing at the ridiculousness of a dog asking for a compliment. What’s even funnier is that he’s willing to give it.

“It’s pretty,” James says.

“It’s a she,” Dave says.

Okay then. “She’s pretty.”

Moxie’s tail stump wags harder.

“And now’s the part where you put it on the floor so she can take it back to John,” Dave says, “He and Mr. G are usually the only ones who can hold onto her bear without her biting their hands off.”

James dutifully sets the bear down. Moxie picks it up and trots back to John, pawing at his leg. John absently bends down, pets her and takes her bear from her, still talking to Rose about the television, worldwide reception, cable TV and some cursed thing called Netflix.

Dave laughs.

“Yeah, Moxie can be a little demanding,” he says, “So far the only humans she fully trusts are Mr. G and John. I think she likes John because he can fly.”

“He takes her flying?” James asks.

“In a baby carrier.”

James looks down, trying not to laugh.

There’s a scratching sound from one of the windows. Both of them turn to it. Buster has climbed up the couch and is pawing at the glass of the window beside it. Dave stands and walks over to him.

“ – so yeah, just so you guys can get updates.” James turns his attention back to where Jade is talking. “You should be fine.”

“Thank you,” Rose says. She meets James’ eyes once before turning to Loki. “We should set up the
television.”

Loki nods. John takes it his cue to place the television on one of the dressers before going back to pick up the satellite dish and disappearing in a flash of blue light while Loki blinks out of existence, although they’re both just possibly on the roof.

“What are the radios for?” James asks.

“We run a city bunker back in New York, as you know,” Rose says, “Some of the people who take refuge there are the homeless – we’ve made a few rooms for them to spend the night in whenever they want to spend the night, although most of them still wander around, restless – and other people who take refuge there are mutants.”

“Like us,” Dave says. He shrugs. “Sorta.”

“The Palmers had an idea,” Jade says, “See, sometimes the homeless can get caught up in the attacks, especially when most of them sleep under bridges or tunnels, so whenever we hear something or one of the Palmers or Rose gets a vision, we update them. Sometimes we receive calls from the mutants, about things they’ve seen or if they need help or if someone’s missing. It’s a little help system.”

“We look out for our own,” Rose says.

James feels it again, that niggling in the back of his mind. Except it’s scratching this time. We look out for our own. *We look out for our own.*
“It reeks,” says Sollux Captor.

Aradia Megido turns around, doing a full sweep of the space they are in. “Really?” She figures it’s a cause for worry, because there’s nothing in the void that can reek, unless it’s the void itself. She highly doubts the void is capable of reeking of anything but dust and the screams of failed sessions.

“Yes,” Sollux says, lisp emphasized as he drags the last letter. He sniffs again.

“Might be good to get out of here, then,” Aradia says. She takes Sollux’s hand in hers, ready for flight.

Sollux stills. So does she.

“Sollux?” she asks, and not a second sooner after she asks that, something very cold, unnaturally cold – deathly cold – touches her back. She turns as best as she can, not letting go of Sollux’s hand. There’s nothing that she can see.

The cold feeling persists, and pushes, bleeding through her pajamas and her tough skin, passing through her spine – she shivers at that – and touching her insides. Aradia flaps her wings wildly, and they make a buzzing sound as she does, but she’s not budging away from her place. Her eyes widen as she squirms, frozen in space.

Sollux is still.

“Sollux!” she yells, desperate, as she feels that cold settle into her stomach, pooling. If she had to describe the sensation, she would say it felt like a hand made out of ice had curled around her gut. Aradia thrashes, never letting Sollux’s hand go, almost crushing it as she holds it tighter.

The cold around her gut pulls.

And Sollux Captor breathes.

Maybe he should bring Tony into this.

If Tony hasn’t already dug through S.H.I.E.L.D.’s files himself. He probably has. And if that is the case, then that would make Steve’s job easier, but then again, there is the problem of Tony asking why he was interested, and if Tony presses it a little further, he’d have to talk about the Safehouse again and maybe, finally, finally, Tony’s curiosity will tip over the edge and –
Yeah. Then again, maybe he doesn’t trust Tony that much, which is sad, because they’re on the same team and they’ve saved each other’s asses more times than can be counted. That should warrant even a bit of trust.

(Even sadder, Steve thinks – is that it’s just work. He trusts Romanov and Barton to keep an eye out for him on missions. Not for much else. Not when they’re at the beck and call of S.H.I.E.L.D. They’re not bad people. Steve just worries about their unpredictability.)

This is what Steve knows so far:

First, Tony Stark has a degree of curiosity towards the Safehouse, and by some intense miracle, or maybe someone hit him on the forehead with some sort of warding spell, he hasn’t pursued that curiosity yet. Nearly everyone in New York knows where the Safehouse is.

Second, funnily enough, S.H.I.E.L.D. agents haven’t gotten the idea to try and talk to people about the Safehouse. Maybe it’s the wards Jade has told him about, keeping the Safehouse out of sight and out of mind.

Third, if this is the case, he wonders why he appears to be an exception.

Fourth, he doesn’t know S.H.I.E.L.D.’s real intentions. He has nothing against protecting the Earth from other threats, but he knows and he’s seen S.H.I.E.L.D.’s methods, and if you’re not from Earth, even if you are relatively harmless, they will hold you captive and put you on surveillance. Ask Thor. And while S.H.I.E.L.D. is just being paranoid (and rightfully so), Steve can also understand wanting freedom and privacy. Lord knows he’s not afforded much of it these days.

(And what a mockery. A champion of freedom held down by constraints.)

Fifth, if Fury wants it, he could have Romanov and Barton take out the Safehouse, and Steve would have to fight against them, because he has friends there.

Sixth, there will most likely be a public uproar if the Safehouse is touched by S.H.I.E.L.D., which is also the only reason why S.H.I.E.L.D. has declined from making any moves. They are, however, trying to find anything that will incriminate the Safehouse, anything that can give them an excuse to see who’s running the place. With the latest news of the disappearing missiles, they seem to be writing up papers on it, but since the public believe (and they’re correct) that it was a friendly force that helped during the attack, they can’t really do anything that’s not going to destroy their credibility.

Steve chuckles at this. Imagine that. Protests and rallies against the Avengers and everything they stand for. Then again, there already are small-scale fights and debates about the credibility of superheroes who can’t do damage control.

This is what the Safehouse is for, he thinks.

Seventh – he should really write all of this down, because there’s too many things to keep track of at once; but if he does, unless he burns the list, there’s physical evidence that might be used, or the cameras can pick up what he’s writing, and paranoia dictates he should be careful – Tony does not like S.H.I.E.L.D.

Eighth, Jade had told him a lot when they talked at Sunny’s a few weeks ago.

True to what had been predicted, it’d rained straight from morning to evening, leaving Steve to have to brave through the downpour with an umbrella that wasn’t quite supersoldier-grade. He’d waited for Jade in the café for a few minutes, vaguely aware of Sunny turning up the volume on a bright yellow radio as the storm outside appeared to grow harsher.
Jade arrived in a flash of green light a few minutes later, and they both ordered coffee and a few pastries as they talked. He explained what had gone on during the debriefing, and how they’d narrowed the missile disappearances down to mutants because if Tony Stark couldn’t build a teleporter yet, then there was a huge chance that nobody else had.

Jade had snorted and muttered something about transportalizers and appearifiers, and a few other things Steve didn’t get, but he figured it was probably a future thing. She told him not to worry and asked him to try and find out about what S.H.I.E.L.D was doing to mutants, because apparently, they’d heard from some of the refugee children that they’d seen their friends – mutant friends – get abducted.

Steve had to stop himself from throwing up. *Children.* Mutants, but children all the same. Children like Jade and Rose.

“I’m not thirteen, Steve,” Jade had reminded him. Then, softly, “At least, not really.”

He…decided not to ask. Following her logic, that meant her twin brother John (Pepper had told him once, he remembered), would be around the same age as she was. They both did look thirteen. Genetics didn’t go *that* far, unless mutant genes also meant you didn’t age past the age of thirteen. Steve highly doubted it.

Jade had looked sad when she said that. Then she cleared her throat, drank the rest of her coffee and continued her explanation in a low voice.

The Safehouse had taken in both mutants – children or otherwise – and the homeless. They’d found a way to communicate with them, and whenever the mutants or the homeless had news for them, they either called (if they were far away – no, it wasn’t by phone; magic, Steve, magic) or they dropped by the house. If the informant wanted to show them something, one of them went and checked it out.

Whenever they pieced something together, like a pattern in mutant abductions (there was no other way to go around it, they were abductions), they warned their refugees. Whenever one of their psychics had a vision, they did the same thing.

They were helping some of the more inexperienced mutants how to control their abilities. They didn’t need to be defenseless, after all.

Jade had fallen silent for a while at that. Then, she said that Rose wasn’t looking for colleges after all.

“I’m sure you’ve noticed she’s been gone a while,” Jade said, “And I’m sorry if this looks like I don’t trust you – I really do, Steve. It’s just that I don’t run the Safehouse alone. Plenty of us do. We decide on things together.” Another pause. “Luke just gave the go-signal recently, so I’m telling you now. She’s on a…a mission, you can call it. Safehouse stuff.”

He could understand. It stung a little, but there were other people’s safeties at stake, and Steve was working under S.H.I.E.L.D.

Didn’t mean it didn’t hurt though.

“She’s protecting some – ” Jade faltered, then settled for, “She’s protecting. That’s all I can say. From S.H.I.E.L.D., mostly.” Shrugged. “What’s new. She’s protecting the world and whatever’s under her care right now.”

He’d nodded, saying nothing. Jade sighed. “Maybe we’ll get to tell you one day, but for now, it’s dangerous.”
He’d nodded again, fingers pressing hard against the ceramic of the coffee cup, trying not to break it. “Why did Luke give the go-signal now?” He tried searching through his memory for anyone named Luke. Common enough name, but he didn’t think he’d met anyone from the Safehouse named Luke.

“Because just in case S.H.I.E.L.D. goes after us, we might need your help,” Jade said, “And you may need to help Rose with protecting whatever she’s protecting.”

He stilled for a moment.

“Okay,” he said. Jade looked relieved.

She continued on about what actually happened during the attack, about how it wasn’t just her who teleported the missiles out of their trajectories, but also the ‘Luke’ she’d mentioned earlier. And then she’d laughed as she remembered S.H.I.E.L.D.’s opinion on people not being able to build teleporters.

“Give us the right equipment,” Jade said, “And we’d be able to alchemize next to anything in existence.”

Again, Steve had no idea what she meant by ‘alchemize’, so he chalked it up to another future thing.

They’d finished up and promised to call if there were any developments, and if they needed to, they’d meet up at Sunny’s again. The Friday jog was still on, and Jade told him they’d gotten a few more dogs since the last time they’d gone for a run together.

So yes, presently, he’s got a lot to work with, and he’s gotten further in the good graces of the other Safehouse members, which is progress. He wonders if Rose is okay. He hopes she is.

Also, maybe he can ask Tony what ‘appearifiers’ or ‘transportalizers’ are. Or what ‘alchemize’ is, in the context Jade used it. This brings him back to his initial line of thought.

Ninth, his best shot at finding out what S.H.I.E.L.D. does with the mutants they take off the streets, is Tony. Steve can’t get into technology, sadly, and if he tried to manually break in and find out, he wouldn’t know where and what he is looking for. Dissected bodies? Prison cells? Laboratories? The margin for error is too huge and if he messes up, he could endanger the mutants and the Safehouse.

JARVIS is crafty, though. And discreet. Steve knows Tony keeps an eye out on S.H.I.E.L.D.’s doings, and hopefully, he’s already started research on whatever S.H.I.E.L.D. might be unlawfully keeping in their cells.

He sighs.

Tenth, Steve Rogers is about to involve Tony Stark in all of this. He really hopes this doesn’t blow up in his face.

That said, he moves to get himself ready to visit the Avenger’s Tower, where hopefully it’s only Tony, or Pepper. Pepper’s presence would be a blessing, because she’ll most likely take Nick Fury by the ear and yell at him if they do find out that something’s wrong.

He’s barely gotten his keys in his pockets when he feels – something. It’s subtle, but it’s there, a shift in the air, a sort of electricity, the feeling that something that doesn’t belong has invaded the space he’s in. He looks around the room. There’s nothing there.

Steve frowns.
Maybe a spy or something? He’ll need to check soon, but for now, he’ll have to talk to Tony first. He ignores the feeling of static in the air, that suffocating feeling of Wrongness, and gets out of his apartment.

Eleventh, something big is coming.

“Okay, I need everybody to bleed.” – is what the pool master greets everyone with when they enter the room, carrying a bag and a few empty vials that are most certainly Loki’s.

As much as everyone trusts Loki with their lives and their bodily fluids, bleeding is still a painful affair unless any of them had a degree in medicine and knew where to stick a syringe into.

“What for?” John asks.

“Mr. Winters – ” right, because the pool master wasn’t a part of the War Council, they didn’t know Loki’s real name, only the alias “ – says that ‘the emergency system is blood-activated’.” There’s a series of groans before people start rolling up their sleeves.

“What about Rose?” Jade asks.

“Oh, Mr. Winters is getting her blood. He put me in charge of getting yours,” they say.

Dave, who has already rolled up his sleeve and stuck out an arm, lets out a huff. “And you don’t get curious about all this?”

The pool master shrugs. “He spares my room of pranks, I do what he says as long as it’s limited to errands.” They set their bag down on the table and motions for Dave to sit by it, then take out a pair of gloves, a length of rubber and a syringe. “Also, I’m the only one here who knows how to use a syringe without causing complications.”

“Were your parents doctors?” John asks. He watches as Dave gets a tourniquet, and then gets the crook of his arm wiped down.

“No, they were drug dealers.”

Even Mrs. H and the others get their blood drawn, because Loki likes being meticulous. The pool master transfers each sample to a vial after every draw and sticks a label on them as to whose blood is whose. The vials light up briefly and engravings etch themselves on the glass after the vials are corked.

“What do those say?” Jade asks, lifting her vial up to the light to inspect it.

She gets a shrug as a reply.

John raises his head as something occurs to him. “You said something about pranks – ” He doesn’t finish the sentence before everyone springs into action, flying (or running, for the others) up the stairs and into their respective hallways. There are several crashes, one shriek, and one loud splattering of something no one wants to try and figure out, and they’re spared from having to when John screams, “Is this icing?!”

Ah, yes, well. Looks like the Safehouse is plunged into another prank war. They don’t get those often, but when they do, it’s usually John against his sister (or Dave and Rose, if he includes them),
or John against everyone else. Mr. G and Mrs. H usually ignore John’s pranks, or just laugh if it gets them good and since they don’t retaliate, John doesn’t push it to a second prank (he feels bad if they don’t prank back – because then it’s not a war, it’s just an unfair fight). Loki, however, will mark up John’s room six ways to Sunday and into two weeks.

Currently, there’s a rune right past John’s door that spits out heavy icing upon contact.

John shudders. Icing drips onto the floor. This’ll take a while to clean up, and he can’t even make Loki do it, because the bastard is in India. He sighs. Well, maybe he deserved this – he’d stolen all of Loki’s leather jackets last week and replaced them with kigurumis (and to be fair, the guy looked adorable in them).

He flies over to Jade’s room just as she walks out, covered in blue powder while holding a broken picture frame. Her glasses are just round circles of opaque blue.

“It’s dye powder,” she says.

“Ah.”

She wraps her glasses in green light and gets them off her face. John laughs when the area around her eyes proves to be the only part of her that’s not covered in blue. Jade frowns. Bits of powder fall off at the action.

“I have to know exactly where things are to teleport them off,” Jade says, “There’s too much of the powder and they’re too fine.”

“You’ll have to take a bath then.”

“I’ll be taking a bath in the pool then.”

“Hey, that’s uncalled for,” John says, still laughing. Dave joins them in the hallway a little while later, glittery-pink-skinned.

“What…what is that?” Jade asks.

Dave shrugs. His hands shimmer under the light. “Beats me.”

It takes about two hours for John to wash off the icing, and three more to clean up his room. Jade has it a little harder, especially since she’s dealing with blue dye powder and the things get everywhere.

At least their pranks are quick to get rid of – Dave’s skin appears to change color every now and then, and it’s Mr. G who points out that they’re changing with his emotions (and good luck to them trying to figure out how Mr. G figured that out because Dave’s facial expressions never change); immediately after that’s explained, Dave turns a deep blue, and the dogs start barking so loud that John has to usher them out of the living room.

The Palmers have switched voices. Nobody comments on this.

(Cecil’s cat looks somehow pleased, like it’s amused by its owner’s suffering.)

Mr. G still hasn’t gone into his room.

It’s a normal day in the Safehouse, all in all. Mrs. H. makes them all cookies and tea as they gather for an impromptu meeting that Jade calls, to discuss whether or not the kigurumis should make a reappearance while Loki’s entire wardrobe disappears. Dave’s skin turns the same color as Kevin’s
chat text and nobody even asks what that means.

And then – after the meeting, when they’re lounging in front of the television while one of the Palmers (the only things they had to go on were the fashion sense and the voices, and since Loki’s gone and fucked the latter up, they’re not going to try sorting through it until this is over) try and get a hold of Loki, or maybe Rose, or even James if he’s in a mood to answer phones – Dave’s skin suddenly turns orange.

John loses it. Jade runs out of the room, trying not to laugh. She fails.

“I look like fucking Davesprite,” Dave mutters. It makes both of them laugh even harder.

Cecil – or maybe Kevin, but most likely Cecil – has a thoughtful look on his face though. “Who?”

“Davesprite,” Dave says, “He’s – nevermind.”

“Davesprite,” Cecil repeats, as if trying out the word on his tongue.

The others, too caught up in hysterics, don’t notice it, but Dave doesn’t miss the familiar look of a Seer fugue in Cecil’s eyes.

James names the puppy Fenrir.

Rose Lalonde has never laughed so hard in her life. Loki doesn’t look amused.

Norse mythology really does prove to be the tabloid mags of Asgard, because for one, Loki doesn’t even have children, and two, Sleipnir has been Odin’s horse since Loki was a baby.

Fenrir used to be his dog. Or whatever passed for dogs in Asgard, so they were a lot more vicious than their Earth counterparts. Sadly, Loki wasn’t allowed pets and Fenrir was, according to him – very pointedly not looking at Rose – “I believe I heard our little water mage Mai say this, got sent to the rainbow bridge by papa.”

Ah.

Fuck Odin.

Still, it explained why he was so good with dogs. If Asgard’s versions of them were bigger and more active, Loki would have had to deal with a huge, slobbering beast running up to him and licking him every time it saw him, provided Fenrir was the affectionate type. From the pulse of sadness and longing that had swam into Rose’s view – and now swims into Rose’s view as James decides the name of his new puppy – that was most likely the case.

Rose should not have stocked mythological books in the bunker, but James appeared to like anything that didn’t concern his spotty memories or real life. Another bad mark for his dissociation, but she can’t force him. Besides, he’s making good progress.

The other night she’d woken up to him screaming from a nightmare and then he’d tried to gouge his metal arm out. When that didn’t work, he started scrubbing at the hideous star that was painted on it. Afterwards he wouldn’t look at or even tolerate the presence of anything that had to do with Hydra or Nazis, so several of the files they had in the bunker went up in flames the next morning.

Safe to say he’s got more than enough memories for that part. He’s kept the history books though;
Rose thinks it’s because of the information on the Howling Commandos.

He’s also started to talk more. They’re mostly questions – “Who are you, really?”, “What are you?”, “Why does nobody see the house from the outside, what did you do to it?”, “Are you soldiers?”, “Rose, why is there two of you sometimes?”, “Rose, why is your shadow moving funny?” – although he’s more vocal with John regarding the dogs, and whenever Dave drops by, they talk. It’s probably relaxing to talk to someone who you don’t need to make eye contact with. Rose knows her brother is incredibly good at that.

As for the rest of James’ questions, they can wait. At least until Rose finds out exactly how he’s able to see what he’s seeing, because she’s more concerned about his behavior, now that his head is finally sorting itself out.

He is something else when he remembers his Howling Commandos days and revels in it, he is something else when he’s spacing out and thinking about his Hydra ‘employment’, and he is something else when he’s just living in the now, spotty memories and fatigue and all of that.

He’s splintering, Rose thinks.

Maybe that’s why he can see her splinters too. Horrorterrors laughing in her shadow.

But right now, they’re in the middle of a forest, Loki’s just delivered Fenrir the golden retriever, and has also just taken a vial of Rose’s blood (did he learn blood extraction from Asgard?), and has teleported them to one of the most beautiful clearings Rose has ever seen. James is walking after Fenrir, who has run off and has started smelling rocks and tree trunks and flowers, excited.

“We’ll need a collar,” Rose says, watching James chase after his puppy as it runs into a bush, only to bolt right out when James is near, weaving past his legs and barking happily.

Loki had been considerate enough to take care of the shots and dewormings and all of that, so all they need is a collar and a constant replenishing of dog supplies, plus a walk every now and then. John and the others are scheduled to visit with the other dogs two days from now.

Fenrir runs back to James and bites the hem of his pants, pulling him for a few steps before letting him go and running again. James stands, blinks and then sighs as he follows his puppy.

“I have a collar for the pup,” Loki says, he makes a motion with his hand and Rose can see space yield for a moment as he plucks out a collar in a flash of green light.

It’s not a sylladex, but she supposes pocket universes are cool.

The collar itself is a slim, light thing that has green runes on its main body and a tiny pendant that looks like a rod of some sort sewed into the strap.

Rose raises an eyebrow.

“I don’t think James would appreciate it if anything happened to his dog.”

“And you warded a collar,” Rose says, “Fair enough.”

Ahead, Fenrir brings James a stick and a clump of leaves in his mouth. He spits it out onto the ground before his owner, sits for a while, and then runs off again. Rose is reminded why she is a cat person. Cats, at least, were easy to understand. You just had to know that they will constantly be in a battle of wits against you, trying to one-up you at every turn to establish who the master of the household is. Dogs are ridiculous. They’re cute though.
But James is smiling, looking like he’s forgotten Rose and Loki are there. He chases after Fenrir again, who has gotten bored of the clearing and is starting to go downhill. Loki says there’s a lake there.

Rose smiles. They’d better follow.

Chapter End Notes

lol i told y'all to be patient and funnily enough i got 'where's the trolls' messages right before the chapter where i introduce them

this is a mage of time right here and you gotta know aaaaaaall about the timing

thing to note - I wrote act two while revising a novel alongside it so a bit of the novel's style might have bled into the story. also i'm happy my knowledge of syringes is being put to good use. don't ask me why i have it in the first place. :)}
Be careful, the…whatever it was, had said. It said it with an infuriating grin on its face that had reminded Eridan of Gamzee Makara, and then the next thing he knew, he wasn’t in two pieces anymore. He’s also going to kill whoever made that joke, as soon as he remembers who made it, because he’s positive he’s heard it, he just can’t remember specifics, just like how he can remember being warned, and then the rest is just vague impressions and then bam, he’s thrashing in the least saltiest ocean he’s ever been on.

The fishes hadn’t been very helpful. They’d been weird – nothing like he’d remembered them, but they’d claimed to be fishes. He got asked what sort of fish he was, and one of them said, *Maybe he’s a whale.*

He’d snapped, “Do I look like a fuckin’ whale to ya?” and yup, his stupid speech impediment was still there, making his ‘whale’ sound like ‘w-w-hale’. The water made it worse.

*Dolphin?*

“The fuck is a dolphin?”

*Mm. Squid?*

Another fish had laughed and said, *He’s no squid. He’s got fins, suddy, fins. And gills. And weird appendages like ‘em waterfolk have.*

*He’s got no tail.*

The other fish had swam up to his scarf, which was floating every which way in the water. *Tail?*

“That’s a scarf.”

*The hell is a scarf?*

“It’s – never mind. Why am I arguing with you. You're not even supposed to talk to me.”

If fishes had eyebrows, this one would have raised them. *Uh-huh. Why’s that?*
“Because I’m a highblood seadweller, you filthy little –”

And then the fish laughed in a way only fishes could laugh, involving a lot of air bubbles and ‘pook’ing. The rest of the school joined it. Eridan tried to take control of the situation and failed.

One fish, one that hadn’t been around for the conversation, swam up to him and gave him his glasses, which had fallen deep into the water faster than he could retrieve it, with his confusion and all.

Said fish also told him that maybe he wanted to talk to the birds if he wanted more information. Maybe the water currents had swept him here and maybe the birds had gotten an aerial view of where he’d come from.

Eridan wasn’t an expert but he was pretty sure that outer space didn’t have water.

So now, here he is, swimming up towards a rock with a flock of birds on it.

Earlier, he’d shrieked and ducked under the water, swimming down, down, down when he’d realized that the sun was rising. Helpful Fish (who deserved to be called that, because the rest of the school were douches) had gotten confused and swam after him, chasing after his glasses again when they’d slipped off.

“The sun is rising.”

Yeah, and?

“I’m going to get boiled.”

Helpful Fish had given him a look that suggested they really didn’t think he was sane.

After a few arguments, he’d swam back up and poked a hand out of the water to the risen sun. He didn’t get burned. Then he realized there was only one sun, and with that realization came several other realizations – namely, the reason why the water wasn’t as salty as it should be, why the fishes looked so soft, why they hadn’t known what he was, and exactly where he was.

He was on Earth.

Son of a cullbait.

(So yeah, fuck highblood terminology at the moment – earth was soft soft soft. He could be disgusting all he liked.)

The birds are soft too, not at all sharp-toothed or predatory, which helps, but Earth is pathetic. It doesn’t stop one of the birds from perching on his head and poking at him with its hideous beak.

“Hey!”

Hey, get lost. Helpful Fish spits water at the bird. It flaps away.

Eridan asks his questions. The birds are still not very helpful, because all they give are descriptions like, ‘The place where the water touches the sun’ or ‘The cliffs of brittle white that chip away at the tempest’. Eridan doesn’t appreciate the poetry because it gets him nowhere. The birds don’t know what town, or city, or sea they’re in. Helpful Fish understandably only knows the water terrain.

“This sucks,” he says as much, swimming back down and making sure his glasses don’t fall off his face again.
Are you trying to get somewhere? Helpful Fish asks. They’re leading him back to their coral reef, and while Eridan is initially wary, it turns out – like all Earth things – the reef is soft too. For one, it’s not trying to eat anything that comes near it. For another, it’s colorful and beautiful.

He figures he can probably stay here and be comfortable. Maybe eat the fucking birds. They’re annoying.

Then he finds himself thinking about Helpful Fish’s question and realizes (ah yes, so many realizations today, he’s on a roll) that even if he does find out where he is, he doesn’t have any frame of reference as to how Earth geography works. The Earth he and the others had created was destroyed when its players started the game, so it’s very possible he’s just in a dream bubble right now.

That’s it. It might be a dream bubble. He just has to wait it out.

He swims over to the reef, following Helpful Fish.

It takes him exactly 74 hours to realize he’s not in a dream bubble.

And then 168 to accept that he’s not.

For one, ghosts do not get hungry. They can eat things that are in the bubble just for fun, but there’s no sensation of hunger or satisfaction.

Eridan, however, starts getting genuinely hungry, and he starts to go up, intent on eating the birds (the Loud Mimics, as the fishes called them), when Helpful Fish follows him and asks what he’s doing. He explains.

Helpful Fish lets out a very upset bubble. We have a truce with them, they say, Our people are prey to them, see. We have been for several cycles. We’ve only recently just come to a truce.

He tries to reason, but Helpful Fish’s distress bubbles are increasing in frequency, so he eats some disgusting sea grass and krill instead. He gets to see whales for his trouble, although Helpful Fish looks terrified of being so far away from the reef, but still not willing to abandon him in case he got lost. Poor thing.

He wanders farther and farther each day, and Helpful Fish takes to swimming underneath a fold of his scarf. The sea is incredibly blue in the light, and the vast expanse of just blue and cold reminds Eridan of Alternia, with its seas populated by predators just waiting in the shadows, aided by the night.

He learns exactly what dolphins are, and learns that they are assholes. Also, he punches one in the snout because it tries to eat Helpful Fish. It yells Hey what the fuck at him and his fins flatten on either side of his head. The gills on his neck open, releasing an angry stream of bubbles.

“Get lost!”

The dolphins swim away after that.

He returns to the reef and doesn’t leave for a few days, just for Helpful Fish’s sake. He takes to staying on the rocks instead, out of water. He hadn’t stayed a lot in the water back on Alternia; breathing problems and all that. For some reason, it’s easier to breathe in Earth’s seas. Maybe it’s the
decrease in salinity. Maybe it’s whatever had happened to him before he found himself in the sea. The memories are fading dangerously fast.

The communities are beautiful too, which helps, and he can pop his head out of the water day or night. The moon is marvelous when it shines down on the ocean, just like it should be.

The sun isn’t too bad. The warmth is nice, and Eridan spends the next few days sprawled out on rocks, sleeping in the sunlight. His skin is too tough for its weak rays, and he doesn’t burn, although he does dry out after a few hours. He jumps back in the water whenever that happens and is thankful he’s taken to folding up his glasses and tying it to his scarf. His clothes are still sticky with salt and they look like they’re starting to take the brunt of constantly being exposed to saltwater and light, but they’ll hold for a little while.

And besides, there’s no one else for miles and miles. There’s no humans, no buildings, nothing. It’s so peaceful that Eridan thinks he wouldn’t mind if he just lived here for the rest of his life (he is alive, isn’t he, if this isn’t a dream bubble), provided he can get something better to eat.

He takes a while to get comfortable with the fact that he’s not in a dream bubble, is seemingly alive (and bye-bye, memories; whatever had resurrected him put a nasty precaution, destroying his memories of the event slowly), and is quite possibly on an alternate version of Earth, or maybe even another planet that’s just similar to the one that he and the others had created. He’s alone, and he has no idea what to do.

So he sits on a rock and thinks, and then decides on an idea. He swims over to shore, takes off the other layers of his clothes until he’s in his pants and shirt, and then hangs the rest on a tree to dry. His scarf is spread to its fullest and he puts his glasses on the smoothest rock he can find.

Then he goes into the forest ahead and kills an animal with his bare claws. He hasn’t done it in a very, very long time, but it’s nice to see that he still hasn’t forgotten what it’s like to chase after prey and sink his teeth into them. The animal (whatever it is, it’s a herbivore and it doesn’t smell poisonous) certainly tastes better than that disgusting sea grass.

When he meets the dolphins again on another excursion (and he’d told Helpful Fish they didn’t need to join in, because he knew how to get back to the reef), they tell him the disgusting grass is called kelp. It doesn’t look like kelp, but this is Earth, so he decides it’s probably kelp, and then he flips the bird on the dolphins, since they’ve been jeering at him for the past few minutes, asking where his cape and other layers were.

They’re on the island, folded up nicely. He wears them at night if he wants to stay on land and it’s cold, but otherwise, they make swimming harder, especially when he doesn’t have a ride.

One morning, he wakes up to commotion in the reef, and tries to find Helpful Fish amidst panicking schools. He doesn’t, not for a long time, and his mood darkens because if one of those stupid birds touched his little guide, he will be breaking a truce between two communities, and he and the fishes will win.

It turns out he doesn’t need to break the truce, because the birds have already done it for him. They’ve eaten several fishes; for Eridan the number is just ‘meh’, but for the schools, it’s a massacre. Thankfully, Helpful Fish isn’t one of the casualties, and he finds them hiding in the reef. They let out a little relieved bubble when they see him.

Eridan smiles as he swims up. It’s not a pleasant smile. It’s a smile that would remind lowbloods exactly how high he was on the caste system. It’s a smile that promises a very painful end of a FLARP. It’s a smile befitting an Orphaner.
He breaks surface right where the birds are still shredding the remains of the dead fishes, fighting over scraps like barbarians.

This, Eridan thinks, is war.

He doesn’t know if Earth fishes are carnivores, but he figures he can’t care less. The water is very, very red (and what a strange color, to him; he’s read about the significance of it in history, of someone who had caused an uproar in Alternia and his blood was the very same color – candy red), and there’s feathers all around, and the bigger fishes are biting and dragging incapacitated birds further into the water, effectively drowning them. Eridan is crouched on a rock, perched like an animal ready to strike at the injured birds that are huddled on another rock just a few feet away from him. They’re surrounded by fishes crying out for their blood, which is funny because there’s already a lot of blood in the water.

None of the fishes even have proper teeth.

Eridan chuckles.

He launches himself at the birds. Several of them flap away, barely able to fly, skimming the water instead. The rest just fall into the waves, and are immediately bit and dragged off by the fishes. Eridan catches a bird in his hand. It pleads. He breaks its wing, then tosses it into the water.

It hits another bird on the way, and both of them crash into the sea, disappearing a few seconds later in an onslaught of fish.

The rest of the flock flies off into the mountains, hiding in the forest, and Eridan is reminded that he needs to retrieve his clothes from the island if doesn’t want them to be shredded by the stupid Loud Mimics. Once he and the fishes finish with those within their reach, they return back to the reef, with Eridan stopping by the shore to get his thankfully-untouched clothes. He places them on a rock that’s far, far out at sea instead, near the reef, just in case.

The earlier mourning has turned into a festivity in the reef, and everyone is ignoring the large amount of red that’s very close to the shore. It’ll either get diluted, or they’ll attract sharks, which hopefully will be Earth-soft, and Eridan can just punch them in the face too. Everyone’s so happy he doesn’t have the time to remind them to be on their guard. Loud Mimics are capable of swimming, just as long as they can hold their breaths, and sharks are still real threats.

Helpful Fish is silent beside him, and when he asks what’s wrong, they confess they’re scared of an all-out war.

Eridan chews on the thought for a few minutes. Well, he’s fought wars before. Besides, it’s a little unfair that fishes have to live in the fear of birds when the fishes can’t actually fight back, so he figures it’s time for a little upheaval.

Helpful Fish thanks him though, and a little while later, they’re swept up by the festivities.

Eridan keeps watch on the edge of the reef, mindful of sharks. They never come.

On the sixth day of the Loud Mimic - Fish Reef War, another annoying bird makes its presence
known. It’s a hugeass bird, and it looks like it shouldn’t be here, and it’s making Eridan panic at the implications of its presence, but Eridan chooses to ignore that in favor of slashing at a flock surrounding him with his claws. He hits one Loud Mimic deep and it falls into the water to be taken by his soldiers.

The Bird just floats above, watching him with those stupid aviators, looking like he’s not sure what to make of the situation.

Afternoon comes before the birds retreat, and the fishes, although not without casualties, return to the reef and celebrate.

“Are you,” starts the Big Annoying Orange Bird That Should Not Be Here, “Fighting seagulls?”

Eridan ignores him and jumps back into the water, diving form perfect.

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*It looks like the Mimics have gotten reinforcements,* Helpful Fish comments, looking up. It’s nighttime, but it’s a full moon, and Eridan is once again at the edge of the reef, overlooking the festivities. He’ll sleep later when everyone’s calmed down.

He looks up, and sees Big Orange Featherball glowing like a stupid beacon, clearly visible through the water.

“Nah, that’s not reinforcements,” he says.

*What is it, then?*

“Bigass birds who have no business bein’ere,” he says. The stupid ‘w’ wobbles again.

Helpful Fish says nothing else.

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“You are fighting seagulls, aren’t you?”

It’s the ninth day of the war, and the birds’ numbers are thankfully dwindling, although some are still fighting. They’ve even gotten other birds into the fight, the ones the fishes call Fliers, which is a dumb name, but Eridan understands as soon as he sees them weave around the fight majestically, adjusting their wings to glide and skim and pull up whenever they wish.

According to Winged Aviators, who has insisted on talking even though Eridan is busy tearing birds apart with his claws, the birds had approached him, saying that if the waterprey had been gifted a god, then perhaps they’d been given a god too. They’d tried to sweettalk him by complimenting his feathers and the fact that he looked like an orange soda, but he’d said that he was done with being a god and he was done with fights too, and from what had been relayed to him about the start of the fight, it looked like the birds were dicks.

They’d tried to justify that they were hunters, and the waterprey were their food, and so it was just nature.

Eridan flinches when Soda Pop says that, remembering Alternia, but he decides *fuck it.* Everyone in a war thinks they’re on the right side, and Eridan’s just decided his side is with his fishes, because
guess fuckin’ what, he’s a seadweller.

It’s a good thing The Floating Duck hasn’t decided to get in with the fight, because Eridan has no qualms about tearing him apart. They’re not friends. They’re not even acquaintances. Feathers and his friends were just entertainment for everyone on the meteor, and then wards, and then Eridan punched up. But still, this is Birds versus Fishes, and Eridan knows who he fights for.

So he fights, until the birds retreat, and Birdboy suspiciously flies up to join them. If he fights, Eridan will rip those wings off his back and find out if sprites really can die.

Helpful Fish’s happy little glubs seal the deal. They look so happy at the idea of not living in fear of predators anymore.

The day the birds announce their surrender, they’re in a middle of a bloody fight. The Fliers have taken to dropping rocks and have brought Carcass Scavengers with them, Eridan has wrestled not one but four of the Carcass birds out of the air, tearing their necks open as soon as he finds an opening. He’s hit a rock too many times, and he’s bleeding furious violet into the water.

A very old-looking bird has just landed on a rock, and Eridan’s about to launch himself at it when The Wingbeast Who Must Not Be Named stops him and tells him to listen, at the same time the birds that have accompanied the old-looking bird calls for the fight to cease (not that Eridan understands; they’re just squawking and then the action skids to a halt).

The birds stop attacking. Quickly reading cues, Eridan holds a hand up and signals for his fishes to stop fighting as well. They obey.

The old bird, who appears to be a chief of some sorts, declares that the birds have decided to surrender and that they were going to migrate onto another island, and they wished for the fishes to cease their attacks, and to not pursue them. Eridan, again, can’t understand bird-speak, but the Great Orange Thing In The Sky Which Is Sadly Not The Sun translates for him.

Eridan doesn’t buy it.

The other birds don’t, either, instead protesting, but Eridan snarls at them that they’re the ones who broke the truce in the first place.

Neonflaps agrees, and tells the birds that as their god, this is my decree and Eridan starts to sit, slightly horrified at the revelation that Shades Wonder has pulled the ‘god’ card on his subjects. While Eridan’s supporting the opinion that yes, the birds were at fault, and that their ‘god’ had every right to punish them for their faults, it’s kind of insulting that the fishes didn’t win the war out of their strength and intelligence, and instead had to get help from the bird god.

The birds obey their god’s commands, although not without complaining. Eridan tells his fishes to keep watch, because this might very well be a trap.

An Earth week – and Earth days are really, really fast – passes. And then another.

By the time Eridan runs out of creative names for the orange aspiring slam poet, he’s also spent an Earth week listening to said orange aspiring slam poet’s claims that the birds really are gone. So Eridan spends two days on the nearby island, cape and scarf and glasses on, trying to see if his sworn enemies are gone.
There are tinier birds on the island, but they appear to be uninterested with the fishes, instead just eating insects. When he gets home – **back to the reef, not home; not home, jegus grist** – Helpful Fish greets him, as they have been doing since a few days after the birds’ surrender has been announced, and being subjected to that hopeful face for .02 seconds is all it takes for him to break.

In his head, he hears something like a ping.

“The birds are gone,” he says, and listens to the entire reef go up in shouts of joy, bubbles of happiness everywhere, little fingerlings swimming round and round the corals.

Eridan huffs, gills opening to release a stream of bubbles.

*Oh, like you’re not happy,* Helpful Fish says, bumping against his cheek, *You’ve been exhausting yourself in the fight.*

And he has, but the action had taken his mind off of his predicament, stuck on Earth, and it’d given him something to finally, finally do after months of sitting on a meteor, after who knew how long in Somewhere Else, and after Whatever Had Happened To Him That He Couldn’t Remember.

He still does have wounds that are just healing. The advantage of seadwellers is that their wounds heal faster in the water, but at least he has war trophies.

“Guess I am,” Eridan says.

And he is. He is happy.

It gets maddeningly boring fast once the birds are gone. Eridan never liked them, he hates them, and if he had the equipment, he would be planning to wipe out the entire avian species at that exact moment, but sadly all he has is rock, kelp, and whatever else the forest lends him. He doesn’t want to talk to the Orange-Scented Abomination, and he doesn’t really have anything to do other than hunt and swim. As much as he loves that the sea isn’t trying to choke him in his sleep, he still misses riding around his Skyhorse.

So he does the next best thing. He builds a canoe.

He’s long figured out that everything on Earth is a watered-down version of everything in Alternia, so trees yield easily to his claws, and he shapes the parts of his canoe with ease. He yanks down vines (and the snakes that usually accompany them) and searches the entire island until he finds a vat of tar to seal the bottom of his boat. He gives up his scarf to make the sail.

Weeks later, he’s sailing off towards the horizon, remembering everything he’s learned about the ocean and navigating it. It’s not that different with Earth seas; the winds can still be harsh, and the currents are still wild in certain areas. He relies on the temperature of the water because he knows nothing of Earth’s astronomy. He memorizes landmarks so he can get back to the reef and the island. It’s no use getting lost on an unfamiliar planet. There might be humans somewhere, on other islands.

Once, just for fun, he hunts down a seal.

He stays out, sailing, for days on end, taking advantage of his tough skin and his tolerance for cold. When he returns, the fishes greet him like he’s royalty – which, he is. And he preens at the attention. Finally, being praised like he deserves.
Helpful Fish asks him what he’s been doing, and he’s quick to launch into a tale about his days of sailing, of battling the waves with a canoe that he’s built from scratch by himself, of seal-hunting, of harsh winds and even harsher waves.

“I think the little guy is trying to talk to me,” Strider Fruit-Flavored Edition says. He’s hovering just above the water, looking down at where Helpful Fish is, in fact, trying to talk to him.

Eridan adjusts the sails on his canoe, slightly irritated.

“Can’t understand you, little dude,” says the source of Eridan’s current annoyance. “I don’t speak fish.”

Clearly, Helpful Fish can understand the bird.

Eridan watches as they frown (best as a fish can) and turn to him instead. He stops tying his sails down.

_He’s a bird, Helpful Fish says, And apparently, I can’t talk to this bird, even though I thought he’d be like the Mimics or the Fliers or the Scavengers. Or like you. He’s just – bird._

If bird is the codeword for stupid, Eridan agrees.

_What is he? I know he’s a bird, but he looks like you? Only he glows._

“He does not look like me,” Eridan says, “For one, he’s human. Or part human. Part bird.”

“What are you two talking about?” Candyshades asks.

Eridan turns to him, then to the fish, and then huffs. “They want to know what you are.”

“Oh,” is the reply. Hesitation, then: “I’m a sprite.”

_What’s a sprite?_

“What’s a sprite,” Eridan translates. He returns to tying down the rest of his sail, and then starts to push the canoe towards the shore.

When he comes back to water, Helpful Fish is getting an explanation of what sprites are and what the game is, and they’re looking very, very confused.

“You have no idea what I’m talking about,” Cluckbeast Wings says, after a while.

Helpful Fish turns back to Eridan. Eridan grins as he wades deeper into the water, walking past his little charge and the ginormous bird they’re questioning. “He’s a mystic guide that’s supposed to help heroes on a journey,” he says, “Not that he’s a very good one.”

“Oh, you’re one to _talk,_” Featherflapper actually _squawks._

Eridan laughs as he dives down.

_Davesprite isn’t very much of a bird, is he?_
Eridan pauses swimming for a moment. He and Helpful Fish are going west of the reef at the moment, where actual seagrass is plenty and off ahead, migrating Silver Schools are moving in the current like an oil slick. He wants to watch it. He’s been told there will be carnage when the sharks and the dolphins arrive. Helpful Fish didn’t need to come, but they’d said that they’d always been curious about the Silver School migration.

“Davesprite?”

_That’s his name, Helpful Fish says, At least, that’s what he says his name is._

“You’re on a first-name basis with ‘im now?”

Helpful Fish lets out a stream of bubbles. _Pfft. I don’t have a name, so I can’t be on a first-name basis with him._

Eridan raises an eyebrow.

_You try growing up in a huge school of fishes, in an even bigger reef. Not everybody has time for names, your Highness, _ they say. Eridan still preens at the title.

“That’s too bad,” he says. He turns and continues on swimming.

_Do you have a name?_

“Of course I do. It’s – ” he pauses, thinking, but his mouth catches up with him first, “ – Eridan Ampora.”

Helpful Fish is silent for a while. They both continue off towards the direction of the migration, and Helpful Fish doesn’t speak until they’re only a few feet away from a tightly-packed school of silver fish, swimming fast. Predators will be here soon, and maybe Eridan will enjoy fighting with them just for the sake of fighting with them.

_Water-bearer, Helpful Fish says. Eridan thinks they’re talking about him._

Eridan wakes up in the middle of a bad storm, in the middle of a bad night, with a bad feeling rippling through the water. The stormclouds had rolled in earlier, and recognizing the signs of turbulent currents, the fishes had holed up in the reef, as deep and secluded as they can. The storm is bad enough to start churning the waters way below the waves, and every now and then Eridan can feel himself being rocked back and forth.

It’s not so bad for him, but it’s terrible for the fishes, who are weak enough to get dizzy and die from violent currents, and there’s always the possibility of rocks eroding and crushing the corals.

But the storm isn’t what wakes him up. It’s that bad feeling that makes him shudder, even underwater, and makes him feel like he’s being watched by a horrorterror, even if there’s nothing he can see for miles.

And then he does see something, except it’s not a horrorterror. It falls into the ocean with such a force that he can hear and feel the ripple it makes, and his fins flatten on the sides of his head. The thing has fallen deep, water resistance doing nothing for how hard it’s been thrown into the sea.

Eridan expects it’s a log or something, blown by the storm, but then the thing starts thrashing and...
starts trying to swim up against the rolling waters, and Eridan realizes it’s trying to swim.

He watches, confused, as the thing starts moving up and is pushed down by the currents again. There’s a bright orange glow above the water, an obvious beacon in the middle of the storm, and then that glow dives into the water as well.

That idiotic bird is trying to swim, and since he’s not being intangible at the moment that means his feathers are wet, and that means his wings are heavy, and that means he and whatever he’s trying to save are going to *drown*.

Can sprites drown? Eridan isn’t sure.

Just as Eridan expects, both the bird and the thing – person? – he’s trying to save go down like a pile of rocks, and even with sluggish flapping of wings, there’s nothing both of them can do against the currents. Eridan has seconds to decide what to do.

The question is, why does he have to decide? It’s not like they’re friends or –

What if it’s one of his friends.

He and the bird were dropped here for some reason, so there’s every possibility that this is one of his friends; maybe it’s even Rose, which would explain the bird’s reaction, but what if it’s one of the trolls, what if it’s –

He doesn’t finish the thought and instead just swims as fast as he can towards the drowning figures. He’s more used to turbulent waters than they are, and uses the currents to his advantage when he can and darts in the water whenever he can’t. He reaches his targets and wraps his arms around the bird’s companion, and Davesprite catches sight of him and understands. The sprite turns intangible, effectively getting all the water off of him but also letting go of his load, and shoots up until he breaks through the water without a splash.

Eridan takes half a minute to breach the surface. His cargo takes in a huge gulp of air and almost chokes on it.

When he’d spent days trying to find materials to build his canoe, he’d found several places on the island that were of use – the hot spring near the volcano, the vat of tar and the cove just on the other side of the island. He heads there now, fighting against the waves that are harsher way up the water and the downpour of rain so thick he can’t see anything. Davesprite appears to know where he’s heading as well, and makes sure to stay close by them so they can use his glow.

They’re violently thrown onto shore by the waves, and Eridan accidentally lets go of the person in his arms as they wash up on the rocks. Eridan shakes the water off – which does nothing because of the rain – and hears a loud cough, and then the sound of someone throwing water up.

Davesprite’s glow is the only light source he has to find the person he’s rescued, and he sees short blonde hair, dark blue god tier pajamas, and the complexion of someone who has almost drowned.

He’s slightly disappointed that it’s not one of his friends. Davesprite is hovering over what is obviously a human, wings spread above her, tangible again.

Eridan motions them towards the cove. “Move,” he says, “Before the wind breaks your wings off.”

The human raises her head – and Eridan’s never seen pinker eyes before, not even Fef’s, that he almost kneels down on instinct – before Davesprite helps her get up, saying, “Roxy – Roxy, come on, we have to get out of the storm.”
This is how Eridan Ampora meets Roxy Lalonde.

Some of the corals are destroyed in the morning. Plenty of them wash up on shore.

“How many died?” Eridan asks.

Helpful Fish doesn’t look too happy. *A lot.*

“How many?”

*They’re still trying to see if the ones who are so dizzy are going belly-up.*

“Oh.”

That’s a little morbid, really, but it’s nothing that fazes him.

He forgets to ask, come the afternoon, and instead roams the shore for whatever washes up. There’s plenty of coral branches, a few shells, and a bunch of twigs from the storm. He finds crabs scuttling everywhere, a few lying on their back and trying to get up.

Eventually he takes pity on the little things and rights them on their feet, sending them on their way into the water. They clack their claws in appreciation. Eridan snorts. Karkat would love Earth crabs.

“Hey.”

That’s – he turns around a bit, to see Davesprite and, Roxy, was it? Davesprite and Roxy are standing behind him. Davesprite is hovering, just like he always does, and Roxy looks marginally better than a drowned cat.

“Thanks,” she says, and in the light her eyes are painfully pink and bright, and Eridan almost kneels again. He wonders if that shade of pink would be higher than Fef’s, or if it’s cullbait. It’s too bright. Probably cullbait, but still.

He shrugs, instead. He finds another crab and helps it up.

*Clack, clack, clack,* its claws go.

Eridan pushes it with a finger. “Just go.”

Another round of clacking.

“Just go before I throw you into the ocean.”

The crab seems to laugh, although unlike fishes, crabs can’t laugh. They just shuffle on their feet and then retreat into the sea. That’s exactly what this crab does.

Eridan watches it go.

In the middle of Somewhere Else, Karkat Vantas screams at someone who is rather peeved at having only a dark green pen as a writing utensil.
friendly reminder that eridan ampora is an incredibly intelligent, bloodthirsty orphaner who loves history and is more than just a wimpy, affection-seeking shade that some fanfics love writing him as :)

Chapter End Notes
Eridan’s opinion on magic is that it’s so obviously fake, but Roxy Lalonde smiles as she hovers over
the water and pulls a scarf out of thin air. It’s the same shade of Eridan’s blood, and he wonders if
it’s coincidence or if she’s trying to say something.

He’s only got the top half of his head above the water, nose still under; there’s a stream of bubbles
when he opens the gills on his neck, something resembling an unimpressed sigh, and the water
gurgles and splashes at his cheeks.

Helpful Fish is impressed, and that makes Eridan even more unimpressed. He really just wants to go
sailing again, but unfortunately, Lalonde has taken interest in his makeshift canoe, which is
thankfully only slightly battered by the storm.

He needs to fix it, but Lalonde’s hovering around it, and he doesn’t want to fix it while she’s
hovering around it. He finds he doesn’t want to talk to a lot of people nowadays, and it helps that
there’s only two around, but they’re annoying as hell.

Davesprite is nowhere to be seen, so he’s probably on the island again.

What is she doing? Helpful Fish asks as Lalonde pulls a slab of wood out of thin air.

“I actually have no idea,” Eridan says, and with his mouth being too close to the surface, his voice is
distorted by the air bubbles that escape him. Helpful Fish giggles. It sounds like a poor imitation of a
gun rapidly firing bullets underwater, or crudely put, it sounds like a \textit{brrrrrruuuuuuuuuuub}.

Eventually, she floats away from his canoe, taking her assortment of scarves and wooden panels with
her, and Eridan tries not to leap out of the water and grab his boat, lest he seem too eager. Instead, he
swims over and pushes it onto the sand and starts checking for things that need to be replaced.

“I’m guessin’ you’ve been here long enough to be able to make that boat,” Roxy says.

The sail definitely needs replacing, but that was sadly his only scarf. Maybe he can weave something
out of the leaves. Laughable. Leaves would break once assaulted by the winds. He can replace
anything made out of wood just fine, but the sail is a problem. Maybe his coat will do?

“And Dave – Davesprite? Still weird calling him that – says you got into a war with the birds or
something. I don’t see any birds anymore, which is apparently from you and the lil’ fishes fighting
them off.” She giggles. “He says there were seagulls first, and then albatrosses, and then vultures – I don’t know what half of that means. Asterisk, I don’t know what all of them mean. What the fuck is a bird, even.”

Nothing comes up. He hadn’t watched Lalonde when she played the game, not like the other set of humans. He wasn’t around, that was most likely a better term to put it, but he doubts the others had time to watch her and her friends play the game either. Not with him rampaging around with a glowstick and whatever else happened on that meteor.

Helpful Fish can’t go near the shore, although they still try and watch what Eridan’s doing.

“You can talk to fishes, right?” Lalonde asks.

Eridan lets out a sigh before he can think of it, and he opens his mouth to tell her to fuck off – and then stops. He doesn’t know why, but he thinks of Karkat, and Karkat tells people to fuck off all the time, but he doesn’t really mean it. Not with Eridan anyway. With Eridan, he’s always ready to talk, ready to listen, and Eridan would rather jump in a lava pit first (and with Earth-softness, he’d probably survive; he went up to the volcano on the island once, just for fun) before he admits it, but he does miss that.

Instead he says, “Yeah. I can talk to fishes.”

He doesn’t turn to her, but he thinks he can feel her radiate giddiness at the chance to talk to someone else.

“Do you hear words?” Lalonde asks, “Or are they just glub-glub or something?”

Eridan snorts, and then laughs, cutting himself off right after. What an awful noise.

“That’s offensive,” he says, glancing at Helpful Fish who squirts a stream of water in the air to indicate they’ve been listening to the conversation, “And of course it’s words, or what passes for it. All languages are composed of words, even though to the untrained and ignorant ear, it sounds like incoherent noise, or vibrations, or a pulse of feeling.”

That line, he’d recited from Alternian Language over the Sweeps.

“Can you teach me to speak fish?”

Eridan tries very, very hard not to laugh this time and almost fails, but he’s a great Orphaner who knows how to control himself, so he wins that struggle. “I don’t think human physiology is equipped to feel vibrations in the water and tell it apart,” he says, “Or identify the nuances in bubbles.”

Helpful Fish is cackling.

Roxy is too, and when he turns towards her, she’s clutching her stomach, thankfully already god-tiered and possibly sturdy enough to not need to breathe. “You’re shitting me.”

“I am not.”

“Fuck,” she says, sucks in a breath, and then laughs again. “Bubbles.”

“If you ain’t traumatized by the water, you can have a look for yourself.” He motions towards the sea.

Roxy hesitates then, and he confirms what he’s been expecting since the night she fell into the ocean
and undeniably broke all of her bones and still tried to thrash around to save herself. Brave girl.

“Maybe another time,” Roxy says.

It’s not a promise, and Eridan doesn’t want it to be.

Eridan figures out what Roxy is trying to do a few days later, when she pulls a goddamn boat out of thin air.

It’s small, almost like a wriggler’s first boat, made of reeds and stuff, and it definitely needs a bit more work if it’s going to float on the ocean, because clearly, Roxy’s never worked with actual boats before, but it’s a boat.

Davesprite whistles.

The boat flops down on the water with a wet slap, Roxy hunching in on herself from exhaustion. She watches as the boat almost sinks and is only saved by Davesprite holding one end of it. The other end is still slowly sinking.

“Tar,” Eridan says, setting up a new sail, courtesy of Roxy. Maybe being friends with her isn’t too bad, considering she can literally pull things out of thin air. “Coat the bottom of it. Else the water’s gonna get in.”

“Won’t it get sticky?” Roxy asks.

“Let it dry, ya idiot,” Eridan says, “And then cover it with a layer of tree bark or something. The fibers of those – ” he points to a cluster of coconut trees, although he doesn’t know what they’re called yet and Davesprite will tell him in the future “ – are good for covering tar. And then slap another wooden panel on it. Something. The wood that little boat is made of is thin as hell. You’ll need to thicken it without making it too heavy.”

“How long have you worked with boats?” Davesprite asks.

“Long as you’ve been wearing ‘shades’,” he says.

Roxy never does learn how to make boats, but she’s content with skimming over the water, making use of her godtier powers. She doesn’t dive in, and Eridan thinks it’s just her trying to tell herself that the water can’t hurt her. That she’s okay, and as long as she can fly, she’s not going to drown.

Eridan, of course, doesn’t invite her along for sailing. This is his hobby for now.

And since he doesn’t invite her along for sailing, she occupies herself with something else, which is building a hive in the middle of the island.

Eridan comes back from days of being out in the open sea (he’d wrestled with an orca, rode on the back of a blue whale, and then dived as far as he could go, trying to test how much Earth’s water pressure differs from Alternia – it turns out, not much, and he’d swam up as fast as he could once it felt like he was going to get flattened) and finds a huge, white and pink thing sticking out of the forests. A light – bubblegum pink, of course – flickers from it, and he tries to keep his jaw on him
when he realizes it’s TrollMorse for Hey Eridan.

Helpful Fish tells him Roxy just finished building the hive (although the term they’d used was *dryland reef*) yesterday, and that she’d pulled things out of thin air like she always does, and collected washed-up sea shells and corals from the sand.

*Come on up,* the makeshift lighthouse blinks at him.

Eridan spends half an hour thinking before he pushes his canoe onto shore and makes his way up the island.

Roxy hasn’t levelled any trees or paved the grounds, but instead has built her hive around them, so it’s effectively a tree-hive of sorts, with its white and pink walls, and pastel pink ropes and ladders. An advantage of being a Rogue of Void (he hadn’t asked, but she’d told him) is that you never want anything, instead taking them out of nothing.

Roxy looks exhausted though, dark circles under her eyes, which is saying something because godtiers don’t need to sleep. She’s created clothes and furniture for herself, even pulled out (questionable) food, but if Eridan has to guess, it’s not out of necessity, but out of boredom. And the need to do something before she starts missing her friends. He knows the feeling. He’s been there. He’s still there.

Davesprite, or maybe just Dave, Eridan doesn’t really care, is lounging around with a bottle of apple juice.

“Nice, huh?” Roxy asks, spreading her arms around in a flourish.

“You need sleep,” Eridan says.

She pouts at him. It reminds him of Fef. “You’re no fun, Eri,” she says, and Eridan twitches, which is clearly her goal since she laughs. Eridan hopes she busts out a lung.

“Everything here’s solar too,” she says, once she’s finished laughing. “There’s no mountains around us or anything, and it’s so bright, so at least all that sunlight’s put to good use.”

“You’re not used to daylight?” Eridan asks. Humans were diurnal, weren’t they?

Roxy shrugs. “Not this much sun. I have no idea where in the ocean you’d have to be, to be on a lone island with so much sun.”

“This is Earth,” Eridan says, “You don’t know where we are?”

“Earth’s huge, dude,” Davesprite says, shrug mirroring Roxy’s so much Eridan is confused for a second, “And I was a city kid. I’m used to high-rise buildings, not high-rise trees. Or oceans.”

“I’m used to oceans. Being surrounded by them, anyway,” Roxy says. A brief look of fear passes by her face. “But I couldn’t really leave home. And half the islands had sunk at that time.”

Eridan doesn’t understand. He doesn’t ask.

Roxy plasters on a smile and stretches her arms. She needs to sleep. “Anyone want to play a board game?”

“You’re bad at board games,” Davesprite tells her with a smile on his face.

“Oh, hush, Davey, I’ll learn,” she says, “I just didn’t have anyone to practice with before.”
The thing in the lighthouse is a gigantic pink flashlight. Eridan does not even want to know how Roxy’s imagination formed this, because a Rogue’s imagination is the limit. But it’s there, and she can turn it off and on at any time. She takes to signaling at him whenever he’s by the water, as she’s decided that she’s better off in the island. He understands. Drowning isn’t easy for landdwellers. They always struggle too much.

*Hey Eri,* says the lighthouse when he’s in the water that night, sitting on a rock and looking up at a bright full moon.

Davesprite has said that it would be best if she didn’t use the lighthouse too much because it exhausts her and they might attract something else looking from the skies – Earth press is vicious, he’d explained, and until they knew where they were and what version of Earth they were on, it was imperative they didn’t draw attention to themselves – but Roxy still uses it sometimes at night, just to piss Eridan off, knowing he can’t shout that well. Karkat would be useful right now. And maybe a little entertaining if Roxy ever got to signaling *Hey Kitkat* at him.

She can’t see or hear him, but Eridan runs a hand over his face, sighs and says, “What.”

*Wanna come up for a sleepover?* Asks the light.

“The fuck is a sleepover?” he mutters.

Roxy just says, *Come on, it’ll be fun,* because she can’t really hear him. When he doesn’t come up, she keeps on blasting *Eri Eri Eri,* making sure to pause in between to get the point across.

He jumps off the rock and goes to shore. Davesprite is already at the tree-hive and gives Eridan a wave with newly-painted nails. They’re a glittery green.

“The fuck is a sleepover?” Eridan repeats, and Roxy grins wide. She hands him a towel and once he’s dried off, lets him sit down on the pink and violet carpet. All three of them are surrounded by hollowed-out pumpkins, placed all over furniture, insides replaced with candles as a source of light. There are so many pumpkins, some of them even tied to the ceiling, that the room is very well-lit even though Roxy hasn’t turned on any of the electricity-fed lights. Davesprite’s glow is helping.

“She wanted Halloween early,” Davesprite says. Roxy and Eridan both say they have no idea what Halloween is, although Roxy sounds giddy in contrast to Eridan’s deadpan.

When Roxy brings a comb and runs it through Eridan’s hair, he almost runs. Dave snorts, and the blow to his pride is enough to make him stay, especially when Roxy points out that his hair has been getting longer, the purple dye has washed out, and his hair is getting brittle and light from spending too much time at sea.

He lets her treat it and dry it off. It does feel a little softer after, even if he still can feel the brittleness. Months out in the sea when he’s used to being on land (when he was on Alternia) will do that. Maybe he’ll adapt eventually. He still *is* a seadweller.

Roxy plays with his hair – putting it in a ponytail, styling it into a Mohawk, letting it mirror Dave’s own hairstyle (and he’d put his foot down at that) – chatting all the while. He finds it hard to understand half of what she’s saying, Earth-terms and all, but ends up arguing with her on the validity of wizards while Davesprite sits back with his now-dried glittery nails and sips his apple juice.
Eventually she cuts his hair for him. She doesn’t have any dye, doesn’t even know how dye works because the apocalypse doesn’t spare special hair products, not even if the Condesce jumpstarts said apocalypse, so he has to deal with all-black hair. It’s fine. His head’s lighter and his hair’s not going to poke into his eyes when he gets wet.

He lets Roxy paint his nails pink, starting up another argument about magic while Davesprite referees. They all fall asleep on her couch.

In all honesty, living in a waterlogged earth should have put her off huge bodies of water forever, but it didn’t kick in how much she hated the ocean until she almost drowned in it.

She can still feel it, being hurtled through the air and straight into turbulent waters, her bones breaking upon impact. The only thing saving her from death was the better resistance and physiological structure that godtiers have. Leave your mortal bodies and ascend indeed. They were still mortal, under Justice or Martyrdom, but they could heal faster and were sturdier than regular human beings, not that Roxy has met regular human beings before.

It would have been a stupid death, and she would have revived, but she’d thrashed in the water nonetheless, trying not to drown. Her limbs screamed, but her survival instincts screamed harder, and she’d cried under the water.

And then Dave came – Dave, Davesprite, she doesn’t care – and tried to pull her out; his wings were too heavy and he was going to drown too, but for the life of Roxy, she couldn’t tell him to leave. She didn’t want to drown.

Eridan grabbed her and swam her to shore. She decided the next morning she wanted to be friends. He hadn’t been very open at first, but Roxy knows how to spot a person who just wants to talk to someone and have them listen; she’s spent enough time looking in the mirror. He hasn’t been rude thus far, only just tries to ignore her, always with that little helper fish of his. Davey had explained a few things to her and she’d laughed so hard she started crying. (And then she wouldn’t stop, and Davey had to hug her until she calmed down.)

Eventually he laughs at something she says, and Roxy does a little victory dance in her head. It’s easier to get him to talk after that, and Roxy observes him whenever she can – he loves the ocean and he’s good with boats, and he loves the fishes and loves a good fight; he can be at sea for days on end and come back glowing, like he’s not tired at all, like he’s found the love of his life in the waves and the endless blue stretching out to the horizon and doesn’t care if he’s exhausted.

Roxy had been like that, once. Or she thinks so. It’s hard to remember through the haze of the Condesce and the game.

But she is nothing but persistent, and Davey smiles at her for her efforts and helps, and eventually time finds all three of them on her couch, Eridan’s hair newly trimmed, Dave’s nails painted green, and Roxy tired but happy and sober.

She wouldn’t trade it for the world.

She hates the ocean, so she goes exploring with Dave (Davesprite? Who cares. She’ll call him Dave.
He hates being called Davey.) sometimes. He shows her around the parts of the island that he knows, and once, they fly up to the volcano and look down at the mouth of it. Roxy has the sudden impulse to jump. She doesn’t. Instead they go back down and try to find as many snakes as they can. A few snap at Dave’s wings, but he flaps at them with enough force to send the little crawlers flying back.

Roxy chuckles. She finds a few friendly snakes that wrap around her shoulders until they prove to be not so friendly and try to squeeze her throat.

“I read them from picture books when I was younger,” she tells Dave once they’re out of the forest, tired and sweating from flying so fast. “I’ve never seen them up close.”

“Never seen them up close either,” Dave says, “Zoos maybe, whenever I could, which wasn’t a lot of times.”

“Never seen birds either – small ones, anyway,” she says.

Dave puffs his chest out and spreads his wings.

“Yeah, you’re a pretty bird, Davey. Don’t let it get to your head,” she says, plucks his aviators off his face and sets them on her nose. Bright orange eyes stare at her, and there it is again, that urge to cry.

She smiles instead and flies off. Dave chases her for his shades.

“I’m not Dave,” Dave tells her one night, both of them sitting on the roof of her treehouse – her treehouse, built by her own hands and her own powers and her own exhaustion, and she’s proud of it – looking up at the sky. The moon’s just gone through its phases again, and it’s nowhere to be seen, only just a faint outline in the clear skies. Somewhere below them, Eridan is sleeping by the reef.

Roxy turns to Dave, confused.

“I’m not Dave,” he repeats, “I was once. I’m not anymore. Not the Alpha Dave, anyway.”

“Still Dave,” she says.

“Mo – Roxy,” he says, tired.

“Still Dave,” she insists. When he looks like he’s about to argue, she tells him this story: “I had a friend; a cherub. Her name was Calliope. In her session, the session that crossed into ours, she died. She met Jade and Janey there, in that place, wherever the dead go when they die but not really. And she met herself too. Another version of her. One that was a fully realized Muse of Space.”

Dave stays silent as she turns to him, and Roxy smiles, feeling her heart break in two as she watches the dulled glow around him. “Guess what? She was still Calliope. Both of them were still Calliope. My Calliope and the other Calliope. Different versions and different circumstances, but the same identity. Get me?”

She tucks a strand of hair behind his ear. “Dave or Davesprite, whatever you want to be called so that nobody gets confused when there’s two of you in the same room, you’re still Dave,” she says.

He shakes his head.

Stubborn. She certainly knows who it reminds her of. “Nope. You’re Dave Strider all the way. With
bonus wings, but hey, it’s an improvement.” She giggles when he frowns at her. “Fuck’s sake, Davey, you still call me mom sometimes.”

Dave almost turns into a bright pink (although only succeeds in looking like a failed mixture of orange and pink; he’s not even red orange) as Roxy throws her head back and laughs.

“The other you – met him once, good kid – does that too. See? You’re both Dave,” she says. It doesn’t seem to be the proper thing to say, because the glow around him dulls further. She sighs and moves to fully face him. “If I met another version of me, she’s still Roxy too. Doesn’t make either of us any less.”

“I don’t feel like Dave,” he says.

“Because you’re trying to be the other Dave?” she asks.

He stiffens.

Roxy sighs. “All my life I wanted to follow my mother’s footsteps,” she says.

Nobody knows this story. Not even Dirk, who had lived on the same waterlogged planet as her, who idolized his ‘brother’ as much Roxy idolized her ‘mother’. Dirk, too busy being too many people at once. Dirk, who shattered into a thousand pieces of himself for his trouble. Roxy can’t pick that many pieces up.

But she can help Dave. Dave’s not a splinter, but he’s starting to be. She doesn’t want to see him destroyed like her best friend.

So she says, “All my life I wanted to follow a mother I never knew.”

She says, “I wanted to follow the watered-down, glorified version of a woman who never raised me.”

She says, “I tried my best, really did. Read all of her work and constantly asked myself, what would mom do, and when I felt like I did something wrong, I cried until it felt like my lungs were too tight and I couldn’t breathe.”

She doesn’t blame her mom. After all, the woman couldn’t be around for her because she fought for Roxy’s future. Fought for the chance of a world without an oppressor and died for it. She was a goddamn hero.

(Roxy did blame her, for a while. She made up stories and saw the alcohol in the house and thought You’re daring me, I know you are, and she imagined her mother lurking in the shadows, telling her she loved her but pushing her to do things she knew Roxy would do but had to practice self-restraint in order not to fall for her mother’s antics. Maybe Roxy was projecting passive-aggressiveness on her.)

If Roxy blames anyone it’s the people who chronicled her mother’s exploits, because they’d painted her as an infallible, indestructible hero that Roxy now refuses to believe in. Heroes are great, but heroes also suck in equal measure. They mess up and run into fights too big for them to win, and create a doomed timeline that they rush to change, and sometimes they don’t even want to change them and instead just want to join everyone in the afterlife.

She knows her mother is not perfect, and probably had more drinking issues than she ever did, but her younger self didn’t know that. Her mother was perfect. Her mother was ideal. Her mother was someone she imagined rocking her to sleep, singing her lullabies, kissing her forehead when tucking
her in bed. And she wanted that mother. She idolized that mother.

For Skaia’s sake, she’d tried to resurrect the woman.

But she knows better now. She’s drowned her sorrows in alcohol and laughed her emptiness away and she’s risen above all of that. She’s lost her mother twice and buried her daughter once, and she’s lost on a planet that’s supposed to be hers but never was.

And she knows who she is. She is Roxy Lalonde, Rogue of Void, she likes bubblegum pink and games and computers, and she hates the ocean with a vicious fervor, and she’s lost on Earth but she doesn’t care.

So she says, “I got lost trying to follow her. And then I realized that I was going to get nowhere trying to be anyone but myself.” She pauses, letting a comfortable silence settle over her and Dave. Pauses are important too. Life is loud enough at times. “From your timeline, I was someone else too. But I’m not trying to be her. I’m just me. We might both be Roxy, and we both are Roxy, but – different versions, different circumstances.”

Dave is silent for a while. Roxy turns away respectfully, giving him his privacy.

Eventually, he responds by hugging her sideways awkwardly, arms around her torso, almost falling on her lap. She gently puts an arm around him and pretends she doesn’t hear him trying to muffle his sobs.

“We’re so fucked up,” he says, so softly Roxy almost doesn’t hear it.

She places a hand on his head and strokes his hair. “Yeah,” she says, “So fucked up.”

She builds Dave his own room. He wants it in light orange. She giggles and makes his blocks for him. He tells her it makes their treehouse look like a goddamn candy store and she tells him she has no idea what that is, but it sounds amazing, even though the most prominent memory she has about candy is Jane’s cursed Juju.

Eridan doesn’t exactly thank her when she offers him a room, but she can tell he’s grateful by the awed look he gives the space, all black and violet, just like he likes it. Since he likes striped scarves as much as she does, she’s taken the liberty of making him a few. He takes to leaving things in his room, even though he says that he’s not really going to find a use for it and her efforts are appreciated (ah, victory dance) but not necessary.

Dave snickers and counts the seashells lining the desk placed beside the window, all handpicked by Eridan.

When she’s not flying around the island or jumping off of trees for fun (and trying to see how high she can push it until she gives Dave a heart attack – it never works because he knows she’s a godtier), she dresses up in her best pajamas and curls up by the window in her living room, looking over the jungle.

There are no carapacians here. No humans either. But it’s nice, and she’s got friends and she sees them face to face, already a better life than she had on her old Earth. There’s no threat that’s trying to kill them, and while she knows she’ll have to talk about the obvious soon – what version of Earth they’re on and where the others are and what they can do about it – she just wants to savor this peace. Pauses are important.
So she makes pink ropes and makes zipline systems all over the jungle, even making one that connects to a pointy rock in the middle of the ocean just so Eridan can try zipping down from a tree and straight into the water. She visits the cove she was thrown onto when she almost drowned. She tries to talk to the fishes and birds, because it’s no fair that Eridan and Dave can talk to animals but she can’t, and fails. She tries to build boats and succeeds in making toys instead. She flies up as high as she can into the air and pretends that her lungs are getting squeezed the further up she goes, and drops down like a rock before pulling up at the last minute, whooping at the thrill of it all.

She sits down besides Dave and tells him funny stories of her thousands of cats, of her carapace neighbors, of her pumpkin-stealing days. When he’s sleepy enough (and he never is, but he humors her), he lets her play with his hair, taking a lock of it and twirling it around. She doesn’t take off his shades without his permission again. She laughs everytime he almost calls her ‘mom’.

She creates apple juice and blank books and pink glitter pens, she plays with her lighthouse and pisses Eridan off with the Morse Eri Eri Eri, she calls the boys over every now and then and paints their nails, she argues magic and wizards and video games and guns. She lives.

(She misses Jane and Jake and Dirk and Rose and Callie, wants to get to know Dave – red Dave – Jade and John. She doesn’t tell Eridan what she remembers of Erisolsprite or the other trolls. She wants her friends but this is all she has and she’s tired.)

It’s a good deal she’s been handed though, so she doesn’t question it. There will come a time, she thinks. But later. Later. That all comes later.

When she feels that cloud of wrongness spread over the jungle, even when the skies are clear, she still thinks it will come later. When she feels the void stir deep in her gut, because she’s always well-versed with the nothingness, always well-acquainted with emptiness, always good friends with the absence of light, she hopes it will come later. When she sees something fall out of the sky, like a shot-down bird (and thinks, oh god, Dave – Dave no, please don’t be Dave, please be something else) she begs it to come later.

And she’s not wrong. It will come later.

But she does fly over as fast as she can towards that little black shape, and catches Dirk’s familiar shades, red circuits visible through the black glass, in her hands as she meets it halfway in the sky.

The red circuits light up and Roxy places the glasses on her nose immediately, mind racing, questions running by too fast for her to catch up, weighing out the choices of staying with her quiet little life and the small chance of chasing down a coincidence.

AR flashes red text across the screen.

Hey, Rox.

Chapter End Notes

FUN FACT: The ocean is very close to my house! Also, as a child, I spent a lot of time living by the sea. And I do mean /by the sea/. No joke, if you step out the front door,
you're immediately facing the beach. So I've been on boats and have seen people make toy boats and tried to remember what they did, and if you can find a natural tar source (quicksand or something), it's really useful for waterproofing things provided you don't get in trouble while getting tar.

(ALTHOUGH it might not have been tar and i might just not know the english word for it, and if that's the case, i apologize and let's pretend this works for this universe)

also fun fact: love the sea and its uniqueness. wouldn't swim in it if you bribed me. (have you seen what's under there? like wow no.)

another fun fact: if you're confused as to what sound Helpful Fish makes, it does sound like a machine gun, and it's based off of the weird noises I make for no reason.
“What the fuck am I looking at here?” Tony Stark asks as he stands in front of the hologram that’s showing – well.

“They appear to be mutation strings, sir.”

“Yes, but what the fuck am I looking at here?”

Mutation strings, just like JARVIS told him, but there’s almost an entire wall of them, just continuously altering codes and then realtering codes, some of them even trying to take over his controls.

On another screen, JARVIS shows him a list of viruses that can be potentially released (along with a small army of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s finest IT personnel and possibly a helicopter full of agents) if he ever made a misstep, and he hasn’t, because he’s Tony Stark, but what he’s focusing on is the fact that this type of security is not S.H.I.E.L.D’s usual style. They find hackers and chase the little upstarts out of their system and into a holding cell.

This wall of mutation strings isn’t even the first wall Tony’s encountered.

He runs a hand over his face and mutters ‘hell’ under his breath. Whatever S.H.I.E.L.D is trying to hide, they’re going all out in trying to hide it. Steve is right to be suspicious of the little fuckers.

“How many landmines are you going to step on until you get chased out of there again?” he asks.

JARVIS pulls up another screen and displays a list of malwares, some serious enough to incapacitate Stark Tower’s functions for a few hours. This is S.H.I.E.L.D they are talking about after all, and Tony’s handpicked some of the programmers they have, clever little insomniacs who deserved a lot more than sitting in decrepit college dorms crying into their coffee cups. He knew it was going to bite him in the ass, he just didn’t think it was going to be this soon.

“Take a break, JARVIS,” he says instead, waving a hand for the holograms to flicker out of
existence. JARVIS says, “Very good, sir,” and Tony barely notices it as he heads out to get some alcohol. He can feel a headache coming on.

He can always manually deal with the strings, like a normal person does, but Tony Stark finds it insulting to be roped in with the rest of the masses and besides, JARVIS is faster. Also besides, when JARVIS gets rid of one string, three more take its place, and it’s not only a cracking game, it’s a race to see whether the wall can build faster or if the strings can be destroyed first.

He almost gets a bottle of tequila before settling for the sixpack in the fridge. He picks the entire thing up and returns to the lab, cracking open a can and drinking it without pausing to breathe. He grabs a tablet and goes through what JARVIS has found so far.

Missing person reports, personal records, lists of social media accounts, dubious traffic cam footage – he’s got a lot to sift through. JARVIS has pointed out things to him, but it never hurts to be just a bit thorough, especially now that he’s seen what S.H.I.E.L.D. is willing to sink to, to protect their precious files. Mutation strings he can understand, redirections he can understand, trackers he can understand, but malware? And an unholy amount of popup ads? Plus videos found in the mucks of Youtube?

Definitely not S.H.I.E.L.D.’s usual MO. Possible, but not commonplace, so either they got one of Tony’s recruits to do the security on these files or they’re that desperate to hide it. Or, they knew exactly who was going to try and hack into these files.

He frowns.

“JARVIS, look for other files that are encrypted the same way as The Great Wall of Mutation Strings,” he says. JARVIS tells him his assent and gets to work.

Kids, Steve had told him. Mutant kids, but still kids. Christ, what is S.H.I.E.L.D. thinking, that a couple of missing children is worth smoothing out paranoia? This is apparently why the Safehouse, which is run mostly by mutant kids, doesn’t want S.H.I.E.L.D. within a fifty meter radius of them. Tony can understand. Hell, Tony’s a little pissed. Defend the Earth, his ass.

He cracks open another beer can and downs that like he did the other.

There are about thirty-two missing kids he’s known about so far. He doesn’t know if there are others, but there most likely are, and there’s probably another five or so missing at this moment, newly abducted, and that’s just in New York. S.H.I.E.L.D. operates in other parts of the world as well.

There’s a pattern though. Most of the kids he’s read up on have publicly displayed their powers. Not maliciously, of course, as others have just displayed their powers by accident while some have just shown off to their friends. A few, like two of the thirty-two Tony’s got intel on, have visible mutations they can’t really help. They’re all kids with homes and parents, so he’s got records out of them. Steve had said that homeless kids were being taken too.

He checks the traffic cam footage JARVIS has given him. There’s nothing suspicious in the footage, and that’s exactly it. The streets are mostly empty, or dark, and the video is just being looped, obviously to cover up whatever is actually happening. There’s no reason for the government to investigate this, of course, especially not if S.H.I.E.L.D. is behind this, but just in case, they’d looped the feeds.

Social media accounts are all filled with worried messages from the missing kids’ friends. Personal records are useful in identifying who is who, but that’s about it. Aside from distraught parents and anxious loved ones, there’s nothing else for Tony to go on, and if he goes around asking questions,
word will spread, because he’s Tony Stark and he’s hardly inconspicuous, and then he’s going to be answering to Nick Fury. This would, of course, confirm the theory that S.H.I.E.L.D. is responsible for the mutant disappearances.

Confirm. Funny. It hasn’t crossed his mind that it could have been someone other than S.H.I.E.L.D.

Worst comes to worst, he can sift through internet forums.

This is why he’s an engineer and not a detective. Detective work is for people in huge coats and fedoras, smoking pipes and running around with magnifying glasses, hiding behind monochrome television screens, dialogue supplemented with jazz music in the background.

“Sir?”

He blinks. He hasn’t noticed JARVIS has been speaking to him for a while now. He opens another can of beer. He’s too sober for this shit.

“Yeah?”

“I’ve found three files surrounded by the same type of security as The Great Wall of Mutation Strings.”

“Pull ‘em up.”

JARVIS lets three different holograms flicker in view, all of them displaying scripts generating faster than the human eye can make sense of. The text just looks like excitable little worms, wriggling around.

“No weak links?”

“As far as I can tell, sir.”

Tony absolutely does not huff like a petulant child.

“However, I’ve found a report that’s linked to one of the files, sir.”

Tony leans forward, listening.

“It’s been deleted – ”

Ugh.

“— but not as thoroughly as they’d like. I’ve managed to recover it.”

Tony forgets he has a beer can in hand and claps his hands together, resulting in him nearly crushing the can and sloshing beer all over himself. Better to make it look like he’d meant for that to happen. So he says, “Let’s see it, then.”

JARVIS’ sigh sounds like static. Tony ignores it in favor of a bigger screen coming to view while the three feeds of the mutation scripts are minimized. Tony reads silently before he leans back in his seat and raises an eyebrow.

“This is from a while back.”

September 2011, the file is dated.
“Yes, it is, sir.”

Ignoring his A.I.’s cheekiness is par for the course. “S.H.I.E.L.D.’s been at this for more than a year, then. What’s the nearest big event this can be tied to – Thor? After Thor, right? New Mexico and the Hammer of Truth? Unless finding Cap counts. I don’t think it counts. He was just found.”

“Yes, sir,” JARVIS says, then, after a while, “It seems there’s another file sir, similarly deleted, but still recoverable.”

“Connected to this one?”

“It appears so.”

JARVIS shrinks the file’s window down so that another one can be placed beside it. Tony reads it, and decides one eyebrow isn’t enough for this revelation. “This one is reported four months and thirteen days after that one. Anything else?”

JARVIS takes a few more minutes, and in that time, Tony finishes his half-crushed beer car and opens another. Two more windows open. The first report is dated almost two months after the last report, and the second is a month after.

Another window.

“This one isn’t deleted, but encrypted. Not in the same way as the mutation strings, of course, but encrypted still.”

It reads like a summary of the last four reports, ending of course, with Amora and the Chitauri attack.


“No wonder S.H.I.E.L.D.’s been in a blind panic,” Tony mutters.

Eight months before the Chitiuri attack, the report reads, an odd reading was gathered by S.H.I.E.L.D. This is further supported by Thor’s astrophysicist friends. The energy spike wasn’t like Thor’s arrival via bifrost, or whatever it was called, but it was something closer to what Tony had read during the whole ordeal with the missing ghostbusters merchandise (which has thankfully now resumed production, although the missing merch never was recovered).

Tony suddenly has an idea.

“JARVIS, see if you can find anything about energy readings during the missile disappearances.”

“Yes, sir.”

The report continues that four months and thirteen days after the first energy spike – February 2012 – there was another. It was also dissimilar to the first energy spike, but there was a noticeable effect on the planet’s atmosphere, and scientists all over the world (Tony bets that S.H.I.E.L.D. is pissed they don’t have a monopoly over information and research) confirmed it and were quite baffled by it. Two months after, more or less, there’s another spike, this one similar to the atmosphere-cleansing one. A month after that, another. A month after that, Amora arrived.

The gap was getting shorter, Tony noted, and it ended with Amora arriving, so no wonder S.H.I.E.L.D. is quite paranoid. It’s possible that whatever had caused those spikes had been on
Amora’s side, or even heralded her invasion. Maybe the whole Chitauri thing had been a distraction, and the first four not-quite-invasions were the real thing. Sleeper agents, maybe.

Tony suddenly feels sick, images of flying up to the tesseract portal, missile along with him, flashing across his mind. That huge ship – god, he never wanted to see that again.

What if that is the case? That the attack was just a distraction and the real threats were right under their noses. Is this why S.H.I.E.L.D. is grabbing blindly at whatever they can? Taking mutants off the streets to see if they were the threat that had arrived?

“I’ve found nothing on the disappearing missiles, sir.”

Damn. Tony is sure if there had been reads on it, it would have been similar to the ghostbusters incident. Why was that? They should have been able –

He pauses, frowns. Exactly why had they been able to pinpoint the ghostbusters incidents when mutants were running around New York all the time, using their powers? If the missing missiles were created by a mutant, and if Tony thought that the ghostbusters thing was caused by the same mutant who made the missiles disappear, then it would stand to reason that the readings of the ghostbusters incident should have been replicated and caught during the missing missiles incident.

And if it was a mutant, then why read on this particular mutant when there were countless others on the street? In the city? All over the globe? Why read on just this mutant and not the others?

Unless, of course, S.H.I.E.L.D. knew what to look for and adjusted the equipment to find that particular energy spike.

Curious.

Maybe the mutant abductions are an attempt to find whoever did the ghostbusters thing, and connect that to the possibility that S.H.I.E.L.D. was looking for that particular reading…how did they even get the idea? A tip?

“JARVIS, this sounds stupid so don’t sass me, but find out everything you can about the ghostbusters mission.”

JARVIS is silent.

When there’s a starting pulse of static, Tony says, “Don’t.”

There’s a titter that sounds like a rapid scale of 8-bit keys. Tony can’t believe his A.I. has the audacity to laugh at him.

“Sir, there are similar energy readings to the ones reported in the encrypted September to May file.”

“Let’s see it then.”

There’s multiple files this time. Three of them report of energy spikes that are closer in gap than the previous ones, two of them are even weeks close. Another is a little spaced farther from them. There’s one more, and JARVIS tells him this was almost discarded because the energy spike was so small, but the gamma readings were similar, so it was kept.

The invasion, or whatever it is, is still continuing, and nobody knows what it is or where it is, it’s just. It’s happening.
“JARVIS, are the readings for the tesseract portal similar to these?”

“No, sir.”

Tony blinks. Twice.

He notices that the beer is warm in his hand and drinks it. Maybe he didn’t hear that right. Maybe he’s drunker than he realizes.

“What?” he says, all eloquence gone.

“No, sir,” JARVIS repeats.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, sir.”

Tony finishes the can and carefully places it on the table, resisting the urge to slam it down. He runs through the condensed report – the first spike was different from the rest but similar to the ghostbusters incident, the next three were similar to each other but different to the first, and the last – Amora’s – was different from the rest. The other spikes were similar to the three in between the first and Amora’s.

“Then why the fuck did that report hypothesize those readings had anything to do with Amora?”

“Because lesser-minded humans, sir, in a panic, tend to grasp at straws.”

Tony snorts, opens another can (he does not want to be sober right now) and raises it in a toast to his A.I. JARVIS plays a ‘clink’ sound over the speakers. Tony laughs.

Still, he can’t discard the possibility that all of this might be involved with Amora somehow. It’s the safety of the Earth at stake here. Maybe S.H.I.E.L.D. is trying to cover all bases.

He also can’t discard the possibility that S.H.I.E.L.D. is, in fact, grasping at straws and trying to take as many mutants off the street as they can in an attempt at the method of elimination. As in, if everyone they take is innocent, whoever’s left is the culprit.

And then there’s the continuing energy spikes. He can’t discard that either.

A cold draft tickles the back of Tony’s neck, and he shivers. Then he realizes it’s not a cold draft at all, because that cold feeling runs down his spine and makes a home in the small of his back.

He shudders violently, and begins to reach behind him to swat at whatever’s there –

In the reflection of a silver beer can he’s placed on the table, there’s something standing behind him, colored dark green.

It moves too fast, and the last thing Tony remembers is the sound of laughter.

And even then, that doesn’t last.

The Great Wall of Mutation Strings is mocking him.
He’s back at it again, playing minesweeper together with JARVIS at it, careful not to make a mistake in case S.H.I.E.L.D. tracks it back to him, or it sends him a malware that will decimate his systems for a few hours (and for a lesser computer, to spark out and weep).

That’s all he can do for now, because he doesn’t remember the last few hours, and neither does JARVIS, which is alarming, because between him and JARVIS, they remember everything. The camera footage is clean, JARVIS’ history is clean, and all Tony has to go on is a couple of empty beer cans, a beer-soaked shirt and a note written in dark green ink. It says Sorry, followed by an exclamation point and a smiley face which is clearly in another handwriting.

This disturbs him for more reasons than one.

First, at least two people got inside his building without alerting security.

Second, these intruders appear to have wiped Tony’s memory, and fuck if that doesn’t piss him off.

Third, these intruders have also wiped and fooled JARVIS.

Fourth, they were confident enough that Tony wasn’t a threat to leave him a note. Like this was all an errand they had to do and, sorry, nothing personal, we’re just going to mess with your head and make you feel like everything you’ve ever done with the tower and your AI is null! Have a smiley face!

JARVIS still hasn’t recovered anything, so might as well focus on what Tony does know he can focus on: The Great Wall of Mutation Strings.

Redirecting is easy, and with JARVIS helping him, ‘manual’ doesn’t even take on its usual meaning, and he just sits back and watches, and occasionally offers his input, sending S.H.I.E.L.D. the occasional barrage of popups. Taste of their own medicine and everything.

He gets a screenful of porn ads when he makes a mistake.

Tony puts – no, slaps – both hands to his face and makes a pathetic whining noise. He’s really lucky no one else is in the tower but him.

Eventually, he calls it a day, and lets JARVIS put all the effort into trying to recover Tony’s missing hours. He cleans up the beer cans instead of letting Dum-E do it so that he can take his mind off of the disaster of the day. He gets a shower and calls for pizza. When Pepper gets back, he smiles at her, and pretends nothing is wrong even though she can see he’s a little peeved by today’s events. It’s not that urgent though, and it shows on his face, so Pep doesn’t press.

The next morning, JARVIS still hasn’t gotten anything on what happened between a sober Tony and a drunk Tony, and they both go back to tackling The Great Wall of Mutation Strings. Hours past lunch, he still gets nowhere.

And then the goddamn radio starts talking to him.

Tony doesn’t even own a radio.

He’s got JARVIS to connect to everything he’d want to listen to, he’s got his Starkphones and Stark TVs, and he doesn’t need a stupid radio.
There’s one. Right inside his laboratory, perched on one of the cabinets, an attention-capturing purple against the white and silver of the lab.

Tony feels his eye twitch whenever he looks at it.

It’s been there for a week and a half now, and he’s tried throwing it out every time he sees it, but it always finds its way back to the lab, like it’s been untouched. He’s thrown it off the rooftop last Wednesday and watched it fall until it was just a speck headed towards the ground, but that’s all it ever was. A speck headed towards the ground. It never touched it.

Tony had run back to the lab and found it on its usual place, and it had the gall to say, “Well, that was very rude.”

He will never, under pain of death, admit to screaming incoherently at it.

For the last day or two, he’s tried the cold shoulder tactic, but it’s really hard because the voice on the radio can just command him to look and he would, despite himself, turn and look. It’s infuriating.

Thankfully, it hasn’t forced him to do that now, instead just leaving him alone as he and JARVIS go back to their task of trying to get past ridiculous encryptions. They’re doing a little better this time, and Tony’s brought redbulls to the fight.

He feels rather than sees the moment the radio turns on, the little display lighting up in violet.

“You’re going about it wrong,” says the radio. Tony resists the urge to put on the Iron Man suit and blast at it.

“Oh yeah?” he says instead, “Like a little outdated piece of junk knows how to hack?”

“Sir, I don’t think it’s healthy to talk to inanimate objects, no matter how provoking they can be,” JARVIS says.

“Again, rude,” the radio says. Then it sniffs. Sniffs. Tony will take this little upstart to the bottom of the ocean if he has to strap it to a Mark V.

Tony turns back to the screen showing his current mortal enemy.

“Have you tried checking the cameras?”

“Of course I have,” Tony says, “I’m not an idiot.”

“Be reminded I didn’t imply anything as to the quality of your intelligence. The feeds of the cameras are not looped either.”

Tony has to stop for a bit at the sudden swerve in topic. He has no problem catching up, of course, he’s a genius, but normal people don’t really take a hard right at topics.

He reminds himself this is a radio.

“And I’m sure you know that mutation strings are very possible to get rid of, except you’re encountering wall after wall after wall of it.”

“Your point being?”

“My point being, your AI can easily take down walls of encryption faster than a sleep-deprived employee can put them up. And that redirection, as you know, is fairly easy.”
It clicks. Tony yells, “Son of a bitch.”

JARVIS holds a poignant pause, and Tony can imagine his AI giving the radio an impressed look, as both of them wait for the only human in the building to start and finish his outburst.

“A generating program, what the hell – ”

Another AI, maybe not as advanced as JARVIS to be able to learn and form the ghost of a personality, but a program designed to throw as many distractions and walls up at him at least as fast as JARVIS. Of course, Tony had designed S.H.I.E.L.D.’s equipment. Why should he have expected any less?

And redirection is easy. So what, maybe two, three programs, passing him around, covering their tracks? Three mini-JARVISes against one? Tony’s almost proud.

They’re hidden in the server, Tony’s positive. And while hitting S.H.I.E.L.D.’s server is possible, it can also incapacitate them, and therefore raise a few heads, which is why Tony’s only opted for staying hidden himself, skirting around codes, but if he’s fighting a program – a very fast program that possible jumps from one processor to another, he needs to hit the root. He needs to paralyze it. As long as Tony’s careful...

“Hit the server, JARV,” Tony says, “We are winning this game.”

They do, and JARVIS almost does it, except they lose the connection by a freak glitch that sends pink sparks all over Tony’s lab lights. He flinches, instinctively moving to duck under the table, but the sparks stop almost immediately.

“What the hell?” he whispers.

“Ah,” the radio says, sounding curious. “Your technology isn’t the problem here then, like I suspected.”

“Like you what?”

“I have a talent for uncovering secrets, Mr. Stark – ” Tony stiffens. It knows his name. He’s popular enough for sentient radios to know his name. “ – you could say I easily see them. And this is a secret indeed.”

A pause. Tony has nothing to say. The radio fills the silence for him. “I can help you, if you like,” it says.

Tony frowns. “At what cost?”

“Nothing at all,” the radio says.

Tony snorts. They always want something. Always. And if S.H.I.E.L.D.’s nabbing mutants off the streets, and if there’s encrypted files all over their servers, and if there’s suddenly appearing radios in Tony’s lab then the prerogative is to not trust anyone. Especially not if what preceded the radio was Tony suddenly forgetting a few hours of his life and a sticky note he’s still keeping in one of his drawers. He needs to run them for fingerprints soon.

He tells JARVIS to hit the server again.

Chapter End Notes
EDIT: LMAO Y'ALL THOUGHT THE GHOSTBUSTERS THING WASN'T IMPORTANT HAH

dthis thing is getting noticeably longer as we go on lol
i can't keep track of errors
feel free to correct me every time you find one
just blow up my inbox lol
The sun won’t burn you,” says Kanaya Maryam.

Karkat Vantas grunts as he closes the curtains again, not even trying to look like he hadn’t been looking outside while it was daytime. “I’m not taking the fucking chance.”

Kanaya hums. It’s been the same argument for half a day now, and Karkat knows she’s familiar enough with him to know that he’s a stubborn fuck. It’s not even that cold in the hivestem, so he has no reason to sit near the windows and leech off heat. He’s just…curious, he supposes. Earth-suns are soft.

Earth-sun. There’s only one of the stupid thing.

“When’s he coming back?”

“This evening, of course,” Kanaya says.

Karkat snorts. “Humans,” he says. They fear the night like they fear everything else. Although perhaps it’s not fully fear, but their body clocks. They are a diurnal species, after all.

Karkat scratches at the skin under his eyes. He’s too sleep-deprived for this.

On cue, he yawns, and Kanaya turns to him.

“You should sleep,” she says.

“No, I – I’m fine,” he says. Stupid body clocks. “It’s boring as shit waking up at night and you’re both asleep.”

“Karkat, you’re going to tire yourself out.”

“Been tiring myself out since I was born,” he says, walking over to the hard couch and flopping face-first onto it. He feels like he can bruise if he just threw himself down on it hard enough.

Kanaya is looking at him worriedly when he looks up.

“Kanaya – ”

“Go to sleep,” she says, “You can wake up at night.”

“With nothing to do?”

“You can’t go outside either.”
He narrows his eyes at her.

Kanaya says nothing.

“Fine, I’m not going out,” he says, “I’m not sleeping either.”

“Please rest when you are tired enough,” Kanaya says, “I worry about you, Karkat.”

Guilttripping always worked on him. It’s horrible. He’s pathetic enough to fall for it too. He sighs instead, rolling over so that she can’t see his face, and goes back to overthinking.

Overthinking feels a lot like running your fingers under a sewing machine while your brain can’t shut up.

It sounds a lot like this:

Karkat hits the ground screaming bloody murder.

Which – typical day.

Or night, whichever, because it’s dark out, or maybe that’s just because for some reason, he’s got his turtleneck pulled up so that it covers his face. It’s an incredibly stupid decision, even if he can’t remember when and why he decided to do that, because he can’t breathe.

His hands fly up, clawing at his sweater, and he ends up on his side as he thrashes around. His clothes seem to be hellbent on suffocating him today, and he wriggles around pathetically until he’s rolling down a slope that ends with him getting soaked, and hearing a loud splash.

There’s voices. Concerned voices.

Karkat nearly tears his sweater and finally pulls the damn thing down his face.

He squints his eyes at the sudden shift of light and hisses, all the while taking in deep breaths.

There’s too many things to catalogue at once – the brightness, the sounds, the tightness in his chest, the dusty quality to the atmosphere – so Karkat mostly focuses on whether or not he’s physically alright first.

He’d hit the ground rather hard, but he’s used to being thrown around by Crabdad during practice strifes that he can hardly feel any pain. He can’t feel anything broken either, just a little sore, but it’ll be gone in a few hours. Other than almost being smothered by his sweater, he’s fine.

He slowly opens his eyes and notices he’s got his hands up in a protective gesture, effectively hiding his face. He lowers them.

It’s so bright.

His eyes shut again, this time involuntarily, and he mutters, “Fuck,” under his breath before forcing them to open, slower this time.
It's not bright at all, he realizes, it looks to be dusk, with only the faintest signs of sunlight at the edges of the sky, and plenty of stars are already out, twinkling merrily in their places. Karkat thinks they look like they’re laughing at him. Fuck them. They’ve never tried asphyxiation via sweater before.

He shivers and remembers he’s wet.

When he puts one hand down to push himself up, that hand slips and he falls back into the river he’s found himself in, head and hair getting even wetter this time.

“Fuck,” he says, even more emphatically than the last time.

“Are you okay?”

Karkat spins around to the source of the sound, accessing his sylladex in a split-second, one hand already open even before the sickle falls into it. His fingers curl around the handle, and he twists his legs under him to right his footing and uses his other hand to push him up to a crouch as he brandishes his weapon and snarls, teeth bared.

The humans in front of him blink, startled. One of them takes a step back.

Karkat almost drops the sickle.

Humans.

“So,” says the one that took a step back, looking nervous. Karkat pulls his lips back until a bit of his gums are exposed. The human squeaks.

“What should we – ” another one – taller, voice deeper – starts to speak, and then looks at Karkat again, wary, before continuing in a softer voice that might have been missed by other humans, but not by trolls. “Should we call or something?”

They don’t look to be threats, Karkat notes, but then again, humans never look like threats. They’re so soft and squishy, but they hide a lot behind their hubris and their words and their weapons. Mostly their weapons, so if these kids access their sylladexes and Karkat doesn’t move fast enough, he’s fucked. They don’t move like they’re trained fighters though, but Karkat can see callouses on the smaller one’s fingers, the sort that holding an engraved staff would make, so perhaps they’re still starting their training.

Karkat slowly moves a leg back, ready to push off and start running. The third human notices and fidgets.

“Um,” it says, then nudges the smaller one. “I think we should definitely call.”

“It’s like, three in the morning, Shaun,” the smaller one says.

Morning. Fuck.

“Someone’s bound to be awake,” Shaun says, “Mr. G, maybe. I hear he’s…what’s the word for people who don’t sleep a lot?”

“Insomniac,” says the other, taller human.

“Right,” Shaun says, “Or Mr. Winters.”

“Mr. Winters is going to ask what we were doing awake at three in the morning.”
“Practicing?”

“I practice. You don’t. You’re a normie,” says the smaller one, grinning up at Shaun smugly.

“I don’t think you’re using that word right.”

The smaller human sticks its tongue out and crosses its arms. “Whatever. They’re definitely going to let us in. You know, let’s just tell them that we met another homeless mutant – ”

Karkat’s ears flatten on the sides of his head. He lets out a low growl from the back of his throat while trying to mentally catalogue if he feels like anything is bleeding. How do they even know he’s a mutant?

The humans all squeak and jump. The taller ones scramble backwards, but the smaller one lifts up its arms and Karkat can feel the water by his feet move away from him, forming curved waves on either side of him. He looks at each of them, eyes wide but standing his ground, readying himself for their crash.

It never comes.

Instead the waves stay stationary while the little human stares him down, brows furrowed, breathing deeply through its nose. When one of its hands falters a little, the wave mirroring that hand moves a bit.

A…special kind of psionic?

What psychic ability can control water? Provided the psionic wasn’t a seadweller? Did humans even have psychics? Dave hadn’t told him anything about human psychics. Dave didn’t even think he’d met human psychics on his Earth.

And another thing. If he’s face to face with humans now, then he’s either in a dream bubble (far-fetched, because dream bubbles are from SBURB sessions) or he’s somehow hit a rift in time and fallen through it and landed in past Earth.

Karkat blinks.

And just like that he suddenly remembers.

At least they don’t dump him in the lake when he passes out, and instead carry him under a bridge where they wait for him to wake up. It’s daytime when he does, and he almost screeches his lungs out before the little one – the water-psychic – clamps a hand on his mouth and tells him to keep quiet.

Introductions are terse and uncomfortable, and he doesn’t give them his name, although they don’t seem to mind.

Karkat takes stock of himself as he sits, and occasionally looks up at the humans to see if they’re doing anything suspicious. He’s fine, as much as he can tell – he’s wet, yes, but that fall in the river and the following collapse hadn’t done anything other than get him even wetter than he originally was when he did a pathetic roll into the river. He’s fine. And he’s tired. Tired of listening to the humans talk, mostly.

The little one is chatty, and Karkat suddenly draws a comparison to a mirror image of him in a red
sweater, and resists the urge to scream at the sky, just in case this was all a dream bubble.

But it’s not. He knows it’s not. It’s like Kankri has told him thousands of times before, thousands of dream bubbles before – the blood always remembers. That, or that little pen-wielding asshole didn’t put as strong a spell on Karkat just for fun. But if something as strong as The Screatch couldn’t block out The Signless’ memories, then what can a tiny spell do on a red-blooded mutant?

For the most part, the children leave him alone, although they argue theories about who he is, thinking they were out of earshot, but troll hearing has always been sharper than humans.

The top theories include him being a mutant (and he’d flinched, almost grabbed his sickle again) who was kidnapped off the street and then managed to escape, but found himself in New York city, which meant that he was from another place. (Not too far off, except he doesn’t tell them that). Another one is that he’s a very light-sensitive mutant who ran away from home and can’t move until evening, and the little water-psychic argues that if that is the case, they can’t just leave him alone while the sun is up. Hah, like they can do anything.

Their voices lower even further as they whisper something about a ‘safehouse’, although Karkat never finds out what it is, because a few minutes later, people are screaming and running around, and Mai, the little water-psychic suddenly takes off her coat and puts it around Karkat’s head, and he squeaks, alarmed, before she grabs him and tells him to run.

He fights with the coat while simultaneously trying to get Mai’s hand off his arm. He can’t see anything and his legs are trying to catch up with the little human – she can run surprisingly fast with those little legs – and almost trips when an explosion rocks the ground.

Mai screams and lets go of him, and he falls on his ass. When he’s lifted the coat from his face, still making sure his head is shielded from the sun as he does so, Mai is standing in front of him, hands out, a directing a stream of water from a broken red thing at the side of the road towards what looked like an ungodly hybrid between a horrorterror and a furbeast.

“Fuck off!” Mai yells.

“Mai!” Lester, her brother, looks a little affronted.

“Go!” She turns back to him – to Karkat – and moves her head to indicate the direction. “Go, run! All of you!”

“Mai!” Her brother grabs her arm and tries to tug her back, but Karkat doesn’t stay for the argument. He doesn’t need to be told twice.

He runs.

Karkat has just decided that he’s getting really sick of passing out from exhaustion when he almost trips as he takes cover in an alley, and then one of those horrorterror-furbeast things screech at him from where it’s currently climbing down a wall.

He skids to a stop, and the wet ground makes him slip and fall back.

Behind him, someone yells, “Duck!” and before Karkat can ask, “What the fuck is a duck?” there’s a whistling sound behind him.
He puts his arms over his head as he ducks, and then there’s a metal clang just as he hears the horroterror-furbeast jump off the wall and lunge at him.

He looks up when he hears the crash, and the furbeast is on the other side of the alley, thrown so hard into one of the rectangular metal containers that it’s formed an indent in it. A shiny, blue-red-white disk is lying a few feet away from it.

The furbeast wriggles at the same time Karkat hears rapid footsteps behind him. When the furbeast pops free from where it’s stuck, Karkat pulls his sickle back out from his sylladex and, one hand still holding the coat on his head, he slashes at the furbeast as it jumps on him. The blade of the sickle catches the thing on its side, and Karkat hears the exact moment the creature’s ribs crack. It thrashes and claws at his sweater.

Karkat lets go of the coat and retrieves his second sickle, then jams the blade through the underside of the furbeast’s jaw.

It stops squirming abruptly.

He removes the blade from the side of the beast quickly and spins around, fangs bared, when he hears the sound of scraping metal behind him.

It’s human, he thinks, the thing standing in front of him. But it’s all…blue. Blue and red and white, with a star on its chest, and frankly, Karkat thinks it looks ridiculous. It’s got blue eyes, though, reminiscent of John’s, except John’s were a deeper sort of blue. So maybe his ectoparent? Karkat’s only met the girl once, and they didn’t really get to talk.

He certainly smells human.

He’s got the disk in one hand, and his eyes are wide as he stares at Karkat and studies his face.

“Fuck!” Karkat hisses, then pulls the second sickle out of the dead furbeast so he can run and grab the coat from where it’d fallen on the ground. He covers his head with it again, careful not to hit himself with the sickle as he does.

The human slowly slings the disk – which appears to have a strap behind it – on one arm and raises its hands, spreading them wide open. “It’s okay,” he says, voice soft, “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I’m not a fucking animal!” Karkat says, backing away slowly, one weapon still brandished in front of him in case the human tries anything funny.

The human says nothing, but it stops in its tracks.

There’s another explosion behind Karkat, followed by a round of ungodly high-pitched screaming. Karkat’s ears flatten on the sides of his head.

The human looks past Karkat and presses its lips to a thin line.

“We need to get out of here,” it says.

“No shit.”

“Come on.” It starts to move towards him, and Karkat raises the sickle higher and growls. It stops.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” it repeats.

“Fuck off.”
Something buzzes, and Karkat narrows his eyes at the human. It puts a hand to the side of its head.

“Cap, what’s going on?”

The sound is faint and tinny, but Karkat can thankfully make it out over the noise around them.

“Spooked civilian,” the human says, “Don’t worry.”

There’s another explosion behind Karkat, and this time, they both stagger. Karkat returns one sickle – the one that he’s holding along with the coat over his head – to his sylladex so he doesn’t hurt himself.

“We have to go,” the human says, and Karkat can taste the desperation in its voice. “My apartment’s close. We need to go. I promise I’m not going to hurt you.”

Apartment. The word is familiar. Where had he heard that word before? Dave? When they were at the meteor? Did they visit a dreambubble? Maybe.

He doesn’t get the time to sift through memories, because there’s another explosion, and the human runs at him and grabs his arm, too fast for him to react. He squirms and thrashes at first, but after a few more minutes of weaving through fire and explosions, he runs as fast as he can towards the ‘apartment’, then huddles in the corner of the respiteblock when he’s brought there and told to hide and keep quiet.

He decides he’s had enough of being dragged around too.

When he wakes up, not knowing when he’d fallen asleep, Kanaya is sitting on the floor next to him, looking at him worriedly, but otherwise fine. He’s never hugged someone so fast in his life.

Introductions, after the ‘attack on New York city, which is pretty normal around here, so it’s just like every other day, really’ (as explained by the weird human in the blue-red-white spandex), had gone with Karkat wielding a sickle to Steve Roger’s neck while the man held up his shield to defend himself. Kanaya had her tube of lipstick out, but otherwise, she was just observing.

“Who the fuck are you!”

“Steve Rogers,” the man had said, infuriatingly calm, “I’m a – I defend New York whenever there’s an attack –”

“The fuck are you willing to achieve keeping us here?”

“Keeping you here?” Rogers had raised an eyebrow, “You ran here with me after you almost got beheaded by a flying plate.”

Kanaya, watching by the sides, had put a hand on her mouth and politely turned away.

“Fuck you.”

“Language.”

“Fuck you.”

Kanaya was the one who had to pull him aside so everyone could explain. Rogers told them all
about New York, and his work, and the frequent attacks. Karkat pulled Kanaya aside so they could
discuss a few things.

Apparently, Kanaya had fallen during the attack – thrown in the middle of the goddamn ‘park’, as
Rogers had called it – and had to fight her way through the horrotter-furbeast things before she
saved Steve Roger’s ass from being bit into two pieces by a bigger version of the horrotter-
furbeasts. After the fight, he asked her to stick around, and told her that he’d found someone who
‘looked like her’ (and Karkat colored at the suggestion that he even resembled a jadeblood, with his
pathetic eye color and nubby horns). Kanaya immediately agreed to come with him, but made sure to
keep her chainsaw out in case Rogers tried anything funny.

The chainsaw was still out even after Karkat woke up with Kanaya beside him.

They decided not to tell him about Alternia – not when Karkat remembered exactly what happened
before he fell here – and Rogers didn’t pry, thinking they were only ‘mutants’.

Currently, they’ve fallen into a little arrangement so neither troll under the human’s roof went stir-
crazy. There’s been mutant abductions, according to Steve, and he wants to get to the bottom of it,
but at the same time he wants to stop the abductions as much as possible, and since mutants with
physical mutations were a lot easier to spot than ability-based mutants, and therefore easier to abduct
(not that Karkat and Kanaya would go down without a fight), it was best that they stayed out of
public sight.

Karkat thinks of Mai and wonders if that’s the reason why she and the others had been hiding under
a bridge and had something called a ‘safehouse’.

Karkat and Kanaya don’t go outside – there’s no ban, although Rogers tells them to be careful if they
ever wanted to go outside, but neither of them are risking it. Also, Karkat’s sleep schedule is fucked
up, because he’s awake at night, but there’s nothing to do because Rogers is apparently shit at
internet and won’t explain why. Kanaya is awake during the day, and she can watch television and
sew, so good for her. She can be awake during the night if she wants to, but it’s not like Karkat can
sew, or do anything related to art to save his life, so he can’t entertain himself by helping her.

So he tries to stay up during the day and gets fatigued for all his trouble. It’s a lot of trouble. And he
hates it.

(As for Kanaya, she’s made Karkat twelve new sweaters already, and Karkat would be a shit friend
if he didn’t know how nervous she actually was based on the number of items she’d sewn.)

He sighs as he flips through the channels this morning. It’s all talk shows and more talk shows, but
it’s three in the morning, and Kanaya says that’s all there ever is on the television during the
morning.

Humans can sure run their mouths if they want to.

He sleeps through the rest of the day, because Kanaya tells him to and threatens him with a needle,
and wakes up when Rogers returns that evening from whatever work he needed to do, and smelling
of that horrible thing Dave used to call ‘coffee’. Ugh. That thing made Karkat smell colors and hear
scents.

“When’s okay?” Rogers asks, when Karkat is rolled up in a blanket, and is wriggling around the floor,
bored out of his mind. Who cares about dignity when Kanaya’s already seen him at his worst, crying
and shaking, scared out of his mind; the human doesn’t count because he’s human and he doesn’t
know Karkat and fuck him, they’re not friends.
“Boredom does unbearable things to one’s mind,” Kanaya says.

“How about the TV?”

“They’re all talk shows,” Karkat says. He almost says, ‘you humans run your mouths like there’s no tomorrow’, before he remembers that Rogers thinks they’re just mutated humans. So he says nothing.

“It’s seven in the evening, Karkat,” Roger says, chuckling. “It’s not talkshows anymore. There’s the news right now, I think. And then they have this new romcom segment? I saw an ad for it a while back.”

Kanaya turns to Karkat the exact moment Rogers says ‘romcom’.

Karkat quickly grabs the remote.

The next day, this is what greets Steve Rogers at the dinner table:

“Benjamin,” Karkat says, somehow looking threatening despite being 4’9” and wearing a sweater with pajama pants while also brandishing a slice of apple pie, “Loves Adam. It’s clear.”

“Karkat.”

“But that bitch Tiffany is fucking blind and keeps on ruining things for them, wanting to auspisticize a budding matespritship.”

“Karkat, there’s no one who is fighting you on this.”

“Shut your fucking load gaper, Rogers,” he says, then takes a bite out of his apple pie. He thinks he understands why Dave is obsessed with apple juice now. Apples are amazing, although the word doesn’t roll off his tongue because of his lowblood Alternian accent, and it sounds more like ‘apurrr’ instead. He hasn’t swallowed before he starts talking again. “And Rika, poor thing, has a flushcrush on Tiffany, even though she can do better!”

“He gets like this,” Kanaya says, “You’ll get used to it.”

Steve doesn’t look like he can get used to it.

He slides the rest of the apple pie to Karkat, who grabs it with a mumbled ‘thank you’.

Once, Karkat manages to stay up for a full twelve hours with the sun out, watching romcom after romcom after romcom – there’s a lot before noon, and when twelve strikes and the noontime show comes on, the one that Kanaya says is just stupid humans doing stupid things to entertain each other, he switches it to another channel that only plays human films, and he manages to time one horror-romance movie. It ends horribly, with both matesprits killing each other. He does not cry. Of course he doesn’t.

The afternoon has softer love stories, with beautiful aesthetics in pastel colors of the Earth’s morning sky and their orange and pink leaves. These ones – these ones Karkat unashamedly admits he’s shed a few red tears, although thankfully, Kanaya is in the respiteblock which Rogers has given up to them, and he just sleeps on the couch instead.

When the evening comes, he eats dinner and falls asleep, and Kanaya continues sewing clothes as she looks out the window, her skin already glowing in the dim light. Karkat tries very hard not to overthink.
“Karkat.”

Karkat startles and rolls over from where he’s pressed his face into the couch. Kanaya smiles at him, a little amused. He hears the door shut with a click, and he grabs one of the couch pillows and groans into it.

“You needed the sleep,” Kanaya says.

“I wasn’t asleep,” he mumbles into the pillow, “I almost fell asleep, there’s a fucking difference.”

“Hello, Karkat,” says a voice from the doorway.

“Welcome fucking back, Rogers,” he says, not bothering to remove the pillow from his face.

Steve Rogers smiles – it looks like Kanaya’s, and Karkat wants to throw something at the human, because is the fucker feeling paternal? – at him and shakes his head, knowing the futility of chastising Karkat for his language.

“I have more cloth, Kanaya,” Rogers says, “And um, apple pie?”

“Fuck yes.” Karkat immediately sits up. When Rogers doesn’t walk fast enough, he moves and grabs the plastic bags from him, almost shredding the thin material between his claws.

Rogers chuckles and heads for the cooking block.

Karkat passes the bag with the cloth to Kanaya and digs out the boxes of apple pie, then stops when Rogers is out of earshot.

Kanaya lowers her voice. “We’ve been here for days, Karkat. Give the man a bit of credit.”

Five earth days or so, at most? Karkat doesn’t know, not with his screwed-up sleep schedule, but definitely not long enough to determine whether Rogers is just playing them.

Karkat has been on a hair-trigger every time Rogers is in the hivestem, these past few days. He doesn’t deserve this fucking stress. He needs –

He needs to find the one that dropped both of them here. Kanaya might not remember, but Karkat does, and Karkat will probably be able to smell the mischief out of that piece of shit if they ever meet again.

He wrinkles his nose. “I know,” he says, “But just – we’re on Earth, Kanaya. Doesn’t that make you suspicious?” Perhaps it wouldn’t be too stupid to try one more time. “Don’t you remember anything about what happened before you ended up here?”

The timing and the circumstance of Kanaya’s landing was suspicious enough, and Karkat, of course, suspects the pen-wielding bane of his existence.

Kanaya shakes her head.

He sighs.

Steve Rogers is their only contact on Earth right now, and Karkat needs to lay low as well, because this Earth has its own set of problems too. Besides, he’s not god-tiered. He can’t just take off and start looking for his ever so generous benefactor at the edge of the universe. He hopes that bastard
gets eaten by a horroterror, and doesn’t respawn because it’s a Just death.

Besides, letting them live together with someone who’s going to cause them harm would be the opposite of whatever that little green-penned upstart wants.

He digs out his apple pie and starts eating it.

Chapter End Notes

taking into account Dave's influence, Karkat has adopted a lot of Earth-terms and sayings
To Tony’s credit he’s been trying not to make his recent spike in drinking obvious so he doesn’t worry Pepper. This is the fifth day that he’s tried to get rid of the mutation strings, and every time he gets even close, his lights spark out and his screens blink pink before dying, and he has to spend a few minutes rebooting everything manually because even JARVIS is shot after every sparkout.

The radio is the only thing that doesn’t seem to turn off – he’s not even sure it’s plugged, really, and currently, since he’s just experienced the third system failure of the day, he can feel its tiny little dials judging him.

“Do not,” he grits out as he stands, brushing off crumpled burger wrappers from his lap, “Say anything.”

“I wasn’t going to, but now you’ve prompted me. Just make a separate generator to reboot everything, Mr. Stark.”

“That’s still going to connect to the building, and apparently, everything that touches the floor or the ceiling dies every time those weird pink sparks fly.” Tony doesn’t stop talking as he walks out of the room to start fixing things. The radio can hear him, he knows, and can even hijack his speaker system, which gives him the hint that the physical radio itself is just for show.

A mutant who can control airwaves? Or just liked technology and made it their signature?

“I don’t even know what those pink sparks are. Why pink? Why spark out when nothing in the lights or the circuits get fried?”

“It’s psychic energy,” says the speaker right above him, when he’s on his way back down to his lab after he’s reset everything, and the lights have come back on.

He stops walking and blinks. “It’s what.”

“Psychic energy.”

“That was rhetorical, I don’t believe that any more than you say you can help me crack the string wall by writing squiggly lines in pink glitter pen.”

“The glitter pen is optional, I assure you; I just like the aesthetic. The psychic energy, however, is real. You’ve dealt with mutants. You know how this works.”

“S.H.I.E.L.D. is employing a mutant to code their files with psychic energy so it kills your system if you get even close to breaking it open? Or if you even try to hit the server?”

That…wasn’t too farfetched, except Tony knows that S.H.I.E.L.D. doesn’t trust mutants very well, and wouldn’t take the chance to let them safeguard precious files. Not one as heavily guarded as this one.

“They weren’t employing the mutant per se. It’s more of a case of the mutant employing themselves.”
Tony snorts, walks the rest of the way to the laboratory and then flops onto his chair. The radio’s voice isn’t as ethereal and airy when it comes out of the radio this time, instead of the speakers in the building.

“I know you don’t believe me, but if you want any chance of cracking that wall open and saving a life, you need to do as I say. I will take blind faith and absolutely zero trust so long as our ends meet.”

Tony eyes the radio suspiciously. He walks over to pick it up, and takes it back with him when he goes back to his seat. He places it harshly on the table, and it doesn’t break apart, although it lets out a tiny burst of static and says, “Rude.”

“Save a life,” he says, “There’s a life riding on this wall?”

“There’s several, if you want to count the casualties – involving the thirty two missing mutants you’re looking for, by the way, although the real number is closer to fifty four children, thirteen teenagers and sixteen adults – ”

Tony tries not to choke on his spit.

“– but there is one specific life that is directly tied to The Great Wall of Mutation Strings. I want that life saved. You’re the only one I can approach regarding this problem.”

It’s possible that this stupid thing might just be guilt tripping him. But there’s also the possibility that it’s not, and if Tony refuses, then that one life’s blood is on his hands.

He sits, never taking his eyes off the radio, crosses his arms, and props his feet up on the table loudly. The radio moves as the table jolts slightly.

“Why am I the only one you can approach?”

“Because Steve Rogers cannot hack, and he is busy with other things, however well-meaning he is. Natalia Romanova and Clint Barton are too close to S.H.I.E.L.D. Dr. Bruce Banner does not need this stress.” The radio pauses. “The Prince of Asgard would have no idea what to do, and might insult runework. I don’t need the unnecessary drama that comes with that.”

“Is Bruce Banner does not need this stress genuine concern for Bruce or are you just saying he might be too anxious and hulk out.”

“Since we’re trading in honesty, both.”

Tony barks out a laugh. “We are not trading in honesty. You haven’t given me anything trustworthy.”

“On the contrary. I have not lied to you since we’ve first spoken. I may withold information, but that is because that information is of no use to you, and may even put the events that are to come in jeopardy. I have no interest in turning this into a doomed timeline.”

“Okay now, you sound like something out of a bad sci-fi novel.”

“I’m a disembodied voice speaking to you from an unplugged radio. Are broken timelines really so hard to believe? Especially when you’ve met a Norse god and fought an Asgardian seiðkona and caught a glimpse of a battleship that’s only one of millions?”

He flinches immediately at the last part and narrows his eyes. “How do you know about that?”
“The correct term for an Asgardian sorceress or the battleship?”

“The battleship. Don’t snark me.”

“But then I wouldn’t be speaking your language, would I?” The radio actually laughs at him, and then it pauses for a bit before speaking again, “I’ve told before. I have a talent for uncovering secrets. I know you have never told any of your teammates what you saw, or why you are actually scared of the whole superhero business more than you let on.”

“I’m not scared.”

“Yes, you are. You get nightmares.”

“I am not scared.”

“You stay awake for as long as you can just to avoid those dreams, and even then you get waking nightmares. Anything that reminds you of the chitauri sends you into an instant panic, and you fight hard to seem calm. You’re hallucinating already, Tony, and Rhodey worries about you but you tell him you are fine – ”

His breaths are getting shallow. Tony focuses on the little insignia on the radio, lit up in purple, and he thinks it’s mocking him. Unravelling him. Looking into him without his permission and he wants it to stop that; he wants it to stop talking, however calming its voice is. It’s unnerving. It has no right. It –

“ – will only get worse, Tony. You need help, and you need to talk to people, but your stubbornness isn’t allowing you, and I can tell you so much more of what is to pass if not for the consequences, but I promise you I will help you if you only listen to me. Your fear is not irrational.”

It won’t shut. UP.

“I am not. scared!”

The radio crashes into several tiny pieces when it hits the wall. Tony huffs, realizing that his ears are ringing and that he’s stood up, and that he’s also apparently picked the purple radio up and hurled it across the room.

The dials are scattered across the floor, and the little insignia – from the control panel of the radio that’s broken in half – is dark.

Tony stares at it, suddenly aware of the silence, and is confused when he mourns that the tiny little purple eye is no longer lit up.

And then it is.

He flinches. The radio doesn’t reassemble like he expects it to, but he hears a voice. The same voice from the radio, but not ethereal or airy like it is when it plays from his speakers, and not with underlying current of low-humming static when it plays from the purple radio.

It sounds close and real and it’s right being him.

Tony wants to turn. But his body won’t move.

“I’m sorry for upsetting you,” says the voice, “I see secrets, but I don’t have the practice of keeping them, and I apologize. That was too far.”
He needs to turn. He needs to know who put that stupid radio in his building and he needs to know how this stranger even got inside but. He doesn’t. Rather, he doesn’t think he can.

“I can assure you that I won’t speak of that again, nor will I mention it in the future unless you give me explicit permission to,” it says, “Although this will not dissuade me from my original goal. Mr. Stark, I need you to break open that wall, and I need you to save someone. The reason why there are so many missing mutants is because S.H.I.E.L.D. has been given information by the same person is making your lights spark out in pink – information that might have sent a few of them into a blind panic, and then some – and they are trying to take the best course of action to protect Earth according to that information. That information is misleading and mostly false.”

Tony has never been one for purple prose, or fancy thoughts, or dramatic soap-opera-worthy lines, but he thinks, for one brief, spontaneous moment, that is what it feels like to hear the void speak.

“The mutant – however you want to call the one who is preventing you from breaking through the wall of mutation strings – will warn you not to listen to me. They have done the same thing to S.H.I.E.L.D. and have greatly reduced my options of people to ask for help. When you decide to help me out on this endeavor, ask me. I’ll tell you everything to the best of my ability, and I promise you I will not lie.”

Tony turns right then, all strength suddenly returning to him, and finds no one standing behind him.

When he turns back to the radio, it’s whole and fixed. The little eye insignia is glowing purple, and then it darkens out.

“What the fuck am I looking at here?” Roxy Lalonde asks.

There are maps, and pieces of maps, all over the living room, spilling into the kitchen. Eridan is in the midst of all of them, sitting with Hal and his laptop, tapping a violet pen against his cheek.

So far, the choice to pull a laptop out of thin air and plug Hal into it, as the bastard also acted as a Wi-Fi, is still dubious, because the only result Roxy can see so far is that Eridan has gone nuts over the internet.

“Eridan has gone nuts over the internet,” Dave says helpfully, moving to hover behind her, bottle of apple juice in hand.

“Yes, but what the fuck am I looking at here?”

Some of the maps have violet writing on them – Alternian, Roxy recognizes. She doesn’t know if Dave’s sprite knowledge helps him read Alternian, but Roxy definitely can, a product of living on a planet conquered by a mass of pink glitter and hair.

Hal – as AR had asked to be called – lights up briefly in greeting. Roxy regrets the laptop.

“Eri?” she asks.

“I’m trying to triangulate our location,” he says, still staring at the laptop. One hand is typing rapidly on the keyboard, the other is still tapping his pen on his cheek.

“You know nothing about Earth geography,” Roxy says.
“I’m learning,” Eridan says, “Or I would be if Hal could just *fuckin’ focus.*”

On cue, the laptop plays some tinny anime song. Eridan doesn’t sigh, although he looks like he’d very much want to, and instead looks up the ceiling and sets down his pen so he can shut the laptop and unplug Hal. He throws the pair of pointy black shades at Roxy. She catches it.

Hal flashes _Rude_ across his screen.

Roxy sighs and places the glasses on her nose before flying over to Eridan, careful not to disrupt any of his maps. She recognizes none of them.

“I’m getting nowhere,” Eridan says. Exasperated, his speech impediment is more prominent, and the ‘w’ wobbles dangerously.

“It’s fine, Eri,” Roxy says, “You’re not on a deadline.”

Eridan crosses his arms and nods. Roxy watches as the expression on his face turns blank, and she knows he’s thinking and won’t be bothered by the outside world for hours until he’s done. She leaves him to it and instead goes to where Dave is picking up a bunch of papers and is writing with an orange marker on the little whiteboard tacked to a wall.

The sea and the island can only provide so much entertainment, so whenever the four of them get stir-crazy from the boredom, they try to find out where and when they are and how much time has passed since they’ve arrived. Dave helps Eridan out with the Earth and time stuff, Eridan calculates geography, Hal trawls the internet, Roxy upgrades him every now and then. It’s a good arrangement, and it’d taken a while to achieve, but it’s there.

Three months or so of acquaintanceship has certainly gotten Eridan and Hal used to each other.

Eridan hasn’t been sailing in a while, and he’s going through another bout of trying to figure out Earth geography and their location again. Normally, Hal would help him, but it’s been two weeks, and Roxy knows Hal doesn’t derail research for no reason.

He needs to relax, Hal offers as an explanation, as if reading Roxy’s mind.

“I know,” Roxy whispers, “Maybe we’ll have game night.”

Or movie night.

Roxy waits for him to elaborate.

The internet, Rox.

This Earth’s internet.

There’s so much.

“And you’re not going to help Eri, are you?”

I’m built with everything but a GPS. Besides, Eridan likes to think and calculate. Let him have his fun or that intelligence will deteriorate.

Until he starts pushing himself too hard, of course.

Dave is writing under what’s already on the board – a working timeline of before they’d arrived, when they’d arrived, and all they’d done since they’ve arrived, along with the differences of this
Earth and Dave’s Earth. There are tiny little notes in pink ink for Roxy’s input on her Earth.

According to what they’ve put together, this timeline is centuries back from Roxy’s Earth, and it’s not waterlogged, and there are in fact other humans on the planet. They just have to figure out where they are and where all the other islands are – and, most importantly, if any of their friends have ended up here.

This is probably why Eridan’s worked up again. He pushes thoughts far back into his mind and occupies himself with sailing until he can’t anymore, and then he gives in to overthinking what if’s and starts up research again like his life depends on it.

Kid probably misses his friends.

I’ve made friends on the internet.

Roxy blinks incredulously before putting her hands on her hips. Just because she knows AR both loves and hates being called by it, she whisper-hisses, “Hal Strider.”

I promise they’re not stalkers, mom.

Calm down, Rox, it’s just Reddit. And do you know people on the internet look out for bots nowadays?

There were plenty of bots on Roxy’s Earth’s internet, and barely any humans.

“And what are you even doing on ‘Reddit’?”

Making friends, I told you.

And discovering that an abundance of humans means an abundance of stupidity.

“I’m human, Hal,” she says.

Hal continues like he hasn’t heard her

There’s a lot of interesting stuff they can get up to, these humans.

It makes you wonder what would have happened if the Condesce kept them around. Quite possibly a revolution, or an awful religious group.

Roxy shudders to think about a religious group dedicated to the Condesce being around at the same time she was, and decides she was very lucky that wasn’t the case on her Earth. Probably on some poor, bastardized timeline, but hers was spared.

“Just be careful on whatever site you’re on,” she says, removing the shades from her nose and moving to place them on the coffee table. Eridan still has not moved, maybe even blinked, and Roxy doesn’t disturb him and looks around the mess he’s made, and sighs.

She supposes Dave is contributing to it by disrupting a few papers on purpose as he floats by the whiteboard.

On the board, Dave has marked out the differences on how far apart the four of them had arrived on Earth. Roxy looks at it curiously, and wonders if any of them can remember what happened before they arrived. Eridan has the strongest impressions of what happened, and Hal, whom they’d expected to remember better because he wasn’t human, hasn’t offered anything substantial. Whether or not he remembers remains to be seen, as it is possible he’s merely withholding information. As to
why, Roxy has no idea.

What they have so far is this:

JANUARY 2013 - Eridan

LATE FEBRUARY 2013 - dave (sprite) ((DAVE)) (sprite) [Are you trying to form a cheer squad.]

MARCH 2013 - that time when eridan fought birds (The Loud Mimic - Fish Reef Wwar) you were fighting birds (I will train Anshu to fight ya) aww no man i cant fight little helpful fish

MAY 2013 - Silver School Migration (sardine run)

JUNE 2013 - roxy

JULY 2013 - hal

AUGUST 2013 - eri finally decided on a name (Don't call me that) roxy calls you that

SEPTEMBER 2013 - eri became king of the whales (I did not) ((seriously why can roxy call you that but not me)) (She's my favorite)

OCTOBER 2013

Looking at the numbers always makes her wonder. Ten months. She’s been here ten months. Living on an island (living, not stuck, not lost) for ten months with three other people, making a ridiculous tree house and trying to talk to birds and fishes.

She would be glad if Eridan found anything to help them get off the island, she really would. It’s just that she’s both excited and scared – there’s so many humans, Hal had said. Would she find her young mother here? Or her mother’s mother? Would she fit in? Do the humans here have rad discussions about cats and wizards?

(Are her friends ever going to arrive?)

She’ll miss the island and her tree house if they move. She’ll miss little Anshu. She’d laughed so hard when Eridan finally decided on the name.

(“I can’t believed you named them Hope. After your title.”

“Why do I suddenly regret telling you that.”)

Moving wouldn’t be too bad, not really, but Roxy isn’t really sure what that will achieve. She doesn’t know how and why she’s gotten to this Earth. She doesn’t know if it was in the plan – doesn’t know if it’s the Earth they made after they won the session, if they even won. There’s a huge blank in her memory, which appears to be the same case for everyone else. She has absolutely nothing to go on right now.

She’d like to have some direction, for once.

That was the only thing she couldn’t just pull out of nowhere, no matter how hard she tried.

Tony Stark stares at the stationery card in his hands.
No, the proper term would probably be a piece of cardboard that looked like it was dunked in glue, shoved into a tub of glitter, bedazzled and then stapled with LEDs to spell out the message on it. It’s an absolute eyesore to read, especially when the glitter, the plastic gems and the LEDs are all in varying shades of pink.

It says: DON’T TRUST THE VOICE.

Which is par for the course with cryptic stuff he’s had to deal with since becoming Iron Man, and also largely unhelpful.

Honestly, if it weren’t for the radio telling him in advance, he might get things like this from whoever had made The Great Wall of Mutation Strings, he would just write this off as a prank from Barton, and incinerate the card.

He still does incinerate the card. And he is not going to listen to this…whoever this is. He is tired of people constantly getting into his building without him or JARVIS noticing. He is pissed at this person for creating the wall of mutation strings and making his system die out anytime he gets close. He is going to have to deal with pink glitter in corners where he thought were already cleaned out.

So no, he’s not about to do as the card says.

He doesn’t think he wants to do as the radio says either. It’s fixed now, and has been silently sitting in his laboratory. It hasn’t spoken to him since he broke it two days ago, and he thinks it might be giving him the cold shoulder for breaking it – which is ridiculous – but also that it’s giving him time to think.

It knows exactly how much one life (and indirectly, eighty three other people) weighs on his conscience.

And what sucks is that, that one life really has been weighing on his conscience. Especially when he can do something about it and he’s just refusing to listen to the radio out of paranoia and pettiness. The paranoia is justified, but he thinks he might be able to escape the danger. The pettiness is just childish (although he will never admit that to anyone out loud).

Besides, if the radio isn’t just playing him and the card isn’t some elaborate scheme to ‘prove’ they have an adversary, Tony might in fact be the voice’s only chance. If some glitter-loving eldritch abomination could create a security system that shot out his own every time he tried cracking it, and could also just get past JARVIS without so much as tripping one alarm, even with all the glitter, then they’d have to be impressive. Maybe as impressive as the radio, but so far, the radio hasn’t destroyed any of his things.

When he goes downstairs, it’s still as silent as ever, and its little eye insignia is still blacked out. Tony huffs and tells himself he’s not a little irritated that the radio’s not awake to tell him I told you so.

JARVIS pulls up the holograms on the missing kids, along with the encrypted files he still hasn’t made any progress with – even the three other files similar to The Great Wall of Mutation Strings make his stuff spark out – and he tries to get some work done while occasionally glancing at the radio.

Two system reboots later, he turns to the radio, visibly pissed, and says, “Yeah, your arch-nemesis contacted me by letting a craft store throw up on a card.”

No answer.

He frowns. “I still don’t know how both of you managed to get in my building without me knowing,
but I’d like some explanations.”

The radio still does not turn on.

“You know, if you’re not gonna talk, I might as well just smash you again for good.”

Nothing.

Tony starts to stand.

“I think what he means is that he is willing to consider helping your case if you gave him more information.”

That’s a very high betrayal coming from his AI, Tony thinks, but since JARVIS doesn’t have an actual face he can glare at, he settles for glaring at one of the cameras in the corner of the ceiling.

The radio turns on. “It would have been easier to ask nicely instead of threatening me, don’t you think, JARVIS?”

“Oh, you’re buddies with JARVIS now but ignored me for the past two days?” Tony asks, both relieved and even more incensed. He sits down.

“You didn’t ask me to give you information on how to crack the mutation strings. I have no reason to talk to you other than help you with this, and you have no reason to talk to me other than to help me in my endeavor. If you were just going to trashtalk me, then it would be a waste of energy to turn this radio on.”

“So you’re not a disembodied entity who lives in a radio?”

The radio actually laughs. “Of course I’m not. You know that. You heard me without me using the radio.”

Tony falls silent for a moment, and hopes whoever is the voice behind the radio can’t see him trying to relax. The memory of his entire body just freezing up and betraying him still makes him feel cold all over.

“How are you even contacting me by a radio? By an unplugged radio?”

“By the very same methods that you will have to use if you want to break open the wall.”

“Which is?”

“Runework. Well, maybe you’d better understand it as sorcery or magic or whatever fantastical term you want to grace it with. It’ll just be symbols paired with intent. And ink. Or blood. Whichever you’re willing to spare.”

“I’ll skip the blood, thanks.” Tony makes a disgusted face. Anyone who could control an unplugged radio and suggest he do magic was bound to be a little off, but he drew the line at writing things in blood.

“Has your opinion in glitter pens changed?”

“No.”

JARVIS lets out a burst of static. Tony glares at the camera again.
“Don’t you laugh at me.”

“I hardly think writing in glitter pen is a bigger concern than writing in blood, sir,” JARVIS says, and Tony doesn’t tell him he has a point.

Instead, he turns to the radio again. “What makes you think I’m actually going to help you, anyway.”

“Nothing. I never assumed anything. You just spouted out a generic line from age-old action movies.”

This time the static from the speakers lasts a lot longer, and the radio actually giggles in response.

For the first time in his life, Tony Stark feels like the adult in the room.

When JARVIS and the radio both stop laughing, the radio returns to being drop dead serious, and asks, “Are you going to help me? If not, then we have no reason to continue this conversation.”

Tony’s pause is even longer this time. “If I don’t help you,” he starts, carefully, “What happens? To the casualty of this – whatever this is? You said I was your only option.”

“It would perhaps be better to say you are my best option. There’s always other options, but they involve too much death and destruction and doomed timelines to even be worth considering, and I want to avoid that,” the radio says, “As for that one life riding on this…well. Life imprisonment for zero crimes. Perhaps mental damage due to that, since being in a solitary cell for years and years can break you. Maybe experimentation. Maybe torture. Who knows. All are possible. Right now, all I’ve seen is the solitary imprisonment, but that’s just because the go-signal for the experimentation hasn’t been approved yet.”

Tony stares at the radio. “You’re lying, right?”

“I’m not,” the radio says without hesitation, “Ask JARVIS to break into S.H.I.E.L.D.’s records of pending requests. I believe it’s number 613412. That subject they’re about to experiment on is not some rock from outer space or a chitauri remain or some other unholy creation from your villain of the week. That’s actually someone.”

“That’s – ” Tony puts a hand on his mouth and tries not to throw up. JARVIS doesn’t even need to be told. The hologram screens just clear until only one is visible, and after a few minutes, he’s pulled up the pending request document #613412.

Tony motions for JARVIS to close immediately after he reads it.

“Oh,” he breathes out. He needs to throw up. He needs a drink. He needs a nap. He needs this to go away.

Defend the earth, his ass.

“Who’s on the pending request?” he asks, voice shaky. He clears his throat. “Who are they going to cut open. What the fuck.”

“They classify her as mutant,” the radio says, “But honestly, even mutants shouldn’t have to go through that.”

“What the fuck!” Tony stands suddenly and starts pacing. “They have to have a reason for it. There has to be. It’s S.H.I.E.L.D., they don’t just – ”
“Order to blow up an entire island when it looks like the Avengers are losing a battle?”

He shuts up at that. Then, “There still has to be a reason. Fury wouldn’t allow this.”

“Nicholas Fury would allow it if he believes it is defending the Earth. And I don’t fault him. He’s just doing his job. Our little mutant was set up by the very same person who created your Great Wall of Mutation Strings. And since that person has proven themselves ‘trustworthy’ to S.H.I.E.L.D. by feeding them information before – information that was actually real, by the way, but now they’re just taking advantage of things to play S.H.I.E.L.D. – they immediately believed them. Now our mutant is in one of their cells, treated as a threat, and as less than a person.”

Oh. Oh. S.H.I.E.L.D. had a rat.

“As I have said, this traitor has also released my information to S.H.I.E.L.D., so if I were to physically go there…”

“You’re next,” Tony finishes, “And I’m guessing this mystery person is also keeping tabs on you and tripping you up whenever you try anything?”

“Yes.”

“Son of a bitch.”

The radio says nothing.

Tony takes a few more minutes to pace, and then sits down and stares at the table for a long, long while.

He expects the radio to have shut off when he turns back to it, but it’s still on. He takes a deep breath.

“Do I have to use a glitter pen?”

“Any writing utensil that will write well is sufficient.”

Tony swallows thickly. “Okay,” he says, “Okay. Let’s do this.”

Chapter End Notes

LATE NOTES BECAUSE I WAS IN A HURRY LAST NIGHT

Eridan’s name for Helpful Fish (Anshu) was taken from the-alternian-lexicon.tumblr.com (http://the-alternian-lexicon.tumblr.com/post/133492769800/anshu)

ANSHU
[anʃu] (noun). Hope.

the joke is that Eridan named his fish after his aspect. an aspect which he is the active destroyer class of.
Karkat Vantas wakes up on a chessboard battlefield. He stares up at the sky – which is not a sky at all, and more like a vast expanse of void with small pinpricks of red that give off the impression of eyes tracking each of his tiny movements. He doesn’t know why he thinks that when nothing could possibly suggest that those little red stars are eyes but, this is what dreams do. They suggest absurd things, and you accept them as truth.

At least he’s lucid. He sits up and tries to pretend that the back of his shirt isn’t wet with the blood (candy red blood) he was lying in earlier.

Maybe it’s the new sleeping schedule, maybe it’s the exhaustion, maybe it’s Earth-weather, but the past few days have been plagued with nightmares any time he wanted to sleep. It had been fine at first – he’d gotten through his boring days with romcoms and slept when the fatigue, or Kanaya’s guilttripping, finally caught up with him, but then he’d had one tiny night terror that turned into nightmares every other night, and now for four days straight, he’d had unpleasant dreams that he was lucid for, but unable to wake up from.

Maybe this is an allergic reaction to Earth’s atmosphere. He doesn’t know.

He stands up.

The battlefield is empty except for the scattered corpses and blood. Most of the blood is red, but Karkat knows that if he looks around, he’ll start seeing the bodies of his dead friends, and their blood spilled on the floor.

The first time he’d had this dream, he’d freaked out and tried to turn and run – only to trip on Kanaya’s corpse. She’d stared blankly at nothing, and her jade blood was all over the ground, all over Karkat’s shoes, and Karkat had taken so long to even move, too frozen in shock at seeing her in pieces and on the ground, lifeless.

As soon as he’d moved, Kanaya did too – her torso suddenly pushed itself up, and then she turned to
him, and he heard her neck pop as she did. He’d let out a shriek and rapidly backpedaled, the blood on the ground making him slip several times, and Kanaya’s torso just crawled towards him. She stared at him with wide, wide, eyes, and a trail of jade blood dripped from her lips down her chin. He thought her mouth had looked a little funny, and after a while, her jaw suddenly unattached itself from her face. It fell on the ground with a splat and left her tongue hanging and some of her teeth exposed. She didn’t stop crawling towards him.

He’d only woken up when he felt someone touch his shoulder, and he’d turned to see a mirror image of him in a red sweater, yelling “Wake up, Karkat!”

There was the sound of birds flapping their wings, and then he’d woken up on the couch in cold sweat.

It’s not that he’s gotten used to this dream, because only the setting ever stays the same and what happens is always different (he’ll never forget the feeling of seeing a dead Nepeta get up and suddenly stab him with her claw gloves and scream, “This is your fault! This is your fault! THIS IS YOUR FAULT!”) but it’s more like he’s tired, and he can’t do anything until Kankri wakes him up, or one of the crows show up to put him out of his misery.

What happens tonight is different.

Instead, the landscape shifts, and the corpses disappear one by one by one, and Karkat takes a step back as he watches that happen, suddenly wary. The blood on the ground – red, he notes again – pools together, and he watches as it rises, and suddenly condenses into a body. It starts from the ground up – it forms the feet, the legs, the torso, the arms, the neck, and then the head; and then he’s staring at what he thinks is himself, only made of blood.

Seeing the veins and muscles pile up on the figure of condensed blood is something he never wants to see again.

It starts from the ground up too. Veins suddenly rising out of the blood, connecting, followed by muscles suddenly blooming along with them, and then skin wrapping around the flesh until he’s actually staring at someone who looks just like him. It’s even got the clothes and everything.

Not-Karkat opens its eyes, and they looks just like his own eyes, and Karkat wants to run and punch this copycat at the same time.

“Hello,” says the…thing in Karkat’s voice. That sort of friendliness sounds so wrong with his voice and face.

“Fuck off and let me wake up before I kill you,” Karkat says.

His doppelganger smiles, and suddenly Karkat’s anger overpowers his fear, just for a brief moment, and then the doppelganger tilts its head and Karkat can just see those red eyes glint. Fear suddenly fills up his chest and he can’t breathe.

“Don’t be rude,” says the imposter, “I might be tempted to keep you here.”

“Fuck you!” There’s two explanations to this – this fucker is messing with him or he’s actually allergic to Earth and this dream, this imposter included, is just an allergic reaction. He’s more inclined to believe the first option because there’s someone to punch.

“Don’t be rude,” Not-Karkat says again, and makes a motion with its hand.

Karkat doubles over and throws up.
When he’s heaved everything up, he wipes at the tears at the edges of his eyes, wipes at his mouth, and staggers backwards, weak. The bile is burning his throat, and he is livid, he wants to strangle this asshole right here, but he knows if he tries he’ll just be made to throw up again.

He looks down at his own sick and realizes it’s not vomit. It’s blood.

It’s red, of course it is, because that cursed color’s the theme for this nightmare, apparently, and in the pool of it, there’s an eyeball, a finger, an ear, and a long strip of red cloth.

Karkat suddenly wants to puke again. The eyeball rolls in the red pool of blood to look at him, and he notices its iris is fuchsia pink.

“I just want to talk,” says the imposter, and Karkat snaps out of his daze to look up at it. It’s looking at him with an infuriating simper on its face, an expression that looks so impossibly wrong since it looks like Karkat right now, but isn’t less terrifying nonetheless.

Karkat bites his own tongue and keeps his mouth shut. Maybe that’ll annoy the bastard.

“Oh, no, the silent treatment won’t work here either,” it says, spreading the same hand that it’d motioned to make Karkat puke.

Karkat’s mouth suddenly opens without his permission and he says, “Hello.” As soon as the word is out his mouth, he slaps a hand over it, feeling violated. “What did you just do to me?!”

All he gets is a laugh, and again, it sounds so wrong. Karkat wants to wake up so badly.

“You’re not having an allergic reaction,” the imposter says, “This – ” it spreads its arms out, motioning to the field “ – is my doing. All me.”

Karkat looks all over the field, clean of corpses now, but the pitch black sky over them has a lot more red pinpricks now, and he feels judged and watched. He wants to run. Wants to scream. Wants to wake up. He doesn’t want to give this sadist the satisfaction of seeing him start crying in…wherever this is and whatever this is.

“You’re rather proud,” Karkat says instead, voice muffled since he’s still got his hand over his mouth.

The imposter smiles wide, wide, wide – so wide, the skin on its cheeks break, exposing gums and sharp teeth, and blood drips down its torn cheeks. “Of course,” it says, “If you’re going to fear something, you might as well know what you’re fearing.”

There it is again, that feeling of fear filling up his chest, and he can’t breathe, suddenly suffocating. When he coughs up red onto the hand over his mouth, he realizes he’s actually suffocating and choking on his own blood. Red lightning flashes on the sky overhead, and in the split second it does, Karkat sees what it illuminates – massive trees, branching out every which way, barren of leaves. Corpses are impaled on some branches, intestines hanging on others; several branches have bodies hung on them by ropes. He swears he saw a head just stuck onto one sharp branch.

They were all looking at him.

He wants to run.

There’s the faint sound of flapping behind him, and he jumps when he feels tiny little crow feet land on his shoulder. The crow doesn’t move, and instead just looks at him before turning to his imposter.
The smile on its face falters, and Karkat suddenly feels immense relief at the bird’s presence near him.

The imposter frowns. “Hello, you dumb bird.”

The bird squawks at it, indignant, and Karkat thinks *Poke its goddamn eyes out.*

When the second crow lands on Karkat’s shoulder, he stands up a little straighter, the bird’s presence chasing a bit more of his fear away. The imposter’s frown grows deeper to the point where literal cracks form on its face, and Karkat sees it bleed out from those cracks too.

“All that blood’s a bit of an overkill, I think.”

*Thank fuck,* Karkat thinks, for the first time since he’s met the asshole who’s dropped him on Earth in the first place. He turns and thinks he’s never been so glad to see that face, which is set in an unfamiliar serious expression, and he thinks it’s terrifying but at least that anger isn’t directed at him, but at Not-Him who also looks equally livid.

Kankri Vantas, white-eyed and concerned, stands beside the green pen-wielding bastard (who is in fact wielding a pen rather threateningly), and Karkat’s never been happier to see him either. He’ll never admit it when he wakes up, but he just wants to *wake up* right now.

“What can I say?” Karkat hears his imposter say, voice sickeningly sweet. He doesn’t turn. He doesn’t want to turn. “It’s my specialty.”

There’s a sharp laugh as a response, but Karkat only watches as Kankri walks towards him. The crows leave Karkat’s shoulder and fly up. Karkat doesn’t watch them go, just keeps on staring at Kankri as he approaches.

Karkat hears, “*You’re a punk bitch – ’*”

And then Kankri touches his shoulder and he wakes up, breathing hard, on Steve Roger’s couch, at 6:12 a.m in the morning.

The way Tony Stark immediately shoves aside papers with runes written on them in glitter ink is impressive. Not that anyone else appreciates it, because Steve Rogers is just confused, JARVIS is silent, and the radio is off, but Tony can feel it judging him anyway.

Taking down the mutation strings wall by wall is exhausting, but at least they’re making progress, and for some reason (that he will get to the bottom of as soon as this mess is done) tacking a rune after every wall they take down onto an elaborate set up of string, a laptop and a drawing of what looks like some kind of path pattern makes sure that the wall never sets itself back up again.

The radio had explained it as some kind of lock. There was a separate rune to stop his system from getting hit, and now he was practicing how to draw a rune that was supposedly going to command that last wall to open. He still had a lot of walls to break through but, it never hurt to practice as early as possible when it came to stuff like this, because apparently, a tiny slip up in runework could create a vastly different result.

There was a possibility the radio was just scaring him, but he didn’t want to risk it.

(It was most likely scaring him. Or messing with him, in general, especially when they had another
argument about the pens that went like this:

“Does it really have to be a pink glitter pen?”

“No. I’ve told you, it’s just an aesthetic choice.”

“…you made me buy glitter pens anyway.”

“You’ll find that I didn’t, but you went out to a stationery shop and bought an entire set anyway.”

“Gotta give you a choice, right? And they didn’t sell them individually.”

“Mr. Stark, you went out and bought the only set that had a pink glitter pen. On purpose.”

“I can use the purple glitter pen if you want.”

“…that would also work.”

“What about the yellow one?”

“No.”

Currently, Steve is visiting the tower – he vaguely remembers JARVIS telling him that two minutes ago, but he’d forgotten, probably from trying to figure out how to write this one curve right here – and he’s trying to shove aside all evidence of him writing in glitter pens.

It’s not working, because he forgets to kick the set of glitter pens under the coffee table and Steve stares at it.

“What’d you need?” Tony asks, smiling in a way that says please don’t mention the glitter pens or the runework.

Steve mentions the glitter pens and the runework. “What are those?”

“Test blueprints,” Tony says immediately.

Steve raises an eyebrow. “In glitter ink?”

“I lost a bet.”

“With?”

“JARVIS.”

JARVIS says nothing. Tony would like it to stay that way, so he glares at a camera and hope Steve just reads that as him being peeved at losing a bet.

“Uh-huh,” Steve says. “Is this a bad time for me to be here?”

“I – yes, no,” Tony hesitates, “Is it important? Life and death important or like, there’s pineapple on my pizza important? Nuclear war important?”

Steve pauses for a moment. “…I’ll come back in a few days.”

“No, seriously, what is it?” Tony asks. He can put the runework aside for the bit. He really wasn't making progress, and JARVIS is taking down another wall and won’t be done for a few minutes. “I’m not gonna be busy for a while. I can listen.”
Steve takes a few seconds to answer. “If…let’s say I found a couple of mutants on the run, can I move them here?”

Tony blinks. He lets the sentence sink in. “Actually, that would be great, but if S.H.I.E.L.D. is hacking my stuff in the same way I hack theirs, they’d find those mutants easily.”

Not to mention, if the mystery person who set up The Great Wall of Mutation Strings can easily send Tony a pink card and break in, that means that they can also just break in again and nab Steve’s little mutant charges.

He’d rather avoid that.

“Are there any cameras in your apartment?” Tony asks.

“I don’t think so, I’ve checked,” Steve says, “Although they might have someone keeping an eye on me there. That’s why I’m worried.”

“Has anyone seen the mutants? I mean, they can just, not show their powers or something.”

“They have physical mutations.”

Oh. Tony frowns. Well, that just brings to light another concern – what if the mutant he’s trying to save has a physical mutation? Then it’d be too obvious to people.

But then again, he’s planning on breaking them out of S.H.I.E.L.D., which is also very obvious. He’ll deal with it later.

“So they just stay in your apartment?”

“Yes,” Steve says.

“That’s probably for the best,” Tony says. “Confirm if you really do have someone watching you, and…try not to let them out without disguises. Or move them out to another location on Halloween. That’ll be less obvious.”

Steve nods. “I just wanted to ask if I could move them here and, S.H.I.E.L.D. watching you is a good point,” he says, “Have you made progress on the missing mutants?”

Oh, plenty.

“Yeah,” Tony says, “Did some digging, and now I’m having JARVIS try and break through a few encryptions. We have approximately eighty three mutants who are missing.”

Steve balks.

Tony waves a hand, “That’s an approximation, it might not even be that many, but JARVIS ran through some missing reports, went through some traffic cam footage. We’re not even sure if all the abductions caught on cam are the mutants or just kidnappings, but we’re operating on that assumption.”

When trying not to explain how you get certain info and trying not to say that you got said info from a radio, bullshit.

“O-oh,” Steve says.

The approximation lie makes him calm down a bit, at least. Tony feels a little bad for feeding him
that lie, but, it’s a whole lot better than explaining magic and an indestructible radio with a hypnotic voice. Besides, the radio never seems to turn on when anyone else is in the room. Just turns off immediately. Tony has had more than one conversation with it interrupted because someone else came into the room.

“Just keep your mutant friends in your apartment and uh, try not to leave them for too long,” Tony says, “Never know who might be snooping around your place when you’re not around.”

Steve still looks a little shaken at being told there are eighty three missing mutants. He nods though, and then looks deep in thought right after.

Tony sighs. He almost wishes the radio would turn on to help him explain this.

It doesn’t.

John Egbert looks up from where he is sitting by the window, sniffs, and sneezes.

Loki turns to look at him just as everyone else in the room says, “Bless you,” at the same time. That’s the standard response to that, he thinks. He’s caught up with most of Earth’s conversational standards, but, a few phrases escape him every now and then, especially when rarely used.

Maybe he’ll get to use this one more often, since it appears like there’s something in the weather that’s been plaguing everyone. The pool master has been nursing a headache since yesterday evening and it hasn’t gone away, John has started sneezing, and Graham has been going through the medicine cabinet because he’s been sick all week. Even the dogs seem a bit more subdued than usual.

Jade, from where she’s playing against Dave in Mario Kart, touches her nose, looking like she also wants to sneeze.

October last year had also made a few people sick, so maybe it really was something in the weather.

Loki watches as Moxie pads over to John, bites at his shirt and tugs, trying to get his attention. When he looks down at her, she yips, and he chuckles as he lifts her up and makes her sit in his lap. She licks at his face, and he giggles.

“Moxie, stop,” he says, half-heartedly, and instead of stopping, Moxie just licks him again, before settling on his lap and deciding it’s a good place to sleep on.

He sighs, leans back in his seat, before sniffing again a few minutes later and sneezing.

He’s getting sick. Loki wonders if Graham has emptied out the medicine cabinet already, because John might need something if he refuses to be healed by runework.

Jade looks up from her controller, although she doesn’t stop pressing down on the buttons. Beside her, Dave is silent and concentrated on the game. “John,” she starts, “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, I just – I keep smelling blood,” John says, waving a hand. He frowns, then gently pats Moxie’s head, “Moxie, are you hurt? Are you wounded anywhere?”

He slowly lifts her up, and she whines at being disturbed, but lets him inspect her fur and her belly. He finds nothing. “Huh,” he says, confused, then lets her settle back down on his lap. She pokes her
nose into his stomach, probably to tell him she’s annoyed, before opting for a more comfortable position.

Jade’s ears flick, and she sniffs the air. “I don’t smell – ” on screen, her character dies. She turns to look at it momentarily “ – oh, holy hell, Dave. I don’t smell any blood.”

“It’s – it’s in the air, I can smell it,” John says.

Loki stops pretending to be interested in the book in his hands. He closes it gently and gives John his full attention, although the boy appears distracted, instead continuously touching his nose like he’s trying to get the smell out.


“I’m fine,” John says. He presses the back of his hand to his nose self-consciously. “I’m fine, really.”

Jade doesn’t look convinced, but she nods nonetheless. Dave gives John a concerned look – which is just his regular blank look, but there’s something in the glint of his aviators – while Loki says, “I can check up on you if you’d like.”

He laughs. “I’m fine, guys, really. I’m probably just imagining things.”

“Imagining smells?” Dave asks.

“Olfactory hallucinations?” Loki considers it for a moment, before turning to address Mr. G from the kitchen. He’s not cooking. Probably nursing some mug of coffee to try and chase his cold away. “Graham, what are the causes of olfactory hallucinations among humans?”

To Mr. G’s credit, he doesn’t miss a beat despite Loki tacking on ‘among humans’ at the end of his question.

“Head injury, dental problems, or nasal infections. In serious cases, it may be temporal lobe seizures, brain tumors or strokes.” A pause. Then, “Is someone dying?”

“Jegus grist, G,” Dave mutters.

“What? I was checking.”

“John’s just smelling blood, that’s all,” Jade says.

“Oh. Maybe he just bumped into a wall again.”

There’s several snickers in the room. Loki pointedly does not look at John, although a small amused smile graces his face. John rolls his eyes at all of them. “Very supportive, guys,” he says.

“Listen, it’s not our fault you decide to go flying blindfolded to see how well you know the house,” Dave says, “Several times.”

“I was bored.”

The snickers start up again. John rolls his eyes.

A comfortable silence settles in the room for a moment, and Loki returns to his book. He gets three pages back into it before John sneezes again.

Jade sighs. “John, you are getting sick.”
“I am not,” John says.

“Let Loki check you up.”

“Oh, first of all, I am never trusting magical healing from Loki after the last time,” John says, and Loki smiles wryly. To be fair, that was in the middle of a prank war, and giving John light-up freckles was hilarious. “Second of all, I’m not getting sick.”

On cue, he sneezes.

Dave snorts. Jade gives her brother a flat look.

“At least go get some medicine, then,” Jade says, “It’ll help.”

“I’m fine. It probably is just some nosebleed,” John says, “Or maybe I just hurt my nose and didn’t notice.”

“How do you not notice smacking straight into a wall?” Dave asks. John sticks his tongue out at him.

“You might really be sick, John,” Loki says, “It’s something in the weather, I think.”

John thinks on it for a moment. “Yeah, Mr. G and PM aren’t feeling well too, aren’t they?”

Jade rubs at her nose. “It might just be from me thinking too much about it, but I might be coming down with something too.”

“I can’t believe October’s gonna kill all of us,” Dave says.

John laughs. “October’s not gonna – ”

Upstairs, Cecil starts screaming.

There’s a scramble of running feet on the floor as they all get up, leaving their books and their controllers behind. John turns to wind the moment the ungodly shriek from upstairs rings out, leaving Moxie by herself on the window seat, although the tiny corgi jumps off from where she’s sitting and runs up the stairs anyway. The scream doesn’t stop even when they’ve all reached the floor the Palmers live in, and there’s already a pack of dogs outside the brothers’ door, barking loudly.

The cacophony gets even louder when the door slams open, courtesy of John, and Loki skids to a stop by the doorway along with Dave and Jade just in time to see John reform and condense inside the Palmers’ living room. The dogs run inside, and Loki and the others follow the pack to where Cecil’s bedroom should be.

The door is open, and inside, Cecil is on his bed, screaming, holding onto his brother as tight as he can.

The dogs gather around the bed, and the kids rush inside. Loki freezes by the bedroom doorway and stares.

He’s faintly aware of other people gathering around the door – Elizabeth, Graham, the pool master and their best friend, a couple more nosy neighbors who heard Cecil sound like he was being murdered – but all he does is stare at the teenager as he cries.

There was once a time when Loki was a young boy, and he had nightmares and cried, and his brother found him and told him that he would battle the nightmares away. Loki liked it every time he said that. When mother found him, she would tell him the nightmares couldn’t get to him anymore,
and then she’d sing him to sleep.

As Loki grew up and wasn’t quite a young boy anymore, his brother found him for the last time and told him that real warriors didn’t get scared of nightmares, and if they did, they didn’t need to be comforted, because they knew they were just harmless dreams. Mother found him less and less because, well, he was a growing boy now, and it would be strange for a grown up prince to still be comforted by his mother when he had a bad dream. What kind of pathetic weakling still needed to be told by their mother that things are fine and nightmares can’t hurt them?

Cecil screams on the bed again, and Loki snaps back to the present.

He catches only the tail end of a conversation, and he can’t make sense of it anyway because Cecil’s words are slurring and he’s talking too fast. Something about trees and heirs and something awful. It’s too fragmented for him to piece.

Outside, there’s a crash.

Several people jump and turn to it, but then a few of the dogs run inside the bedroom, and they all sigh in relief.

Loki does too. “I’ll go make sure they didn’t break anything,” he says. There’s nothing for him to do here anyway.

There’s nothing broken in the Palmers’ living room, or in the hallway, so he tries to check downstairs if the dogs have bumped into a table or something.

There’s another, softer thud. Loki stills, then cautious approaches the living room.

“ – leave him out of this – ”

He hastens his steps, but still approaches as silently as he can.

He expects someone in the living room when he gets there, but it’s empty except for the things they’ve left there when they ran upstairs to check up on Cecil. He frowns and wonders if some of the other tenants have gotten into fights.

When he turns, he thinks he hears the faint sound of laughter, and even though it’s cheerful, he can feel the malice dripping off of it.

When he thinks about the voice he heard from the living room, later when Cecil has stopped screaming, he thinks that voice sounded just like his own.

Chapter End Notes

i really really appreciate that you guys are picking apart the clues and coming up with theories! you guys can totally jam up the comment section for your theories. i love them. in fact, a few of you have gotten close (also probably hit it on the head but i am not giving details), and i haven’t even revealed all the players and the clues yet so kudos!

(also do you know how hard it is to not just let Green Pen break the fourth wall and like. talk to y’all)
The Heir (Apparent)

Chapter Summary

Heir Apparent
[noun]
- an heir whose claim cannot be set aside by the birth of another heir.
- a person who is most likely to succeed to the place of another.

Chapter Notes

so if some of you haven't been reading the tinhatting in the comments in the last chapter, here's a few things that might help

- obviously, the chapter titles of this and the previous chapter is important
- a description of the Heir class from creative-classpect.tumblr.com says: inherit their aspect and are naturally protected by it.
- also, totally recommend checking out creative-classpect because i base some classpect descriptions on that

also, the 'fun without plot' tag is dead and buried at this point, but let me keep it. remind me of my failure to keep my promise to have fun without plot. now i have this mess.

June 2016: Fun Without Plot
October 2017: Excel spreadsheet to keep track of everything that's going on, a notebook on several easter eggs, plot devices and character groups, a classpect chart

See the end of the chapter for more notes

lksenna (4:13 AM):

have you guys seen this?

[missiledisappearance.avi]

tcrimeeats (4:13 AM):

What’s that?

lksenna (4:13 AM):

a bunch of missiles disappeared during a new york attack
BorkinBork (4:13 AM):
Which one

tcrimeeats (4:13 AM):
Brutal.

abeille (4:13 AM):
Imao

777angeles (4:13 AM):
i mean to be fair new york gets attacked like every other day?

lksenna (4:14 AM):
-_- -

autotestifieus (4:14 AM):
Honestly, what is up with New York being like that?

tcrimeeats (4:14 AM):
It’s cursed.

abeille (4:14 AM):
nah it’s probably just a melting pot for megalomaniacs

BorkinBork (4:14 AM):
I mean you’re not wrong

lksenna (4:14 AM):
who knows tbh it’s like the setting for sci fi movies. it’s like the rest of the universe doesn’t exist. it’s just new york
777angeles (4:14 AM):

well uh. at least it’s all condensed in new york? like i don’t wanna wake up to my street on fire

lksenna (4:14 AM):

point though

autotestifieus (4:14 AM):

Why are these people even allowed to run rampant in New York?

777angeles (4:14 AM):

probably because no one can catch them before they do something wrong unless like. they drunkenly let their plans for world domination slip. but since they’re drunk, people are just gonna be like

whatev brent

tcrimeeats (4:14 AM):

asdhafh

‘I'm gonna kidnap your mom and reenact king kong.’

‘Whatev, Brent.’

BorkinBork (4:15 AM):

“Whatev Brent but also quick question wtf”

tcrimeeats (4:15 AM):

Bonus points if you pronounce wtf as letters instead of ‘what the fuck’.

777angeles (4:15 AM):

“quick question doobul-yu-tee-ef”
tcrimeeats (4:15 AM):

w h e e z e

777angeles (4:15 AM):

just censor yourself by saying letters instead of the actual words

BorkinBork (4:16 AM):

‘I love you but es-tee-es-yu’

Whoa that rhymed

tcrimeeats (4:16 AM):

NICE

lksenna (4:16 AM):

ah yes this is what i’m awake on a school night for

tcrimeeats (4:16 AM):

ahdafsgh Love you, Senna!

lksenna (4:16 AM):

ew

BorkinBork (4:16 AM):

DAMN

777angeles (4:16 AM):

REJECTION

autotestifieus (4:16 AM):
That was goddamn brutal, Senna.
Just straight up step on Crime’s heart, why don’t you.

tcrimeeats (4:16 AM):

__;_
Should I break out the kaomoji?

lksenna (4:17 AM):
bye

777angeles (4:17 AM):
senna no Ó ∩ Ó

lksenna (4:17 AM):
angel i will kick your ass

777angeles (4:17 AM):
()

lksenna (4:17 AM):
i can’t believe i’m gonna tp to your town to burn your house down

BorkinBork (4:17 AM):
I love how you default to immediately burning their house down

abeille (4:18 AM):
okay i watched the vid and wtf
also keep spamming senna kaomojis and memes
lksenna (4:18 AM):
(-:>'-)

BorkinBork (4:18 AM):
Gasp
Hypocrite

autotestifieus (4:18 AM):
(•_• - ■ )

lksenna (4:18 AM):
auto i trusted you how could you betray me

autotestifieus (4:19 AM):
You betrayed me first with your pixelated fists.

777angeles (4:20 AM):
wait i haven’t actually watched the vid lemme move on desktop bc it’s not loading on my phone

tcrimeeats (4:20 AM):
Just watched it. That’s…kinda cool?

BorkinBork (4:20 AM):
Whered the missile go
Also the video corrupts halfway through

lksenna (4:20 AM):
i think it was because of the green thing
autotestifieus (4:20 AM):

It looked like it teleported or something.

tcrimeeats (4:20 AM):

Ooh teleportation.
Also hey 420.

BorkinBork (4:20 AM):

Blaze

lksenna (4:20 AM):

b l a z e

777angeles (4:20 AM):

ABLAZE

tcrimeeats (4:21 AM):

ABLAZE

Goddamnit.

autotestifieus (4:21 AM):

Haha, time is an illusion.

lksenna (4:21 AM):

me whenever i have a deadline
time is an illusion and space depends on whether or not you’re wearing your glasses or if you’re drunk

777angeles (4:21 AM):
preach lmao

tcrimeeats (4:21 AM):
Senna, aren’t you like, allergic to beer?

lksenna (4:21 AM):
don’t!!! call me out i was doing a cool cinematic line!!! how dare u

tcrimeeats (4:21 AM):
Wink wonk.

lksenna (4:22 AM):
teleportation is real and i am about to tp across space to kick your ass

777angeles (4:23 AM):
also I just finished the video and w o w
i mean
unless this is common in new york

autotestifieus (4:23 AM):
I honestly wouldn’t be surprised?

tcrimeeats (4:23 AM):
LMAO
It wouldn’t be far off but, it was all over the news, I think?
I read on new sites from friends who linked it to me.
They don’t know if it was one of the Avengers.

abeille (4:23 AM):
avengers are a myth

BorkinBork (4:23 AM):
ASJDSDF
I love that meme

abeille (4:23 AM):
iron man literally crashes through your living room
‘avengers are a myth’

tcrimeeats (4:23 AM):
‘They’re a mass hallucination created by the government.’

abeille (4:23 AM):
THAT VIDEO OH MY GOD

autotestifieus (4:24 AM):
I didn’t know humans could live that far in denial.

abeille (4:24 AM):
i mean humans can live deep in a ramen-only diet. they can totally live deep in denial

lksenna (4:24 AM):
[war flashbacks from romcoms]

777angeles (4:24 AM):
don't call me out senna

lksenna (4:24 AM):
i can and i will

777angeles (4:24 AM):

tp here so I can kick your ass

lksenna (4:24 AM):
your five foot standing can’t touch me

777angeles (4:24 AM):

TAKE THAT NACK

*BACK

autotestifieus (4:24 AM):

Nack.

tcrimeeats (4:25 AM):

Nack.

BorkinBork (4:25 AM):

Nack

abeille (4:25 AM):

nack nack bitch

777angeles (4:25 AM):

screaming

autotestifieus (4:25 AM):

Wait, do you have more videos on this?
I can’t seem to look this up on Youtube.

I’ve found other videos, including one that is apparently commonly featured on news sites, but not from this angle. It looks like someone was on the ground and just moving their camera around to film as many disappearing missiles as possible before the green burst of power got to their phone.

lksenna (4:26 AM):

a friend actually just sent it to me like
i wake up in the morning and it’s just ‘hey we got attacked and look what i filmed’
like wtf sasha

autotestifieus (4:26 AM):

Damn.
That’s stupid and brave.

777angeles (4:26 AM):

legit just run wtf
unless they were stranded or something

lksenna (4:26 AM):

i asked her and definitely not stranded
just whipped out her phone instead of getting in the car and started filming

BorkinBork (4:26 AM):

New Yorkers are something alright

tcrimeeats (4:26 AM):

Probably too used to being attacked.

BorkinBork (4:26 AM):

I mean I’d be jaded too if I woke up to my street on fire every Tuesday
“Ah yes it’s just villain day”

tcrimeeats (4:26 AM):
‘Appreciate your villain day’

777angeles (4:26 AM):
everyone just dresses up as their favorite villain on halloween

tcrimeeats (4:26 AM):
HAH

autotestifieus (4:26 AM):
I have a feeling some people actually would.
Also does anyone know how to figure out where you are when you wake up in some place unfamiliar and you have no GPS.

777angeles (4:27 AM):
what
auto did you get kidnapped

tcrimeeats (4:27 AM):
Auto, wtf.

BorkinBork (4:27 AM):
Please tell me you just got wasted and then woke up someplace

autotestifieus (4:27 AM):
Hmm.
BorkinBork (4:27 AM):

Oh my god did you actually get kidnapped

autotestifieus (4:27 AM):

Maybe.

Iksenna (4:27 AM):

the fuck auto

which black van did you climb into

autotestifieus (4:28 AM):

A pretty neighbor’s.

777angeles (4:28 AM):

goddamn my dude

autotestifieus (4:28 AM):

They were pretty and just my type, what can I say.

But really, my GPS is busted and I need to text my mom to pick me up.

777angeles (4:28 AM):

how do you have wifi but not a GPS

autotestifieus (4:28 AM):

Long story.

BorkinBork (4:28 AM):

He got too distracted by the pretty neighbor to notice someone hacked his GPS
tcrimeeats (4:28 AM):
To quote Angel, goddamn my dude.

lksenna (4:29 AM):
i can track your ip address if that’s okay with you?
just try to at least triangulate your location

autotestifieus (4:29 AM):
That’s fine with me.

lksenna (4:29 AM):
i’ll dm you
give me a few minutes

777angeles (4:29 AM):
i can’t believe you got yourself accidentally kidnapped by your pretty neighbor

tcrimeeats (4:29 AM):
I mean, if they were pretty enough…

autotestifieus (4:29 AM):
Distractingly pretty.

777angeles (4:29 AM):
I CAN’T B R E A T H E

BorkinBork (4:29 AM):
Lmao tag your stuff auto
autotestifieus (4:30 AM):
Distractingly pretty short.

abeille (4:30 AM):
DAMN

BorkinBork (4:30 AM):
asdjah
Actually maybe your neighbor deserves to kidnap and throw you in the middle of the woods

abeille (4:30 AM):
auto gets murdered for slander

777angeles (4:30 AM):
AUTO GETS MURDERED FOR THE DISCRIMINATION AGAINST THE VERTICALLY CHALLENGED

abeille (4:30 AM):
sue him lmao

autotestifieus (4:30 AM):
How are you gonna sue me when I’m dead?

777angeles (4:31 AM):
watch me sue your corpse mr testifieus

abeille (4:31 AM):
just arrest him, cop-in-training
autotestifieus (4:31 AM):
Mr. Testifieus is my father. Please, call me Auto.

777angeles (4:31 AM):
i
cannot believe

tcrimeeats (4:31 AM):
I’m torn between applauding that and slapping Auto in the face.

BorkinBork (4:31 AM):
Both

tcrimeeats (4:31 AM):
Actually, yes.

lksenna (4:31 AM):
auto wtf
i got your location but
the fuck

autotestifieus (4:31 AM):
I’m on vacation.

abeille (4:32 AM):
is auto okay

777angeles (4:32 AM):
he’s probably in a cannibal’s basement or something
autotestifieus (4:32 AM):
My pretty neighbor is probably a cannibal.

tcrimeeats (4:32 AM):
I didn’t know you were into cannibals, Auto.

BorkinBork (4:32 AM):
That’s a hardcore type my guy

lksenna (4:32 AM):
I’ll just dm you but like
the hell

autotestifieus (4:32 AM):
I swear there’s an explanation, but it’s too long and you have a paper to turn in tomorrow.

lksenna (4:32 AM):
don’t you distract me
are you okay

autotestifieus (4:32 AM):
I’m really fine, don’t worry. It’s just weird out of context.
Thanks for the address.

lksenna (4:32 AM):
np?
still concerning
autotestifieus (4:32 AM):
Haha, I’ll do your paper for you as thanks and as bribe to not ask questions.

lksenna (4:32 AM):
…i’m tempted

777angeles (4:33 AM):
auto do my paper

tcrimeeats (4:33 AM):
Cops aren’t supposed to accept bribery.
Or cheat.

777angeles (4:33 AM):
i’m not a cop yet!

BorkinBork (4:33 AM):
Another cop that fails the system tsk tsk

777angeles (4:33 AM):
sleep depriving students should be a crime

tcrimeeats (4:33 AM):
That’s actually a good point.

abeille (4:33 AM):
good policy lmao

autotestifieus (4:34 AM):
Unfortunately, I am not about to encourage you to make others do your work for you, cop-in-training.

777angeles (4:34 AM):
auto, babe, love of my life, don’t forsake me

autotestifieus (4:34 AM):
There is nothing I can do to fight the enemy, Angel.
This is it for me.
I can see the light at the end of the tunnel.

777angeles (4:34 AM):
oscar-worthy sobbing

lksenna (4:34 AM):
go to fucking sleep both of you

777angeles (4:34 AM):
let me have my oscar, mom

autotestifieus (4:35 AM):
oscaraward.jpg

777angeles (4:35 AM):
i am reminded why you’re my favorite

autotestifieus (4:35 AM):
;)

;(
Karkat runs.

The land under him is turning into flesh as he does; it softens, like mud, and he doesn’t dare look down because he knows it’s not mud, it’s the battlefield suddenly dissolving into muscle and veins and blood. The blood of dead people, he knows, by how wrong and poisonous it feels. It’s blackened too, because everything has just pooled together; every color of the caste and every shade of red human blood takes – and he thinks, no, he feels, because he really doesn’t want to think about it, that there’s something in there from horroters too, and he doesn’t want to know exactly how that got there, and what can make a horroterror bleed.

His feet start to sink into the liquefied ground, and he tries to run faster, but the tar-blood is clinging to his legs, and his movements slow, despite the fact that he’s panicking even more. He frantically tries to move and instead sinks faster, until the blood is up to his knees, and then his hips, and then he’s barely walking and just swinging his arms to maintain his balance. The tar-blood snakes up his torso, and then his neck, and he lifts his head to avoid it from reaching his mouth, but it still does and Karkat makes the mistake of screaming and it starts to pour itself down his throat –

Wings. That’s the first thing he’s aware of. There are wings flapping behind him, and the sounds are getting nearer and nearer, and his relief increases as they get closer. He feels the crows land on both his shoulders, and by some impossibility, lift him out of the mass of black blood. The landscape shifts, he can feel it in the way the air no longer smells of stale, poisonous blood, and he almost throws his head back and laughs when he feels the faint echo of an outraged scream.

The crows set him down gently, and he opens his eyes – when had he closed them? – to soft, electric blue grass that’s casting a soft glow at him. He sits up, looks around to see a stark absence of blood and viscera and nightmarish impostors, and falls down onto the ground, flat on his back, with a sigh of relief.

He immediately sits up again when he hears footsteps, hands out and ready to access his syladex – until he remembers he can’t get to it here, and this may be a dream but he’s shit at trying to control it, so he bares his teeth instead, and readies his claws.

“Oh,” he says, when he notices who it is. There’s no pen this time, but he recognizes the clothes, and the face, and the small smile on the bastard’s face.

“Sorry I was late.”

“You did that on purpose, you fuck.”

“Oh no, I think I find being drowned in blood to be highly unpleasant.”

Karkat just frowns as the asshole sits, and the soft blue light of the bioluminescent grass under both of them softens the smile even more. It should be comforting, Karkat thinks, but he just wants to punch that smile off as a thank you for dropping him on Earth, and then getting him stuck in neverending nightmares.

“You should sleep.”

“Oh, so you didn’t notice I was trying? Why the hell do you think I’m here?”

“Sleep deprivation will not get you anywhere, Karkat.” The gall to act caring like that. “Kanaya is
getting worried, and you will end up getting sick if you exhaust yourself.”

“If you even care about what Kanaya feels then you shouldn’t have dragged her into whatever game you are playing.”

There’s a snort. “Karkat. You were both already in the game.”

“Fuck you.”

“No thanks.”

“Get pailed, fucker,” he hisses. He doesn’t care much for smartass comments right now and gets up, curling one hand into a fist. He doesn’t even get a flinch or a worried step back. Just an unchanged, amused expression. He can just swing right now.

“You’ll be fine here for the night, I promise. If you try to wake and stay up again, you’re just gonna cause problems for yourself. If you fall asleep after waking up, you’ll have to go through all that again, after I went through the trouble of pulling you out. Please, sleep.”

“No.”

A sigh. Karkat notices the crows, still flying overhead, caw at him, like they’re telling him to just listen. He doesn’t even remember these birds’ names, so he can’t exactly use it to insult them, but he cusses them out anyway.

The caw he gets for it sounds disappointed, and he wonders if they’ll both stop rescuing him from his nightmares now. He’s unsure as to what he feels about that. The birds are better company than the rest of the party that comes to pick him up from lakes of dead blood.

“Rest. You’ll be fine, I promise.”

The birds come down when they are beckoned, and they perch regally on small, thin shoulders, and stare Karkat down with their beady red eyes. He thinks their names tickle at his thoughts and memories, but nothing is clear.

He bares his teeth at the birds, petty. One of them squawks at him.

“Tell your featherbeast to fuck off and mind its own business,” Karkat says, still glaring at the bird. The bird doesn’t look away from him, and instead squawks again.

“Oh, they’re not mine. I’m borrowing them.”

Karkat is one second away from strangling the bird and the snarky bastard.

Instead, he watches as that infuriating smile widens, and then he blinks, and he’s alone in the middle of a dreamscape of rolling hills covered in glowing blue grass. The wind blows by him gently, and he unclenches his fist, only then realizing he’d dug his nails in so deep he’s bleeding.

He stares at the blood.

And he doesn’t look away for a long, long time.
“How’d you manage that?”

All three of them are standing in front of the laptop, all in varying expressions of confusion. There might have been a bit of pissed (Eridan), concerned (Roxy) and curious (Davesprite) along with the confusion, but it’s not like any of them would admit to it because they’re mostly focusing on staring down the laptop right now, so nobody comments on Eridan’s scowl, Roxy’s worried frown and the certain glint in Davesprite’s shades that indicates he wants to know all the details to this.

I didn’t think it would work. It was simply a backup plan in case Eridan and Davesprite got nowhere, and since I thought it had been long enough, I asked for help.

Roxy uncrosses one arm to gesture towards the screen. “And you’ve known for – how long, about a month?”

“We could have been off this island, Hal,” Eridan says, voice low and sharp teeth gritted, like he’s trying very hard not to speak at all.

Only a few weeks.

“You should have told us,” Roxy says. They actually have a location now, and that means it would be easy to pinpoint themselves on a map, and if they can do that, they can plot routes and go all over the world and try to find more people, try to find where Roxy once lived and maybe find their friends and –

There’s no guarantee. Roxy has to slow down. There’s no guarantee and so there’s no reason to be this upset over Hal not telling them sooner, because really, there is nothing at stake. Maybe that’s why Hal didn’t tell them right away. Maybe he was actually mapping routes out, but took his time because, there really wasn’t any hurry, was there?

I was doing research.

Trying to see where we should go if we did get off this island, because just getting off it and wandering blindly would have been counterproductive to what we have been doing for the past few months, which is survive.

Nobody says anything, although Roxy notices that Eridan’s frowned deeper. He’s not looking at the laptop anymore though, and instead is looking too lost in his thoughts, brain already firing at all cylinders.

Hal slowly erases his text, as if giving all of them time to think, and then types again.

You remember I said I made friends online, don’t you, Rox?

I branched out a bit, endeared myself to people, and then decided that if you all still got nowhere with finding out our location after a period of time, I would ask their help. But like I said, it was a backup plan, mostly because it hinged on them actually caring about and trusting me. I did in fact manage to endear myself to them and got our location, which should be something celebrated right now, in my opinion, despite me not revealing it immediately to you for understandable reasons.

And also, those friends I made online showed me a very curious thing that I also did research on, and I think I found something of interest.

The word document closes, and then Hal pulls up a video on screen.

It’s filmed in the middle of a city, Roxy realizes. She’s never exactly been in one before, but she’s
read stories, and she imagines this is how places with tall skyscrapers that aren’t flooded look like. There’s people, a lot of people, and they’re running around, screaming, panicking, and the camera pans up to see something – a missile – fly by and then…disappear in a flash of green light.

It happens several times. The camera keeps swinging around, capturing the moments when missiles just zip by and almost hit something but then disappear, and one blast of green energy is so strong it makes the footage glitch for a moment before clearing up.

Roxy swallows thickly.

Beside her, she feels Dave still. If he wasn’t a sprite, he would have needed to breathe, but he is, and so he holds his breath for a long, long while.

This is from New York.

I tried to dig further and I found a lot of news, a lot of videos, conspiracy theories – I can show you all of them if you are interested. I didn’t reveal our location to you because I needed to dig through this, because if we’re going to get off this island, we might as well head to New York.

He has a point. A very clear point. Roxy sees Dave nod beside her, and she thinks he’s finally breathing again.

Hal pulls up another video, and it looks like it’s still filmed in a city again, but the street is mostly empty and deserted except for pieces of metal and rubble, turned-over cars, and tipped-over garbage bins. The one filming appears to be whispering, but it’s too incoherent for anything other than ‘– look over here – ’ and then everything else is just a mess of static again.

This time it’s Eridan who draws in a breath and holds it when someone walks into the shot, holding a jacket over their head and running as fast as they can. The grey hand holding the jacket is visible, and when the jacket sways, Roxy can see the troll’s face. They’re being accompanied by someone in a ridiculous blue-red-white outfit, and they both look like they’re running for their lives.

“Karkat?”

Eridan’s voice is so, so small. It feels like cold water dumped all over Roxy because Eridan doesn’t sound like that.

I was lucky my friend who gave me this showed it to me right away before uploading it. I negotiated with them to not upload this video and they agreed, and I made sure to search the entirety of the internet for it in case they did, but they have kept their word thus far.

In contrast to Dave being deathly still, Roxy can see that Eridan’s hands are shaking slightly. He curls them into fists and digs his nails in to stop them, but it only makes it worse.

“Where is this New York?” Eridan asks instead, voice calm. She pities him for the amount of effort he puts into it.

Hal pulls up a map on the screen.

They all stare at it for a while.

Roxy can literally hear the ticking of a clock.

“We’re going to New York,” she says. Her voice is a lot messed up than she expected it to be, and she clears her throat. Her friends could be there. They could all be there and they were so close.
“We’re going to New York. Calculate travel time a-and, make plans…”

There’s hands on her shoulders. Dave catches her before she even realizes her knees are actually buckling.

“The breath, Rox, breathe,” he says. And Roxy realizes, she’s the one not breathing this time. She sucks in a breath and chokes, and tries not to let tears form at the edges of her eyes because her throat closes up and *so close, they could just have been there for months, they were so close, she can just find them.*

“Shit.” That was Eridan. She’s only faintly aware of loud noises before she’s sat down on a bean bag, and then she pieces it together slowly as Dave reminds her to breathe. She’s okay, she’s fine, she just needs to let it sink that she can actually see her friends again; Eridan carried the bean bag over, and Dave made her sit, and she’s *fine.*

They are all silent as they help her calm down, and when she’s finally clear-headed, she looks back at the laptop, which is now back to an empty word document.

You okay?

She nods.

“We don’t have to go right away.

“No, I – I’m fine. We’ll go. Let’s plan. I’m fine, I swear. I want to see everyone else –” *not a guarantee who fucking cares* “ – as soon as possible.”

Hal erases his words slowly once again, and types back just as slowly. How generous.

Dave?

Eridan?

There’s a pause before Dave nods. “Yeah.” He turns to Eridan, who still looks deep in thought, and takes a bit longer to answer.

“Alright,” Eridan says, when he finally does speak, “We’ll go to wherever this is. We should start planning what to do. What do you know about New York?”

Hal pulls up a lot of tabs, and Roxy suddenly thinks she should make another laptop – no, two other laptops – to make the research easier. She looks at her hands, still cold and slightly shaking, and when she looks up, Hal has typed out:

Don’t push yourself too hard, Rox, it’s fine. I’m sorry for suddenly springing this up on all of you.

Roxy draws in a breath and lets it out, slow. “I’ll be fine, Hal. We’ll split the work.”

Hal doesn’t type anything back, like it’s his turn to pause now, before clearing his text again.

Roxy steels herself. This may not be a guarantee but – if there is the slightest chance she can meet *anyone* on this trip to New York, she’ll take it.

Judging by Eridan and Dave immediately picking out their tabs, she thinks they agree.
this was so hard to format with the beginning chat log but at least it wasn't a pesterlog so no need for colors. obviously i just made up a bunch of online friends for Hal, don't worry about it. it just wouldn't be realistic if there weren't any actual 'online friends' with their own sets of personalities and inside jokes.
Three-Dimensional Chess

Chapter Summary

Three-dimensional chess (or 3D chess) refers to any of various chess variants that use multiple boards at different levels, allowing the chess pieces to move in three physical dimensions.

Chapter Notes

I'm honestly still laughing about how some people didn't notice the usernames in the last chatlog at first. Might wanna go back and check them out because they might just be Hal's internet friends but...hmm, do you really trust me. Do you remember the Ghostbusters Incident. If not significance, there's at least got to be easter eggs.

Actually, even the chumhandles had a lot of thought put into them. My personal favorite is Kevin's abendrotTriptych.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

October 24, 2013

“How on earth are you going to travel while that sick?’

John has a point, and Loki can see that the pool master is deliberating whether to accept this point or not. The kid had a stubborn streak, he’d discovered, during one afternoon when they were redecorating the betting pool board because they had nothing else to do, and absolutely insisted that everything should be color coded even when one of the dogs had accidentally eaten their chalk.

(They’d fussed over the dog first, of course, and immediately had the animal brought to the vet. The excitable little thing – named Milko, Loki remembers – didn’t even look like it was getting sick, and was just as energetic as ever despite having eaten half a box of colored chalk.)

There’s a few minutes of silence for this deliberation, and then the pool master shrugs as their brain catches up to them, and they say, “Ruben’s coming with me.”

“Are you sure you don’t want help?” Loki asks, and the pool master narrows their eyes at him, clearly remembering the last time he offered his ‘help’, and they ended up with electric blue hair.

“That’s a nice offer, but no thank you,” they say, sneezing slightly. They sniff, annoyed, and fish their phone out of their pocket when it buzzes. They frown at it and furiously type into it, muttering under their breath as they do so.

Ruben comes down to help them with their bags a while later, and everyone bids them both goodbye. Loki’s on betting pool duty while Saph is gone, and he’s more than determined to sabotage things as best as he can even when he’s temporarily banned from participating in bets so that he’s impartial as the stand-in pool master.
It’s not like they can stop him from, say, giving people tips.

There’s a collective feeling of people dreading for the contents of their wallets, and Loki preens – well, there’s no other word he can think of, and he hasn’t done this for a while – at this; he hasn’t even done anything yet.

John still hasn’t stop sneezing though, which is a problem, and Graham has also been hit with fever and has practically started living in the Safehouse infirmary. This isn’t going to stop bets from proceeding as usual, but that means bake-offs would have to not include John until he stops accidentally causing gusts of wind when he sneezes.

At least he’s not smelling blood anymore, which is good. He didn’t have a nosebleed or hurt his nose, like they’d thought he had, so perhaps he really was just imagining it, or Moxie had a tiny cut that was just hidden underneath her fur and he’d smelled it when she sat on his lap.

Rose is still with James, and she’d updated them that he was doing very well with Fenrir, who had unfortunately taken to shredding furniture although James thought it was funny. Jade visited them yesterday to take James and the dog to play in open space, and she’d told them when she came back that he was looking way healthier than before. Less looking like he’d been frozen alive and more like he’d been enjoying the sunlight. He still didn’t talk a lot of course, but he was more responsive, and still collected photos of dogs, and managed to name every single dog in the Safehouse whose breed matched the photos he had.

Although he did ask Jade, “Why do you also sometimes have two of you?”

Jade had said she’d asked Rose, and Rose said nothing.

Loki’s still studying on human psychology, so he can’t really say anything for certain, and there was of course the possibility that James simply had latent abilities they somehow unlocked with trying to piece together his mind. Or maybe it was a side effect of them trying to piece together his mind. Who knew? Magic and mental states are such a fragile combination.

The sight that greets him when he goes to the stairs, intent on retiring to his bedroom, is Dave trying to balance a tray of cookies and coffee while avoiding getting jumped at by dogs.

The boy raises the tray slightly just as Rover stands up on his hind legs in an attempt to reach it.

“I assume that’s not for you?” Loki asks.

“No,” Dave says, then almost imbalances. Loki reaches out an arm and catches the tray easily, sliding it so that his hand is positioned directly under its center, and then lifts it over his head as the dogs turn their attention to him.

Dave straightens out his shirt, relieved, although his expression stays blank. “Palmer #1’s been holed up in his room for a while.”

Loki looks up the stairs for a moment, even if he’s clearly unable to look at the Palmers’ room is from where he’s standing. “He hasn’t been eating.”

“Nope,” Dave says, “He keeps forgetting. His brother’s worried.”

And obviously, so is everyone else. Loki nods and moves the tray so he’s holding it properly, and Dave mutters a small “Thank you” before returning back downstairs. The dogs stay, more interested on the tray than Dave, and Loki walks the rest of the way up to the Palmers’ bedroom.
Kevin is passed out on their couch, surrounded by several papers that look like multiple drafts of a broadcast, corrections standing out in red ink. There’s dark circles under Kevin’s eyes, and several food wrappers around him along with unwashed mugs. Loki briefly thinks of waking him up to tell him to move to his bedroom, but decides he has to bring Cecil food first.

Cecil’s door is unlocked, and it opens easily when Loki lightly knocks on it.

The teenager is sitting on his bed, facing a wall that now has multiple sticky notes and papers tacked onto it. There’s a lot of writing on those papers, and Loki can see where the ink ran out in the middle of sentences and a new pen had to be picked up, and how the handwriting changed from calm and readable to hurried and miniscule. He can’t make sense of most of it.

He spots his name on one of the papers and tilts his head, curious, and then sees everyone else’s names, and wonders if Cecil’s seen something massive in the future.

“Cecil,” he says.

He gets no response.

Loki sets the tray down on the boy’s desk – cluttered with papers and broken pens, and several pads of half-used sticky notes, along with untouched food and mugs of coffee that Kevin probably brought for him – before slowly walking over and carefully placing a hand on Cecil’s shoulder.

Cecil jumps and screams.

Loki blinks at the reaction, and watches Cecil scramble backwards, eyes wide with fear, before he recognizes Loki and breathes out a sigh of relief.

“Oh,” Cecil says, and his voice sounds wrecked, which makes Loki once again blink in confusion since it sounds so wrong and out of place.

“It’s been two days, Cecil,” he says, and gets a frown for it.

“No, it’s not, it’s like, nine in the evening and – ” the boy scrambles to find his phone underneath a mass of pillows, blankets and crumpled up papers, and looks like he’s about to cry when he finds it dead, uncharged for a while. Loki hands over his own phone instead.

It’s not nine in the evening. It’s two in the afternoon on the 24th of October.

Cecil draws in a sharp gasp, and Loki notices when his eyes start going glassy.

It’s curious how someone’s personality can completely turn over when something very very bad happens, and even the most cheerful and collected can turn into bawling messes at the slightest things. Loki’d been frustrated with himself the first time he’d done that – set fire to half his bedroom and ended up crying in the corner when he’d messed up one tiny detail in a spell, after days of fighting with his brother – and he thinks he’s been getting better about it over the years.

That’s just wishful thinking though.

He slowly pries Cecil’s hands from where the boy is almost crushing his phone. “You need to eat,” he says, “Move downstairs, at least.”

“No, I – I can’t, I might forget to write down about – ”

“Moving downstairs will help you not see all of this, Cecil.”
“No.”

It’s like a tiny explosion, Loki thinks, the way that psychic driving just bursts from Cecil and spreads across the entire room, nearly bowling him over and getting him to comply. Maybe this is how the kid had gotten Coulson to ship himself off to the Caribbean; he’d heard the story, but he hadn’t actually seen the ability demonstrated firsthand. He wonders if humans had their own silvertongues too, because Cecil certainly fits the role.

“Move downstairs,” Loki says, feeding magic into his voice as well. Cecil’s eyes widen, in shock at what he’d accidentally done and at the fact that Loki can do the same thing as he can. Perhaps silvertongues are rare among humans. Perhaps Cecil is the only one.

It doesn’t do anything of course, just like how Cecil’s persuasion is lost on Loki. Maybe their equal magic cancels it out. How curious.

Although the surprise is enough to make Cecil nod and slowly get up, and discover that two days without eating or sleeping has weakened him and he can’t stand too well. Loki moves to get the tray from the desk, and then puts a hand on Cecil’s shoulder.

In the next blink, they’re in the kitchen, and Cecil staggers from the displacement until Loki adjusts his hold on the boy so he doesn’t fall.

The skywalking was probably a bad idea, because Cecil looks ill. Loki traces a quick anti-motion sickness rune on his forehead, before following it up with one for strength and then cleans Cecil up with a snap of his fingers.

Cecil shivers, and then, “What was that?”

“I assume you also haven’t taken a bath in two days.”

He gets slumped shoulders for that. “I remember Kevin trying to get me out of my room and I didn’t listen to him.”

“He’s resting,” Loki says, and doesn’t elaborate. He places the tray in front of Cecil instead. “Eat.”

Cecil looks at it for a moment before sighing dejectedly. “I might throw it up.”

“You have to get something down.”

No response.

Loki sighs and touches the mug so the coffee reheats itself again. “Do it for your brother, at least.”

That appears to be the right thing to say, because Cecil immediately grabs at the food even if he precedes the action with another small gasp. Loki walks over to the fridge. They still have pizza here, he thinks, and Cecil could use something other than cookies to eat.

He sets the pizza in the oven and waits for it to heat while Cecil devours the cookies and chugs down the coffee, clearly more hungry than he seemed.

Neither of them say anything, and the silence is only broken when the oven makes a sharp ding as it finishes its job. Loki swaps the empty plate and mug for the pizza and places the dishes in the sink as Cecil continues eating.

He sits down across from Cecil and waits, saying nothing. There’s not really anything he can do here.
besides just making the human eat; he doesn’t know what visions he’d seen or if Cecil would even be willing to talk about it, and prying would probably trigger a meltdown, so he keeps his mouth shut instead.

Cecil is halfway through his second slice when he says, “Do you want me to talk about it?”

Loki gives him a curious look. He’s never heard that before. “If you want to.”

“I feel like I have to,” Cecil says, then shrugs. “But I’m not – I’m not sure. I’m not sure with what I saw or what it means so I can’t…really tell you for sure? Does that make sense? Like what if I interpreted it wrong and tell you the wrong thing instead, and it’d mess it up even more and –”

“Breathe, Cecil, breathe.”

Loki wishes he can say he learned this from watching healers calm down patients, or mothers calm down their children, but while those are still contributing factors, he mostly unfortunately learned this from firsthand experience.

He makes his voice as soothing as possible, running Cecil through breathing exercises until he calms down.

“Alright?” he asks, when the human no longer looks like he’s about to cry.

Cecil nods. He picks at the pizza again and takes a bite out of it, even if it clearly tastes like cardboard to him. The effort is appreciated, at least.

“I...I have to tell you,” Cecil says, after a long long while, when he’s finished eating and has just been staring blankly at nothing for fifteen minutes straight, “I don’t know what else to do.”

“Just tell me what you saw then, if you want to,” Loki says, “You don’t need to interpret it.”

Cecil winces. “Not here,” he says, “Not here – not here, the walls have ears, he’s going to –” then he shuts up suddenly, aware he’d send himself into a panic attack again. He breathes in deeply and then slowly lets it out. “Not here,” he says, softly this time. “Somewhere very far away from here, please.”

Loki thinks for a bit before nodding. He places a hand on Cecil’s shoulder again, and in the next second they are both sitting by a beach. The ocean is dark and inviting, waves softly crashing on the shore, and the night around them even darker without any light pollution to chase it away. Overhead, the moon is bright.

He doesn’t think he’s imagining it when Cecil’s eyes go bright from the Seer fugue, and by some impossible feat, the moon is reflected on them despite the fact that it shouldn’t be, not with how Cecil is sitting with his back to it.

And then, Cecil speaks.

Roxy has been packing and unpacking and then packing again for about four times in a row now. She’s nervous, she knows, but it’s not helping her clear her head at all. She just needs something to do with her hands, and she’s kept on unearthing her closet and pulling things out of thin air, even if they’re clearly unnecessary.

All that she’s achieved is surrounding herself with a lot of things, some of which she doesn’t even need, like the tiny little music box and a golden statue of a wizard. Her head is not any clearer than
when she’d first started, and her hands are not steady.

She sighs.

Outside, she knows the others are just as nervous as she is, and are also worried about her. She
doesn’t need to stress them out even more, not when Dave has been flying around all day in a similar
fit of nervousness, and Eridan has been underwater all day too. He’d packed a few hours ago and
then went back to the sea again and still hadn’t returned. There isn’t really any way of knowing if
Hal is nervous when he just turns himself off all day. Probably retreated to the internet again.

She hates it when things like these happen. She would long for a thing to arrive, pray day and night
for it, say she would do anything for it – and then it gets dropped on her lap and she suddenly has
nothing to say. Suddenly just wants to take it back. Suddenly just wants it to stop.

Indecisions would be the death of her, she thinks. It’s pathetic. And cruel, not just to her but to her
friends. But is she ready for if they really weren’t there? Maybe she just wants to not have false hope,
and is it really wrong to wish that?

She sighs, packs her things one more time, and then leaves her bag in the corner of her room and
walks out, leaving her mess right where it is. She’ll clean it up later, because she’s clearly not getting
any sleep tonight.

It’s not like she’ll reach New York immediately anyway. At most they’d spend hours of travelling
before they reach it, and then they’d have to make sure to stay low and have a base of operations,
and then actually go look for their friends. Hal said he had a list of places they can try, but it’s still
just a hit and miss, Roxy really really doesn’t want to hope for something that’s going to end up
destroying her.

Dave is on the roof of the treehouse again, looking out at the sea. The moon is high and full in the
sky tonight, and the light looks nice against the water, even though Roxy knows he’s not focusing on
that at all. She flies up to sit beside him, and he acknowledges her presence with a nod.

Neither of them say anything for a long time, and they leave each other to their thoughts.

Roxy wonders if Eridan is sleeping or if he’s swimming back and forth the reef. Maybe he’s saying
goodbye to little Anshu. Skaia knows he’d miss the tiny fish, even if he just grunts and rolls his eyes
whenever Roxy says anything about it.

She’ll miss the island too. It’s isolated, and it’s surrounded by water – painfully reminiscent of her
old home – but it’s nice and it’s teeming with life and she made friends with Dave and Eridan here
and, well, who can blame her for sentimentality.

“We’re really leaving here, aren’t we?” Dave asks, finally.

Roxy nods. “Yeah,” she says, and her voice is a lot softer than she wanted it to be. She clears her
throat and tries again. “Yeah, we are.”

Dave hums in response, and continues staring out at the ocean.

“Hey Dave?”

He turns to her, slowly, “Yeah?”

“If your friends are there, but mine…aren’t. I won’t feel bad, I promise.”
She can see the way his eyes slowly close behind his shades due to his glow making them visible even through the dark tint and he draws in a slow breath.

“What if they’re not? Hal said this Earth had a lot of…mutants.”

Ah, of course he’d be worried about that too.

“Then…we’ll deal with that when we come to it, I guess,” she says. *We’ll come back to the island and we’ll continue waiting, or maybe come to terms with the fact that we’ll never see them again*, is what she doesn’t.

“Good for Eri though,” Dave says, “Hal’s confirmed that at least Karkat is there.”

“You know Karkat too, don’t you?” Roxy says.

Dave pauses. “Well not – not *me* Dave. Not really. The other Dave.”

“Oh,” Roxy says.

“Yeah.”

Roxy stares out at the ocean again, this time looking for Eridan even if she knows she won’t find him from just looking at the waves up while she’s up on a treehouse. “Just Eri, then.”

“Good for him though. At least someone’s happy.”

Roxy barks out a laugh despite herself, and she hopes Dave doesn’t notice it sounds like hysteria.

“Yeah, good for him,” she says.

When Dave looks a bit worried, she stands up and stretches, and fakes a yawn. “We should both go to sleep. We’ve got a lot of travelling to do tomorrow.”

Dave just looks at her, staring, and she squirms under his scrutiny until he nods back and says, “Yeah we should.”

He’s in the process of getting up when they hear Eridan yell, “Who the fuck are you?”, and they turn, immediately flying to the other side of the island, the part where the sand is softer and there’s less rocks, instead of the rocky cove where Roxy was tossed onto after she’d broken all her bones by falling into the ocean.

There’s just Eridan there, high on alert and looking like he’s ready to attack at any second, yelling at whoever he’d seen to come out.

She doesn’t know what to make of Eridan telling them that he’d seen two people, sitting there on the sand, one of them sounding exactly like how he imagines it would be if he could hear the Void speak.

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**October 25, 2013**

Loki has been on the phone the whole day. It’s slightly unnerving considering he never actually stays on his phone for more than fifteen minutes even if he’s well-versed on how to work them. Dave swears he’s got to be the first Asgardian to even be proficient with technology (not that he’s met anyone else, or has any plan of meeting Thor), and the dude squanders his talent on just sending short texts or using phone calls only for emergencies.
Which is why this is worrying, because there is no emergency, and yet, Loki’s in the sun room and has been on his phone all day.

He’s writing a few things down on sheets of paper that disappear in a flash of green light as soon as he’s done as he talks, which is impressive since he’s still effectively carrying the conversation, but Dave’s focusing more on the fact that this behavior is strange for him.

So either Loki’s got some really really bad news, or he hit it off with someone from a speed dating place. Dave doesn’t know which one he prefers.

Loki doesn’t even look like he’s noticed Dave purposely walking by every few hours or so. If he has and hasn’t said anything, then the phone call’s probably nothing important. If he hasn’t, then…what ever would distract Loki Silvertongue like that?

Right now, Dave’s just obviously leaning on the doorframe, waiting for Loki to tell him to go away. He doesn’t. Instead he pauses in the middle of whatever he was saying (he’s speaking too fast, and for the life of him, Dave can’t piece anything even from context clues, so he’ll give Loki points for sneakiness, at least), and says, “Are you sure you’re alright?”

Dave blinks. He knows Loki has capacity for kindness, he really does, but Loki doesn’t easily worry over strangers. Not very verbally anyway. He’ll subtly offer them shelter in the Safehouse, but never really very openly concerned.

The person on the other end replies, and Loki says, “Yes, of course I’m fine,” and then continues on with his original train of thought.

Another piece of paper disappears in a flash of green light. Dave sighs, and then starts to walk away when Loki lowers the phone, puts a hand over its microphone and says, “Dave, send Cecil here, would you? I need to talk to him.”

He’s unashamed of the several seconds it takes him to process that – seconds in which Loki has returned to his call – because what the fuck.

He goes and gets Cecil anyway, who’s looking much better than he did yesterday. Whatever powwow he and Loki had yesterday had worked, and Cecil was taking care of himself again, saving Kevin the trouble of losing a few years from worrying over his brother.

“Loki’s been on his phone for like, the whole day,” Dave says when he joins John and Jade (and the dogs, who have decided to follow the two of them up as well) on the rooftop garden. Jade’s picking out pumpkins they can carve for Halloween, which is fast approaching, and Dave hadn’t even noticed despite the fact that he’s hyperaware of how time progresses.

But that’s exactly it. Time just progresses. It doesn’t exactly have markers or dates or alarms that hey today’s a holiday, and so sometimes he just feels it move and slip through his fingers, and he just lets it. Just watches it.

This, as Mr. G would say, is exactly what depression is. Dave snickers to himself.

“Oh, no, he grabbed lunch earlier,” Jade says, inspecting a rather big pumpkin that looks like it’ll be tough to carve, although Jade can probably just teleport parts of it out to carve it, the cheater.

Knowing the Safehouse, there’s going to be a contest on pumpkin-carving, and Loki’s probably gonna sabotage it. Dave suddenly misses the pool master. At least they never sabotaged anything.

“I think he was still on the phone while grabbing lunch,” John says, carefully aiming the hose at the
plants, and then looks down at the little corgi currently trying to eat the leaves off of one of the pots near her. “Moxie, no, don’t eat that.”

Moxie ignores him and continues ripping the leaves off and chewing them.

John sighs. “Jade.”

“She’ll be fine, that’s harmless.”

Moxie spits the leaves onto John’s shoes.

Dave says, “Atta girl.”

Jade snickers. Sugar, their resident Border Collie, starts dragging a pot out of line by its plant. Jade stands up to pry it from her mouth.

“God, how do you two keep these guys to behave?” Dave asks. He moves to sit beside Moxie and stop her from eating and spitting leaves onto John’s shoes, but then Posie jumps into his lap and licks his chin, and he jerks back a little from the sudden sensation of being licked by an excitable Chihuahua.

“We don’t,” John says. Then motions his head to the side. “Incoming.”

Dave turns just in time for the rest of the pack to barrel into him, completely knocking him and his glasses over.

“Shit,” he mutters, and is thankful when the glasses teleport back onto his face courtesy of Jade, although now it’s being licked by the dogs too.

He takes a few minutes to sit up, and counts that most of the pack is surrounding him, except for Moxie (still ruining John’s shoes, good girl), and Winston, who’s looking over the edge of the rooftop with a seriousness dogs shouldn’t really possess, but he’s still doing it anyway.

“Winston,” Dave says. The dog doesn’t turn to him. He nudges John’s leg. “What’s up with him?”

He has to point to where the dog is sitting before John realizes he is, in fact, talking about Winston. “Oh, he’s been like that all day. I don’t know what’s up with him.”

“Is he sick?”

“Maybe he just likes to people-watch? I don’t know.”

On cue, Winston turns away from where he’s observing the street and heads for the stairs, running down and bounding towards who knew where.

Weird dog. Then again, he gravitated towards Mr. G, so maybe the man rubbed off on him.

“I swear to god, there’s a lot of things off recently,” Dave says, reaching out to absentmindedly pat Milko’s head. His hand gets licked too, and he grimaces.

John looks down at him for a moment, then turns his attention up to the sky. “Yeah,” he says, “Something feels wrong.”

Dave tries to follow his line of sight and sees nothing, just a slightly cloudy sky that’s probably going to rain soon, a few birds looking like dark spots against the blue, and nothing else.
And then John sneezes and blows back several of Jade’s plants with a burst of sudden wind.

Karkat has not been getting enough sleep. He knows it shows, and he knows both Kanaya and Steve – Rogers, when the fuck had he started calling Rogers as Steve – (and maybe the little menace who he hopes chokes on that green pen) have been telling him to get some rest, but he’d be damned before he actually willingly dived into that blood-filled hell again.

That damn look-alike had tied a noose around his neck the last time, fashioning it out of veins and intestines, and he’d squirmed until Kankri had forcefully pulled him down, and told him to run, and then they’d both yelled at each other before their survival instincts forced them to shut up until the crows had arrived with their usual backup.

They both got sent to the same field Karkat always ended up in, the one with the bioluminescent grass, and he’d mockingly asked Kankri how he’d gotten roped into helping because that selfish asshole would rather run his mouth than pull Karkat’s ass out of hell. And then Kankri had, of course, risen to the argument, told him that the swearing was offensive, and that before he called someone a selfish asshole, he should probably ask their side of the story so as not to hurt their feelings and that if Karkat had known this and that, and honestly the circumlocution was getting so tiring that Karkat just flipped him off and then rolled himself down the hill.

So he’s not going to sleep for three reasons – one, the bloody nightmareland; two, Kankri Vantas; three, the thrice-damned abomination spat out by a constipated Horrorterror, who had the gall to drop him and Kanaya onto Earth. Whose name, of course, Karkat didn’t get. He was too busy yelling, and honestly, they’d had no time to introduce each other.

He’s just staring at the ceiling and trying not to fall asleep now. The television is on and whatever show is playing is background noise to him, Kanaya is asleep since she’d been staying up from sewing too many outfits for him and the human, Rogers is out on his job – it’s the perfect time for him to be at peace and not sleep.

Until the television suddenly says, in a very static-ky voice, “Honestly, what on earth do you think you’re doing?”

Karkat groans, picks up the couch pillow and buries his face in it.

“Mr. Vantas.”

“For one day, please just for one day, piss off.”

“That’s not very nice.”

“I’m not very nice.”

There’s a snort. “Alright then, I’d just like to let you know the Heir isn’t the one speaking right now.”

He frowns into the pillow, then slowly lowers it so he can see the television screen, which is just showing a purple eye insignia. His voice is still muffled by the pillow when he speaks. “What?”

“Hello!”

“What the – what the fucking fuck. If you’re – ”

“Oh no, no. I’m not the Heir of Blood, either. He’s…definitely not a friend. I’m a Seer, darling, and
am unfortunately the one who takes over 'message-relay' jobs. It makes things easier if we designate roles as to who does what.”

“What the hell are you talking about.”

There’s a pause, and then. “I probably shouldn’t say all of this. You’ll get more confused.”

Karkat sits up, glaring at the television screen. “If you crawl out that box, I will shove my sickle down that strep-infected chitinous windhole of yours.”

“You’ve been watching way too many horror movies. I suppose October’s the season for them being run on television. It’s been a while since I’ve seen one.”

Karkat’s glare falters, turning into a frown – how had the corpseshit known he was watching The Ring the other day, unless of course Seer meant – “Lalonde, if that is you, just come get me and stop playing.”

The television actually sighs, and it sounds like a painful burst of static. “Mr. Vantas, as much as I would love to tell you that I am Ms. Lalonde to ease your concerns, I am sadly the farthest thing from Rose Lalonde.”

“You sound like her.”

“Perhaps my speech pattern is, yes, but she’s not the only one who has a way with words.”

Karkat frowns. Whoever is talking may or may not be affiliated with the bane of Karkat’s existence (that was pushing it, there are definitely worse people than a midget with a green pen), but they’re definitely some sort of psionic to be able to hijack Rogers’ television like this. Sadly attacking the television would do nothing, so Karkat just settles for staring it down, and hopefully who was on the other side would be able to see him.

The static riding the voice was definitely on purpose though, so they were cautious. But then, for what purpose?

“But you know Rose Lalonde?”

“I’ve never personally met her, no. I know her in the same way I know you and your name.”

He frowns further. “You talk around in circles a lot.”

“Actually no, I’m being very truthful, Mr. Vantas. I suppose it just seems that way.”

“Yeah, well, if you’re gonna just keep on doing that, bye.” He stands up and shuts the television, then unplugs it. When he walks back towards the couch, there’s a purple radio sitting there, and on the panel where several dials are mounted, is a tiny screen with the same eye insignia that was on the television.

He immediately pulls out his sickle and turns around the room, looking out for whoever came in without him noticing.

“There. I sound nothing like Ms. Lalonde, do I?”

The static is gone now, and instead Karkat feels a wave of calm wash over him at the soothing, ethereal voice that filters through the radio. As soon as it stops speaking, his head clears, and he bares his teeth. “Stop that. Stop doing that, all of you. I’m getting really fucking tired of having myself
being pulled around like some stupid hoofbeastmanure-bathed toy.”

“Apologies,” the radio says. There’s just really something very calming about the way it speaks, and Karkat grips onto his sickle tighter, trying very hard not to calm down.

“Fuck do you want.”

“I’m just here to tell you to sleep. You’re exhausting yourself.”

He’s going out on a limb here, but. “That tiny menace sent you here to hijack the television with your psionics to get me to sleep?”

“You’re no use to anyone dead, Karkat.”

Karkat stills, caught by surprise. The voice immediately continues, “That might have sounded crass. I’m sorry again. But the Heir really is worried about you. I can’t tell you names, not yet, or else you might try tracking people down, and I tried to hide my voice because it is rather easy to recognize voices. And any memory spell put on you, you would easily break through, so that plan’s fallen through as well. So I’ll simply try to negotiate with you and convince you to sleep.”

He snorts, annoyed, and picks up the radio. “Good luck with that, assdick.”

“I’ll give you a heads-up for four very special visitors who’ll be arriving six days from now.”

He stops in the middle of hurling the radio at the floor, thinking about it. The radio seems to wait. Then he actually smashes it.

Or tries to. It doesn’t reach the floor, and instead hovers over it one inch just before it touches down, and a red circle of light suddenly spins into view underneath it. It’s another insignia, Karkat realizes, a symbol he’s seen so many times before and –

And the radio suddenly flies back up, like time is reversing, and shoots right back into his hand. He yelps as it smacks into his palm, and his fingers curl around its handle against his will. He stares at the radio in horror, and then back at the floor.

The Game’s mark for Time is gone.

“They’re your friends. Or, well, one of them is. The other three are friends of your friend, and one of them is an iteration of a very close friend of yours.”

“Would you just tell me straight to my face before I smash you again,” Karkat hisses at the thing, bringing it close so he can glare at the eye insignia. The damn thing can probably see him. The damn thing can most likely see him. It’s probably psionic bullshit.

“Before you try, you mean. The effort is appreciated. I’ll tell you if you sleep.”

He hurls the radio down. The same thing happens and he grits his teeth to prevent from crying out when the radio flies back into his hand again, and somehow, it hits harder than the last time.

“Why do you do this to yourself?”

He throws it down again.

He doesn’t know what he expected. Probably for it to finally hit the floor and smash itself to pieces. It doesn’t, of course.
“Fuck, fine!” His hand stings like someone dipped it in a vat of acid, and his fingers are shaking, barely holding on to the radio’s handle. “Tell me.”

“If you sleep.”

“No.”

“Then I don’t tell you. Maybe not even send them your way. And are you sure you don’t want to see your friends again?”

Blackmailing son of a cullbait, he was gonna run outside and throw this thing right into the path of a speeding truck, laying low be damned by the empress herself.

The tiny purple eye seems to mock him, or maybe patiently wait would be the right term here, although he’d rather imagine it to be actually asking for a fight. Otherwise he wouldn’t feel as strongly as he did about wanting to throw it into those loud things Rogers called a washing machine.

Actually, whether or not the radio was mocking him, he would still throw it into a washing machine.

Karkat presses his lips to a thin line and lets out a low, annoyed growl.

October 26, 2013

Karkat sleeps.

October 27, 2013

[In a space where Time has no meaning]

“Caribbean.”

“No.”

“No, I swear, it’ll be better.”

“We already have one person in the Carribean.”

“Eh, they’ll work together.”

“Language barriers exist, if I may remind you, dear?”

“Pfft. He totally speaks the language. There’s no problem with the language barrier.”

“And exactly why do you insist they be put in the same place?”

“Because they both need a friend right now?”

“Oh, fuck you, what the hell is that argument.”

“It’s a good argument. And did you just say ‘fuck you’ to me?”

“Like I’ve never said it before?”

“No, you’re usually so eloquent, like I’d expect you to say, go fornicate with thine self – ow! What the fuck.”
“I don’t talk like that.”

“You so fucking do, your highness. Like seriously, you think I didn’t hear it when you said, I think you’re the one offended, my good bitch?”

“I will strangle you with your own halo, Angel, I swear on my dead dog.”

“Go pester the AI, you fuck.”

“He has a name.”

“Well, I don’t know it, I’m not on info-planting and make-friends-on-the-internet duty, am I?”

“Go take care of nightmares, you vertically-challenged tiefling.”

“You didn’t play DnD right, did you?”

“Fuck. Off.”

Chapter End Notes

listen i actually had to time it so that this posted on 4:13 pm UTC + 8, October 31, 2017
Arrival

Chapter Notes

Double post because of Halloween :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

777angeles (6:12 AM):
so!!! being sick with pneumonia sucks >:(

autotestifieus (6:12 AM):
Are you alright, Angel?

777angeles (6:12 AM):
yeah, i’m just going home for a while. got invited to some reunion bc my grandfather came home. nice timing. i don’t want to go home :)

autotestifieus (6:12 AM):
Family drama?

777angeles (6:12 AM):
extended family drama. i’m not exactly a legal child.

autotestifieus (6:12 AM):
Oh.
Is that a sore topic?

777angeles (6:12 AM):
nah it’s cool i’m used to it. i didn’t even know i was related to them until like, my grandmother visited? idk
lksenna (6:12 AM):
this is probably a weird coincidence but same?

777angeles (6:12 AM):
!!!
holy shit

lksenna (6:12 AM):
i mean i was more adopted, and then never told until i was grown up
but like
family drama

777angeles (6:13 AM):
:D dude yes
family drama support group
altho everyone probably has family drama so. it's just all of us

abeille (6:13 AM):
actually yeah
families are just hard i guess

BorkinBork (6:13 AM):
Im adopted too actually

lksenna (6:13 AM):
YO

BorkinBork (6:13 AM): AYE
tcrimeeats (6:13 AM):
I was out of wedlock too, does that count?

777angeles (6:13 AM):
DUDE

tcrimeeats (6:13 AM):
HOLY SHIT!

abeille (6:13 AM):
oh my god
i guess kids like us also move in herds

autotestifieus (6:13 AM):
Well, I don’t know where I really count as.
But I definitely have no parents.

lksenna (6:14 AM):
sorry dude

777angeles (6:14 AM):
oh

abeille (6:14 AM):
sorry auto

autotestifieus (6:14 AM):
It’s actually not as serious as it sounds.
I didn’t know the people who could technically be counted as parents.

I made everyone here awkward, didn’t I?

BorkinBork (6:14 AM):

I’m an orphan too and like

Nah you didn’t make everyone here awkward

This is such a coincidence though???

It’s so great

777angeles (6:15 AM):

we definitely move in herds

tcrimeeats (6:15 AM):

You know what would be funny though?

If one of us had Secret Relatives who visited and said we were royalty.

Just turn everything into a cliché movie.

abeille (6:15 AM):

god that was such a dream when i was younger

BorkinBork (6:15 AM):

Princess Diaries but with Angel trying to climb onto a very high throne

777angeles (6:15 AM):

i’m not that short!

autotestifieus (6:15 AM):

Yes, you are.
777angeles (6:15 AM):

fight me, testifieus

autotestifieus (6:15 AM):

I can’t do jokes twice, Angel, otherwise I’ll look uncreative.

777angeles (6:16 AM):

good i’d kick you in the gut if you told me ‘mr. testifieus is my father’ again

tcrimeeats (6:17 AM):

It wouldn’t be The Princess Diaries, it’d be The Heir to Tiny Town.

abeille (6:17 AM):

DAMN

BorkinBork (6:17 AM):

Its Bully Your Local Midget Heir day and I love it

777angeles (6:17 AM):

first order of business, kick crime out my kingdom

tcrimeeats (6:17 AM):

Good. I’d probably keep hitting my head on doorframes because of how low the ceiling is.

autotestifieus (6:17 AM):

Goddamn.

lksenna (6:18 AM):

g o d i haven’t stopped l a u g h i n g
777angeles (6:18 AM):
what have i ever done to you people

lksenna (6:18 AM):
you were cute. that's your transgression

autotestifieus (6:18 AM):
Your height provides extra adorability points.

tcrimeeats (6:18 AM):
Have you guys ever seen Angel in real life.

777angeles (6:18 AM):
cocks shotgun
show them my photo, i dare you

autotestifieus (6:18 AM):
Have you met Angel in real life?

tcrimeeats (6:18 AM):
Yeah while I was visiting New York once.

lksenna (6:18 AM):
how did we not know about this!
we coulda met up, angel!

777angeles (6:18 AM):
if you think
that i'd stand beside your possibly six foot tall ass

guess again

lksenna (6:18 AM):

6'2"

777angeles (6:18 AM):

yeah bye never seeing you in my life

lksenna (6:18 AM):

too bad the fates will find a way

777angeles (6:18 AM):

i'll fight fate itself

abeille (6:19 AM):

wait angel are you from new york

777angeles (6:19 AM):

well

not really?

i moved around a lot and moved to NY like three years ago or so

BorkinBork (6:19 AM):

You mean all this time you've been in the middle of those attacks

777angeles (6:19 AM):

yeah but like

sometimes i forget i'm in new york?
i hole myself up in the house and my flatmates are wild and i just forget and think i'm back home

BorkinBork (6:19 AM):
So like when you said you wouldn’t want your street on fire
You meant like back home

777angeles (6:19 AM):
ye
also like, i meant the whole ‘filming in the middle of an attack’ thing when i was like ‘if this is common in new york’. i always forget

abeille (6:19 AM):
how the hell do you always forget

BorkinBork (6:19 AM):
Thats impressive Angel

777angeles (6:20 AM):
honestly ask anyone who is a safehouse regular. people often forget the city is on fire. especially when there’s bake offs and betting pools and all that

autotestifieus (6:20 AM):
What’s a safehouse regular?

777angeles (6:20 AM):
people who regularly take shelter in the safehouse when there’s an attack. the safehouse is the city bunker

lksenna (6:20 AM):
yeah i’ve read stuff about it on the internet
how accurate are those

777angeles (6:20 AM):
i mean personally i haven’t read any of those? so idk

tcrimeneats (6:20 AM):
I visited Angel when there wasn’t an attack, so I’ve never been to the Safehouse.

autotestifieus (6:20 AM):
Capitalized?

tcrimeneats (6:20 AM):
Yeah, it’s kind of a known thing, but it’s more like people are aware of its existence, but nobody really spills details.

Maybe all the people there have some sort of secret oath?

abeille (6:21 AM):
i mean if it’s the city bunker, then that makes sense because if it’s secrets are known and exploited, they’re all dead

autotestifieus (6:21 AM):
Is there some sort of membership?

777angeles (6:21 AM):
no, you just get in the safehouse if there’s an attack. like, go right ahead

autotestifieus (6:21 AM):
So if, hypothetically, I was to go on a vacation to New York and got caught in the middle of an attack, I can take shelter in the Safehouse?
777angeles (6:21 AM):

ye

are you planning on a vacation

have you finally gotten out of your pretty cannibal neighbor’s basement

abeille (6:21 AM):

he probably ended up dating said neighbor

tcrimeeats (6:21 AM):

Nice.

BorkinBork (6:22 AM):

Everyone quote Angel on three

lksenna (6:22 AM):

goddamn, my dude

tcrimeeats (6:22 AM):

Goddamn, my dude.

abeille (6:22 AM):

goddamn my dude

BorkinBork (6:23 AM):

I

Hadnt even counted

lksenna (6:23 AM):

it’s a great hivemind
777angeles (6:24 AM):
real tho auto are you planning on a vacation here

autotestifieus (6:24 AM):
Maybe.

tcrimeeats (6:24 AM):
Oooh, maybe you guys can meet up.

777angeles (6:24 AM):
rip i’ll be staying home for who knows how long
and if i’m still sick i definitely won’t be travelling back to NY soon

autotestifieus (6:24 AM):
That’s too bad. I would have loved someone to show me around New York.

777angeles (6:24 AM):
haha just get on a tour bus

autotestifieus (6:24 AM):
But really, the Safehouse takes anyone in? Even mutants?

777angeles (6:25 AM):
*especially* mutants. the people who run the safehouse are mutants themselves
the safehouse lets everyone in. even the homeless

tcrimeeats (6:25 AM):
Oh my god, that’s so good?
abeille (6:25 AM):

that's great omg

777angeles (6:25 AM):

yeah it even has rooms so like, if the homeless wanna stay they can just stay. so maybe kinda like a bunker-hotel

autotestifieus (6:25 AM):

No charge?

777angeles (6:25 AM):

no

omg are you planning to vacation in NY and stay in the safehouse bc 1. safe 2. no charges?

autotestifieus (6:26 AM):

Well.

lksenna (6:27 AM):

that

is genius exploitation

tcrimeeats (6:27 AM):

Oh my god, Auto.

abeille (6:27 AM):

just be nice to the safehouse people at least omg

or leave tips or something

they sound like nice people to set up a place like that
777angeles (6:28 AM):
they're wild
i love them all

autotestifieus (6:29 AM):
Well, I'd love to meet them too.
And hopefully you’ll get better soon, Angel, because I have never been to New York before. Some help would be appreciated. Internet research can only go so far.

777angeles (6:29 AM):
haha no promises but hopefully yeah
if you’re staying in the safehouse when i get back i'll definitely meet you

tcrimeeats (6:29 AM):
Haha, you wanna see Angel’s photo so you know who you’re looking for, Auto?

777angeles (6:29 AM):
donOT

autotestifieus (6:29 AM):
If Angel allows it.

777angeles (6:30 AM):
…dm’s are okay. crime can dm it to you

tcrimeeats (6:30 AM):
Okie dokie.
lksenna (6:30 AM):
i never thought i’d read the words ‘okie dokie’ on a chat

abeille (6:30 AM):
we should honestly have a chat bingo or something
we already hit ‘blaze it’ and ‘okie dokie’

autotestifieus (6:30 AM):
Angel.
You are small.

BorkinBork (6:30 AM):
Can we include that in the chat bingo

tcrimeeats (6:30 AM):
Auto’s so brutal, I love him.

777angeles (6:30 AM):
wow you know what
i ain’t ever going back to NY

autotestifieus (6:30 AM):
Angel, no.
Don’t leave me here to die.

777angeles (6:30 AM):
bye bitch
we’re reenacting the scene from lion king
and i’m pushing you off the edge now
lksenna (6:30 AM):
holy shit

777angeles (6:30 AM):
long live the king

tcrimeeats (6:30 AM):
You’d be the shortest Simba.
Or Scar.
Can’t be The Lion King.

777angeles (6:30 AM):
i’m leaving this chat bye

The sun is setting by the time they near the strip of land that is supposedly New York. Maybe calling it a ‘strip of land’ is an understatement of its size, because compared to their island in the middle of nowhere, it’s huge, but from where they are still flying over the ocean, New York simply looks like a line on the horizon, with tall skyscrapers jutting out of the uneven silhouette of roofs.

Roxy Lalonde somehow finds a way to fidget mid-flight, and worries that her illusion of Void over herself and her friends will falter with her nervousness, but the boats minding their own business a long way off below them seem to continue minding their own business, and she sighs in relief.

Learning how to take the Void to encase things in it and keep it out of sight and out of mind has been a work in progress for months, because pulling things out of thin air can only entertain her for so long. She hasn’t perfected it yet, of course, but she’s happy that she’s been able to make one or two things be unnoticeable for about a week. It’s tiring, of course, but it’s an exercise in focus and she had needed the stimulation when she was just stuck on an island for months. The first living thing she’d learned to apply Void to was Anshu, and Eridan freaked out like no other because he didn’t know she’d hidden his little fish.

He’d eventually admitted that it was a cool ability after he’d gone around the reefs three times looking for Anshu, and then refused to talk about it.

A bit more time to practice had been helpful in making her able to at least shield them from prying eyes as they travelled. She crashed and slept like a rock every time they took a break and rested, of course, because this was exhausting, but it was better to put her focus on this than on worrying
whether or not her friends were in New York.

They are most likely not. She’s sure of it. Although at least Eri would be able to reunite with Karkat.

They touch down on the shore, and Roxy is careful to not abruptly remove their veil and instead keep it steady, even as her feet touch the sand. Eridan is set down by Davesprite on the sand carefully, and he frowns as he stares at the ocean.

“You okay, Eri?” she asks.

He takes a while to answer. “The ocean is sick,” he says. Roxy waits for him to tell her not to call him that infuriating nickname, but he says nothing else.

She pulls at the hem of her sleeve.

Dave hovers over the sand, casting an orange glow over it that’s very visible in the dim lighting, and Roxy wonders if people are able to see the glow and are confused as to where it’s coming from. She hopes not, or if they do, they just brush it off.

They’re weird like that, she thinks, the people she’s met so far. This Earth is teeming with them, and one tiny building can contain over twenty of them, and while she knows this isn’t a ridiculous number for this Earth’s standards, she’s never seen that many humans crowded together in one room, and might have cried a little and then pretend she was just tired.

Sneaking into motels and houses had been quite a time for the four of them. It was like the movies, she thought, and she would have loved to be able to do it again when they’d arrived in New York, even if it would be exhausting. Sadly, Hal said he had new information as to where they could stay while they were in the city, although they’d have to lay low while they were in the building so they didn’t draw attention to themselves and just blended in with the rest of the tenants.

She sways on her feet and Hal, on her nose, lights up his screen.

We should go find the Safehouse.

She frowns at the letters for a moment when they refuse to register in her head. She’s crashing from fatigue already. “Safehouse is the name of the building and you didn’t somehow buy us a bunker, right?”

Safehouse is the name of the building.

“Okay, gotcha,” she says, and then yawns. She waits for Hal to give her instructions before she relays it to Dave and Eridan, who both look as tired as she is. Eridan is stretching his arms, which have been hurting the entire time Dave had been carrying him as he flew.

“We really can’t stop someplace closer?” Dave asks.

“Hal says the Safehouse is the closest thing we can stay and actually rest,” Roxy says, reading off of the glasses’ screen. “I actually am getting tired.”

“Well, let’s get walking,” Eridan says, rolling his shoulders and trying to get the burn out of them. “I want to sleep and wherever this safehouse is had better actually be close, Hal.”

“He says of course.”

Eridan makes a noise of acknowledgement, gives the ocean one last look, before starting to walk up
the beach. The winds are cold at night, and with the sun almost gone over the horizon, the
temperature is dropping faster. Roxy shivers despite her sweater, and she pulls her pink scarf up to
cover her mouth and nose to hide another yawn. It’s cold and she’s tired and sleeping right here on
the beach sounds like such a lovely idea right now, although the others would probably disagree.

Well, maybe the sand would aggravate her face but, she just really wants to lie down and not have to keep up with the veil over them.

Getting near the buildings and the houses takes even longer, and as soon as they’re properly in the
city, they all duck in an alleyway for Roxy to lift the veil. Her shoulders immediately feel marginally lighter as she lifts the illusion, and then almost slides to the ground and closes her eyes right there, but Dave stops her and tells her they still have to get moving.

Eridan suggests they take half an hour to rest from walking, and she agrees immediately, breathing out a sigh of relief.

Half an hour turns to an hour, and then another, and then another, and then she wakes up sneezing and confused as to when she’d fallen asleep in the first place. Her head is on Eridan’s shoulder, and Eridan’s cheek is pressed against her hair, and on her other side, Dave is leaning back on the wall and fast asleep, mouth slightly open.

She blinks and realizes Hal is almost falling off her nose, and she pushes the shades up before it falls to the ground.

Rise and shine, Hal says. She thinks he’s amused.

“We fell asleep,” she mutters, still not moving for fear of disturbing Eridan.

Yeah you did, Hal types out, too fast for her to catch up with right now and the letters just blur as the screen prints it across its black background. Although in the meantime, that had me doing a bit more research, and I might know where Karkat is.

Eridan doesn’t wake up. Roxy pokes at his side and he immediately jolts up, too ticklish where his scars from his wriggler days are.

“Ah, shit!” he hisses, touching his side. “Roxy!”

She laughs, and is vaguely aware of Dave waking up as well. She didn’t even know sprites slept until a few weeks ago, when she’d found him sprawled out on their treehouse’s couch, actually sleeping and surrounded by a few small birds.

“What is it?” Eridan asks, running a hand over his face and trying to wake up properly, although he’s clearly as exhausted as the rest of them are.

“Hal said he found Karkat.”

It’s an art, the way Eridan snatches the glasses off of Roxy’s face and doesn’t scratch her despite how close his claws get to her skin. He puts Hal on his nose and stares down at the glasses with an intensity he reserves for getting lost inside his own head, and Roxy chuckles as she leaves him to arguing with Hal via frowning.

She rolls her shoulders and works out the kinks in her neck, wincing at the way her muscles burn from being stuck in a position for hours. She doesn’t even know how long they’ve been asleep for, but the sun has completely set and the night has already taken over the city, so it must have been a while.
There are people passing by their alley, Roxy realizes, casting them weird looks, but surprisingly just shrugging and moving on to wherever they’re going. They’re ridiculously dressed up, all carrying bags, and Roxy swears she sees one tiny kid walk around with a huge white sheet over them.

“It’s Halloween,” Dave says, and Roxy has to remember what she knows of the holiday. She’s heard and read about it, but seeing the real thing is…strange.

She wipes at her eyes, afraid she’ll start crying. This was supposed to be the Earth she should have known, with its ghoulish holidays and its seafaring people, not the one that was drowned out by an alien tyrant.

She stands instead. They’ll blend right in with the crowd like this, so as soon as Hal and Eridan finish staring each other down, they could go to Hal’s safehouse. She would be impressed if he managed to find them an actual bunker or something.

“No, we’re going to find Karkat first,” Eridan suddenly says.

She turns to him, and he’s glaring at Hal. Not the usual fuck you and everything you stand for glare, but an actual glare that promised rage, which…worries her. Frowns were normal, bitchfaces more so, but glares with intent to kill were not. He might smash Hal on the ground.

There’s a few seconds of silence as Hal replies, and Eridan waits, but not without the stony look on his face worse growing worse.

“Yes, we are.”

Another pause as he waits for Hal.

“He could be in danger. If we find him, we can easily take him to this safehouse of yours.”

Pause.

“Well, we’ll do it fast. Tell us where Karkat is, we’ll go get him, and then we’ll go to your safehouse.”

Whatever Hal says next appears to make Eridan even angrier, although thankfully, Dave sighs and says, “Hal, just tell us where Karkat is, it’s fine.”

Roxy watches as Eridan narrows his eyes at the glasses and clenches his fists. She hopes Hal doesn’t aggravate him even more.

Three minutes pass before Eridan tersely hands over the glasses to her, and she can see how much effort it takes to not crush it in his claws.

“Come on,” he says, standing up and brushing the dirt from his clothes. “Let’s go.”

The streets are more crowded than Roxy expects them to be when they get out of the alley, and she inhales sharply, suddenly stilling. So many kids, all in ridiculous costumes. Some of them are out with adults, who are also equally dressed up, and they’re all laughing and talking and comparing each other’s bags. The bags should have candy, she thinks, and wonders how all of that tastes like, and whether it’d mess her up as much as Jane’s cursed juju did.

Dave gently puts a hand on her shoulder and reminds her to get going.

The streetlamps are bright, and she appreciates the glow they give off even if, when paired with the
lights from the houses and the shop windows, they’re too bright. The stars aren’t visible here though, not with all that light pollution. On the island, they were; they twinkled brightly down at her, and she finds herself missing her treehouse and sitting up on the roof at night, just trying to make up constellations. But the island was isolated and quiet, and there weren’t any kids in costumes, running around with their parents and their bags of candy.

Roxy wants to grab a bag and see if she can somehow get candy too.

Dave is remembering, she knows, with the way he keeps looking at the kids and stops every now and then, wistful. She wonders if his Bro had let him trick or treat. He didn’t sound like a very nice person when he’d talked to her about him, drunk and weeping, shades on the counter and tears all over his face.

They should try this holiday, she thinks, if they have time after they find Karkat and the safehouse.

Ahead of them, Eridan weaves through the crowd with ease, and she wonders if it’s because he’d expected to see a lot of humans on Earth, or if he’s actually just set on finding Karkat. Perhaps both, knowing him, and actually having an objective lent more focus compared to just acting on the slight chance that there was something to find.

Roxy adjusts Hal on her nose and whispers. “Is Karkat really here?”

Yes, Hal says.

Roxy nods and says nothing else.

Several kids bump into Eridan and he simply grunts and continues on, and Roxy and Dave have to speed up to catch up to him. Roxy hears a few kids gasp and whisper, “Dude, that’s so cool,” as they pass by Dave, and Dave immediately lowers his hovering so that his sprite tail touches the ground more. He’s careful not to make it obvious that it’s phasing through the asphalt.

They walk around for a while, from street to street, and Roxy notices the pattern of what’s happening – people in costume walk up to a house, knock, say ‘trick or treat’ and they’re given candy. It’s cute, she thinks.

She has a brilliant idea and grabs Eridan by his scarf, ignoring the way he almost chokes on it and glares at her. Dave raises an eyebrow, but snickers, and then follows her as she walks up to a building, decorated extravagantly for Halloween. She then pulls a bag out of thin air and then knocks on it.

Dave seems to get it. He says, “Trick or treat!” in the same false, cheery tone as she does while Eridan fixes his scarf.

Hal, amused, flashes: Well. And then turns himself off.

The door is opened by a man who looks like he’d be better off sleeping, curly hair all over the place and glasses askew, and he looks at Roxy like he expected her to be there but was tired anyway. A furry head pokes itself past the doorway to lick at Roxy’s hand. She pulls back in shock at the sensation.

“Rover, no,” the man says. “Sorry about that.”

“No, it’s okay,” Roxy says, suddenly realizing she’s never actually seen a dog face to face before. Not one that didn’t stand on two legs and try to kill her, anyway. As soon as she thinks that, several more dogs join the first one, surrounding the man, and they all wag their tails expectantly at her,
except for the tiny one with only a stump for a tail.

Dave chuckles.

“Hang on, let me go get the candy,” the man says, but is interrupted by someone else carrying a bowl of brightly-colored sweets.

“I’ll handle it. Honestly, Grahambell, always be ready with candy when you open the door tonight,” says the stranger, laughing at his friend. His cheerfulness makes Roxy smile a bit, and he generously puts candy in Roxy’s bag before telling her, “Have a nice night!” and then to Dave, “Nice costume.”

There’s cheering from inside the building, and Roxy thinks maybe they’re having a party right now. Good for them. The dogs start to retreat to the direction of the noise, except for one, who stares at Roxy and tilts its head, curious. The bedraggled man says, “Come on, Winston,” and leaves to follow the rest of the dogs to where the party is currently blowing up in shouts and laughter.

“Kevin, get your ass in here and knock Luke off his high horse.”

“Okay!” Kevin calls out, and then turns back to Roxy and the others. “What about your friends, don’t you have bags?”

“Oh.” She should have made more bags for Dave and Eridan. Whoops.

Dave just shrugs, while Eridan is glaring at the brightly-dressed human who simply laughs at this and tips the entire bowl of candy into Roxy’s bag instead.

“Holy shit,” Dave whispers, and Kevin winks, then laughs again.

Someone else runs up to the doorway to grab Kevin’s arm, going, “Come on, he’s just sabotaging the betting pool and turning everyone’s ingredients into a rubber turkey.” Roxy has to wonder exactly what’s going on inside the building, although she’s more distracted by the fact that a mirror image of Kevin has just showed up, and she smiles as she realizes, **twins, how cute.**

“Alright, Ceec. Have a nice night, guys,” Kevin says, and then moves to close the door, but not before his brother catches a glimpse of Roxy and the others.

Roxy briefly stares straight at violet eyes, and then the door closes.

When they all finally continue walking down the street, Dave picks through the bag of candy and occasionally unwraps a few to stick in his mouth. He pelts Eridan with a few grape-flavored sweets, and Eridan ignores them until one lands on his hair. He glares at Dave then, and Dave hands him a piece of candy.

Eridan takes it from him and bites it in half, wrapper and all.

Dave just shrugs and continues to eat. “Good kid,” he says, moving his head to indicate the building they’d just gotten all this candy from, through a mouthful of chocolates, “Kevin, I mean.”

Roxy laughs, and wonders if the tenants of the safehouse they would be staying in were as nice as that boy.

It’s a nice night.

And then it isn’t.
So far, about thirteen people have been rubber-turkied. Dave’s counted, because it’s a lot funnier than keeping count of how many people are getting pissed at Loki for sabotaging the whole cook-off. Whoever suggested this whole event must be regretting it, and Dave’s pretty sure it’s no one from the War Council.

Trick or treating would have been nice, but someone had suggested to Mrs. Harrison to have a Halloween party instead, and they’d all gotten way too intense at the planning, and somehow gotten everything together in the span of three days. It was impressive, to say the least, and Rose got to pop in and have James push carts around as she picked out Halloween decorations. It was the first time the man was visiting the Safehouse, and in the few three days he’d been here, he’d been pretty okay.

He was excited to meet the dogs, so there was that. Yesterday, he’d made the mistake of lying down in the sun room and enjoying the light, and then found himself under a pile of approximately twenty dogs.

Good times.

Currently, James is in the corner of the room, looking like he’s torn between clenching his teeth and laughing his ass off as someone else empties a box of cheese only to find a small, rubber turkey inside.

That’s fourteen people. Loki is looking smug from where he’s sitting near the betting pool board.

He only raises an eyebrow when his latest victim yells, “Winters!”

Dave snickers.

He goes to grab a few more sandwiches from the buffet table and is considering just stealing the entire tray when he notices the Palmers come in, and he wouldn’t have paid it any mind if Loki handed gotten up and immediately walked over to Palmer #1.

Who looks slightly distressed.

He watches as Loki says something—it’s too far away and too loud to make out and he’s shit at reading lips—and Cecil nods, and responds. Loki seems to be considering something for a moment before he heads off to find Rose.

Dave looks at Palmer #1, still visibly distressed, before taking the entire tray of sandwiches and bringing it over. Palmer #1 wrinkles his nose.

“Dave.”

“You could eat.”

“I’m not going to starve myself this time, I promise,” Palmer #1 sighs, taking a sandwich and slowly tearing a piece of it off to pop into his mouth. “That wasn’t even on purpose.”

“I know. I just thought eating helped you calm down.”

Palmer #1 stops eating his sandwich. “Stress eating.”

“Yeah.”

Another sigh.

Dave chuckles.
“I just – there’s going to be an attack in a bit, and I thought we should at least send James to someplace that’s…not very stressful for him.”

Ah, yeah. That was understandable. “We should get ready to receive refugees too. And prepare the infirmary. There’s a lot of people on the streets tonight.”

“Yeah, that too.” Palmer #1 reaches up to massage the space between his eyes.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m – I’m fine.”

“You look like you should sleep.”

“I should, probably,” Palmer #1 says, then sighs again. “I don’t want to.”

Dave looks at him for a moment. Maybe Loki could knock him out for a bit, that would help, if Palmer #1 wasn’t opposed to it.

He’s about to say something when Rose and James interrupt them, saying that they both needed to go back to their bunker in India before the attack started. James didn’t look too keen on being in a city that was under fire, and Dave didn’t blame him, not when he was just starting to recover his memories, and a lot of those memories weren’t shy of bombs and bullets and death.

Loki skywalks them back to India after they’ve said goodbye to everyone else. He returns to the Safehouse in less than five seconds, and then tells Palmer #1 that he does, in fact, look like he needs to sleep.

Dave just eats another sandwich and then shrugs when Palmer #1 looks at him, as if asking for backup.

“Cecil, you really do need to sleep,” Loki says.

Palmer #1 shakes his head and says, “I don’t want to.”

“I’m going to get your brother.”

Dave raises an eyebrow and Palmer #1’s mouth opens in a tiny ‘o’, shocked.

“You can’t use I’m going to get your brother for everything.”

“As you and your brother say, Watch me.”

Dave would applaud if he wasn’t holding a tray of sandwiches right now. Instead he just looks at Loki and mouths, “Holy shit, dude.”

Loki meets his gaze steadily, smug. Palmer #1 punches his arm half-heartedly, and Dave blinks at that. Nobody in this house actually punches Loki Silvertongue outside of sparring sessions, even half-heartedly.

“I can’t sleep,” Palmer #1 says.

“Would you agree if I put you to sleep, and make sure it’s dreamless?” Loki asks.

Dave internally winces in sympathy for Palmer #1. Nightmares were a bitch. That close call with the missile attack probably messed him up pretty badly, especially since he’d had to actually be driven
home in a police squad car that looked incredibly beat up by the time it arrived.

Outside, there’s a huge explosion that should have shaken the Safehouse if it was a normal building. It’s not, thankfully, and the floor doesn’t shake, even when the noise is very clear to everyone inside.

The faint screaming starts.

Dave nods as he and Loki share a look again, and he finishes one last sandwich and returns the tray back to the buffet table before heading to the door, keeping watch for anyone who needed to duck inside.

The first of the refugees start arriving five minutes later.

Chapter End Notes

So, I'll be doing NaNoWriMo again this year and that might affect the upload schedule of Lullaby, so I apologize in advance if we suddenly go on hiatus again. I'll try my best to edit and update but no promises. In the meantime, theorize to your hearts' contents.
Hal had told them that New York was prone to attacks, but they didn’t think it would be prone to attacks right now.

Eridan Ampora is running as fast as he can, one hand holding onto Roxy, as they weave through the crowd, because she’s refusing to fly.

“We’ll get singled out!”

“There’s a fuckin’ firebeast behind us, who cares about getting singled out!” he yells. At least Davesprite is flying, although he’s slowing himself down to keep speed with Eridan and Roxy and has long since thrown the bag of that disgusting thing humans called ‘candy’ at the same firebeast Eridan had mentioned earlier. Said firebeast is still chasing them, and Eridan is not in the mood to get burned right now.

“Fuck,” Roxy mutters as Hal’s ridiculous pointy shades almost fall off her face. She pulls them off and tosses them to Davesprite, who deftly catches them.

“Just fucking fly!” Eridan yells, again, to this ridiculously stubborn girl.

“No. You can’t even fly.”

“No, the damn point, Rox.”

“You are going to get left behind,” Roxy says, squeezing his hand tightly. He thinks if he were human, she would have crushed it. “Fuck that.”

Another firebeast jumps out of the alley ahead of them and they all try to stop, but the asphalt is slippery with blood, and water from a broken pipe several feet away from them. He grits his teeth as he yells, “Jump!” and then lets Roxy go, slides down and uses his momentum from running to slip underneath the firebeast, all in one motion. The asphalt is slick enough to just let him slide past the creature, and he inhales sharply he does, hoping the damn thing doesn’t crush him in the millisecond it takes for him to perform this feat.

He pushes himself up quickly and bares his teeth, predatory, and is thankful that Roxy appears to have taken his advice and is now airborne along with Davesprite.

Unfortunately, she also flies full speed towards him, wraps her arms around his torso, and then takes off flying down the street. He lets out a strangled gasp as his breath is knocked out of him from the strength of what was essentially a full body tackle.

“For the Empress’ sake, Roxy!”

“Just give me directions!”
He wriggles in her grip, trying to get a view of the street instead of the monster that is chasing them while also trying to be careful not to injure her, but gets nowhere. He huffs. “Turn me around.”

“What?”

“Just turn me around, I can’t see the street for shit.”

“Fine.”

Roxy lets go. He flails as he’s dropped, and it’s like déjà vu – falling through sky and wind and clouds, and for a minute, Eridan thinks he can see the void and the stars and blue and green and red flashes of magic and hears phantom whispers of be careful be careful be careful – almost expects to hit saltwater, except Roxy grabs him, spins him in mid-air and then takes hold of him again, flying down the street even faster this time.

He has to remember to breathe. Beside them, Davesprite is matching Roxy’s speed.

“The fuck,” Eridan says – says, not wheezes.

He tries to focus on the humans below them, running for their lives as well, with only very few pausing to look at them, flying above, in shock, before self-preservation instinct yells at them to mind their own business and run the hell out of there.

At least they had enough brain cells to try and focus on getting out of this whole mess alive.

“Directions,” Roxy says.

“Don’t drop me,” Eridan says, then looks around his rapidly blurring surroundings as best as he can, trying to get his bearings and comparing them to what Hal had told him. “Turn left,” he says.

Roxy cuts a sharp left, and Davesprite follows her, silent and focused. There’s still so many humans running around and screaming, and Eridan’s fins flatten on the sides of his head at the noise.

He clicks his tongue. “Put Hal back on, he knows this city better than I do.”

“You know the way to Karkat just as well.”

“No, listen, we need to lose this firebeast, okay – we can’t just bring it to wherever Kar is hiding right now,” he says, trying to adjust Roxy’s arms so they’re not squeezing his stomach and making him want to puke his guts out, but to no avail.

That seems to get through her though, as she flies for a few more minutes before ducking in an alley and then up towards a roof, rolling onto the flat surface ungracefully and taking Eridan with her as she hits it. They both let out grunts of pain as they land, unable to slow down from too much momentum.

He’s about to ask what she needed to duck into an alley for if she was just going to fly up when he hears the firebeast’s loud steps in the alley, heavy and angry and seeking out blood.

“Fuck,” he says instead as Roxy lets him go, and he touches his ribs gently, wincing when they feel tender. “Holy shit, I think you cracked my ribs.”

“That’s impossible,” Roxy says, breathing hard. Davesprite carefully helps her up before handing her Hal’s glasses, and she takes a few seconds to steady her heartbeat before she puts the shades on.

Eridan lets out a breath, and tries not to throw up from being squeezed too tight; he mostly succeeds.
He waits as Roxy talks to Hal, and hopes they find Karkat soon in this forsaken city.

It’s going to be a long night.

Steve Rogers has just decided that he hates fire.

Actually, no, he’s decided that a long time ago, like maybe half a century past, somewhere during his forced cryosleep or maybe even back in the war (definitely back in the war) but every now and then, he just likes to remind himself that he really really hates fire.

He’s surprised that his shield doesn’t go through the…fire creatures, whatever they are, and one of the things still manages to catch the disk hurling towards it in its mouth, a glorified Frisbee, before throwing it to the side – it crashes through the glass of a diner. Steve feels offended. Thankfully the diner is empty of civilians, who have thankfully fled to the Safehouse by now.

“Okay, seriously, what are these things?” That’s Tony over the line. Steve doesn’t answer, knowing the man really isn’t expecting one, and he also really doesn’t have one to offer. He’s not the one sitting in a lab putting things together to make freaks of nature.

“A pain in the ass, that’s what,” Clint says.

Steve is inclined to agree as he dives to the side to avoid being torn in two pieces by the hungry, sharp-toothed maw of a firebeast. He rolls, glass and rubble crunching under him as he does, and he’s thankful that his suit prevents the debris from bruising and injuring him unnecessarily. He quickly gets to his feet, making sure to keep an eye on the firebeast, which has noticed he’s not a mass of bloody flesh half on the street and half in its mouth. It roars, a loud piercing shriek he’s sure is heard all throughout the city, before bounding towards him, jaws wide open.

Steve runs and dodges again, as quick as possible, sacrificing his shoulder as he lands on a huge slab of concrete which has fallen off the nearby building – the joint hits it first and he winces, before rolling and sliding off the concrete, ducking behind it as he tries to quickly pop the possibly-dislocated joint back in place. It’s a little sore, but it feels like it’s not dislocated like he initially thought it was.

Before the creature can turn to him, he runs inside the diner where his shield was thrown into, right across the street. He can feel the heat rise up sharply when the creature turns, noticing him, but he makes it inside before it can stick its snout into the broken glass wall of the diner. The beast is so huge that its entire head doesn’t fit through the space – neither does its snout – and Steve’s arm escapes from being torn off. He takes a few seconds to locate his shield, and picks it up, then spins to face the beast again.

He’s sweating madly, and a creature made of fire blocking the only way out of this place isn’t helping. He looks around for another exit, but it’s just walls and more walls, and half the building has its ceiling collapsed, so he’s just stuck in a room that’s half rubble and half – that. A snout of an angry lab experiment gone wrong wanting to eat him.

“Guys, a little help,” he says, hoping being trapped in a building so close to hell on paws doesn’t disrupt the comm’s signal, “I’m a little stuck.”

“On it,” he hears Tony say a moment later, and he breathes in relief, slowly backing away from the mouth that’s still trying to get to him. The temperature seems to rise with how pissed this beast is getting, and the hungry snapping teeth double their attempts to snatch at Steve.
Steve presses his back close to the pile of rubble that’s blocking off the rest of the room, never taking his eyes off the firebeast, on alert for the opportunity to run out of there. He inches closer and closer to the wall to his right, careful not to step on anything sharp as he does, when he hears a terrified shriek.

His head snaps to his left. There are several tables that have fallen over, and there’s too many overturned chairs, but he still makes out the figure huddled in the corner, curled up under two tables that have fallen over each other, effectively but barely saving them from the ceiling that has collapsed above them. The light of the fire from the beast makes the glasses perched on this frightened civilian’s nose glint, and Steve meets wide, horrified eyes pleading for help.

He moves towards them, still just as careful, and then crouches down, making sure he doesn’t disrupt the balance of the tables and send the rubble piled on top of them crashing down.

“Iron Man, I have a civilian with me,” he says into his comm, which Tony helpfully follows up with a “Shit.”

Steve smiles, friendly, and slips his shield onto an arm, and sliding that under the tables, so that if the rubble comes down, it hits his shield and he can hopefully still hold it up instead. “It’s alright,” he says, voice calming, ‘You can come out. Just move slowly.”

The person – A child? A teenager? Maybe even an adult? They look much smaller than they’re supposed to be with their obvious fear – just stares at him, frozen, before shakily muttering an “Okay” and crawling out on their hands and knees. Steve sees them leave bloody tracks on the floor and he winces. They’d gotten glass on them and they didn’t even notice.

He holds his shield and arm under the tables until the civilian is out, and once they are – collapsing in an undignified heap of sobs and short breaths – he moves his arm out, still just as careful as he had when placing it under, and thankfully, the rubble doesn’t crush the tables and cause any more complications.

He turns to the civilian, who has thankfully sat up, but is still shaking. They have their hands on their head, leaving bloody prints all over their cheeks, and are trying to breathe, which is hard considering the firebeast is burning up oxygen rather quickly.

Said firebeast snarls and the civilian jumps a little, backing away quickly until they’re pressed against the rubble, shaking even harder. Steve needs to get them out of here. Where is Tony?

He settles for waiting for a moment before moving closer to the civilian, who quickly turns to him, just as terrified as they are of the firebeast.

He raises his hands up slowly in a placating gesture. “It’s okay,” he says, “It’s okay. Breathe.”

The person seems to recognize him at least, eyes darting from the shield to his uniform, before finally meeting his eyes. They raise a hand to adjust their glasses, although in their panic, just makes the things more lopsided.

He needs to get the glass out of their hands, but trying to help them with their injuries here would probably make them more panicked right now. But since he still does need to get them out – “I’m going to carry you out of here, okay?”

It would be of no use to him if he was going to be carrying a frantic, panicking civilian trying to scratch his eyes out of terror because they currently didn’t want to be touched, too fearful of everything around them. He needs to give them a heads-up, at least. He’s thankful when they seem
to understand, and nod.

“Okay,” he says, then moves to pick them up, and they are meeting him halfway by extending their arms so he can easily loop his own around them and carry them like he would a child – they are rather small – when the firebeast suddenly lets out an ear-splitting howl that has them both slapping their hands on their ears. Steve winces for a bit when he remembers the glass on the civilian’s hands, but all thought is shattered into static as the sharp keening of the creature that keeps them trapped here rings out the small space. He feels like his ears would burst and bleed out, glass or not.

And then, the heat is suddenly gone, and Steve chances opening his eyes, even though his ears are still ringing and everything is blurry and doubling. He lists, and thankfully catches himself, before remembering – civilian.

Said civilian is crying, doubled over, breathing hard again. There is vomit on the floor, and Steve winces in sympathy before immediately picking them up, thrashing and eye-scratching be damned. He doesn’t know how long the firebeast is going to stay away, so he loops his arms under theirs, stands and carries them out of there, running as fast as he can, nearly slipping several times due to his sense of balance being fucked.

His head is still ringing, and everything is doubling in phantom holograms but – he’s out of the building and running down the street, not even taking the time to remember which way this street is going, he just needs to get out there with the civilian fast.

The civilian whimpers, and clings onto him, terrified, and there sounds like faint whispering before he registers they’re actually muttering words into his suit.


Steve’s brain kicks in gear in a split second, and through blurry vision, he takes stock of his surroundings before skidding to a stop, turning on his heel and then running back the way he came from. With the focus comes the slow clarity of not having ringing ears or seeing in twos, and he’s vaguely aware of the firebeast screaming as Iron Man blasts it for all its life’s worth.

He runs as fast as he can, and then turns sharply again, to his right. The civilian holds on tighter, so small and frail that Steve thinks they really are a child. They let out a panicky yelp when he has to jump over a fallen and half-melted lamppost, and their glasses look like they’re uncomfortably digging into their face with the way they’re hiding and crying into Steve’s suit, but their fear isn’t letting them register it.

The Safehouse is all the way across the city.

Steve grits his teeth and runs.

So does Roxy Lalonde, except she has to grab Eridan again and jump, launching into the air before the stupid torch on legs can devour them both. Davesprite slashes and cuts off its ear as it brings its mouth down onto nothing, since Roxy and Eridan have thankfully dodged, and then flies upwards as the thing whines and whimpers and snarls, black tar-oil oozing from the stump that used to have an ear.

Roxy doesn’t wince in sympathy.

Eridan breaks free from where she has a hand on his arm to rip out a nearby hydrant and hurl it
towards the crying beast. It hits the thing straight between the eyes, making the oversized flaming
dog whine and howl in pain.

Roxy puts her arms up to shield herself from the shower of water that comes with the hydrant being
broken. A huge geyser has burst from the spot where it once was, and water sprays onto everything
and everyone within range – including the firebeast, which howls even louder as steam rises from its
body when drops of water hit it. Davesprite touches down on the ground beside Roxy and raises his
wings to shield them both, just as Eridan ducks under to take cover as well, although he’s looking
less tired out from being exposed to too much heat even if he’s soaking wet since he was the one
who ripped out the hydrant – the water helps, maybe.

Roxy’s about to tell them to find a way to direct the water straight from the geyser to the firebeast –
the thing is jumping up and down and scratching at its body like a cat, still steaming from the water
raining down on it – maybe by putting all their hands on it to stream it to the creature, when the water
suddenly does slant down until the full force of it is hitting the flaming abomination.

Roxy watches as the entire thing is hit in the face, and it tries to turn and run, but that just gives the
water more access to its body. The flames die down where the water hits, leaving a black, scarred
surface not unlike burnt flesh. Roxy **gag**s as the smell hits her nose.

The firebeast twists and turns, and thrashes, but the water bends and follows it, until it’s nothing but a
writhing mass of blackened skin and bone that looks like it’s slowly melting the more water hits it.

And then the water stops, suddenly reaching up into a geyser again, and the…thing…whatever it is,
is on the ground, weakly pawing. The skin on it looks like it’s going to slough off until the bone and
muscle – if it even has any – would be exposed.

Eridan is suddenly tense beside her, and she turns to where he’s facing.

There’s a man, dressed up in blue-white-red, holding a disk of the same color scheme with a star on
it. He’s knelt down beside the geyser, unfortunately bathed in the water, and is just standing up when
he spots them looking at him. It’s the shield, Roxy realizes, he put the shield on the geyser to direct
the water.

Eridan, though, realizes something else faster than she does, and in the second it takes her to blink,
he’s already tackling and putting sharp claws on this building of a man’s neck, snarling, even before
the man’s back hits the asphalt.

“Where’s Karkat?”

“Eridan!” Roxy runs towards him, and when she almost slips, takes off flying and instead barrels into
Eridan to knock him off the person. They roll a few ways off, and when Eridan twists to his feet,
intent on fighting the man, Davesprite’s the one who flies and holds him down this time. Eridan
thrashes, and Roxy crawls over to pin him down as well.

“Where is he?!”

The man is getting up, one hand rubbing his neck. There’s cuts on him. Roxy feels a little guilty.

He seems a little intrigued as he looks at them, and then he sees Eridan. He looks like he recognizes
the grey skin and the horns, because his eyes light up, and he mouths a tiny, “Oh.” Then, after a
pause, “He’s safe.”

Eridan stops thrashing for a minute, surprised at the easily offered information, and then glares.
“The city isn’t safe for you right now,” the man says, “We need to –”

“Yes, we noticed. We need to run and hide. Where’s Karkat?” Eridan cuts in.

The man shuts up. Then, “I’ll take you to him.”

Eridan’s fins flatten, and when he curls his fists, Roxy can feel the muscles in his arms tense. Davesprite kneels him in the sternum, effectively knocking the wind out of him, and his fists uncurl.

“*Fuck you, Strider.*”

“Fighting him isn’t going to get us near Karkat,” Dave hisses. There’s red lights through the tint of Hal’s shades, Roxy notices. He’s probably discussing plans with Dave. “We can take him if we need to, but you need to *behave* if we’re going to go get Karkat.”

Eridan manages to wrench one hand free from Roxy’s grip to sock Dave right under the jaw, sending him flat on his ass. Hal’s shades fly off and hit the asphalt, cracking a little at the impact.

“*Eridan!*” Roxy twists the arm in her hold, and when Eridan grunts in pain, she steps on his shoulder, making him actually cry out.

He grits his teeth and tries not to scream, before glaring at her, and for a minute, Roxy remembers that her friend is a highblood seadweller.

But then that glare flickers out, and Eridan says, “Ow, Rox.” He rests the back of his head on the asphalt, giving up. “I’ll behave. Let me up.”

Roxy stares him down for a minute before releasing him. He sits up, slowly, touching his shoulder gingerly. Troll physiology is tough, but having your arm twisted and then having the overextended muscle stepped on couldn’t have been pleasant.

She helps him up, and he says nothing as he accepts the help.

Dave, meanwhile, is rubbing at a split lip while the man in blue-white-red helps him. He has Hal’s shades in hand, and Roxy appreciates the care he handles them with when he passes them back to Dave. He’s not blinking at the orange coloration or the wings, at least.

“He’s…your friend? Karkat?” the man asks, then motions a hand to indicate someone about the height of a child or just a midget. “Around this tall? Usually likes to talk about romcoms? Never sleeps?”

Dave chuckles quietly and nods. “Yeah,” he says, “We – we saw a video of you with him, and we’ve thought that’s where he’s been hiding for a while. This whole *mutant* business, you know?”

Right. They had to play the cover of looking for their fellow mutant friend who got chased out of their town by some close-minded humans. Not that it was far-fetched in this version of earth, apparently.

The man nods. “He’s alright. He’s been hiding in my apartment for days,” he says, then looks around, hefting his shield up onto his back. He’s still soaking wet. “Come on. The city won’t be safe for a while and we need to get you someplace where there’s nothing that’s trying to eat you.”

“Take us to Karkat, please,” Roxy says, before Eridan can snap at the man again. He’s amiable, or at least seems to be, and if he turns out to be danger for them, they can easily take care of that, but they need to find Karkat first.
The man looks at them for a while, as if assessing if they’re any danger to him, or to Karkat. Roxy sees it in the way his stance tenses and as he studies them, taking in what they’re wearing, their exposed vital points, any hidden weapons (his eyes linger a little too much on the sword that’s returned to its usual spot on Dave’s chest, sticking out like a sore…sword). He thankfully looks like he thinks he can take what he’s seeing, and he nods.

“Okay,” the man says, “Come on.”

Superhearing just sucks when all Steve hears up close is the blubbering of a terrified and injured civilian he’s currently holding.

He’s running as fast as he can, jumping over fallen bits of concrete and overturned cars, maneuvering his way past water-slippery streets. There’s barely anyone around, thankfully. They’re all probably at the Safehouse – which is only just a few blocks from where he is, and he’s moving fast. Steve has forgotten how long he’s been running, but he knows one thing: he has to get this civilian to the Safehouse. Leaving them out here would leave them vulnerable to whatever else is out here, and they’re already terrified. All the other Avengers appear to be busy, and he tried to reach out to them, when it looked like this civilian was going to die of fear before he even made it to the Safehouse, but they’re taking care of their own flaming monsters.

So the Safehouse it is. He doesn’t quite reach it before he notices that there’s one of those monsters in his path, footsteps heavy and hot. The thing emerges from an alley, bits of burnt and torn flesh on its lower jaw.

Steve immediately cuts a hard right to duck behind an abandoned car. The civilian he’s holding appears to understand what this means, and clings to him tighter.

He puts a hand on their neck, a gesture of comfort, and lets out a little, “Shh.”

When he hazards a glance at the creature, it’s looking around. Off in the distance, he can see the Safehouse. It’s incredibly close.

He draws back again, not risking running out there with someone else in tow. He needs help, maybe he can call someone, or turn back, but –

The person in his arms is shaking, sobbing, and if they get any louder, they will grab the attention of the firebeast.

Steve weighs his options. He can run out there as fast as he can, and provided he’s quick enough, get to the Safehouse. Provided he’s not quick enough, they both die. If he turns back, there’s an equal chance of the beast spotting them, and since he has nowhere to hide in, they’re both just as dead. He can call the other Avengers, if they’ve taken care of the monsters on their ends, but he’ll just be opening questions of where the hell he was taking this civilian and why he hasn’t answered and why, instead of Stark Tower – which was considerably farther away from where he’d come before – he was so set in bringing them to the Safehouse.

And then they’d probably be able to make some excuse to infiltrate the Safehouse, or maybe not, but he can’t risk it. Maybe they’ll use his presence there as an excuse. Checking the Safehouse to see if they had put any bugs on Captain America or something.

He grits his teeth, going through his choices again, but it turns out it’s made for him, because he’s sweating like crazy, and a burnt hand falls from above to land in front of him.
He jumps. The person in his arms screams.

When he looks up, the firebeast is above him.

Steve runs.

He pushes himself off the ground so hard that he thinks he’s broken his boots from the force, just as the beast opens its jaw and brings it down. It doesn’t catch him, only the car he was hiding behind, and he books it out of there like mad, running even faster than before towards the Safehouse, heart pumping wildly. The person in his arms is still screaming, and the sound is disorienting, but he runs, because the building looks so close even if the actual distance might be farther because he’s not getting there as fast as he thinks and wants to be –

A car, crushed and half-melted, crashes and rolls on the street in front of him. Steve skids to a stop, and then runs to the side to avoid it, still making his way towards the Safehouse. Behind him, the firebeast roars, angry at the fact that it hadn’t hit him when it threw the car.

Steve almost stumbles when the ground shakes once, and then again, and he chances a brief look behind him and realizes the damn thing is running towards him.

He tries to get faster, faster, but even supersoldiers have their limits, and that thing has longer legs, and moves like a hunter set on its prey, muscles moving too quickly for even an enhanced human to outrun, and Steve has to make a decision, because the heat of the firebeast is advancing faster than he can get away from it.

The civilian’s screams stop, dwindling to sobs and whimpers, and that’s what makes it.

He rips out the comm from his ear, ignoring the chatter on the other line, and then, in the loudest voice he can manage, his lung capacity be damned, yells, “Jade!”

For a moment, he thinks he’s going to die, because the heat behind him is getting even closer. But then he sees the green at the edges of his vision, and he doesn’t even blink when this happens, so the experience is somewhat akin to seeing a sudden blackness rushing up to meet him. Steve takes a step on asphalt –

And his foot hits the tiled floor of the Safehouse common room – the sudden change in surface texture and the disorientation makes him slip, and he has to roll to avoid crashing face-first onto the floor, taking the civilian along with him. The civilian makes a high-pitched cry, but Steve manages to roll onto his back, and he stares up at the Safehouse’s chandelier. It takes him about a minute to register that there’s shocked gasps around them, and then, he releases his death grip on his cargo.

The civilian shakily sits up, and then falls off of him, too jittery, and their palms hit the tile. Steve winces at their sharp gasp of pain.

“Alright, give them room to breathe.”

It’s a familiar voice, but Steve can’t quite place it. Maybe it’s the disorientation. Whoever it is, they’re getting nearer, as their voice is getting louder. The murmur from the crowd around them dwindles, and Steve can see the people shift backwards, generous and obedient.

And then he sees Jade Harley burst through the crowd to tower over him, and then kneel down suddenly. “Steve, oh my god.”

She pushes his mask off his face, not even caring that she’s just baring him to the public, but it’s not like he’s a secret, and he’s glad to have the thing off his face. “I’m so sorry, I wasn’t on lookout duty,
I didn’t notice you outside until you yelled, I – ”

He laughs weakly. “It’s fine,” he croaks out, then weakly motions to the civilian who has decided to be sick again right there on the floor. That’s twice that they’ve lost their meals today. Not good. “Injured civilian.”

Jade’s head snaps up, and she motions for someone to come over. “Dave, infirmary.”

Steve has to turn his head to see a kid in aviators kneel down and gently help the civilian up. When they stumble, he slings their arm over his shoulders to help walk them to the infirmary…right. The Safehouse has an infirmary. It just hits him how equipped this place is. It’s still a surprising thing to actually see – the lavish white, high walls, and the gold chandelier overhead, when from outside it looks just like any apartment that just had a rooftop garden.

“You okay?” Jade asks. Then, “Stupid question. Let’s get you to the infirmary.”

“I’m fine,” he says, starting to sit up, and Jade puts a hand on his back to steady him. “Really. I’m fine. I need to get back out there.”

Concerned green eyes look at him, considering, before Jade sighs and nods. She’s about to say something when there’s a loud noise outside, and both of them turn.

Jade’s brother, John Egbert, is looking through the window. His mouth is pressed to a grim frown when he turns to them. “The street is on fire.”

It is, and flying with Eridan in tow is all Roxy can do. He’s silent now, instead of yelling threats every two seconds at the strange, costumed man, that if he did anything to Karkat, he’d have his spine ripped out through his throat in about sixteen different ways, possible all executed at the same time.

The man runs in pace with them, impressively. He runs with the grace of a dancer, or maybe one of those giant cats Roxy only knows from glossy photos, the only remaining relics of a lost, drowned time long gone. He’s all speed and power and beauty coiled into muscles, running and leaping over debris, barely even breathing hard as he sharply cuts and yells at them to follow.

The apartment they’re led to is high, and not particularly impressive, although it does remind Roxy of her own home, back on her Earth, except this street is surrounded by fire everywhere instead of water. She doesn’t know what she prefers.

“Neighbors.” Dave edges close to her to whisper, and Roxy immediately pulls the void around all of them before they reach the apartment’s front door, and the man ushers them in, telling them to move quickly, before shutting the door and running up flights of stairs. Roxy hopes no one has the bravery to look out, and that they’re drowning out whatever is happening outside with their loud movies and their even louder music.

They go up several floors, and just when Roxy thinks they might have been played, the man stops and slams a door open to get them inside. They all run in, and then…then nothing.

The apartment is small and modest, and there’s a turned off television and a ratty couch, and it looks like there’s someone sleeping on it, curled under a blanket.

Eridan whirls towards the man, going, “Where – ” but the man puts a finger to his own lips and
say, “I have to go back. I have a job to do. Please, stay here.” And before any of them can protest, he is outside, shutting the door behind him, footsteps thundering as he runs back.

The angry string of curses in Eridan’s throat dies just as Roxy turns to the sound of an irritated growl, and she sees whoever it is on the couch push themselves up, letting the blanket fall off of their head.

Dave inhales sharply, and Karkat Vantas hisses, “What the fuck is it this time, Rogers?”
“Holy shit,” is the first thing out of Davesprite’s mouth.

Or something like it, anyway. Eridan doesn’t hear it, because he’s too busy staring at the angry lump on the couch, too small under the huge blanket, glaring at Roxy, and then at Davesprite, and then at him.

And then that glare falters, and Karkat opens his mouth, and closes it, a little beached up fish, and then he just says, “You."

He’s trying to be accusing. And he’s failing miserably at it.

“Hey –”

Karkat holds up a hand, making Eridan shut up – not out of obedience, but out of shock that Karkat’s basically gesturing at him to keep quiet – and then he stands and goes to the window, scanning it from side to side. Whatever Eridan wants to say dies in his throat as he watches the smaller troll close the curtains and then go around the room, rummaging through things, looking for something.

Roxy looks confused, Davesprite looks worried and Eridan is…wondering why Karkat’s not tearing his throat out with his nails.

“Where’s that radio when you need it?” Karkat mutters, and then looks up, and around the room again. He hisses, “Seer, where’s your stupid highblood radio?”

No one answers. And Karkat just crouches down and starts crawling all over the floor on all fours, reaching his hands down into the spaces under shelves, under couches, under the coffee table. It’s a strange sight, and the absurdity of it makes Eridan want to laugh.

Davesprite’s wings twitch. “Uh, Karkat,” he says, “What are you looking for, what Seer?”

“The stupid thing that uses that purple radio,” is what Karkat says, which makes even less sense than what Eridan is expecting. “You never got indestructible radios popping out of random places – wait, gog, I should have asked if it contacted you. Son of a cullbait.”

“Random what?”

“Radios. It’s what it called the thing.” Karkat sits up and uses his index fingers to draw a rectangular shape in the air. “Keeps annoying me. Told me you were coming.”

“Wait, what?” That makes Eridan’s brain kick back into gear. “Someone knew we were coming?”

“Yeah, duh, it’s a Seer.”

That kick hits again, although it’s mostly a kick that’s duh, you idiot, than something’s wrong.

Then Karkat stands, wiping his hands together, frowning. There’s dark circles under his eyes, and Eridan knows the only reason he’s not yelling at them or demanding answers is probably because of the fatigue. Other than that, though, he looks mostly fine and unharmed. The man wasn’t lying. He
was even sleeping on the couch, which indicates he’s comfortable and familiar enough with the place.

Safe.

“Who brought you here?” Karkat asks, eyeing them all with suspicion. “Who was it?”

“A man,” Roxy says, then raises her hand to indicate the man’s height. “He was dressed up in white, red and blue? Like a costume? Had a – ”

“Disk with a star he throws around,” Karkat finishes, then frowns, deep in thought. “Of course it’s Rogers.” Then he walks over to the couch to sit down again, brooding. He’s chewing his lower lip, Eridan notices, and not even really surprised that they’re here.

It’s the most lukewarm welcome Eridan has received, certainly more tame than he expected – he expected at least rejection, if not an outright fight, not…this.

Maybe this is what whoever warned Karkat wanted to happen.

“Karkat, since when did you know we were coming?” he asks instead. To his right, Roxy sits down, exhausted. Then she decides that’s not enough and lies down and spreads her arms, a pale starfish on the carpet. Davesprite hovers over towards the window, but doesn’t pull the curtains aside, and there’s a brief red glow from Hal’s shades.

“Four days,” Karkat says, “Are you sure it was the human in the weird spandex?”

“Yes.”

“For the Empress’ sake,” Karkat hisses, glaring at the floor. Then, “Do you remember anything at all before you were dropped here on this forsaken planet or timeline or whatever alternate reality?”

Davesprite turns towards the couch, Roxy does her best to do the same thing, and Eridan just narrows his eyes.

Karkat looks at him and sighs, then puts his hands in his own hair and messes it up in frustration. “Why does no one remember?”

“What are you talking about?” Eridan asks.

“I’m talking about that – ”

The sound of a door opening cuts through their tension, and Eridan turns, and then regrets the action, as the light of a livid rainbowdrinker floods the entire room.

Steve stands, shaky, and with Jade helping him up, he makes his way over to where John Egbert is standing. The firebeast is outside, livid and roaring, and it’s thrashing around, hitting buildings with its tail as it moves, and leaving trails of flames in its wake.

“I need to go,” Steve says, “Someone has to stop that thing before it destroys the entire street.”

“The building’s safe,” John says, then, “I’ll take care of it.”

Steve instinctively puts a hand on the boy’s shoulder, “Son, it’s dangero – ”
“Relax, Cap,” John says, grinning in a way that easily knocks Steve’s worries out the window. “I’ve handled fire before. Who do you think keeps blowing flames out before the entirety of New York burns to the ground?”

There had been observations of strong winds putting out flames before, but Steve usually thought it had been just luck, or maybe divine intervention. He doesn’t know if S.H.I.E.L.D suspects it’s a mutant, but if they do, then John is in trouble.

“Let him handle it, Steve,” Jade says, “I’ll be helping.”

“Jade.”

Jade chuckles lightly, too similar to her brother in her bright demeanor. “We can handle this, and then I’ll find a way to get you back out, yeah?”

“I should at least help along with you,” Steve says. To relegate the task of destroying the beast to these kids is downright irresponsible, and while he knows they may be more than capable, he feels like he should at least be watching over them as they do, in case they need help.

Jade just giggles, and turns to someone in the crowd. “Hey, Mr. G, could you get Luke in here?”

A man, curly-haired and sleep-deprived, nods and then makes his way up the stairs, quickly disappearing out of sight. Steve remembers Jade mentioning a ‘Luke’ once.

“I’m finally gonna meet this ‘Luke’ huh,” he says, in a low voice, so as not to be heard by anyone else other than Jade.

“About time you did. You’re in the house already anyway.”

‘Luke’, as it turns out, is a man who seems to like looking like someone who crawled out of a fashion magazine, with the skinny jeans, the green-and-gold shirt, and the leather jacket. The slicked back hair makes this impression even more pronounced, and Steve notices that his eyes are a bright green, almost the same shade as Jade’s.

The memory of seeing blurry photos from when the Safehouse first became known to S.H.I.E.L.D comes to the forefront of his mind. So Luke was the one they thought was Jade and John’s older sibling, although now that Steve has seen him face to face, he doesn’t look anything like them.

He doesn’t sound like them either.

“What did you need me for?”

“Is Cecil okay?” John immediately asks. This meeting has been too educational, Steve thinks. He’s a little disappointed Cecil appears to be out of commission that he can’t meet him.


“Can you put invisibility spells on us?” Jade gestures to herself and Steve. Steve blinks at ‘invisibility spells’. “We’re gonna try to put out the monster outside.”

Luke glances out the window, then moves close to it, saying nothing for a bit. “S.H.I.E.L.D. might get footage if that thing disappears.”

“I’ll shrink it then,” Jade says, “And maybe they’ll think it’s just an experiment going wrong, because the monster is shrinking.”
“How many things can you shrink at once?”

Jade blinks. “Uh.” She adjusts her glasses. “One. I’ve never tried two things at once.”

“It would be better if you tried to shrink them all at once, less suspicion,” Luke says, “But good enough. You’ll have to shrink every single monster in the city though.”

“Can do,” Jade says, performing a tiny salute, which Steve immediately mentally corrects, soldier training and all.

“I won’t be able to help you with this, so good luck,” Luke says. “Is your brother going out?”

“Yes,” John says.

“Alright,” Luke says, then starts writing in the air – literally writing, because his fingers are leaving trails of green light as they move, and Jade looks a little giddy as he does, and then.

Then, Jade disappears.

Steve immediately tenses, assessing Luke, trying to see if he’s going to attack him next, but Jade’s laughter rings out the empty space where she was standing a few seconds ago.

“Relax,” she says, “I’m right here. Just invisible.”

As if to prove her point, Steve feels his shield being pulled in her direction and he tilts a little bit.

John steps forward this time, and Luke repeats the gestures he did before, and John also disappears.

Luke raises an eyebrow at Steve when it’s his turn. Steve shifts on his feet awkwardly.

“It doesn’t hurt,” Jade says, helpfully.

Steve just stands a little straighter, tense, and Luke starts writing in the air again.

And then, it’s like John and Jade just bleed back into reality, a drop of color in water, rippling and slowly spreading, and he can suddenly see them. He blinks. He’s been doing that a lot. Incredulity is jarring.

“Did it wear off?” he asks.

“No,” Luke says, already starting to head back towards the stairs and upwards, “It’s modified so that you are all invisible but can see each other.” He pauses, then turns towards Jade, somehow correctly knowing where she is. Did he just memorize which spot she was, guessing, or does he actually see her? “And no, this one doesn’t let anything you touch become invisible.”

“Damn,” Jade says, then waves at him as he continues his trek up the stairs, “Okay, thanks, Luke!”

Luke only vaguely waves back, and then Steve can’t see him anymore.

“Okay,” Jade says. She turns to Steve and grins. “Ready?”

Steve adjusts his S.H.I.E.L.D on his back. “Yeah, ready.”

It takes a while for Steve to register what he’s seeing.

For a second, John Egbert is right there with them. And then he’s not, because he appears to
disperse, the solidity of him warping and fading and moving until he’s nothing, and Steve sees the front door of the Safehouse rattle a bit, and then realizes that John Egbert has literally turned into the wind and just slipped past the spaces through the doorway.

He feels Jade touch his shoulder, and then he blinks and he’s outside the Safehouse, on the front porch, and there is a firebeast in front of them swinging its head from side to side, a melting car in its mouth. It chucks the hunk of metal to its right where it then embeds itself violently into a building. Steve steels his jaw, hoping no one was in there, before slinging his shield onto his arm.

The monster roars in anger, and then suddenly rears back, its flames moving back as well, and the thing shakes its head, pawing at its face as if it was trying to get rid of an itch. Dust and debris move towards its direction, although not in an attempt to attack it, but more like the wind is blowing towards it and everything else in the way is getting carried in its strength.

Jade hops off the porch and Steve immediately follows her, ready to protect her in case things go awry, but she just puts her hands in front of her and sticks her thumbs and forefingers out, positioning her hands far apart, her fingers forming the angles of a rectangle.

And then she brings her hands closer and closer, and Steve is confused for a moment, before he looks up and notices that the monster – still pawing and still being mowed down by the sheer force of the wind – is shrinking in time with the diminishing space between Jade’s hands.

Steve watches, stunned, as the monster is reduced to the size of a cat, too small to weather the force of the wind, and it crashes straight into the building behind it and falls onto the ground.

It doesn’t move.

The wind stops.

Jade tilts her head. “Is it dead?”

“Maybe I cracked the spine,” John Egbert says. Steve looks up to see him floating up in the air, the action obviously effortless. And to think Tony had to figure out how repulsors worked to get his suit airborne.

“Ouch,” Jade winces.

The tiny thing is still flaming away, but it’s small and manageable should it try to cause trouble. It still doesn’t move.

When even after a few minutes, it remains stationary, John turns into the wind again, blowing down the fires of their street, and Steve watches as Jade kicks off into the air as well, following in the direction the wind is going. Steve runs to keep up.

“You can fly?”

“Yeah,” Jade says, turning to him, still smiling away like flying was a natural talent given to children on their third birthday. “Don’t worry, I won’t go too fast so you can catch up.”

He doesn’t tell her that’s not what’s surprising him, but really, if they’re mutant twins, he should have at least expected some similarities in their mutation. He still tries his best to match her pace. John, meanwhile, is going through the city with the reckless abandon of someone in a race to put out fires before too much damage is done.

“Who else of you can fly?” Steve asks, just in case he’s going to see someone else from the
Safehouse take off into the air. He might as well prepare for it.

“Dave and Rose,” Jade says.

Ah. Maybe they all met up at flying practice. That’d make sense.

“Kanaya!”

Karkat throws himself across the room just to reach Kanaya before she can rush at Eridan. She’s glowing incredibly bright in her rage, and Eridan can see her fangs, abnormally longer and sharper than most trolls’ teeth. He leans back a little, an involuntary response to her aggression, and his fins flatten on the sides of his head. He feels a sting on his midriff and puts a hand over his stomach.

“Kanaya, stop,” Karkat says, clearly digging his heels into the floor while Kanaya, easily towering over him, is trying to get past him without hurting him. This proves a little hard since Karkat has wrapped his arms around her just to hinder her.

“What are you doing here?” she spits out.

Roxy sits up, wary, alternatively looking between Kanaya and Eridan, one hand hovering, ready to pull either something out of the void or a weapon out of her sylladex. Has Roxy met Kanaya?

Davesprite turns from the window and stiffens slightly, even if Kanaya isn’t paying attention to anyone other than Eridan at the moment. The red glow from the shades is back, and this time it stays.

Kanaya thrashes in Karkat’s hold.

“We were brought here,” Eridan says, carefully. He moves his feet apart a little, ready to run or attack should he need to. “By a man in strange clothes.”

“Rogers brought them here, Kanaya, please,” Karkat says.

Kanaya seems to stop at that, and then thrashes again. “Liar.”

“He’s telling the truth, I was on the couch when they were brought in – Kanaya.” Karkat is almost tipping over, bending back as Kanaya extends her arm in an attempt to get at Eridan despite him being too far away for it.

Outside, there’s a loud crash, and everyone turns to it for a second. Eridan quickly turns back to Kanaya in case she uses the distraction to claw his guts out.

She doesn’t. Instead she calms down a little and settles for coldly glaring at him, her mouth set in a thin line.

“She is getting out as soon as this attack is over,” she says, “If he is not, I’ll gladly tear him in half again.”

Eridan steadies his ground, reminding himself that he can completely defend himself if he needs to. Just because she got him once doesn’t mean she can easily do so again, at least not without him fighting back.

She doesn’t try to get at him anymore though, and after a few minutes, Karkat lets her go.
Eridan tenses. She doesn’t attack.

“Now, what are you doing here?” Kanaya asks again, still glaring at Eridan.

Eridan doesn’t answer, just holding her stare, so Roxy has to answer for him.

“We saw the video of Karkat being…rescued…by that strange man. You called him Rogers?”

“His name is Steve Rogers, yes,” Kanaya says, crossing her arms. She still doesn’t look away.

“Where did you find it?”

“Hal’s friend,” that’s Davesprite. Hal’s still glowing, clearly explaining a few things to him, seeing as Davesprite pauses first before saying, “They were all discussing the recent New York attack and their friend had a video of Karkat being rescued by Rogers. We thought to come looking.”

Kanaya looks like she wants to say something, maybe something along the lines of You shouldn’t have, but that’s largely unfair to Davesprite, Hal and Roxy, so she holds her tongue.

“Why were you looking?” Kanaya asks. Karkat moves to stand beside her and puts one hand on her arm, just in case she changes her mind on not attacking Eridan just yet, although he also appears to be curious of the answer.

“We’ve been stuck on an island for months,” Eridan says, “I got dropped there first, and then feathers over there – “ he motions towards Dave, who flips him off, “ – and then Roxy, and then Hal. We didn’t know where we were since Strider the Prequel didn’t design his AI’s shades with a GPS.”

“Or, someone took it out. Someone who knew how to,” Karkat points out. “You don’t really remember anything?”

Eridan frowns. He turns to Roxy, who, despite now having crossed her legs and put her elbows on her knees so she can cup her face with both hands in an attempt to look nonchalant, is still obviously tense and ready to run if they all need to, shrugs.

“No,” he says.

Karkat rakes his claws through his own scalp in frustration. “We didn’t just get dropped onto this Earth for no reason!” he says, ignoring Davesprite’s snort and mutter of, “That’s deep.”

Kanaya looks a little concerned. Clearly, this isn’t the first time he’s tried to get someone to ‘remember’.

Eridan knows something happened. He just doesn’t know what.

“There’s someone who’s doing this. I’ve only seen one of whoever these people are but I know – I know they’re not just one person, unless they’ve somehow managed to duplicate themselves or something. The radio clearly knows them. So that’s two right there.”

“Karkat,” Kanaya starts, but Karkat plows on.

“No, even if you don’t remember, I do. And that radio has been talking to me for days and told me you were coming,” Karkat says, gesturing towards all four of them, Hal’s shades counted. Kanaya raises an eyebrow at him.

“I don’t remember anything, I just woke up…here,” Roxy says, shifting.
“Yeah, well, if we’re gonna get off this Earth and back to our session, we need to find…whoever that little twerp is. I didn’t ask for a name,” Karkat says.

“If someone dropped us here, they can probably drop the others too,” Davesprite says, “Maybe we just don’t know where they care.”

“Well considering the positioning – we were far off in the middle of the ocean, and Karkat and Kanaya are here, I doubt we’d find anyone else in the city,” Eridan says, “Maybe they’re deliberately spacing us apart.”

“For what?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if it was shits and giggles,” Karkat says, crossing his own arms as well. He looks too much like Kanaya at the moment. Eridan alternates looking between them and decides it’s unnerving.

“Did you talk to them?” Davesprite asks.

Karkat suddenly falls silent. When he presses his lips to a thin line, he looks too much like Kanaya too.

“Karkat, you never told me this,” Kanaya says, “Did you talk to them?”

Karkat takes a while to answer. When he does, he shifts on his feet, nervous. “Yes. Too many times.”

“Karkat.”

“It’s mostly in dreams. Something’s been getting in my dreams lately. I don’t know what, but I want it out, and whoever sent us here has been…helping.”

“Helping whoever’s sabotaging your sleep.”

“No, helping me sleep. It’s annoying.”

Eridan tilts his head, curious. “You dream about whoever sent us here?”

“No,” Karkat says, clearly not liking the wording. “Something’s been getting in my dreams, dumbass. I know this because it clearly…feels like it. That’s the only way I can describe it. It feels like there’s something in my head when I sleep. Whoever sent us here just hijacks the nightmare and gets me someplace else so I can sleep fine.”

“So they’re an ally?” Roxy asks.

“I wouldn’t rule it out, but I wouldn’t jump to conclusions just yet,” Davesprite says, “Might be a trap.”

“They might be playing,” Eridan says, “Both of them together, or both of them apart. It’s possible.”

“So what, it’s a pissing contest between two fucked up Heirs?” Karkat says, incensed. The circles under his eyes are too dark, and he looks slightly scared, but his anger is making him push past that. Brave boy. “Cause I want out.”

“Why don’t you tell us more about this?” Eridan asks, military instincts clicking into place, years of FLARPing suddenly coming back to him. He slowly sits down, making sure to look as unthreatening as possible under Kanaya’s scrutiny. Davesprite hops over the couch’s backrest so he
can sit on it, tucking his wings in and resting his arms on his knees, ready to listen. “Maybe it’ll jog our memories,” Eridan says.

Kanaya is still looking at him with distrust, so he focuses his attention on Karkat instead.

Karkat looks at the floor for a second.

And then he nods, and he tells them everything he remembers.

It’s impressive how John manages to put out the fires in less than an hour, but when you’re literally the wind, Steve thinks that’s understandable. He also thinks he doesn’t quite like flying when it involves getting hauled up by the wind itself, and he’s just flailing and trying not to fall because his sense of balance has been disrupted. But he and Jade need to travel fast, so he lets himself be buoyed up like that, with Jade teleporting him down onto the ground every time they’re close to their target.

She shrinks the firebeasts down, and he fights them off when they’re still violent even when miniaturized. His shield is scorched, and parts of his uniform have burn marks on them, but he’s getting rid of these monsters faster than he normally did by trying to face them off in their normal size, so it’s fine. He kicks the top off of several hydrants to get the things drenched if he needs to.

Occasionally, they pass by an Avenger, and he dutifully avoids eye contact even though he knows they can’t see him. They’re probably wondering what happened to him after he ripped out his comm.

The entire mess is cleaned up in about four hours, and Steve is dropped back inside the Safehouse by Jade, where they both try not to collapse into heaps of overfatigued metahumans on the floor. John looks a bit better than both of them, but that might just be his innate cheerfulness overpowering through his tiredness. There’s nearly no one in the hall, Steve notices, but they might have just gone to sleep. It’s been hours after all.

Dave, sitting by the window near the front door, just looks around at the noises they make, and Steve briefly forgets they’re invisible. The boy has a hand out, and in a split second there’s a sword in his hand.

Steve’s entitled to the What the fuck that pops up as a thought. Mostly because of the katana, partially because a teenager is wielding it expertly, even more partially because Dave just pulled it out of thin air.

“It’s just us, Dave,” John says, and the kid’s stance immediately relaxes.

“Oh,” he says, then, “Where are you?”

“Right here.”

Dave somehow conveys a bitchface without changing expression. “Right. Luke, get your ass down here to un-invisibilify these guys. I’d do it but I can’t see them.”

Steve should really get used to people just appearing out of nowhere, but he’s still slightly startled when Luke suddenly appears in a flash of green light. “Un-invisibilify?”

“There’s no word for turning someone not invisible.”

“How about reverse your runework.”
Dave shrugs. “Un-invisibilify is cooler.”

Luke says nothing for a moment. His back is to them, so Steve can’t see what look he’s giving Dave, who just looks smug.

“Right,” the man says, then turns to the three of them. He really can see them, because there’s no way he walks over to where they each are to undo his spell or something from them, and then they’re all visible again, judging by the way Dave waves at them.

Steve consciously pats at his torso, like it’d reassure him he is, in fact, visible. John laughs.


She adjusts her glasses, and starts to talk, but then sways. Steve instinctively moves to catch her, but Luke is closer, and easily puts his hands on her shoulders to steady her.

“Sorry,” she says, “This just…exhausts me too much.”

“Try practicing on a daily basis so you don’t surprise yourself when you suddenly have to go all out,” Luke says, then, “Do not fall asleep on me this time.”

Dave snickers. John laughs harder.

“I want a video this time,” Dave says. “And this time you are carrying her into the kitchen because she wants cookies.”

“No.”

John looks like he’s suffocating from how red-faced he’s getting, and his laughter is suddenly the silent sort that usually happens when someone’s struck comedy gold. Clearly, Steve missed something here.

“I’m teleporting to my room,” Jade says, and Luke immediately says, “Don’t crash into anything.”

Jade just waves him off. “I’m fine. I’m not that tired.”

She’s the one who disappears this time, and all three remaining Safehouse residents look up, as if expecting something. Steve does too, mostly out of confusion. There’s nothing.


“I’ll check on her,” John says, turning into wind again, flying up to check on his sister.

Dave snorts, and then with a flick of his hand, the sword he’s holding disappears, and Steve stares at the empty space before Luke snaps him out of it.

“Where do you need to go, Mr. Rogers?”

“O-oh, uh,” Steve tries to forget about disappearing swords and the general weirdness of a household full of mutants. It must get wild here. “I need to join the rest of the Avengers and debrief so, anywhere outside would be good, really.”

Luke nods, and then steps towards him. “Alright,” he says. “This is similar to Jade’s own abilities. Don’t be too surprised.”
He nods, already adapted to Jade’s teleportation that he doesn’t have spatial displacement motion sickness anymore.

Luke puts a hand on his shoulder and he steps forward when the man does.

It does not at all feel similar to Jade’s abilities.

Somewhere in the infirmary, the civilian Steve Rogers has brought in is recovering. They’ve calmed down significantly from when they were first brought in, and their injuries have been taken care of. The pain meds have helped with their hands being a wreck, at least.

They’ve managed to eat a bit, nothing too heavy, and have slept for a while before waking up screaming and crying, and they had to be put to sleep by a light sedative again, which they gladly took since clearly, they needed their sleep, and they looked better when they woke up from an undisturbed rest anyway.

No one comes to visit them, except for the mutant children who hang out at the Safehouse, and the mutant kids (and one adult) who help run the Safehouse, but they’re fine with that. They nervously talk to people and laugh softly, like they’re trying not to disturb anything too much by what they’re doing, and really, a few people think it’s sad.

They stay in the infirmary for a while, for three days, and then they decide they’re better enough to try and get back home. They’ve borrowed too many clothes from the Safehouse residents already, and they’re embarrassed but grateful. Still nervous, sadly, and everyone happily but worriedly lets them go. They look too jittery. They’re a nice kid though. Unobtrusive, polite, got along well with the dogs and managed to remember their names quickly and tell them apart. Able to play and handle them well too.

But they ask to be allowed to go home, so they are, even if they’ve slightly endeared themselves to the Safehouse residents. Jade, once she’s well rested enough, (and did not crash into her dresser when she teleported to her room, thank you very much) and the others see them out the front door. The kid doesn’t even act like they have a family to go back to, but maybe they live alone and are just used to it. They can always come back to the Safehouse if they need to.

“Take care,” Jade says, and the kid adjusts their glasses on their face, nervous. The lenses are a little cracked, and Jade doesn’t think they’re going to be serviceable for a while, but it’s clear that the kid isn’t keeping them for their functionality, but for the sake of having a small barrier between them and the rest of the world. A flimsy shield, a nervous tick. The kid isn’t meeting her eyes either, instead looking at the ground, only occasionally chancing a glance at everyone at the door.

Their fingers twitch, and when they bring their hand down, satisfied with the way the frame of their glasses seems to block out their eyes, they pick at their bandages. Jade sighs a little, fond, and think they should probably let the kid go already, because they look a little too anxious.

“Safehouse is always open for when you need it, okay?” she says, and sees her brother nod beside her.

“Okay,” the kid says, and then bites their lower lip, unsure if they should leave.

Jade chuckles, gives them one last reminder to be careful, and then ushers everyone inside and closing the door behind her. Clue should be a nice game to get all of them yelling.
A walk from the Safehouse to several blocks away is made by a tiny, frail, jittery kid with bandaged hands, and broken glasses. The kid picks at their bandages and hisses when they hit their wounds, but they still fidget, and they don’t meet anyone’s eyes. Not that anyone is paying them attention, because they’re just a tiny, vulnerable little kid, who would probably be mugged and stabbed in some alley, and then a line in the obituary of a newspaper. And that’s the end of it. Nothing special. Just that.

That kid walks past stores and apartments and coffee shops and almost bumps into people, although they somehow manage to navigate past even those who tower over them menacingly. They still fidget, and pick at their bandages, until the wraps have almost unraveled from their hands.

They walk, and walk, and walk, and it’s like they never tire, and soon the Safehouse can’t even be seen from where they are. Actually, it’s like New York can’t even be seen from where they are.

And they still walk, and walk, and their bandages slip from their injured hands, and just before the bloodied things hit the ground, something shifts in the atmosphere. It’s like a switch, somewhere in the cogs of the universe, hidden deep beneath the folds, a little party trick.

That switch hits off.

And then suddenly, no one notices that tiny, vulnerable kid.

It’s not like before, when they were walking around, and everyone thought they would be easy pickings for whatever murderer had them in their sights. It’s that no one notices them. Like they’re not there. And in fact, maybe they really aren’t, because proof of existence is having proof in the first place, and where’s the proof when no one can give it because they weren’t able to glimpse it?

That kid, that now unnoticeable kid, takes off their – his – glasses, and with that, he no longer looks frail, and he straightens, pushing his hair away from his face. He looks taller than he was earlier, whatever and whoever that kid he was pretending to be. He’s certainly not as frail, and not as shaky, and his hands are clean and uninjured, and all the injuries he really does own have healed a long time ago.

He folds the glasses, cracked, useless, expired, and tucks them into his pocket, and then walks down the road, humming. There is a coffee shop ahead he must go to.

When he almost reaches the coffee shop, there’s someone else walking towards it, a man dressed in blue-red-white, a huge disk on his back. No one notices him either. The man smiles, and suddenly he is no longer blond or blue-eyed – in fact, he shares no resemblance to the man he looked to be before, except maybe for the fact that he is also tall.

They both make their way towards the entrance of the coffee shop, and slowly, that little switch hidden in the universe’s programming turns itself back on, and when they both meet at the doorway, they are both fully noticeable.

“Hello,” the tall man says, “Did it go well?”


“Well, I’ve finished up on my end,” he says, “Coffee?”

“That’s what we came here for, isn’t it?”
The man nods. “Good, I’ve rather missed coffee.”

The kid laughs, and they both step into the shop, dressed and looking like any other person in this city would, to the table where there’s other people who also look like any other person in this city would, and then they talk about things we have no business learning about.

Not yet, anyway.

Chapter End Notes

more chaos? more chaos.
All Hands on Deck

Chapter Notes

welcome to the formal beginning of what can be considered Act Three of the fic :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

tempestuousAnarchy [TA] began pestering archimageChaos [CA]

TA: okay
TA: so i did the thing you told me to do. i have this. whatever this is. on your paranoid shifty chat client you had ruben code months ago.
TA: what did you need me here for.
AC: Are you still sick?
TA: you won my grumpiness at being woken up at 4:13 a.m in the morning over with your concern.
TA: fake or genuine concern. whatever. it’s nice being asked after.
TA: yes i am still dying with my grade A pneumonia.
AC: Come home.
TA: i am home, dum dum.
AC: Come back to the Safehouse.
TA: oh.
TA: uh my aunt kinda just tried to behead my third cousin four times removed with her umbrella and the house is a warzone.
TA: they’re not gonna take kindly to me wanting to leave.
TA: also. ruben’s still here.
AC: Your aunt did what?
TA: asjdagha
TA: not literally.
TA: although. She did in fact try to slap him with her umbrella. It hit him so hard I thought his head was gonna spin.
TA: you could say she
TA: tried to *remove* his head.

AC: Sapphrel.

TA: heck you, you woke me up at 4 am, winters, you’re suffering through my snowstorm of puns.

AC: I will eliminate all of your colored chalk left in the Safehouse.

TA: what!!!

TA: rude!!!

AC: You know what to cease.

TA: …well

TA: where do you think egbert got his supply of pastel pink kigurumis.

AC: Oh, you fuck.

TA: HAH!

TA: i can’t believe i know your true fear.

AC: I am taking away your exemption privileges. From now on, pool master or not, you are not exempt from pranks wars.

TA: i am five feet of fragility, how could you.

AC: I’m six feet and two inches of ruthlessness, that’s how I can.

TA: neon pink crocs, bitch.

AC: You vertically-challenged tiefling!

TA: i will bedazzle all your leather, you take that back!

AC: No.

TA: do it.

AC: No.

TA: do it.

AC: No.

TA: >:(

AC: Eloquent as always.

TA: well not everyone speaks like they ate seven sets of regency era drama dvds.

AC: What?

TA: rip. A – 1, W – 0.
AC: A biased and incorrect scoreboard, because if you recall correctly, I did a burn on you for your height.

TA: i can’t help my height and this is discrimination.

AC: No.

TA: oppression.

AC: Saphrel, did I catch you while you’re on medication?

TA: i

TA: ye a h?

AC: God damn it.

AC: Still, I need you to get back here.

TA: with as much focus as i can muster through my pain meds:

TA: seriously, why do you need me to do that?

AC: Pain meds. Did something happen?

TA: yeah i got pushed down the stairs and sprained my ankle or something.

TA: so like. really not a good time to leave the house right now.

AC: Who pushed you?

TA: uh. someone. i didn’t see. probably one of my cousins or something, just standing behind me and then. push.

AC: I did warn you about stairs.

TA: not my fault this fancy ass house has a lot of stairs!

AC: Nothing else?

AC: Nothing weird?

TA: uh, no?

TA: did you have anything specific in mind?

AC: …

AC: Nothing I can say with confidence for now.

AC: Anyway, I still need you to return here.

AC: I can send Jade over.

TA: and how am i supposed to explain a floating mutant girl that is surprisingly not one of my hallucinations.
AC: I will skywalk over there.

TA: and how am i supposed to explain a wannabe biker that is surprisingly not one of my hallucinations.

AC:...

AC:...Sapphrel.

TA: /snickers

TA: seriously, mr. winters, just wait for me to like, heal up or something. i'll be back there when i can.

TA: unless you needed like, someone to take over like…the weird stuff you let me catalogue sometimes?

AC: I was going to induct you and Ruben into the War Council.

TA: what the fuck why

AC: I'm concerned if it will be an all-hands-on-deck situation soon.

TA: did something happen?

TA: while i was gone?

TA: i've been trying to melt into my bed for days, i haven’t checked the news.

AC: Well, there was an attack on Halloween, but it was nothing out of the ordinary.

TA: o...kay? so what’s this? more paranoia?

AC: Moving the pieces on the board before the game starts.

AC: Or maybe trying to catch up to the game that’s already starting.

TA: luke

TA: i love you but 4 am while i'm loopy is not the best time for your surprise poetry.

AC: I need you on cataloguing duty more often.

TA: oh

TA: well you didn’t need to go be cryptic about it!

TA: how about you just send me things over this chat client and i'll organize things?

AC: This chat client is safe for now, but I do not want to jeopardize important information if it is potentially hacked.

TA: …i am not going to ask questions.

TA: you’ll have to wait since you insist on this then.

TA: and do not show up and kidnap me or ruben or anything.
Tony Stark doesn’t make a habit of skipping out on parties.

For Tony Stark to skip out on parties would be akin to seeing the sun flicker out one day, and maybe it’s not a permanent arrangement, but it’s still Highly Disconcerting and A Cause of Concern.

But thankfully for him, skipping out on Halloween to try and finish breaking the last barrier of The Great Wall of Mutation Strings was easily shoved aside from the forefronts of Pepper’s and Rhodey’s minds since New York was, again, under siege, and thus he had an actual excuse to skip out on Halloween instead of feigning being sick just to finally defeat his fated enemy of around almost a month now.

He had been having trouble with one rune and had misplaced the blue glitter pen he had been using to practice, since he couldn’t waste the ink of the pink and violet ones. After several days (and the few hours on the 31st) of trying, he finally got it right and managed to lock a wall of code down right before the Avengers were called to assemble to deal with the flaming dogs outside.

Currently, the fight’s been wrapped up, because apparently, the things had some expiry date and shrunk after a few hours. They were more manageable by then, and by the dawn of November, New York was smoking a lot less than it was a few hours ago.

Steve’s back too. He ran into one of the firebeasts and had half his suit scorched, the same side where the comm would have been – where it would have melted into his ear if it had been exposed to so much heat. Understandable that he had to rip it off. He even had a few burns that were just healing and had to be rushed into Stark Tower’s clinic for treatment. He was doing well though, super soldier and all.

The streets are still being cleaned up though, and Tony is running on the last of his caffeine and agitation, moving around debris. Even being in the Iron Man suit isn’t helping him with his fatigue, not when he’s been staying up for three days learning runes and chasing disagreeable glitter pens under couches, and then had to fly out to take care of this mess.

The others are helping too, as best as they can, with their S.H.I.E.L.D volunteers and forklifts. The civilians are just starting to walk home, probably from the Safehouse, and Tony wishes he’s just back in his tower, with a beer and a pizza, and that JARVIS is done dismantling the last string of code so he can finally know what and who is behind that wall.

Three hours into clean up, and almost half an hour to noon, he moves to sit on a pile of metal that’s going to be sorted through soon. The suit allows him to sit without the usual discomfort that would come with sitting on a pile of broken hydrants and car doors, and he flips his mask up to breathe. He
really needs to sleep, he thinks, but if JARVIS has finished his task, then Tony’s more than happy to chug sixteen more cans of caffeine to do more work.

“You okay?”

It’s Steve, out of his Captain America uniform and in sensible sweatpants and a jacket that’s still somehow tight on him. He looks less burnt. More fixed up. How fast do supersoldiers even heal?

Tony tries to pinch the bridge of his nose, but the suit’s gloves are huge enough to poke his eyes instead, and he sighs. “You got unburnt quickly.”

“I heal quickly,” Steve says, “You can probably just go home now, you look tired.”

“Clean-up’s not done.”

“I can volunteer, I’m here. I’ll take your place, just go rest.”

Tony eyes him for a minute. “It’ll be faster if it was the two of us.”

“Tony.”

“I’m fine,” Tony says, then stands. The little wobble he does when he hops off of the unsteady pile of mismatched metal doesn’t help his credibility.

Steve raises an eyebrow at him. “That stubbornness isn’t getting you anywhere.”

“Untrue. It’s getting me off this pile of metal.”

Clearly, Tony’s comedic genius is unappreciated by the ignorant crowd. Steve just crosses his arms and gives him a flat look as he finally stands properly, the suit making him almost tower over Steve.

“What is it?” Steve asks.

Tony weighs his options for a bit before pulling Steve aside to talk. “I just want to make sure the others don’t go into the tower. If I leave now, they might plan to go there without me knowing. I’m so close to finding something out about your missing mutants.”

The information makes something clink in Steve’s head, and Tony can see it in the way his eyes light up. “Oh. How long have you been up on that?”

“Almost five days.”

“Tony.”

“So close,” Tony says, “JARVIS is probably done with the last thing I needed him to do. But I might need time to figure out whatever he finds and I can’t just – risk having other people find out.”

“Isn’t your tower protected?”

“Listen, S.H.I.E.L.D. agents pop in there from time to time and I don’t even notice.”

“How do you not notice?”

“Because they hack the passcode sometimes and I have to change it a lot!” Tony briefly considers having runes as locks. He can probably do that, he just has to ask the radio how this works, and he’d have one of the most fortified systems in the planet. No one in New York probably used runes.
Steve looks a little confused and disappointed. Tony sighs.

“Okay, I might also be slightly paranoid that Natashalie and Clint know what’s going on and will just get in the tower while I’m cracking this thing open.”

He seems to take that better, at least.

In a split second-decision, Tony says: “Just drop by the tower when we’re done here, okay?” Before he can backtrack, he tacks on, “I’ll catch you up to speed on everything.” This’ll be easier than having to reopen files a lot of times. That’s more chances of getting caught.

“Alright,” Steve says after a while. “Yeah, I’ll stop by the tower.”

The rest of the clean-up goes on for several more hours, and by the time they’re done (and Natashalie and Clint go back to S.H.I.E.L.D., and so does Bruce but it’s more for the routine check-ups of making sure he’s alright from hulking out rather than him staying there to hang out with Fury or something, and every other agent goes back to whatever spying cave they’re assigned to hole up in), Tony is ready to crash into his bed and actually sleep. Which is a feat. Tony Stark almost never voluntarily sleeps.

He still has a few things to take care of though, so he doesn’t, and instead lets Steve try to puzzle out the mess that hasn’t appeared to have changed since the last time he visited – crumpled up burger wrappers, empty beer and soda cans, papers everywhere. Tony’s more lax at letting the runework lying around though, and the set of glitter pens is still there, although maybe the orange pen had rolled under a table again…is the green pen missing? Son of a bitch, he’s misplacing everything.

He orders pizza, takes a shower, changes into actual comfortable clothes, and then takes three cans of coffee into the room, ready to drink it all in quick succession. Steve watches said drinking in horror, before the arrival of the pizza gives him a quick escape, and he doesn’t see Tony finish all the cans and then stack them up on top of the pyramid of empty cans he’s set up a few days ago, out of boredom. He ought to gather the other empty tins in the room. The pyramid could grow a little higher.

“Uh,” Steve starts, and Tony nods, knowing he has to explain things, and not even caring that he’s going to sound like he needs a lot of sleep, or to lay off whatever he’s sniffing.

“Okay, so, these things you’re actually seeing – ” He points, no, gestures, to the scattered papers all over the floor with nonsensical scribbles on them, made in glitter ink and pencil (they’re actually not so nonsensical now that the radio’s taught him a few things; the symbol on the paper by the cabinet means Connection, the frustrated markings he’d made with a pencil that had broken due to how he handled it means Shield Against, the almost-elegant and careful rune he’d made with a yellow pen, almost unseen on the paper except for when the light glinted off of it means Curse). “ – are runes. They’re like some form of magic or some bullshit. Don’t ask, because I don’t know how it works, but it does, and I swear I’m trying to find the explanation to it because there has to be something physics can say about this that explains it, but I’m not there yet, and all I know is that it works.”

Steve blinks, then frowns, but not in disbelief or anger, but more like confusion and curiosity, and instead of the barrage of sentences along the lines of ‘you can’t be serious’ and any of its twenty seven thousand variations, Steve just nods, strangely accepting, and then says, “Where did you even learn this?”

Tony motions towards the purple radio sitting on the cabinet in the corner of the room. It’s off today, which isn’t too unexpected, since Steve is in the room. “That taught me.”
Steve does blink in disbelief at that. “…what?”

“The radio taught me.” Tony repeats, and then realizes how ridiculous he sounds, and also realizes he needs booze for this conversation, but also that he can’t afford to be drunk when he’s tired and trying to get Steve to look behind the scenes and understand so he can actually be of help. “I know this sounds unbelievable but – ”

Tony turns towards the radio, which is stubbornly, unhelpfully, turned off. “You know what, let’s not focus on that for now. Let’s just say I have a friend who communicates with me by that radio, and they’re teaching me how to do these runes – which is incredibly hard to nail down because all I’m working with is dictated instructions, by the way – and these runes help in taking down The Great Wall of Mutation Strings. Doesn’t make sense? Doesn’t make sense.” He nods to himself. He needs to sleep.

Steve isn’t giving him a weird look though. Only the radio. His eyes are a little narrowed. Maybe he’s a little shocked to see a borderline old-timey radio in an age that’s supposedly modern.

“That’s…a very distinct model, Tony,” Steve says, “Where’d you get it?”

Tony snorts. “Fuck if I know.”

Steve just purses his lips, concerned, but Tony can probably mull on that concern later, before he forgets his original train of thought. So he continues.

He tells Steve about his research on the mutants, on what he’d found in S.H.I.E.L.D’s drives, his attempt to break into S.H.I.E.L.D’s files, his failure at breaking into said files, the appearance of the radio and how it kept coming back, the weird pink card, the agreement he and the radio reached – everything from the start of his research up to the present, where he’s just one wall of code away from cracking everything. He hasn’t gotten JARVIS to pull up whatever he’s found though, if he’s done. He wants to introduce Steve slowly to this so he doesn’t run down the street and yell about Tony losing it.

He thankfully doesn’t, and instead just looks pensive.

“So there’s…potentially someone behind this wall of string mutations or whatever you called them?” Steve asks.

“There’s two ways to take that question.”

Steve sighs. “There’s someone who created this wall, and there’s someone who’s being hidden behind it? You mentioned someone’s life on the line here.”

“Yeah to both,” Tony says, then jerks a thumb towards the radio in the corner. “That thing’s being unhelpful as always but, that’s what it said, and so far what it’s suggested has been working, and I’m not losing anything other than sleep if I crack that wall and it turns out all that was hidden is a bag of radioactive doritos, so…” Tony shrugs.

Steve is quiet for a moment, then nods. “Are you done with the wall?”

“Should be,” Tony says, then calls out, “JARVIS, are we done with the wall?”

“Yes, sir,” JARVIS says, and Tony feel sweet, sweet relief flood his chest. He fistpumps a little. He’d spent days on end trying to get the runes right and mulling over footage and internet evidence just to make sure this was solved, and to keep track of any other mutants that have gone missing. This had better be worth it.
He turns so that he can face the holographic screen JARVIS pulls up just as he says, “Pull it up, then.”

What meets him first is a wall of codes, but they’ve stopped jittering around, and are instead frozen. All these codes, white against a black background, suddenly light up in green in quick succession before the words ACCESS GRANTED flash across the screen, and Tony’s suddenly seeing file upon file listed out before him. There’s titles like Physiology Report, and Month One, and Interview 12b.

“That’s a lot to go through,” Steve says.

Tony nods. “JARVIS, print all those out, would you?”

“All six hundred and twelve files, sir?”

Tony pinches the bridge of his nose. “Yes, all of those.” Some of the files look like images, at least, so that’s not going to be just six hundred and twelve files he has to read.

“There’s also access to a live feed, sir. Would you like to view it?”

Tony’s head snaps up suddenly, and he sees Steve do the same. The man looks like he’s about to stand and jump into the holographic screen if he could, just to get to the other side of the live feed, and it’s not even up yet.

“Yes,” Tony says.

JARVIS clears out the file list to pull up the live feed.

The screen is split into six sections. Four are from cameras on each corner on the ceiling, one from the dead center of the ceiling, the last one is from the hallway outside of white, solitary cell with the glass wall.

There is someone sitting on the floor, huddled in the corner, knees pulled up to—her, the radio had said—her chest. The way she hugs herself makes her looks painfully, painfully small. She has grey skin—mutant, Tony thinks—and weird appendages on the sides of her head that look like…fins? A fish mutant? Long black hair spills all over the floor, clearly from months of having it uncut. It’s not too wild yet though, not Rapunzel-level of unruly and long. Just…neglected.

She has horns too. Curious.

JARVIS pulls up more screens, zooming in on her face. Tired yellow scleras and fuschia pink irises make Tony’s brain go wild with questions, as well as the sharp claws with pink nails (manicured or natural?), and the view of the fins on the fish-girl’s head makes him want to just get in that cell to ask questions.

Steve, however, draws in a sharp breath. “Get her out,” he says, “We have to get her out.”

That pulls Tony back down, back from the high of his curiosity, because this might be a rescue mission, but he can’t deny that he’d really like to take a look at that physiology report too.

The girl looks miserable in her white laboratory-experiment prison scrubs though. He nods.

“We’ll have to…try to find a way to get her out that’s not going to send S.H.I.E.L.D. looking for our asses.”

“There has to be something,” Steve says, “I’ll help you read all those reports. Maybe there’s
something there. I’ll stay here for the night.”

Tony frowns. “Don’t you have your own mutants to look after?”

Steve pauses, then, “They can take care of themselves. At least Kanaya can make sure they take care of themselves.” He mumbles the last part, and Tony doesn’t know who Kanaya is, so he just nods.

“Alright,” he says. “Let’s do this then.”

Time is fluid and is hardly linear, and with the right tools, can either bend or break, aimed or redirected, contained or expanded, melted or vacuumed.

So before Steve Rogers went with Loki to skywalk over to the Avengers (with the bonus of being disoriented because his magic did not at all feel like Jade’s, and another bonus of being glamoured so that he looked a little burnt and was just slowly healing – the magic was rigged to slowly wear off and look like it was ’healing’, and Steve will forever feel weird about having to stand still and being explained to by a stranger about how this runework party trick worked and to not tell the other Avengers if he had any working brain cells at all) to go help with the clean-up after the attack, and before the civilian he saved exited the Safehouse three days after the attack to go do their business which we have no business butting into, there was Eridan Ampora, Karkat Vantas, Kanaya Maryam, Roxy Lalonde, Davesprite and Hal in Steve’s apartment, trying to sort things out.

There was them, two hours after the attack, discussing things that needed to be discussed, and said discussion went like this:

The edges of Karkat’s visions are littered with shadows.

They’re not there, he thinks. Maybe he’s starting to hallucinate from days of not sleeping. He’s been trying to pretend that he is – for Kanaya and Rogers to stop pestering him about it – but he’d rather brave sleep deprivation than getting into the first five minutes of his nightmares before being flown out of there by birds and whoever else cares enough to get him out of there.

That bastard imposter’s starting to suggest how to destroy his friends lately.

Not that Rogers is a friend (okay, maybe he is, just a very tentative maybe), but that little worm’s been whispering to him, while showing him Steve and Kanaya, exactly how he can dismantle their lives and their minds. Maybe knives were nice to use, but it was always better to hit where they hurt most. Maybe he can mention Rose to Kanaya, maybe he can find Rose, she should be somewhere, maybe he can slit her throat and let Kanaya drink up the blood.

Steve’s a little harder but, it’ll be easy to find his Avenger friends. Take them down one by one in front of him. Remind him of what he’s lost, all the time he’s spent in the ice, all his dead friends. It would be easy.

He blinks and focuses. Tries to focus anyway. Roxy’s talking.

“So you don’t know this guy’s name at all?” she asks.

Karkat nods. “No,” he says, “I never asked.”
“Maybe try to, the next time you sleep?” she says, “I mean, no pressure. Nightmares are bad.”

“So is sleep deprivation,” Dave says.

“I’m used to not sleeping, Strider,” Karkat says, “I’m not gonna start being a wimp about it now.”

“Karkat, you look awful.”

He really does, and he knows it. There’s a certain heaviness around his eyes most days, and a soreness on the skin around it when he blinks, and everything feels irritating and itchy to him. He’s still not sleeping, because nightmares aside, he doesn’t trust either of the Heirs that can get inside his head.

Paranoia, paranoia.

Eridan had a point earlier though. It’s very possible the Heirs were just playing off of each other, or possible that they were just doing this for fun, to test each other, and when they were done, they’d just go grab some pie and faygo and then sift through the universe to ruin more lives. It wouldn’t be far off, what with the almost strategic placement and timing of dropping Eridan and the others on the island, and then Karkat and Kanaya here, and then telling Karkat that they were coming here so he could prepare. He’s almost positive this wasn’t the limit of their handiwork.

The damn radio was certainly in on it, so that makes them three people. Taking into account Dave pointing out that there was a possibility that whoever could reverse time on the radio could be a separate person – it isn’t unprecedented for players to work together, after all – that adds another person to their tally.

How many were there? What did they want? Did they want anything other than just chaos?

“Do you think we’ll see this…whoever this is who dropped us here?” Roxy asks, pulling her knees up to her chest and rocking back and forth a little. She reminds Kanaya too much of Rose, Karkat notices, with the way Kanaya tenses a little and then looks away, a little sad.

“If they were confident enough to show themselves to Karkat, there’s a possibility,” Dave says, then looks to Eridan, who nods.

“There’s a huge possibility,” he says, “But we should also take into account that their hand might have been forced, although if that was the case, it should have been easy to terminate Karkat instead of jeopardizing their play.”

That’s the wrong thing to say, judging by the brief flare that Kanaya’s light makes, and Eridan pauses, careful, while Roxy tenses, ready to access her sylladex just in case.

“No offense or harm meant,” Eridan says, “I was talking about possibilities. If one of us had been a liability, it would be easier to just get rid of us.”

“And lose a piece?” Dave asks.

“Better to sacrifice one than throw the entire game,” Eridan says, “Unless the challenge is in that they’re not allowed to harm the piece?”

“Maybe that’s neither of that at all,” Roxy says. “Karkat did mention the – we need a name for this person who dropped us, I swear – was furious once when Karkat had a nightmare.”

“A normal reaction of someone losing,” Eridan says.
“I don’t know, something just feels off about that theory. Just...something,” Roxy says, “I just feel like there’s something hidden but I can’t figure it out.”

Karkat looks at Hal’s shades – obnoxious little pointy things – as they light up. Dave reads it off for them. “Hal says we should obviously not jump to conclusions and just plan about what we’re going to do next.”

“Sensible,” Eridan says, tilting his head in a ‘eh, he has a point’ motion.

Dave reads off, “Hah,” from the shades.

Eridan flips him – or the shades – off.

Karkat doesn’t know how long these four have been staying on that island, but they seem comfortable with each other. He sees in the way Roxy’s shoulders are relaxed, and how she sits close to Eridan – too close for Eridan’s standards, anyway, the only person who’s ever really come close to being that relaxed around Eridan without sporting a three-sweep grudge is Feferi, and Karkat knows how that went. So far, Eridan hasn’t torn Roxy to shreds – sees it in how Davesprite’s wings are tense, ready to shield all four of them if needed, sees it in the easy, almost habitual motion of Eridan just flipping off Hal without even looking, and how Davesprite knows it’s not meant for him, but the pointy glasses on his nose.

Eridan’s found friends.

That’s nice.

He briefly thinks, for one moment, one tiny relapse, that if he was the Heir of Blood, and he was in Eridan’s head, he’d set everything up to look like the meteor, and he’d hang all twelve of their little group from the ceiling, bodies sawn in half, blood dripping onto the floor in multicolored splatters, and then he’d slowly tie Eridan’s new friends up, and watch them struggle as the ropes on their necks choke them when they’re lifted off the floor, and cut them in half too, while Eridan watches, and can’t do anything.

Karkat blinks. Wipes at his eyes. He’s not sleeping. He’s never sleeping. Not when it’s getting to his head like this.

He realizes he’s been wiping too hard at his eyes when he sees starbursts and hears Kanaya say, “Karkat, are you alright?”

He stops and looks up. Everyone’s fallen silent. They’re staring at him.

“I’m fine,” he says. He’s not.

“You need to sleep,” Davesprite says.

“No.” And before Kanaya can protest – he knows she will – he gets up and goes by the window to look outside. He turns to the clock across the room, puzzling out the marks, trying to remember how human numbers worked, and then says, “It’s been hours. Where is he?”

The others have no idea what he’s talking about. Kanaya just sighs.

“He’s probably helping his other human friends, Karkat. These things always take time. This isn’t the longest he’s been away.”

“Still,” he says, pretends to be worried (he might slightly be, but that’s not because he cares for
Rogers, not at all), and looks out the window again. There’s barely anyone on the wrecked street. There’s not gonna be any sign of Steve Rogers soon.

He doesn’t rejoin the conversation when Davesprite reads off whatever Hal has typed out, steering it back to the dilemma of what to do now that they’ve found Karkat and Kanaya and appear to have a lot of time in their hands.

He just looks out the window and waits.

And because time is, once again, fluid, and all the other adjectives that come with this description, even further back before New York was attacked, two idiots in the Caribbean had a conversation that involved birds, a boat, and a sword.

It went like this:

“Do you know how to operate a boat?”

There’s no answer, so he turns around, in case she’s distracted with something – maybe the birds again – but he’s assaulted by one such bird that’s got enough guts to try and knock the shades out his face and land on his already messed-up hair. He needs to get cleaned, he knows, but there’s hardly any place around here he can hide and get cleaned up properly. He’s thankful he doesn’t need food, and that his godtier pajamas (complete with poofy asshole pants) don’t get dirty, but she does, so they have to stop every now and then to get food, at the very least.

She’s beating his streak for staying awake though. Although not counting his godtier days. Only the ones when he was still living in a shitty apartment complex eating only fish and ramen.

The bird lands and kicks its tiny, annoying feet in his hair, like it’s trying to make a nest. He swats it away in annoyance. He doesn’t have his sword with him, sadly, since she’d decided that it was a nice weapon to slash at people with and an even nicer weapon to keep. Whatever. She was the one without the godtier powers, he’s being generous.

He rights his glasses and looks around. It’s dark out right now and he can’t see shit with his glasses.

“Megido-san?” he calls out, cautious.

He hears a bird squawk, and knows Damara Megido is probably trying to figure out how their wings work. She’s fascinated by them, tiny little things, and he thinks it’s probably because the ones on her planet – if any of the creatures the Condesce sent to his Earth were any indication – were huge, and more often than not, had razor knives for wings.

Dirk Strider sighs, climbs up the pier, and goes looking for her.

She’s sitting somewhere far off the docks, with a seagull in hand, pinching each wing between a thumb and a forefinger, pulling the wings far apart – not enough to tear off, thankfully – like she’s playing with a toy.

She can just rip the wings off, Dirk knows. Trolls are ungodly strong. Damara’s angrier than most.
She doesn’t look up when he approaches, but he knows she notices.

“You okay?” he asks.

“Do you think this thing’ll sink if I rip off its wings and toss it into the ocean?”

Well. They’re doing this again tonight.

Dirk sits down, crossing his legs. He knows he’s in for a time.

“It certainly wouldn’t float,” he says.

“It should be lighter.”

“That’s not how buoyancy works.”

Damara wrinkles her nose and lowers the bird. She stares straight out into the ocean. Then, “I could eat this.”

Dirk just resists the urge to sigh. “You’re more than welcome to. But do you want to get moving tonight or not?”

“Do you even know where we’re going?”

“I stole a map,” Dirk says, “I’m fairly sure I can read it.”

“You said this Earth – ” she says the word awkwardly, her pronunciation an unsure ‘ji-ku’, which is a lot better than when she usually says the first syllable with a hard ‘z’ “ - wasn’t like your Earth. How are you sure you know where you’re going?”

“Because I speak the human language English and understand most people here, and they told me where to go and what to look for, and I have a map,” he says. He’s normally patient – haha – but they really need to get moving.

“You’ve never been here.”

“First time for everything.”

Damara levels him with a look, then turns back to her bird. She lets go of its right wing, and it flaps around uselessly, still dangling from her other hand. That looks painful. He tells her as much.

“It is,” she says, “I don’t care.”

Dirk purses his lips to a thin line. He watches as the bird squirms in Damara’s hand. It’d have been able to fly away if only troll claws weren’t the thing holding it.

“Megido-san,” Dirk says, slowly, carefully, “Please let the bird go.”

Damara looks at Dirk again, and for a moment, he breathes out, tentatively relieved she’s not going to rip the wings off this poor animal.

And then she moves to rip the wings off this poor animal. Dirk snatches it from her hands before she can, shoving her with an elbow so she falls on her side with an angry yell, and the bird only ends up with a broken wing.

Dirk cradles the thing in his hands awkwardly. He’s not good with animals.
Goddamn it, Megido.

Speaking of her, she spins so that she kicks his ribs, knocking the breath out of him, and he’s about to hit his head on the concrete before he tucks the bird to his chest, moves so that his back his the ground instead, and rolls, until he’s got one knee on the ground, one foot back ready to sprint, a hand holding the bird to his chest, and the other on the concrete under him, holding him up.

Damara’s in the same position, except instead of a bird, she’s holding a sword, and it’s held out and ready to cut Dirk in half.

Dirk holds her cold (angry, angry, angry) red gaze before looking down first, and then slowly getting up, making sure he’s unthreatening as possible.

Damara glares at him for a moment longer before standing up and sheathing the sword in the makeshift scabbard he’d put together for her, and then marches past him towards the boat.

Dirk watches her go.

Roadtrips are always fun when one’s too angry and the other’s too numb.

In a cell somewhere in the depths of S.H.I.E.L.D, Feferi Peixes sits alone.

Chapter End Notes

one mystery down, [looks at smudged writing in hand] two - three, [turns to google docs] - seventy million more to go.
“Oh, hello.”

Aradia slams the door behind her, pushing Sollux into the room with a franticness usually associated with people running for their lives. In this case, she isn’t sure if they are running (flying) for their lives, but she’s not risking anything. This is nothing the voices have told her about when she was still on Alternia and ghosting about, and this is nothing she has expected seeing as how she’s never even considered this happening.

Sollux Captor, very much alive, blinks blue and red eyes at her, wheezing hard, one hand to his stomach, trying to breathe.

Both of them stiffen and turn to the greeting when they hear it, and they both immediately take on a defensive stance.

The young man looks at them with white, empty eyes, and blinks, bemused.

“I never get visitors here,” he says, “Hello.”

The softness and gentleness in his voice makes Aradia’s hostility falter for a moment, but she steadies herself, not quite willing to give in just yet, in case this is a trap.

The young man leans a little to the side so that he can look out the window – it’s terribly bright out - and frowns, a small expression that doesn’t detract from the warmth that he seems to radiate. It’s comforting. Inviting.

Aradia’s confused by it.

So is Sollux, with the way he moves to stand beside her, still ready to lash out if need be.

“Is something wrong?” the young man asks, then giggles and says, “I mean, you’re in a stranger’s house, of course you’re a little jittery but – you look like you flew an awfully long distance to...get away from something.” He squints and tilts his head, “Although this might be your lucky break for a while, if you wait...til’ maybe a few hours by my clock. I could be wrong. I haven’t done this in a while.”

Aradia’s attention flicks down to the young man’s sweater and relaxes a little at his words, and then once again berates herself for it. This isn’t the time to let her guard down.

The young man smiles at them though, and it’s blindingly bright and disarming.

“So,” he says, “Coffee?”

The phone is ringing. Roxy watches carefully as Kanaya tenses and then turns towards it, before standing up, but not before giving their little group a wary glance. Her gaze lingers a little longer on Eridan, and Roxy makes a mental note to ask exactly what happened between them that she’s so hostile. She knows Eridan wasn’t – isn’t? They’re both on good terms, but that’s what usually
happens when someone’s too tired to put their hackles up every time – the best person to get along with; because while they are friends, she has no illusions that he’s a saint; but he’s trying. She can see he is. He’s come a long way from tossing her onto a cove to running around with her trying to not die a fiery death in New York.

It might be her bias, or because she’s only seen the aftermath, but she thinks a bit of leeway is due here.

Kanaya listens and talks to whoever’s on the other line for a while. And while she does, Karkat Vantas lets out a small sigh and massages the spaces between his eyes. The circles under them are bruises at this point, and Roxy feels a brief pang of pity for him. He’s clearly suffering, although, if he’s telling them everything he’s been dreaming of for the past few days, she wouldn’t blame him.

Throwing up bits and pieces of your friends is awful.

“Dude,” Dave says, adjusting his wings a little. They’re clearly ruffled. “You really need to sleep.”

“And you really need to understand that I don’t want to,” Karkat says. He looks like he wants to snap, but holds his tongue instead and looks at Dave, exasperated. They both stare at each other for a while, aviators to bloodshot eyes, before Karkat sighs again and looks away.

“If this…yeah we really need a name for them – ”

“I nominate Insufferable Dickshit.”

Dave stops and once again gives Karkat a look. It’s not chastising or disappointed, but it’s more like You’re tired and half dead and you can still run your mouth like that and I’m honestly impressed.

“Okay, Green-Penned Bastard?”

“…better, I guess. If this Green Penned Bastard is helping you with your nightmares, why not just sleep and let them do their job?”

“And risk playing right into their hands?” Petty, petty, Roxy thinks. Karkat doesn’t seem to be wavering though. “If it is just a pissing contest, I’m out. I’m not doing this anymore. Not even if I’m getting help with the nightmares.”

“You’d be better off risking it,” Eridan says.

Karkat raises an eyebrow at him.

He shifts a bit, clearly uncomfortable. “I’m just saying it’s better if you’re rested. You’ll have a better fighting chance.”

“Against what?”

“Against…this.” It’s a strange sight, watching Eridan fumble for words and trying not to step on landmines. “If this is all a game to them, then they’re going to target the rest of us soon, and maybe it’ll get worse too. You’ll need sleep if you’re gonna fight through the ‘worse’ part.”

Karkat blinks once, twice, and then turns to Roxy. “What did you do to him?”

Roxy bites down her knuckles to try and stop herself from laughing. Kanaya’s still talking to the phone after all. It would be impolite.

Eridan frowns and shifts again, then lightly punches her arm. Roxy snickers and pats his shoulder.
“Nothing at all,” Roxy says. It’s most likely the weeks of being away from pressure that cooled him down a little, and the freedom to go sailing and not have to worry about things. Time off does wonders for people.

Karkat snorts, and then moves back to lean on the wall behind him. “Yeah, whatever,” he says. He sounds…relieved, somewhat. Roxy tilts her head a bit, curious.

She doesn’t get to ask why his reaction’s like that though, as Kanaya puts down the phone and says, “Steve is not coming home tonight.”

Karkat – whose eyelids had been drooping even for the brief lull in conversation (this boy really needs to sleep if he’s already starting to pass out on them) – snaps his head up towards her. “What?”

“He isn’t coming home tonight. He has business to attend to,” Kanaya says, “There is food in the thermal hull, although I think he didn’t account for having visitors all of a sudden.” The last part is added on more as a musing afterthought, and then Kanaya says, “Although I expect he’ll come back with more food seeing as how he knows you’re here.”

“What’s he busy with?”

“He said he’d explain when he came home,” Kanaya says, “I don’t pretend to be an expert on how things work here, but I expect that as someone who protects a city, there are a lot of spies he has to deal with.”

Karkat deflates at that, hunching in on himself and then glaring at the floor.

Kanaya sighs. “There’s still apple pie, Karkat.”

He brightens, just a bit. Roxy resists the urge to pinch his cheeks.

Dave looks like a curious bird though, with the precise headtilt and the slight rearranging of his wings. “Apple pie?”

“Steve likes to bring those back sometimes,” Kanaya says, “I recall you being fond of apple juice?”

The wing shifting is more defensive this time. No, not defensive. Timid? Deer in the headlights? Dave in the headlights?

“Yeah,” he says, with that careful inflection that says I’m absolutely not bothered. It reminds Roxy too much of Dirk.

“I think we have some here,” Kanaya says, “You might as well have some, seeing as how it’s not wise to get out of here while the city has just undergone an attack.”

“Yeah, when are we getting out of here?” Roxy finally asks. They had to get moving sometime, but then there was also the question of where they were going. The island again? They could make a base there, and then look for everyone else dropped here when they catch word of it.

Kanaya and Karkat give her looks of confusion. She gives them one back, feeling it mirrored on Eridan’s and Dave’s face (well, Davesprite’s shades). Hal’s red text flashes red light on Dave’s nose again.

“I’d say it’d be safe for you to leave at night,” Kanaya says. They’re already past the early hours of the morning, having talked and talked and swapped and shot down theories. Roxy suddenly feels just how tired she is when she turns to the window, which is clearly bright behind the curtains.
Eridan straightens a little, glancing at Karkat and then Kanaya. “And you’re not?”

“We’re perfectly fine here,” Kanaya says, “Steve is welcoming.”

“You’ve known him for less than a human month.”

“I think my character judgment isn’t suspect.” The ire in those words is so tangible even Roxy feels her hackles rise.

Eridan has the common sense to bite down whatever scathing reply he has to that. Literally. Roxy sees a small bit of violet peek out his lips.

“You can’t stay in this hivestem forever,” Eridan says.

“And exactly what is there to do if we do get out of this hivestem?” Kanaya says, straightening as well and crossing her arms. “You were on an island for months, Ampora. Doing nothing.”

Roxy hears the scratching before she sees Eridan uncross his arms and put them to the floor like he’s ready to launch himself at Kanaya. His nails dig – literally dig – into the floorboards. “I wouldn’t say nothing.”

“And even if we do get and try to do something about whatever’s going on in the background, with whoever’s messing with Karkat’s head, we don’t even know where and who they are.”

“Why are you so against this?” Eridan says, standing. “I have nothing against Karkat, I’m not gonna – ”

Oh. Oh.

Roxy feels like the floor has given out on her.

Eridan lets the sentence trail off, and just glares at Kanaya, although for one, almost imperceptible moment, he glances at Roxy.

“You know why,” Kanaya says.

“Okay firstly, fuck off with your tension and skirting around the issue,” Karkat says. He tries to stand, but then almost topples over and has to be assisted by Dave to sit back down without falling flat on his face. Hal’s still flashing his text, Roxy notices. “Eridan went on a murder spree. Kanaya doesn’t trust him. Fair. But Eridan’s also supposed to be dead.”

That…Roxy didn’t know. She stares at the floor for a moment, trying to digest this information. Murder spree. Supposed to be dead.

Kind of hard to pick which one to focus on first.

“Karkat,” Dave says, “Sleep.”

“F- no,” Karkat says, batting Dave’s hands away. “I’m fine, I don’t need to sleep, and I’m not sleeping if these two idiots are just gonna start clawing at each other the moment I pass out.”

“We’re not going to claw at each other,” Eridan says, surprisingly. It takes Kanaya off guard too, by how she leans back a little and blinks incredulously. Eridan just raises an eyebrow at her. “I am civil, contrary to what you think. And I’m not going to kill anyone since that’s not gonna do anything for me.”
“It did a lot for you the first time.”

“Yeah, it got me dead,” Eridan says, a little self-deprecatingly.

The silence that falls in the room is so sudden and thick that Roxy can feel its weight.

And then someone laughs. It’s a snicker, really, but it’s all it takes to break the tension. Roxy turns to Karkat, who’s back to sitting and leaning back on the wall. He snorts as he looks at Eridan, and then shakes his head.

Eridan looks at him, and then at Roxy. She shrugs.

“I’m up for apple pie,” Dave says, “You two can argue later.”

Karkat waves a hand. “I’m up for apple pie too.”

“No, you’re down for sleeping,” Dave says, “You need it, dude. You can eat, but then you’re sleeping right after.”

Karkat makes a noise that could have been a ‘fuck you’ stuck in his throat due to drowsiness, but Roxy barely makes it out, because then Karkat yawns and leans back more into the wall, and his eyelids droop. She hears Dave sigh something out in relief, and she can’t blame him, because the kid needs his sleep.

And then she sees it, a brief flicker of something. A shadow, maybe.

The next moment, it’s gone, and Roxy remembers nothing about it at all.

Days pass this way.

The only person in Roxy’s party who actually needs to eat is Eridan, so he’s the only one who has to share food from the fridge with Kanaya and Karkat. Roxy is gracious enough to pull out a few things from the void – apple juice, a few packets of chips, some candy that looks suspiciously just like the ones they’d gotten from their impromptu trick-or-treating. Dave borrows the phone for a while after he lets Hal do a quick search on the internet and hunts around for cash in the house. He orders pizza and some fast food, and Roxy takes a bite out of a cheeseburger and then stares.

Dave raises an eyebrow at her, although Hal, from where he’s now placed on the coffee table instead of being worn, makes tinny little buzzing sounds that might be laughter. Eridan just stares at the fries and then takes one experimentally.

“What are these?” he asks.

“Fries,” Dave says, then, “Oh, shoot, you probably haven’t eaten those. Not Earth-fries or whatever anyway.”

“They’re salty,” Karkat says, stuffing his face with apple pie. Kanaya is eating pizza beside him just fine, although she did say something earlier about Earth-pizza being a lot less…meaty…and organ-y.

“You don’t like salt?” Dave asks.

Karkat snorts.
“The opposite,” Kanaya says, “Steve once caught him in the meal block eating nearly half the bag.”

Hal’s doing the buzz-laughter again. Dave just chuckles. “You’re either anemic or trolls just like salt.”

“I don’t like salt,” Kanaya says.

Eridan takes a bite out of his fries. Not just the one piece he had in his hand. He puts that piece back into the paper box, and then takes a huge bite out of all the fries there, almost taking a bit of the paper with it. Dave looks on in horror, which is an impressive feat because a) he’s rarely ever horrified, b) there’s actually no outward indication that he is horrified, but Roxy catches the tiny movements on his face and how his glasses nearly slip off his nose.

Eridan chews and then swallows, then shrugs. “It’s not that bad.” He folds the paper box a little bit so he can take another chunk out of the fries as a collective.

Roxy lowers her (glorious) cheeseburger for a moment to pick up her box of fries to do the same. Dave actually snatches it out of her hands afterwards and stares at the row of bitten-off fries. He looks like he’s mourning.

“What?” she asks.

“That’s not how you eat fries.”

Eridan, however, has finished his box and is neatly folding the paper back into the plastic bag.

Dave sighs, and demonstrates with his own box of fries. Eridan just looks at him like he’s weighing whether Dave is right or not and says, “That’s time-consuming.”

“You’re supposed to enjoy it.”

Roxy carefully tries to follow his actions, picking up one significantly shortened fry to eat it. The taste isn’t as strong as when she just took a huge bite. Easier to process though, and not as overwhelming. She slowly continues her fries, and then returns to her cheeseburger, although she surveys it with care, gently picking apart the burger to look at what’s inside.

Eridan hasn’t touched his cheeseburger. Roxy tells him to.

“Why?” he asks.

“It’s so good,” Roxy says, then takes a bite, and resists the urge to vibrate right there, and instead settles for an excited, muffled squeal. She can cry from how good actual Earth-food is.

Eridan takes a moment, but does as he’s told. He looks startled and then takes another bite, and then his burger’s finished in less than two minutes. Roxy, however, is savoring hers, so it just turns into Eridan trying to wheedle her to sharing while she vehemently says no.

The pizza is another thing, because yeah, Eridan complains that it’s not the same as Alternia’s pizza, but Dave and Roxy fawn over it like they’ve been deprived, which isn’t really that far off.

After hours of debating over food, they start debating over options on what to do again. As always, Kanaya refuses to go with them, and Eridan points out that they’d be better off not hiding away in a dingy little hivestem in a human city.

Steve calls every night to tell them he’s still busy.
“With what?” Karkat asks, a little irritable, every time.

“His own business, I suppose, we never did ask,” Kanaya says.

Roxy and the others stay there, for the rest of the time that Kanaya refuses to move, and Karkat doesn’t say anything about it.

They all wait for Steve Rogers to come home. Which, who knows when that’s gonna happen.

Loki has been thinking a lot lately.

This has two possible reasons for it. One, there’s going to be a huge prank war soon and everyone’s going to have to duck and cover if they want to be spared. Two, something is terribly wrong.

Not that anyone is really sure what goes on in Loki’s head, and sometimes his own thoughts escape him, so who’s sure, really? And it’s not like anyone here knows there’s something wrong. Halloween has come and gone with its dramatically-timed attack, and everyone’s going on with their lives; Cecil’s been doing significantly better than he did when he was refusing to sleep. It probably helps that his brother is fussing over him and is amusing him with mirror tricks.

The reason for Loki’s musing, however, is plainly obvious for anyone who knows what’s going on (which is approximately two people in the Safehouse, but Loki’s been looking at the shadows and not trusting them lately): something is terribly wrong.

He just doesn’t know what.

Well he knows there’s something, but all Cecil has given him are broken visions that don’t make sense even to the boy once he’s pulled out of his fugue. He seems all-knowing when he’s Seeing, but as well-versed as he is with unveiling secrets when in a fugue, the ability to interpret them and make sense of them is lost on him once he’s fully back on earth.

It frustrates the poor kid. It frustrates Loki too, but he’s not about to say that. He can make sense of a few vague prophecies on his own. Besides, Palmer doesn’t need that kind of pressure.

What Loki does know is that he needs all the advantages he can get, no matter how miniscule. Unfortunately, he hasn’t been able to convince Sapphrel to come back to the Safehouse yet – which is an annoying setback (and, somewhere in the back of his head, something snickers and says, an annoying set-up), but he’ll make sure he has both them and their best friend on board if push comes to shove. He doesn’t know when the shoving will start though.

Checking up on them on a daily basis is all he can do, and he knows he’s freaking the kid out, because while they’re not strangers, he has never exactly forwardly asked after their well-being. Sure, he’s asked them to set up the emergency system, and asked them to catalogue things, and asked them to draw blood from everyone else, but he’s never really clapped Sapphrel on the back and asked if they’ve eaten or slept properly and fussed over them. The closest thing he’d done was hunt down their pill bottle after they’d misplaced it and Ruben was late from college and couldn’t help with his best friend who was silently freaking out in the bathroom.

He’s got all the kids in the house accounted for, and even if Rose is still with James in their bunker all the way across the world, he keeps an eye on them too, communicating with Rose on a daily basis much like with their sick pool master. He knows the Palmers haven’t been leaving the apartment lately, and Mrs. Harrison’s in the house excited for her husband to visit all the way from Soho, and
Mr. G’s just going on with his dogsitting days. He and John have gotten over their sickness easier than poor Saph has. Human immune systems are a little troublesome.

Seeing as there’s nothing he can do, he waits. He checks his notes from Cecil (and frequent phonecalls to Saph – he’d ceased that when Cecil had said that even those wouldn’t be safe from anyone who wanted to listen intently. He didn’t have anything particular in mind when he talked to them. Just wanted to bend the conversation and direct them places as discreetly as he could, to see if something caught his attention. Something that had escaped their’s because it would have been normal, but Loki knows what to look for, and while he can’t risk whoever’s watching to know that he knows, or risk putting two of his – friends? Acquaintances? Wards – in danger, he needs the information to keep them safe in the first place. Cecil’s visions are blood-strewn, and he’d very much like to not let that come to pass.), and everything else he deemed important, kept in a little pocket space so that no one else could find it, no one else but him, and he tries to look for anything that stands out and makes his hackles rise.

There’s only been one, and he’s pretty sure it’s just a byproduct of him being paranoid, but then again, since when has Loki Silvertongue ever not listened to his paranoia? This is why contingency plans are a must for him.

He wasn’t there when Jade and the others saw off that little civilian Steve Rogers had brought in.

He’d only seen them from the corner of his eye, but there was something…off. They were perfectly normal, yes. They certainly looked normal, and the jittering and anxiety reminded him of someone (and sadly he couldn’t place whoever that someone was, which is what pinged the suspicion alarm in his head in the first place), but it looked wrong. Off. Like this was an imitation and an act instead of the real thing. Of course it looked so natural, but it’s like Loki has seen the original that even though this was a good replica, it still fell flat in some areas.

And there was a vague air of something around them. Electricity. Magic. Secrecy. Whatever one could call it. He has no word for it either, and he’s spent a rather long time trying to find it.

It feels familiar too, whatever it is. The fact that he should know this and yet can’t figure it out is irritating him. Something is stopping him, and he doesn’t know what. Like a particularly annoying dream where you’re trying to run, but your limbs are lead, so you fall down a lot, and even if you’re yelling at yourself to run, the best you can do is a shambling walk, desperate to get away from whatever monster that’s chasing you.

Loki hates it.

So he writes notes on that too, and tries to sketch out what that kid looked like, but…even that escapes him. He pictures them out in his head, and then tries to put it on paper and – forgets. Like he knows what the kid looks like, but not really. They have hair, and eyes, and a nose, and a mouth, but he can’t recall specifics. What was their hair color like? Black, brown, red, white, blonde? Their eyes? High blue? Candy red? Near-glowing green? Ethereal violet? What was their stature even like? Neither tall nor short, thin nor fat?

And it’s the fact that Loki just can’t with anything regarding this person that hits off so many danger signs in his head. And in case, just in case he forgets that too, he writes those down and throws the papers into the pocket space, because whoever’s going to try messing with his memory isn’t going to have such an easy time. He can always do better. He’s always done better. Memory spells were cakewalk to him, so unless he was going up against himself, whoever else is doing this can fuck right off.

And he continues to take account of everything, and watches the shadows, and listens intently to
everything that goes on in the Safehouse. He listens to the radios the Palmers have set up in case any of the mutant kids around the city have seen something strange.

Whatever is going on, he’s going to find out.

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year and a Happy New Character Reveal! :D
A voidlight; Avoid light

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The table was a soft yellow, fitting right in with the white tiles, the peach walls and ceiling, and the orange window frames. Not that Aradia would know or appreciate anything about bright color schemes seeing at it would usually sear her eyes, but this particular house is tiny, and comfortable, and has such a warm feeling to it, that the first thing she thinks when she looks around and enters the dining room is inviting.

And then she shakes her head, because really, this place is the farthest thing from safe. They’d declined the first offer for coffee, because firstly: what the hell is coffee, secondly: they’re not about to accept anything from a complete stranger, and thirdly: they needed to run.

So they ran, past the house, past everything, and then slammed straight into a wall of blood and viscera and shot through the other side covered in gore. When they’d gone past their revulsion, they’d looked up to see the Skaian battlefield covered in corpses, and blood, and surrounded by tall, boney trees, that had things that shouldn’t be on them. Sollux had almost thrown up.

And then there was a Thing there. Something so malevolent that the air itself seemed to be repulsed by it, and they ran again. When they realized the battlefield stretched and stretched and never ended, they turned back the way they came, barely missing having Aradia’s wings torn to pieces, and it was concerning how easy it was to get out the way they came from.

They stumbled and tripped and rolled ungracefully back into the house with warmth, and that young man just opened the door and sighed and gave them towels to wipe all of the blood off. The red didn’t look like it’d ever wash off those white towels anytime soon.

For now, they’re cleaned up, and at a pretty yellow table, with mugs whose designs looked like they were pulled straight out of grublr, and are staring into what should be ‘coffee’ and ‘tarts’.

Sollux had poked at a tart, asked if it was good, and then the young man shrugged and said that he hated the things, but some people liked them and he knew how to make them anyway, so here they were.

Aradia doesn’t touch her coffee or the tart. They aren’t here for pleasantries.

The young man just shrugs, and then starts eating a lot of them, even if he claims to hate the things.

“So, do you want to introduce yourselves?” he asks.

They both just stare at him blankly.

He shrugs again. “It’s only polite to,” he says. He manages to decimate half the plate in five minutes (not that time passed here, but it’s in Aradia’s innate nature to know about time and to know when things happen), and then says, “But no pressure. You won’t be able to stay here anyway.”

That sounds like a threat, Aradia thinks – no, it should sound like a threat, but it was more that it didn’t. It sounds like a given. Like at the end of the day, they have to and will leave later.

Eventually, there’s only two tarts left, and the young man has drained all of his coffee. He stands, and goes to wash his dishes, while they both watch his movements, wary.
“There’s a bed upstairs if you want to use it,” he says, and Aradia tilts her head at that. ‘Bed’s were for humans, yes? “And the couches are pretty comfortable if you want that. I never sleep anyway.”

“I don’t need to sleep,” she says.

The young man tilts his head to Sollux. “He does. He hasn’t ascended.”

She narrows her eyes, opens her mouth, and then stops – of course. She just settles back into her seat.

“I know you won’t believe me, but I really won’t harm you. It gets me nowhere,” the young man says, “So rest for as long as you need, I’ll just be around the house.”

“And what do you get from helping us?”

The young man pauses. He seems to think for a moment before shrugging. “I don’t.”

“Then why help at all?”

“It’s called human decency,” he says, “And besides, I think your friends need you alive.”

Aradia stands up so fast that the chair gets knocked onto the floor with a metal clatter, and in the next second she’s in front of the young man, claws out – only the young man has already pulled a sword out in a brief flash of light, and held it between them, sharp edge of the blade too close to her neck for comfort.

They both stop, stalemate, and she hears Sollux behind her stand as well, hands out and ready to use his psionics.

“Killing me is not going to solve anything,” the young man says, “And I don’t have all the answers anyway, I only have a few.”

“Why are you after us?”

The young man laughs. It’s a pleasant sound. Aradia doesn’t like it.

“I’m not after you. I’m stuck here. Or more like, this is the only place that can keep me safe. You saw what’s out there,” he says.

Aradia falters. He’s seen the battlefield too.

“What – what’s wrong with it?”

He shrugs. The sword disappears in another flash of light, and then the young man goes back to washing his dishes. The casualness throws Aradia off-balance. He speaks again when he dries his plate.

“Corrupted would be the best word for it. Influenced, maybe. Deceased. Infected.” Here, he pauses. “Infected. Like an open wound. It festered. We couldn’t fix it.”

“Why?”

“It was too far gone. It ate up everything.”

Aradia takes a step back. She looks around the dining room, at the young man, at his milk-white, blank eyes. “And you – ”
“Yeah. I think that was when everyone else got the hint that it was too far gone. Or when they should have anyway.”

He finishes drying off the plate, and then the mug, and then places them back onto the cupboards. He motions towards the table. “Just put them in the sink when you’re done. I’ll clean them up.”

And he smiles, before walking out the room, humming a cheery tune as he does.

He finds her somewhere in the middle of October.

Because, like a sensible human being who doesn’t lose his head (haha) in the middle of a crisis, the first thing Dirk Strider does when faced with a challenge is to accept it and keep moving forward. So he does that. He gets out of the tree he’s stuck in (and he had no idea how he got there, only that he woke up with a hell of a lot of scratches and his shades were on the ground, way, way below him, and his limbs were all tangled up in branches), goes to find civilization (which surprisingly isn’t hard), realizes he can’t speak the language and tries to find anyone who knows how to speak English or Alternian.

There’s people who speak English. There’s no one who speaks Alternian.

He’s in 2013.

He gets maps and tries to learn as much as he can about the area and the language (and that’s slow progress that’s frustrating the hell out of him), and then tries to learn about this earth so he knows what in the fuck he’s doing. He doesn’t remember why he’s here or how he’s here – the last thing he knows is that they were going to fight against Lord English and the Condesce and Jack Noir and whoever else, and then – then, nothing. And he’s in a tree.

Despite the amount of water that he’s seen here, it turns out this earth isn’t waterlogged, and he’s just landed somewhere that has a lot of ocean in sight. Huh.

The lack of carapaces and the overwhelming amount of people makes him fidget and keep a hand on his sword at all times (and he’s tried hard to conceal it under stolen fabric after the first time he almost got arrested – what the hell – for it), and he takes to mostly moving at night when there’s not a lot of people who can go after him or stare at him for his pajamas. The poofy asshole pants really don’t blend in with the rest of the island.

He manages to fly from one island to another before he finds Damara Megido trudging her way to the shore, absolutely soaked and pissy about it.

She’s the only troll for miles. Of course Dirk talks to her.

She’s alright, for the most part. A little spooked and stressed about being dumped into an ocean in broad daylight, and he helps her find some shade (in a tree) while they talk about things. No, she has as much of a clue as Dirk has on ending up here; no, she doesn’t know anything about this earth; no, she has no idea where they actually are.

She’s mostly suspicious about how he understands her. He doesn’t say anything about it.

She’s not god-tiered, so he builds a fire so she can dry off her clothes faster and then lets her rest until the sun goes down, and then they move. The fact that she can’t fly poses a problem, and she just narrows her eyes at him when he says he can carry her, so they amble around the island for a while.
He tries to argue about the merits of flying with him; she argues back and then eventually flips him off with a scathing hiss. So there’s something there, he thinks, and then has to stop himself from poking at it because that would just make him lose his only companion here so far.

So he doesn’t, and instead just guides her around places and making sure they don’t get in trouble. There’s a lot of things to be done, and a lot of problems to get around, but he tells her he’s got in all under control. As much as he can, anyway. He knows their location (the name of the island, anyway) and he knows they’re in an alternate version of Earth, and he knows that they have to get off this place and maybe find someplace safe to hide out on that’s not too crowded, but also not too barren of resources.

Constantly being chased around when they do get seen does nothing for Damara’s mood. That’s when she steals his sword and starts slashing at people, and he has to grab her and run so that they’re not on some wanted list around here. She punches him in the face after, and then doesn’t apologize even if she clearly did it out of instinct to protect herself since she hates being touched.

They get chased, they have to hide, there’s too many people and too much sunlight and it gets unbearably hot sometimes, so all in all, it’s an unpleasant situation, and it makes them both irritable. Well, it makes Damara irritable. Dirk’s doing fine. Trying his best to, anyway.

Which is how they both find each other in the middle of the ocean operating a tiny little boat. It’s a little wooden thing he’d stolen off the shore, but it’s more than enough for two people and the supplies they’ve gathered that would last them a while. It has a little motor that Dirk’s taken a while to learn how to operate, and they’re both speeding across the ocean under full moonlight. Damara is asleep.

Dirk should sleep too, even if he doesn’t really need it. It would help take his mind off of things, and it’s not like he still wakes up on Derse anymore (or have to deal with a lot of his splinters). Still. They need someone to make sure they both end up in their destination safe and sound and not caught because Damara doesn’t look human. Not even close.

He doesn’t sleep. He just watches the waves go past them, and looks up at the moon, which is huge and bright and nothing like he’s ever seen it on his earth – even the moon back there seemed a little….subdued or something. Like it didn’t quite understand what it was shining for anymore. This one looked stunning, although maybe that was the lack of light pollution or because Dirk’s actually taking the time to look at it and not just stay cooped up in his room with all his robots and his flashing screens and his wires.

He decides not to think too much about that. And not to think too much of failing the game. Maybe this was what happens when you fuck up too much. You end up in another universe entirely and not know what to do.

He just glares at the moon at that thought.

A few hours pass, and he just absentmindedly lets his fingers skim the water as the boat runs. The sky is still dark, and he has no idea what time it is, but he doesn’t really need to keep track since he’s got nothing scheduled except to just keep moving.

And then the boat motor suddenly sputters and stops.

Dirk blinks, incredulous, and then turns towards it, at the end of the boat. It just falls silent no matter how hard he looks at it.

He slowly hovers over to it, making sure not to wake Damara up by rocking their little vessel, and
goes to check it. He was sure he put enough fuel in it and there was nothing wrong with it. He calculated it right, didn’t he? He was sure he did. He’d done his math over and over and he’d checked the distance –

“You know theory and practice are completely different things, right?”

He stills, slowly turns. Damara is awake. She rubs one eye and yawns and then rearranges the blankets around her.

“Yes,” he says. He doesn’t sound reluctant. At all. Really.

“Not enough psionics?”

“We’re not using batteries, we’re using fuel. Old Earth uses a lot of it, and I’m pretty sure I remember everything correctly,” he says, turning back to the motor with a rare expression of displeasure.

Damara hums. Then. “How much further do we have to go?”

“A few kilometers,” he says. He tries to restart the engine, and it sputters, but then stops. He tries again. The motor gives off a pathetic whine.

Damara hums, sits up properly, and then Dirk suddenly feels the boat steady. He stiffens for a moment.

And then the boat lurches forwards, knocking him back and making him grip onto its sides for support. Damara only flashes a brief smile, smug, before moving to the head of the boat and lazily lying down, arm propped up on the very end and her chin resting on it.

Psychic. Of course.

Dirk stands, and then sits back down carefully, to one of the wooden slats designated as seats.

“You could have done that before,” he says.

“You never asked,” Damara says, then, “Correction – you never ask, Strider-san.”

“You don’t like being asked things.”

“I don’t like having my privacy invaded. There is a difference,” she says. Before Dirk can say anything. “And you don’t like asking if there’s anything I can do either.”

He shuts his mouth at that. He’s very aware. But he needs to have something in his hands right now, because he has no idea where they are and he needs something.

If he doesn’t. If he has too much time in his hands, then. Well.

He settles for just sitting there and crossing his arms. He’s not pissy or anything, just a little…peeved. “Thank you for the help, Megido-san.”

Damara snorts and then waves a hand before turning back to the water. They both revel in the silence for a while before something makes a small sound, and they both turn to the small lump of feathers in the middle of a nest of fabric.

Damara frowns at it. “Throw it out.”
“You broke its wing.”

“Yes, so throw it out,” she says.

Dirk presses his lips to a thin line and sighs. “Okay, I get it, you don’t like birds or something, but leave it alone. I’ll get rid of it when we arrive.”

Damara just shoots the bird a dirty look before turning back to the ocean.

Dirk sighs and pinches the space between his eyes.

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“So.”

“So,” Aradia echoes. Time doesn’t pass here, but she’s been keeping track, and they’ve been here for roughly three days, two hours, thirty two minutes, seventeen seconds and counting. She doesn’t like the place – doesn’t like that she’s starting to like it, rather, with its warm and alive air, and its soft couches and beds that are rather pleasant, and its good, albeit weird, earth-food.

Sollux seems to be adjusting fine too, although he’s still sleeping off the fatigue of running around the void for weeks with nearly nothing to survive on. He’s faster with his responses, more talkative, even though he’s tired. He’s recovering from death. Or being revived, whichever.

The young man is sitting across Aradia, cross-legged on the opposite couch, carefully setting up the glass pieces of a chessboard. She tilts her head at it. The concept of it is familiar, but she remembers their version of it in Alternia being…significantly harder. And less prettier than a crystal-crafted board with glass pieces.

“Do you play?” the young man asks.

“I think we had something similar back in Alternia but it was more difficult,” she says, “But I used to, yes.” *With the voices of the dead,* she doesn’t add.

“Mm,” the young man hums, and then stops setting up his pieces. Instead he holds out a hand, palm towards her, up to his chest level, and then brings it down. A curtain of light follows his motion, consuming the entirety of the board. When he draws his hand back – making the light die out – the board is different. There’s multiple boards now, stacked on top of each other, and the pieces are already set up.

The young man’s pieces are cut from emerald. Aradia’s are made from ruby.

“Is this difficult enough?” the young man asks.

“I think we had something similar back in Alternia but it was more difficult,” she says, “But I used to, yes.” *With the voices of the dead,* she doesn’t add.

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“Is this difficult enough?” The young man smiles at her as he asks.

This is more familiar. “Space chess,” Aradia says, and nods. She moves first. Red always moves first.

“I heard it commonly referred to as Three-Dimensional Chess,” he says, moving as well. “I’d personally call it *Hell* Chess, but a friend of mine once said that honor goes to three-player chess.”

“‘There’s three-player chess where you’re from?’” Her move.

“Yep,” he says. “It’s way more chaotic, but it’s fun.”

She hums, nods, and then gets into the game. She moves, takes a few pieces, and he stays silent,
smiling, oftentimes pausing, and then suddenly, Aradia finds that most of her important pieces have been taken, and a lot of the young man’s pieces have ascended on the boards. She frowns, concentrates, but in the end, the young man just smiles and triumphs.

She stares at the boards, and then at him, and then laughs. “Of course.”

“I’m supposed to use my aspect to my advantage, yes?” the young man says, “I had a friend who nerded on and on and on about that.”

“A huge fan of learning?”

“He was a goddamn mage, so yeah,” he says, laughing. He quiets down for a bit before shaking his head fondly. “Although now that I think about it, maybe that would be working to his advantage now.”

Aradia quiets again, that suspicion at the back of her head rearing up. Still. He has been kind to them. She might as well take advantage of that and whatever knowledge he possessed. Light players tended to be fountains of information.

“So you know what’s happening. Outside, I mean. And why Sollux is alive,” she says.

He nods. He snaps his fingers. The chessboard resets itself in a flash of light.

“Obviously, yes,” he says, “But only up to what I remember. And what I can still sense. I was what you’d call a natural seer. Not very good, but, enough.”

Aradia nods again. “So currently, you have no idea what they’re doing?”

“I can guess. I can see from you and…Sollux? Was that his name? Can I use his name?”

Aradia makes a vague ‘go ahead’ gesture.

“Thanks. I can see from that, but otherwise? Nada,” he says, then shrugs. “Kinda lonely here sometimes too but, what can I do?”

She just stares at him for a moment. It really probably is, especially since he seemed to be the only one out here for miles.

Another bout of silence drapes over them both for a moment. Aradia is aware that right now would be when a sunset usually happens, and the clock on the wall that’s still ticking away says so too, but the sun never sets here. There’s no sun after all. There’s just light. From nowhere and everywhere all at once.

“Another game?” The young man asks.

“What about this three-player chess you were talking about, how does that work?”

“Ah.” The board shifts to a round one when he moves his hand this time. Like the previous boards, it’s beautiful, but this one more so – the pieces this time are blue, red and green, and its squares alternate between purple and yellow; the border was a deep red, and there were etchings on it that still somehow appeared to be made of precious gems, only they were in grey and light blue.

“Oh,” Aradia says, breath escaping her. She doesn’t know all of the stones in this board, but it’s absolutely beautiful.

The young man touches the red border. “Garnet.” The light blue and grey etchings. “Aquamarine

“Oh,” Aradia says again, looking at the board. “It’s…"

“I’m aware the color scheme is shit, but hey, it was lovingly crafted.” The young man laughs.

“No, it’s gorgeous,” she says, “Less about the colors and more about how the light catches on them.”

And yeah, the light bounces off of the board and its pieces beautifully, fracturing all over the table and the floor and the walls and on their faces.

The young man smiles. “A friend made it,” he says, “Or, well, we all did try to help, but he did most of the work.”

“Who? Your mage?”

“Yeah.”

“Wow,” she says.

He chuckles again when she’s silent for several more minutes, just looking at the board. “Don’t get too distracted by all the light fractures now, there’s still a board. Do you want to learn how to play?”

“Yes.”

“We’ll still need a third player though,” he says, then, “Sollux?”

Aradia looks up for a moment, staring at the ceiling like that’d help her see Sollux, who’s sleeping upstairs. “I’ll ask him. The boredom would probably make him say yes.”

The young man chuckles again. It’s still such a pleasant sound.

“Do you have Three-Player Space Chess?” Aradia asks. “That might be easier to understand since we already know how to play Space Chess.”

“Hmm.” The young man thinks on it a moment. “Well, I don’t think we have that on Earth, so I don’t have a board, but…” he smiles.

Despite herself, Aradia smiles back. “We’ll make it, then.”

Loki watches from his desk. He’s currently tapping away on his phone, checking up on Rose and Saph and Ruben again (Fenrir is getting too big now, Rose says; Pneumonia might be done, but the mother of all colds and a sprained ankle is still hell, Saph says; Does spilled milk usually find its way back into the glass, Ruben asks, to which Loki snorts and says, not unless time rewound itself), but everyone’s in the sun room today.

The dogs are well-behaved, for a change, although that might just be because of the sunlight coming through the parts of the glass wall that isn’t covered right now. They’re certainly enjoying just lying down and snoring away. There’s Buster and Posie by his feet, the Chihuahua leaning against the terrier as they both slept (and Loki will never admit to taking a photo); Rover is taking up a huge spot on the carpet by himself, while Milko is resting his head on top of Sugar’s stomach. Moxie, the little
shit, is on top of them both, feet and belly up, and she kicks every few seconds or so, dreaming.

The rest of them are also sleeping in piles, all happily bathing in the sunlight.

Except Winston. Winston’s standing by the kids, there in the shade, while they’re all setting up prisms all over the place.

They seem to have had some sort of brilliant idea, some science experiment, and are now happily executing it, with John floating around affixing prisms to the ceiling while everyone else does the ground work. Loki’s told Rose what they’re doing, and she just chuckled and asked for a photo. He’ll deliver as soon as these little scientists are done.

It doesn’t take them long, and once they’re all satisfied with the way the prisms are set up, most of them sit together with the dogs, who immediately wake up (save Moxie, leaving Milko and Sugar trapped under her) and pile on them. Dave’s shades get stolen by Appleberry, and then Captain lays his head on Dave’s lap. Dave just sighs, and accepts his fate and pets the German Shepherd while their Collie goes over to Loki and places the aviators in his hands.

Loki chuckles.

“Everyone ready?” Jade asks. She’s standing with the Palmers by the roll-up blinds.

John nods, Dave gives her a thumbs up, Graham just makes a noise and then Mrs. H – Elizabeth, Elizabeth, she’s insisted he call her that – excitedly says, “Yes.”

The three of them slowly roll up the blinds, and the light filters through. It bounces off from prism to prism expertly, and Loki tracks the movement as each beam of light connects and fractures into a thousand shades, and the dogs yip. Everyone else claps and cheers, and Loki just looks at the light patterns in the room, amused. How easy was it to entertain these humans.

The colors were beautiful though.

“Alright, take pics, I need it,” One of the Palmers says, and then Jade starts snapping photos. John just lies down on the floor, and Moxie finally relieves her friends of their burden to go lick his face. He giggles and picks her up, raising her high into the air, and she wiggles her little stump tail.

Loki finally asks when Dave walks over to him to retrieve his dog-spit-soaked aviators. He doesn’t put them on and just sinks into the chair across Loki.

“What is this about?” Loki asks.

“The Palmers have a project,” he says, wiping his glasses on his sleeve. It’s a huge improvement, Loki thinks, how he’s not even caring that his red eyes are in full view (and then Loki laughs in his head, because he wouldn’t ever like to have his red eyes in full view). “It seemed fun, so we thought helping would be cool.”

“Has the dog spit cooled your glasses?”

The look Dave gives him is absolutely disappointed. Loki grins.

“I think you’ve been spending too much time with the pool master.”

Loki just snaps his fingers. Dave’s glasses are shiny and new and not slobbered all over.

“Thanks,” the kid says, and then puts them back on. Kudos to him, at least, for being able to put on
glasses he knew had been licked by a dog, even if Loki thoroughly cleaned it. “Anyway, what’s up with that? They have a chumhandle now, right?”

Loki nods. “I just needed to see how they were doing.”

“That’s fair, I guess. They still sick or something?”

“Someone pushed them down the stairs and they sprained their ankle, and they still have a cold.”

“Warned them about the stairs, and yet this still keeps happening.” Dave leans back into his seat and crosses his arms. “You sure about the whole ‘inducting them into the War Council’ thing? I mean, I get that PM’s been your go-to for stuff, but you haven’t really broken the full story to them.”

Nor to you, Loki thinks, but that’s not really important. He just taps out a reply on his phone (to which he gets a frowny face for), and then puts it down on the table. “I’m sure. We need as many people on board as we can,” he says.

Dave stares at him for a moment, calculating, and then lifts a shoulder. “Whatever you think’s best, I guess,” he says, “PM’s been pretty alright so far.”

“I had them draw your blood, remember?” Loki says.

“Yeah, that was still creepy as shit.”

“That was for an emergency system. An emergency system that can be triggered by only me, or in case I’m incapacitated, the least likely member of the household who knows enough to activate it.”

Loki can see the moment the gears click in Dave’s head. “Oh that’s why. We can’t have you both unavailable, so if you’re out for the count – ”

“Angeles is going to get you all out of here, yes,” Loki says.

Dave nods. Then, “Don’t deliberately get yourself out for the count though. Whatever you think is… going to happen.”

“I have no interest in getting dismembered or anything, no,” Loki says, “Just making sure.”

“Does this have something to do with Palmer #1’s freaky visions?”

Loki raises an eyebrow at the boy. Curious.

“Come on, it’s not that hard to infer,” Dave says, “First we get him screaming bloody murder, and then you’re hovering around him, and you two have weird secret meetings, and the kid’s a natural Seer. So either you’re playing really intense scrabble, or something’s up with Palmer #1.”

Loki pauses. There’s a lot to say here. He could call a meeting, Saph and Ruben’s positions be damned – he’ll skywalk there, drop them here, and then drop them back off when they’re done – to discuss all of this, to tell them what he thinks might be going on, because the pieces are starting to click, from the familiar handwriting in the missile print-out, to the voice he heard that sounded like his own, to Cecil’s visions.

But there’s also the chance of being overheard. The walls are listening. Loki knows he’s warded the Safehouse good. He knows he’s redone the wards while everyone was asleep, just in case. He knows he checks every night, wandering around the building quietly as he can, making sure he’s unseen via invisibility spell.
He doesn’t know exactly if whoever’s listening can bypass these wards. There’s always a chance. He’s not taking that. Not when the walls have ears.

So instead, he says, “We’re not sure yet, but – ”

And then there’s green sparks, showering over him, the sound of something being electrocuted, and he whirls around, ready to defend himself, just as Dave stands and pulls a sword out of thin air, looking up at the space above Loki.

There’s nothing there, except for the fading arcs of green light, a few more sparks, and then it finally actually fades to nothing at all. Loki looks around, trying to spot a shadow or anything else that could tell what was there, but there’s nothing. At all. The light that’s drifting in through the glass wall does nothing to reveal anything that might be hiding.

Loki is aware that everyone else in the room has stilled. When he turns to them, after several minutes of inspecting his surroundings, they’re all wearing expressions of surprise and concern on their faces. Cecil looks like he’s about to cry.

A dog barks. Loki’s not sure which one.

“What,” Dave says, after a while, still looking at the area where the barrier Loki had put around himself had been hit. “In the fuck was that?”

Loki’s been writing runes all over everyone while he roams at night. Protection. Alarms. In case any one of them gets hurt, he’ll know. In case anyone with intent to hurt or manipulate them, compulsion-wise, approaches them, he’ll know, and they’ll be protected, because whoever and whatever it is will bounce off in a spark of green lights, off of the barrier that he’s set up around them.

Which is exactly what just happened.

Something had gotten into the Safehouse.

Loki presses his lips to a thin line.

Shit.

Chapter End Notes

i set f i r e to this plot
As soon as Loki’s feet hit the red carpet, he lets go of Ruben’s shoulder and then walks around the table to take his seat at the head of it. Ruben, the poor kid, has to try to not throw up and fall over right there seeing as he’s still carrying a very sick Sapphrel in his arms. He shoots Loki a look of distaste-and then quickly looks away, because this is Luke Winters, who can snap his fingers and turn you into primordial goo if he wanted to – and just stagers over to the table, deposits his best friend in one of the seats, and then collapses in the one next to it. He puts his hand over his mouth after a minute and tries not to retch.

Jade enters the room right after he does that. She watches him, turns to Loki, frowns, and then sighs. “Oh dear. I’m getting you some medicine.”

She gets out of the room, and Loki sighs. He doesn’t need more delays today.

He’s already called up a War Council meeting – everyone is on board, even Rose, and she’s had to drag James in this too, and they’re both currently making pleasantries with the Palmers and Graham and Elizabeth since James hasn’t exactly met them properly yet – and went to check with his pocket space for all the notes he’s stashed there, to be used for the meeting, but there was a surprise waiting for him there.

There was nothing.

All his notes, all his discreetly-taken photographs of the places where the missiles had disappeared, even the printout with the chalk marks on it – gone. The entire space was empty. And it wasn’t just his notes that were there. He had weapons there too. From a time long past (from almost two years of not thinking of Asgard anymore), and they were gone.

That pocket space is – was – known only to him. No one and nothing gets in there except for him.

Until now, apparently.

Whoever had gotten there had thankfully left the wardrobe, at least, and all the other trinkets Loki had deemed fit to keep. They only took what was, for all intents and purposely, tactically important.

So he stands from his seat, walks back to Ruben and Sapphrel, and then almost slaps his palms onto their foreheads (he’s careful to not actually slap them, and just…very roughly places his hands on them that their heads hit the backrest of their seats). Ruben stops wanting to heave his guts onto the table. Sapphrel stops shaking and looks at their foot in the walker boot strangely before taking it off and chucking it at Loki when he walks back to his seat. It hits the back of his head.

“Saph!” Ruben hisses.

The tiny kid just flips Loki off. “I was sick, you jerk.”

“You lied about the pneumonia.”

“So you’d stop pestering me. Hell, it’s not like I have a role here, I’m your damn pool master, not a superhero.”
Loki just looks at the kid, briefly remembering the missile print out, and then sits back in his seat.

“Tell me, Saph, do you like green?”

“What?” the kid blinks at the sudden swerve, irritation ebbing. “No. I hate green.”

Loki just hums. He watches as Ruben moves from his chair to fuss over his friend.

Minutes later, everyone piles into the room, greeting Saph and Ruben with smiles and hugs briefly before taking their seats. Rose stays by the doorway a little longer, because James is dithering, watching everyone, guarded, and then his eyes land on the newly-returned duo seated right across where he’s standing and he breathes out a little, “Hey.”

Ruben looks up at him and waves. “Oh. Hey, James.” Saph just wiggles their fingers.

“You’re the one that – ” James pauses, and then squints. “Which one are you right now?”

Since he appears to be looking at Saph, everyone turns to the kid, confused. The kid mirrors the looks back at them. “I’m…Sapphrel? You said my last name was nice.”

“No, which Sa – ” James halts and frowns, like he’s having a hard time saying and just remembering the kid’s name. Interesting. Maybe it was James still recovering, maybe it was just that everyone seemed to forget. Loki’s notes on that had vanished like thin air. “Which you are you?”

“Excuse me, what?”

Rose frowns at this and turns to Saph, tilting her head, intrigued.

Most of everyone’s attention turns to Saph, actually, and they swallow nervously and start fidgeting, nervous, until Elizabeth tells all of them to stop staring because Saph doesn’t like the attention. Loki watches the kid look at the ground and try to keep still, pulling their legs up to their seat instead and curling up into a ball. Ruben kneels by their seat and starts whispering something to them, probably reassurances.

“James, please sit,” Loki says, redirecting everyone’s focus. As interesting as this all was, he really needs time to say all of his research to them, and to bring them up to speed, and it will not be done in one sitting. At least not without confusion and argument.

He thankfully does.

Loki stands. This is not for his or any of the other War Council members’ benefits, but for their new recruits. This is because no one offers any information about their pasts if someone else doesn’t bare theirs first, because it’s unfair and unsettling to feel vulnerable. It’s a fair trade, it’s a negotiation, it’s because the safety of everyone here is more important so he’ll spill his truth and hopefully everyone else will spill their necessary information, emotional baggage optional.

Everyone watches him stand and square his shoulders.

Suddenly, he isn’t Luke Silvertongue, he isn’t weird housemate Loki who pranks everyone until they concede and give up, he isn’t the big brother figure Jade clings to unconsciously when she’s tired and passed out. He’s Loki, prince of Asgard, with his regal stance and his raised head, and green light scatters across his clothes, reforming them into leather hide and armor, and he can feel the electricity spread across the room. Magic. He hasn’t done this in a long, long while, this display of power.
“I am Loki, former prince of Asgard,” he says the name of his former home like he’s swallowing tacks, but it’s the truth, it’s logistics, nothing more. He was the former prince of Asgard. That’s where he came from. And if he’d like to skip through explaining that and repeating things again and again, thank you very much. “And I fell to Earth by accident.”

Even the kids don’t know everything about this. They knew only some of it, before Loki decided they really weren’t going away like he hoped they would at hearing what he’s done and instead had just shut up and let them stay. Best decision of his life.

Rose leans forward and clasps her hands together. John is open-mouthed. Dave raises an eyebrow. Jade just looks at him wide-eyed. He hopes they’re not too incensed. He does know how kept secrets feel.

“On Thor’s – ” Tacks in his mouth “ – coronation, I had Jotun sneak into the castle and into the vault to derail the ceremony, since I felt like he wasn’t ready to be king yet.” He bites his tongue there. He shouldn’t have to defend himself. Just say it like it is, you coward. Scheming son of a bitch. Jealous bastard.

Conniving wretch.

“Thor was not aware that this was my doing, and stormed into Jotunheim. There was a bit of a skirmish after he got insulted and called princess, and we came back home to Asgard, and he was stripped of his power and his crown. He was banished to Earth for a little while. I believe news of that can be read – not of him falling, exactly, but of strange sightings of the Bifröst in New Mexico.”

He pauses. Rose’s eyes seem to light up while everyone else just looks confused.

“While we were on Jotunheim, in the middle of the skirmish, a Jotun had grabbed my arm. And if you’ve read anything about Jotuns that isn’t inaccurate, then you’ll know that their touch is so cold, it burns. They are frost giants,” he says. And then…

Then…falters.

He’s only known these humans for two years. That isn’t nearly enough time to build enough trust. They could always just turn him away and then he wouldn’t be able to help them at all. Something is coming and he needs enough pieces to maybe try to fight against it, or fully figure it out, because this is his home now damn it.

Oh.

Home.

What a strange word.

Then again, these kids had heard that he’s planned to wipe out his race. Hadn’t run away when he’d told them the few, few stories of what he’d done before he’d fallen. Hadn’t shunned him like he’d expected them to. Maybe it was the fact that they got it second-hand. Maybe they were naïve. Maybe they were just…this. Forgiving. Either way, whether they were too blind to see his mistakes or were too soft to forgive him, he can work with this. This is what he needs, their cooperation. If they hated him after this, it was fine. He just needed their help.

“When one of those Jotuns touched me, I didn’t burn. Instead, my skin turned blue,” he says. He deliberates again – and how funny that, that his silver tongue would turn to lead in a room full of humans, would deliberate now of all times, like he was ashamed. It’s just humans. It’s just…his friends.
Eventually he decides, fuck it, and lifts his glamour, slowly, and is disgusted by how easily his skin turns blue. It should be painful, he thinks. Like peeling off a mask that’s already grown around him because of how long he’s been wearing it. A mask that’s stretched too thin already.

Dave’s eyebrows climb past his shades and into his hairline, but that’s as much reaction he gets. No screaming or spears hurled at him. Curious.

“If you should need a brief course on Jotuns, it’s that the children of Asgard are taught from a young age that they are vile and monstrous, and are enemies of the Realm Eternal,” he says, “And eat naughty children when they don’t go to bed on time.”

Jade snorts.

“I was horrified and demanded answers from – Odin. By this time, Thor was already banished to Earth. While Odin and I were talking, he suddenly collapsed and fell into an Odinsleep, and my mother –” He halts. Well. Too late to take that back now. “My mother crowned me ruler in his stead, as Thor was banished, and Odin asleep until he recovered. Thor’s friends, who were planning to plead Odin to restore Thor’s status back, saw me on the throne instead.”

He forces himself to stare straight ahead. “Things didn’t go too well after that. They wanted Thor back, I couldn’t defy Odin’s last order. In an attempt to convince Thor to not make an effort to come back to Asgard, I lied to him about our father dying because of his grief at Thor’s actions. Do not justify yourself do not justify yourself do not state your reasons say it as it is you snake. “Thor’s friends came down by Bifrost to convince him to come back, and I sent The Destroyer to stop him, almost levelling an entire town in the process.”

There’s a sharp intake of breath. Loki can’t tell whose. Or if everyone did it all at once. Straight ahead. He cannot be distracted.

“By that time, I was already planning to destroy Jotunheim with the Bifrost – it’s quite a powerful thing when focused onto one object for too long – and I had also contacted the King of Jotunheim, my birth father,” he says that surprisingly easily, maybe because Laufey was dead, “And tricked him into getting into Asgard to try to kill Odin. I killed him first before he could do it, to make it look like I’d just saved Odin.”

He pauses for a moment again, this time to wait for comments. There’s none. He clears his throat and continues.

“Thor and his friends defeated The Destroyer – after Thor regained his abilities because he got killed – and then they returned to Asgard. Thor and I fought.” He actually slows down a little here. “And the fight got to the Bifrost bridge. And after a long and arduous mess, Thor decided to destroy the bridge to prevent Jotunheim from being destroyed – stupid choice, because then he’d never see his lady love again – and there was an explosion. Thor and I fell off the bridge.”

Pause.

“Odin saved us. Well, saved Thor. I just hung on,” he says.

When he didn’t speak again for a long time, John asks, “…and then?”

Loki draws in a breath and slowly lets it out. He sees the air particles freeze. “And then I decided it wasn’t worth it and let go.”

He doesn’t look at their downcast eyes or their pitying looks. Jade puts her face in her hands and mumbles, “Oh, Loki.” and he ignores it. Instead, he lifts his glamour up again. It feels better on him
than that nauseating blue skin. He still hates the pink flesh anyway.

“I was falling for a long time in nothing.”

“The Void,” Rose says, “Cecil did mention he saw traces in the Void on us. You included.”

Loki smiles a little, remembering their first few meetings with the Palmers. “Yes.”

“And then?”

“And then everything else is vague and I was here. It took a while to find this building, but it happened. The rest, you already know.”

“Do you think what got you dropped here was the same thing that dropped us?” Dave asks, “Like, if we think for a second that we’re all gathered here in the same building because of chance, we’d have to be stupid.”

“Logically, the four of us in the same building isn’t that far off,” Rose says, then gestures to everyone else, “All of us, however…that theory’s worth delving into.”

Amazing how they just take his story in stride. Loki blinks a little. He’s just spilled out something he’s held on to for two years – maybe more in the Void – and this is how they just receive it. With sympathy and no accusations whatsoever.

He must look a little dumbfounded because the pool master turns to him and goes, “That’s all the juicy deets, right?”

Parsing the sentence takes a while, but he nods. “Yes.”

Saph claps once, and then says, “Did you have to be that dramatic?”

John bursts into laughter.

Despite himself, Loki’s lips pull up. “I had to make an impact somehow. They didn’t call me Silvertongue without reason.”

“They should have called you Drama Queen,” Saph says. Ruben elbows them. They pout. “If this guy wakes me up from a nap for a meeting, I have every right to sass him.”

“You will get your sleep soon, Angeles.” Loki huffs, exasperated but fond, and sits. He waits for more comments, the more scathing ones, but there’s none. Really, really none. He could cry. But he doesn’t, because that’s just pathetic.

“So, we’ve cleared up that you’re the Norse God of Mischief and why you’re here,” Dave says, “Even if we don’t know how you ended up here, which lines up with us because we also have huge blanks in our memory. Do you know anything or anyone who can do that?”

Loki sets his lips to a thin line, thinking. “I can. Most seiðmaðr can.”

“Oh, right. You wiped Stark’s memory once and made sure he wasn’t privy to the Safehouse.”

“Just a mild compulsion charm, it’s harmless. Just makes people think a certain way even if it’s not entirely logical,” he says and waves a hand.

“Okay, so we’re talking someone with your level of magic.”
“Um,” Cecil suddenly says, and then turns to Loki, nervous.

Loki inclines his head in acknowledgement, and then turns to address everyone else again. “That’s actually what we need to talk about. There is a lot that’s taking place behind what we can see here, and Cecil has only glimpsed some of it.”

That gets everyone’s attention.

Loki steeps his hands and smiles. “But first, I’ll need another explanation from four of you.”

As if they know what’s next, John, Jade, Rose and Dave turn to him.

“Well, shit,” Dave mutters.

Explanations about The Game are rather lengthy. It starts with Dave clearing his throat and trying to explain and falling into a tangent, and then Jade taking hold of the conversation before Dave completely swerved out of topic and got himself upset, and then John interrupting every now and then with comments until he started talking about Jujus and altering timelines without being a time traveller and someone called ‘Terezi’, and then Rose told them all to shut up and then went back to the beginning, dissecting each topic carefully and giving in-depth, if unnecessarily loquacious, explanations of each.

Needless to say, Elizabeth looked a little confused by all the technology talk (as was Loki, not that he’d ever admit it – just because Asgard’s technology was different from Earth much less an alternate Earth’s didn’t mean he was ignorant, of course not), Graham just blinked at them, Kevin looked like he wanted them all to speak in English and Cecil looked like he was connecting the dots all the way to hyperventilation. Saph fell asleep. Ruben corrected them all and said that Saph passed out since they hadn’t eaten all day and Loki just kidnapped them both to get here. Elizabeth fussed at them both to go to the kitchen and the meeting finally had a formal break.

It’s been three hours since they’ve started the meeting, and Loki’s already starting to run several things through his head. He should take notes, he knows, but seeing as how his last venture went, it would be good to remember everything instead. He’s good at that too, thankfully. Too good.

Which is why, presently, he’s looking out the window of the council room. It’s not a fancy window by any means – the entire room isn’t fancy. It’s just a regular carpeted study with a table and several chairs, and that’s about it. It’s just called a council room because the kids wanted to call it that. But he’s still looking outside of the window, fogged up because of the rain, and Dave walks up to him silently and goes, “You’re aiming for cinematic depression, huh?”

Some of the War Council members are downstairs. A few are taking naps at the table. Dave’s speaking low enough that only the two of them would hear.

“I’m not aiming for any sort of depression.”

“Yeah, depression sucks,” Dave says, and Loki knows he’s not joking, “Just saying you look a little…bothered.”

“I’m not.”

“Well you look like it.”
A pause. It's actually an awkward one, and Dave shifts from one foot to the other. They haven’t had awkward pauses since their first few weeks as friends.

“Listen man, like – I get saying all of that was a big deal for you,” Dave starts. Loki turns to him, and he actually holds up a hand and interrupts him before he can say anything. Funny boy. “And I’d just like it to go on record that my sister suggested this. But – ” he adds on hurriedly when Loki just looks amused, “ – she has a point.”

“She usually does, but not on this one.”

“Just hear me out, okay, Silvertongue.” Not Odinson, Loki notes. Dave runs a hand through his hair. He never does that. “I get that was a big deal you admitted to us. Like, shit, dude you almost levelled an entire town. I know you’ve told us before that you were trouble and all, but this certainly puts things in perspective.”

Ah, finally. Here it comes.

“And I guess most of us don’t know how to accept that? How are you supposed to react to knowing a friend of yours is suddenly a mass murderer or something? Or some criminal? Or someone who is at least planning that sort of stuff? Especially when you’ve only ever known them to fish you out of the fire?” Dave looks out of the window. “Our reception of your story isn’t lukewarm, we just… don’t know how to deal with it.”

“Deal with it like a rational human being would.”

Dave snorts and crosses his arms, glancing at him briefly. “Dude, if we were rational human beings, we would have walked out of this room the second you mentioned levelling a town.”

Loki holds his tongue. He tilts his head slightly.

“It’s hard reconciling you with that, I guess. We’ve only known you like this. You’ve never tried to level the house,” Dave says.

“I haven’t tried yet.”

“Are you planning to?”

Loki takes three seconds. Dave doesn’t flinch. “No,” Loki says.

“Good. See, we’ve only ever known you as a friend. And maybe it’s because of that and because we’re getting the story second-hand, but while it’s horrible – we know it’s horrible, at least I do – it’s not really something I can’t get past. I can’t say the same for everyone else but, I can get past that, at least.” Dave looks uncomfortable now. Not that he shows it. He just shifts his arms and refuses to look Loki in the eye, instead focusing on the road. Cars are speeding down it despite the rain. “You’re clearly not levelling towns now and you’re actually trying so, that makes a difference. I still trust you to get us through this shit.”

Loki’s brow furrows.

“You’re still a friend. And you’re not a shitty one,” Dave says.

The boy has said nothing about forgiving him, and all the better, because Loki doesn’t think what he did warrants forgiveness but – but, well. Apparently, he’s able to move past that. And yes, maybe it’s the fact that Dave wasn’t there. Maybe it’s that he’s seen Loki after the fall instead of before. Maybe it’s all the prank wars and the jokes and the bake offs and tournaments instead of adventures that
usually involved joking at Loki’s expense and not-so-harmless tricks done out of spite. Maybe it’s that but...Dave doesn’t look at Loki any differently. Aside from the fact that he looks uncomfortable with this talk.

Loki turns to look outside the window as well. “You don’t do ‘feelings jams’ very well, do you?”

“No shit. Good talk.” Dave claps a hand on his shoulder and then turns on his heel, breathing out a sigh of relief at being given the go signal to leave.

Loki just watches him go and shakes his head fondly, feeling a little less wretched.

When they resume the meeting, it’s an hour and a half later and everyone’s a little more awake. Those who were out the council room finally get back inside – Jade bounds over to Loki and hugs him, and he freezes, and then she goes back to her seat before he can do anything. John just smiles at him (and it looks…fond, somewhat) while Rose laughs softly – and they all take their seats, ready to listen to whatever explanation the kids can clearly give with their mess of information.

Graham has a mug of coffee in his hands. Loki doesn’t blame him. He does look at the pad of paper Saph has in hand a little amusedly. No notes they would take here would probably last.

When everyone’s silent and settled, Rose goes back to her explanation again. She’s at the end of explaining how ‘ascension’ works and everything else that comes with it. It’s all fascinating. A role with an element to govern for each ‘player’ of this game? That sounded like Loki would have loved to play had he been younger. And had the game been less inclined to destroy the world with it (although, had he been younger, he wouldn’t have seen the downside to that).

After Rose goes through explaining what she has of that, she starts explaining ‘sessions’, and how there can be multiple sessions of this game and how they can interact. Everything branches out from there again. John launches into something about trolls, Jade talks about different versions of something called ‘Jack Noir’, and then Dave just crosses his arms and mutters something suspiciously like ‘Batterwitch’ (there it is again, they always say that) and ‘Lord English’. Rose tells them all to shut up. They don’t.

“One at a time, please?” Elizabeth asks. They take a while, but they do listen, and then slowly argue with themselves as to what to explain first.

An hour passes, and then two, and then three, but they all get it done.

When they’re finished talking and their throats all hurt, Loki leans back in his chair and lets the information settle and sort itself out in his head. It’s…quite a lot to process.

But it fits with what he has been theorizing about.

“You said it was possible to interact with time without being a time traveler, yes?” he asks John.

“If you have a special sort of juju, I guess,” John says, shrugging.

“What about other methods?”

Another shrug. “I don’t know. I found out about the juju because of Vriska.”

“Would a time traveler be able to send things or people back in time?”
“That'd be hard,” Dave says, “I guess it depends on how good you are, and maybe if you had some sort of power boost. Like first guardian powers.”

“But time travel is definitely an aspect in this game?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Can you time travel and interact with other sessions?”

“We talked to the trolls non-linearly.” Rose this time. “And I wouldn’t say that’s time travel, but technically, you can interact with any session, if you had the right equipment, from any point in time, to any point in time.”

Loki nods, and then slowly massages the space between his eyes.

“What is it?” Rose asks.

“I think whoever’s been messing with us –” he starts, and then just gets looks of confusion. For a second, he mirrors their expressions before he realizes, right, it was only him and Cecil who knew this.

“Does anybody remember that civilian Captain America brought in last Halloween?” he asks.

“Oh, you mean –” Jade starts to speak, ears perking up at the mention of a friend, but then she abruptly stops as the name dies down on her lips. She tilts her head, confused. “Um.” Her ears flick down. “I don’t remember the name.”

Rose frowns.

So does Dave. “I don’t either.”

One by one, they all admit to not being able to recall the stranger’s name. Or face. Or build. Or any feature of them, really. Just that they existed and was here and then wasn’t.

“That never struck you all as odd?” Loki asks.

“I didn’t think about it,” Jade says, “At all.”

Rose turns to Loki, gears in her head already turning. “Did they want something here?”

“That’s the most logical assumption, but sadly, I don’t remember if they took anything or if they did anything of note,” Loki says. He almost says ‘trust me’, swallows that down and instead says, “I’ve tried.”

“And then there was that weird green thing earlier,” Jade says. Her ears are flat on her head, agitated.

“I put a barrier around myself and everyone here,” Loki says. Everyone turns to him. He angles his head to Saph and Ruben. “Well, almost everyone. I hadn’t with these two since they were away.”

“Why?”

“Precautions,” he says, “In case someone wants to approach you with intent to harm, or compel, or plant nightmares into your head or make you See by force, like what happened with Cecil.”

Cecil shrinks into his chair when he says that, and the room’s attention turns to him. It’s jarring, Loki thinks. Cecil thrives on attention. He’s used to it. He breathes it. It’s his medium. Right now, he’s just
shaking in his seat.

Kevin looks livid. “What?”

It’s not possible to melt into the chair but Cecil appears to be attempting.

Loki sighs. “You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to, Cecil.”

That seems to calm down Kevin’s ire, and he just moves over to where Cecil is as Cecil nods and lets his shoulders sag.

“So, judging from that, it’s possible that someone is pulling the strings in the background,” Loki says, “My question is who.”

Cecil suddenly slumps forward and hits his head on the table with a loud, painful thump. Kevin immediately pulls him back up, checking his head for any injury. Everyone else stands, worried, but as Cecil appears to be unconscious, they just stay where they are, unsure of what to do.

“He passed out?” John mumbles, then looks to Rose, and then Loki.

“He ate, it’s not hunger,” Ruben says, moving over to assist Kevin, who looks like he’s going to be the one to start hyperventilating soon. “Fatigue? Has he been sleeping well?”

“Loki helps with his sleep,” Kevin says, “I don’t understand – ”

Cecil’s eyes snap open.

The room almost breathes a sigh of relief, except Cecil’s eyes aren’t Cecil’s eyes. They’re glowing a pale violet at the edges, and the blue-purple-pink lights that swirled in his irises during a Seer fugue were brighter than Loki’s ever seen them, moving stars in the spaces of color that were left.

Cecil opens his mouth, closes it, and then clicks his tongue. When he speaks, he sounds like he’s testing out his words, carefully enunciating them, syllable by slow syllable. It takes everyone a few minutes to piece together what he’s saying.

“You...already...know...them.”

Loki frowns. And then Cecil repeats it, faster this time, diction clearer, pronunciation more confident. “You already know them.”

“Know who?”

He tries not to flinch when Cecil turns to him and smiles. That’s not the Void speaking. That’s the Void and everything else in it.

“You already know us, Loki.”

And then Cecil’s eyes roll to the back of his head, and he lists to the side and passes out on the floor.

Chapter End Notes

are y’all ready for hell to get answers
It’s been days.

Granted, it had already been days for a while now, and Steve calling to say that he was busy was becoming routine to the point where even Steve’s words sounded rehearsed and grew to be the same over and over as time passed. Something still scratched at the back of Karkat’s head that something was wrong, and Steve needed to come home, but there was no convincing him even when Karkat was the one to pick up the phone.

Thank god for Lalonde’s Void powers, honestly, or else they all would have starved, but unfortunately, Lalonde’s Void-taken food was also only what her imagination could think of or what she’d already seen, which mostly composed of fries, cheeseburgers, pumpkins, pie and candy. The pie Karkat can tolerate, the rest needed to burn.

Eridan was downing cheeseburgers like he’d never see any of it again though, so good on him, but Karkat still hated the things. He was aware he’d never tried one, but just watching Lalonde and Eridan scarf them down was enough to put him off of them forever. And god, the mess that came with eating that. Condiments everywhere. These kids ate like pigs.

He’d lost count which day of surviving the foodpocalypse it was, but there were more cheeseburger wrappers in the trash bin, so it must have been quite a while into it. They’d sparingly used Steve’s money, and Lalonde couldn’t be trusted to answer the door since she kept striking up a conversation with the delivery people somehow – lucky for her to have natural people skills, coupled with being interaction-starved for most of her life, but god, they needed the food and there were non-humans in the house – which was unfortunate since she was the most human-looking of them all.

Davesprite had shifted his wings, clearly offended, when Karkat had pointed that out, but said nothing.

They still had a few bills, and according to Davesprite, that’d probably survive two more meals before they could expect to drown in horrid Halloween candy forever. Karkat is weighing the pros and cons of going out to the alley to go through the trash.

Kanaya and Davesprite are thankfully trying to make sure that doesn’t come to pass, budgeting on the kitchen table with actual pads of paper and calculators and everything (Kanaya’s just having fun with the calculator; the numbers flew from Davesprite’s pen rather too quickly, and Karkat’s slightly impressed. Arithmetic never was his strongest suit. ), while Roxy’s sleeping by the window; peaceful, blanket draped over her by Davesprite hours ago. No one will wonder why a human girl is sleeping by the window at night, and she’s taking advantage of this by conking out right there. That left the couches and the beds to the others though, which is rather generous of her.

Eridan’s going through the apartment, carefully lifting up trinkets and inspecting them, flipping through books before clicking his tongue in frustration at being unable to read most of the stuff he
found. Occasionally, Kanaya threatens to tear out some part of his body if he breaks something. He just either grunts or hums in acknowledgement.

It’s a sitcom, Karkat thinks. He wishes the radio is here right now, just so he can have someone to talk to and so his friends would finally have proof that he really isn’t making things up. He’s sure they still don’t believe him, even if they did plan around contingencies.

(His imagination has a contingency plan of its own: if they don’t believe him, he can always gut them open and tear their insides out with his mouth. He is hungry, isn’t he? And they’re better off feeding him that doubting him and making him feel horrible – he shuts that line of thought down. His nightmares are getting to him.)

Kanaya puts down the calculator to look at him, concerned. “Karkat?”

He rubs at the skin under his eyes, massaging them carefully. “I’m okay. It’s okay. I’m not tired.”

“You are,” Davesprite says, pen still moving too fast. Karkat wonders how fast his brain is going given how casual he is with this. “You haven’t been asleep in –”

“Three days,” Karkat says, at the same time Davesprite does.

“– six hours, forty seven minutes, three seconds and counting.”

“Is this your version of guilttripping?”

Davesprite pauses and looks up for a moment, lips quirking up. “Might be.”

“It’s not working.”

“It should,” Kanaya says, “We worry about you, Karkat.”

“Don’t,” he says, “I’m fine.” To make his point, he stands and stretches, and feels his bones pop and his muscles painfully move. He really should spend more time in other positions aside from crouching.

He’s faintly aware of Eridan moving on to another room, but he can’t be bothered to turn. Probably the kitchen, because Roxy follows him a moment later, yawning.

“You’re clearly not,” Kanaya says, “The few times you’ve napped haven’t been that bad, have they?”

They were. He had whispers in the first few minutes he fell asleep before everything quieted out, possibly due to intervention. Not that it helped much. Those few minutes stretched out and felt longer, and the – what had the Seer called him – The Heir of Blood always knew what to say to put him on edge.

Not that he’d told everyone else this.

Kanaya picks up on it, as always, because otherwise she wouldn’t be Kanaya. “Do you want to talk about it, Karkat?”

“Nothing to talk about.” He looks down immediately, which is a mistake given that it just tells her that there is, in fact, a lot to talk about even if he refuses to spill.

Kanaya sighs. Davesprite puts down his pen.
“Karkat, we can’t help with your problems if you don’t tell us.”

*They can’t help you, period.* There’s some cold laughter following that imagined voice. Karkat shivers.

Davesprite catches it. “How bad is it?”

“How bad is what?”

“Your…nightmares. Dreams. Whatever.”

“There’s nothing.”

The set of his jaw is of someone who’s dealt with all of this before. “Karkat.”

“I told you, my –”

“Nightmares are bad enough that you’re not sleeping,” Kanaya finishes. “Please, Karkat, even if you don’t tell us what’s going just…tell us what you need. Tell us if there’s anything we can do, and please take care of yourself.”

Guilt is hot inside his gut, and Karkat shifts uncomfortably with it.

Davesprite just looks at him, lowering his glasses for a moment, concern evident on his face. The orange irises throw him off for a moment, but the face is Dave’s alright. Anyone unfamiliar with Strider’s face wouldn’t be able to guess it quickly, given that Davesprite’s needed a haircut for a while, and the angles of his face are sharper, older, and the coloring throws people off, but it’s him. It’s unmistakably him. Karkat suddenly misses his Dave.

“I keep trying,” he says, closing his eyes. The battlefield flashes against the back of his eyelids. Mistake. “But he’s moved on from just changing faces and showing me corpses.”

Kanaya’s hands curl into fists.

“Not torture, no,” Karkat says, then snorts. “Although it might as well be. He’s been giving out suggestions.”

“To what?”

“To tearing everyone apart.”

He sees both of them still. Davesprite is the first one to relax.

“Do you mean like, he’s tearing all of us –”

“He’s telling me how to tear you apart – and yeah, that includes physically and, you know.” He waves a hand. “Sometimes it’s my own hands doing it.”

“Shit, Kar.” Davesprite runs a hand over her face. It stays there for a moment, and he looks away and sighs.

Kanaya looks livid.

Karkat sits back down. “I’m just tired, okay?” The physical fatigue, he could take. The fact that he can do everything the Heir of Blood is saying just makes him want to lie down and not wake up.
Kanaya opens her mouth and then deliberates. Karkat sees her running her options through her head, discarding things quickly and then idling on a thought, before shaking her head. “You said you had help with the nightmares.”

“They don’t always arrive on time.”

Her hands curl in tighter. She’s probably digging her nails hard enough to draw blood. “They should be faster.”

The TV might have flickered briefly in offense, but that’s probably just Karkat’s imagination. He snorts. “They’re trying.”

“It probably has something to do with similar aspects,” Davesprite says.

Karkat raises an eyebrow.

“What? My sister nerded on and on about this. I listened.”

He snorts again, and waves a hand for him to continue.

He does. “Given that blood is connections, and deep ones at that, he’s probably got a tighter hold on you and chose you because you were an easy target because of this. Blood’s easily infected. The amount of diseases you can get in the things. Ugh.”

That just seems to make Kanaya angrier, although she’s glaring at the table rather than either of them. “And you don’t know who he is or what his name is.”

“No. Only heard of him and his title from the radio.” He’s gotten a lot of things from the radio, really.

Kanaya nods.

Davesprite taps her knuckles with his pen. Her fists unclench. She sighs.

“I’ll try to sleep,” Karkat says, with no plan to follow through it. It seems to appease them, at least. “Don’t know if I’m not going to wake up screaming, though.”

“Just try. You need the rest.”

He never feels rested after a nightmare, anyway.

In the other room, there’s a flutter of cloth. Roxy hisses, “What the fuck!”

Davesprite’s out of his seat in a flutter of feathers. He steps on the table and takes off, despite his wingspan being significantly bigger than the room. He at least has the foresight to go incorporeal so he phases through things easily and get to where Roxy and Eridan are.

It’s not the kitchen, Karkat realizes as he and Kanaya follow. It’s Rogers’ room.

Kanaya hisses out a curse and a promise to gut Eridan like the fish he is, and then they both stop by the doorway. Roxy’s outburst suddenly makes sense.

Eridan is holding a mass of dirty white cloth in his hand, staring at what he’s just uncovered. Roxy has a hand over her mouth, eyes wide, and Davesprite is frozen in mid-air. Kanaya stumbles as she skids to a stop, and Karkat has to hold onto the doorframe to prevent himself from falling over, having been running too fast to successfully suddenly stop.
Staring back at all of them is the cheerful face of John Egbert, painted onto a canvas.

Steve Rogers counts the amount of coffee cups he’s got stacked on the table. Currently, there’s six of them, and they’re rather small, so that makes it fair. The amount of coffee cans, however, is more troubling.

He and Tony had been trying to see what they could do to extract the mutant from SHIELD’s cells without getting unnecessary attention, but so far, they hadn’t been able to come up with anything. Miss Peixes (her name according to her file), is under heavy surveillance, and SHIELD would definitely notice it if an asset of theirs suddenly went missing. Not to mention, Tony and Steve would have to physically break into the prison to get her out.

The most Tony can do for her is have JARVIS stall whatever experiments that are to be run on her by deleting pending requests, jumbling them up, corrupting their files, or erasing approval on them. It’s worked thus far, and Feferi has mostly been left alone in her cell, except for routine physical checkups. JARVIS has made sure she’s fine on those.

It makes him pick at the half-moon indents on his palms from clenching his fists too often. He’s used to stressful environments, of course, but there’s an urgency in this situation. It’s irrational, he knows, but there’s just something that tells him it’s really really important that they get this done as soon as possible.

But then again, if this girl is a friend of Karkat and Kanaya’s, and hopefully she is, then his wards would skin him alive. That’s probably why he just wants to get this over with and save this kid.

Speaking of his wards. He should probably call them again. Or check up on them, but there’s a still a lot to be done here – Tony’s checking and rechecking the layout of the prison cells and trying to figure out how they’d hide the girl once they got her out, and Steve’s mapping out entrance and escape routes and making contingency plans, but overall they’ve still got nothing on how to execute all of this discreetly.

He sighs, loot through the numerous pizza boxes on the couch and happily takes out the last remaining slice that remains in the stack of cardboard.

From where he’s scribbling on used paper, Tony tells JARVIS to order more food.

Steve can’t read the marks Tony is making, but he claims that they’re effective and that he understands enough of the theory to be able to form something. Maybe make them both invisible (and there, Steve thinks back to Luke Winters, and then Dave Strider mentioning that he could reverse invisibility, and then wonders what else these children know), or maybe temporarily stop time, or maybe just make people not look their way and not notice them and then forget they were ever here or ever existed.

They could probably ask Winters, Steve thinks, but that would require the Safehouse in this operation. That sounds like a bad idea.

He frowns. Exactly why does that sound like a bad idea? It would be easy, and it would make sense to even hide Miss Peixes in the Safehouse since they are known for taking in mutants, but would that also make it too obvious? They are known for these things, so maybe SHIELD would go looking there in the first place, but if they haven’t touched the Safehouse mutants yet –

“This would really go easier if that goddamn radio was on.”
Steve blinks, forgets his line of thought completely, and wonders why he’s been spacing out for the past few minutes. “Hmm? I thought you didn’t do following.”

Tony snorts. “I don’t, but I know when I’m out of my depth. Now I’d get Brucie in here to help us out, but he’s busy somewhere else.”

“Yeah, where is he?”

“Last I heard, on a vacation.” Tony winks, conspiring, “Not privy to it.”

“Ah,” Steve says. “How long has it been since you’ve heard from the radio?”

“I don’t know, about a week plus, give or take,” he says, then frowns. “I just need a handbook for this, and then I can piece it together.”

“Would you like me to compile a list of runes and combinations you’ve successfully used thus far, sir?”

They both look up. Steve smiling slightly at ‘successfully’, because Tony’s accidentally set a thing on fire with what he was sure was a ‘duplicate’ rune yesterday, and Tony sighing at remembering that and then waving a hand vaguely.

“Yeah, go ahead.”

“Very good, sir.”

JARVIS does fast work, and in a few minutes, they’re both swiping holograms of arcane scribbles. It’s something out of the fantasy movies Steve’s watched and been fascinated by. Jade had just giggled at some of them.

“Still would have been useful to have the radio around,” Tony says. He arranges a few runes together, studies them, and then shakes his head and swipes them away.

Steve has no idea what he’s looking for. The runes have the translation under them in tiny font, but he has no idea how to arrange them or resize them. Tony does, but the way he arranges has no pattern. For one combination, Breath is at the top. For another, it’s at the side. For another still, it’s shrunk and put in the center.

He just studies the runes instead, trying to see if any of them are familiar, maybe from Winters drawing them, but nothing clicks.

Tony is pouting like an overgrown child. Steve can’t stop the laugh that bubbles out of him.

“We have all these plans, but that means squat if SHIELD notices us and still goes on a manhunt,” Tony says, “I mean, the whole ‘take every mutant off the street thing’ was probably out of paranoia.”

Or a cover-up. Red herring, says something in the back of Steve’s head. He frowns in confusion, wondering where that thought came from, especially since it wasn’t his own voice talking.

What would it be a red herring for?

They’d found all the other mutants, in the upper cells of SHIELD’s containment facility, and JARVIS was keeping an eye on all of them too. They could always stage a jailbreak, but there was too high a chance for casualties, and there were children involved.

But now that he thinks of it, he hasn’t seen SHIELD do anything with the mutants they’d gotten
aside from physical checkups and tests on what they can do. Feferi Peixes was the one with all the pending requests for vivisection and…there’s one for transportation there somewhere, he remembers.

Suspicious.

*Red herring.*

He files that away for later. For now, there’s the problem of getting her out and getting her somewhere safe, along with everyone else. Tony’s already prepared to give the tower renovations if they’re expecting to house these people, but their families would want them back, obviously, which again would get SHIELD’s attention, and having too many kids in Stark Tower would also be a dead giveaway once they’d gotten everyone out.

There’s the Safehouse, of course, again –

“*Steve Rogers.*”

Tony drops the can of coffee he’s picked up while Steve was lost in his thoughts. It spills onto the floor and stains several papers with its contents, but Tony doesn’t mind. He’s lit up like a Christmas tree at the sound of the voice, and he turns, abruptly, at the same time Steve does, towards the source of it.

Sitting on the coffee table, over a messy pile of papers, is the purple radio that is supposed to be sitting in the corner of room, on one of Tony’s cabinets. Steve knows that neither of them have put it there.

“I never thought I’d say this, you one-eyed, outdated piece of plastic, but am I glad to see you awake,” Tony says.

Steve’s attention snaps to the eye insignia on the radio at Tony’s comment.

“I appreciate that you missed my presence, Mr. Stark,” the radio says, sounding amused. “I apologize, I was busy.”

“With what?”

“Fieldwork. I have a day job.”

Tony snorts.

“We’ll argue the statistics on the job market for radios later, but for now, I have more pressing matters to address - Steve Rogers, you need to go back to your apartment.”

Steve blinks. So does Tony.

It’s like he’s been sleepy for the past few days or so. A dull fog he’s never really paid attention to just clouding his head and his eyes, making him sluggish, lethargic and unable to think thoroughly, instead just grabbing the nearest solution and explanation and accepting it as the only way to go. Pliable. Compelled.

Steve Rogers feels cold wash over him and he’s properly awake for the first time in days, and he thinks *oh god, Karkat and Kanaya.*

Tony turns to him, clearly looking disoriented for a few seconds, before turning back to the radio. “What’s going on –”
“Are they both okay?” Steve asks, almost picks up the radio to shake it. God, he’s been stupid, what was he thinking.

You weren’t, he hears that faint voice again. It sounds like the radio, he realizes.

“They are, but if you don’t go back to your apartment right this instant, you’re not going to find them there anymore.”

Steve blanches, then quickly scans the room to pick up his jacket and shrug it on. “Was that a threat?”

“That was half advice, half warning. This is urgent. Go to them. You have four minutes and thirteen seconds.”

He grits his teeth. That’s too little time. “What?”

“Time’s running out, Rogers.”

The radio’s voice doesn’t sound like it’s coming from the radio this time. It’s coming from all around them – the speakers overhead, the nearby laptop, his and Tony’s phones, even from behind him, spoken in a clearly human voice, as if the one speaking through the radio is in the room with them.

And then the radio shuts off.

Tony curses. “JARVIS.”

“Ten seconds, sir.”

Steve looks at Tony, a little bug-eyed. “What?”

“You might be a supersoldier, but you’re not getting to your mutants in less than four minutes,” he says, and then starts running out the room. “Come on, Cap.”

Steve nods, following after, and they both rush to the rooftop, where the Iron Man suit is ready to meet them halfway.
I might drop by there soon.

777angeles (7:08 PM):

oh cool!!

still back here in my stuffy old home though. i wish i was back in new york T_T

autotestifieus (7:08 PM):

Do you know when you’ll be back there?

777angeles (7:08 PM):

well I got myself a lovely little sprain since the last time we talked, so, my original plans of returning earlier are shot until i recover.

autotestifieus (7:09 PM):

So, a few weeks.

777angeles (7:09 PM):

yep

autotestifieus (7:09 PM):

How’d you get a sprain?

777angeles (7:09 PM):

i fell down some stairs

autotestifieus (7:10 PM):

Hmm. I feel like I should have warned you about them.

777angeles (7:10 PM):
haha fear not
a friend already did and this still happened
in my defense, i was pushed

autotestifieus (7:10 PM):
Who pushed you?

777angeles (7:10 PM):
someone. i didn’t see. probably one of my cousins or something.

autotestifies (7:11 PM):
Rude.

777angeles (7:11 PM):
very

autotestifieus (7:11 PM):
Do you have any contacts in the Safehouse?

777angeles (7:11 PM):
i have a lot
i mean. i live in the place after all

autotestifieus (7:11 PM):
Excellent. Could you leave a message, then? That I might be visiting?

777angeles (7:11 PM):
lmao my guy anyone can just walk in the safehouse, i told you
autotestifieus (7:12 PM):
I’m bringing some friends with me.

777angeles (7:12 PM):
oh. group tour?

autotestifieus (7:12 PM):
Something like that.
There’s six of us. That might be slightly surprising.

777angeles (7:12 PM):
yeah i guess? but like, we get people all the time, it’s not that surprising, auto

autotestifieus (7:12 PM):
We’re in dire need of shelter.
And we’re in New York already.

777angeles (7:12 PM):
oh
well i
xo(gp@ce*Tc64^jLarLg1]F1s!9/k^;m

autotestifieus (7:12 PM):
Angel?

777angeles (7:12 PM):
EE)=l/H[QS=5=EhZnaFKO>WC"4%&/E
jrzIL:/p$yYDXadX3LzIx)A
autotestifieus (7:12 PM):
Did you fall asleep on your keyboard?

c%gb5=keG$a.B (---):
arLg1]F1s!9/k^;mKiZ2y;1R8%+xTm2oS8wJ

autotestifies (7:12 PM):
Oh.
I don’t have a cryptography module, Angel.

c%gb5=keG$a.B (---):
that's okay we can work even without that

autotestifieus (7:13 PM):
Your text looks weird.

c%gb5=keG$a.B (---):
the chat clients glitching i think

autotestifieus (7:13 PM):
It’s only your text.

c%gb5=keG$a.B (---):
so it is

autotestifieus (7:13 PM):
Okay, haha, showtime’s over.
Where the fuck is Angeles.
c%gb5=keG$a.B (---):

right here

autotestifieus (7:13 PM):

I’m not an idiot. Where are they and why did you hack into their account.

c%gb5=keG$a.B (---):

i didn’t do anything to your angeles

autotestifieus (7:14 PM):

Okay, I’d appreciate it if you patched them back to me then. We were having an important conversation.

c%gb5=keG$a.B (---):

we can have an important conversation

autotestifieus (7:14 PM):

Yes, of course. I have a very important message to pass on to you:

Fuck off.

c%gb5=keG$a.B (---):

ever eloquent, auto

autotestifieus (7:14 PM):

Thank you, I try.

Now patch them back.

c%gb5=keG$a.B (---):

no
autotestifieus (7:14 PM):
I’ll make you then.

>>>_
>>> xoufW</NMRc6l.kLe5(g`<}Y$F20i9(ifP;lc)_Y#F20ux8jg5^IZ
>>> w501K:B1w&Z%xE>i3oTg]*R11T3
>>> connection stabilized

c%gb5=keG$a.B (---):
oh, auto
nice try

autotestifieus (7:18 PM):
What the fuck.

c%gb5=keG$a.B (---):
no patches until i say so, my guy
sorry about that :)

autotestifieus (7:18 PM):
Let’s have that important conversation then.
What do you have to say that you had to hack into this correspondence?

c%gb5=keG$a.B (---):
haha
what makes you think it had to do with having something to say

autotestifieus (7:19 PM):
Why else would you disrupt it?

c%gb5=keG$a.B (---):
why else indeed

autotestifieus (7:19 PM):
Stop talking in circles.

c%gb5=keG$a.B (---):
lmao or what
you’ll try to hack into my device again and kick me out this client

autotestifieus (7:19 PM):
…
What other use is there for you to derail my conversation with Angeles?

c%gb5=keG$a.B (---):
hmmmmm i wonder
you’re smart, big guy, you can figure it out

autotestifieus (7:20 PM):
Stop patronizing me.

c%gb5=keG$a.B (---):
im not
just saying. all that algorithm and you cant figure out what im doing

autotestifieus (7:20 PM):
Hm.
c%gb5=keG$a.B (---):

take a fuckin guess babe

autotestifieus (7:20 PM):

It’s incredibly easy to find decoders online.

c%gb5=keG$a.B (---):

haha have fun with that then
you can get decoders, sure, but you can’t get answers online, Hal

autotestifieus (7:21 PM):

Oh?
Watch me, then.

c%gb5=keG$a.B (---):

always

autotestifieus (7:21 PM):

…

c%gb5=keG$a.B (---):

:) 
kinda busy tho and i think ive kept at this long enough so
bye bye!

autotestifieus (7:21 PM):

Good riddance.
have fun :)

>>> destabilizing connection
>>> deleting chat log

autotestifieus (7:21 PM):
Wait.

>>> deleting connection between accounts [autotestifieus] and [777angeles]

autotestifieus (7:21 PM):
SHIT

>>> terminating communication
>>> 9ojg=[RvwSq3mB4j.zh+D.TX0$]#B
>>> arLg1]F1s!9/k^;m/l=[*J TbUK:+x#q44_1}<H[LR!0lE

[-autotestifieus has terminated connections with 777angeles-]

“*knew we couldn’t trust him!”

“It’s a painting, calm down.”

“This whole time, he knew the Egbert kid was here –”

Karkat has his ears flattened on the sides on his head, mouth set into a thin line. They’ve been at it for hours, yelling – Eridan saying that he’s been suspicious from the start and the fact that Rogers knew John and yet didn’t tell Karkat and Kanaya could very well mean he’s part of whatever game is being played by GPB and the Heir of Blood; Kanaya opposing him because she’d spent a while under Rogers’ care; Davesprite and Roxy staring at the painting of John; the glasses (Hal, they’d said?) running lines of red on its black surface.
The noise makes him want to (break someone’s neck, rip someone’s tongue out with his nails, tear out their throats with his teeth) go lie back down on the couch and put a pillow over his head.

When his claws start twitching for violence, he makes his way back to the living room and does exactly that. The voices are muffled, but not wavering in intensity. Eridan’s animosity is spiking and Kanaya’s rage is static in the air. Karkat can almost smell the blood that’s about to be spilled.

He decides that’s not him but the Heir in his head. He scratches at his temples, irritated.

The television turns on with a soft burst of white noise.

He lowers the pillow, looks at the eye insignia and can’t find the strength to call to the others.

“Why the television?”

“You look like you need somewhere to visually focus on,” the television says. The voice is clear and not staticky like the last time it came from the TV. “It often helps.”

He grunts and nods and hugs the pillow to his chest. “Yeah. Where’s your radio?”

“Perfectly fine, thank you for asking. We have a limited supply of those things.”

Karkat snorts.

“You find that amusing?”

“Yeah, just figured why you just reverse it when it breaks.”

The Seer hums. “Well, who would want to waste a perfectly good radio?”

“I do. I need something to break right now.”

“Would something in dream bubbles work?”

Karkat frowns. “I’m not going to sleep.”

“We’re keeping the Heir of Blood preoccupied right now, I assure you.”

He pauses at that, thinks that he’s so, so tired that he might just snap but – but. “No thanks.”

“You really do need the rest, Karkat.”

“I don’t need another lesson on evisceration.”

“If it helps, our Bard is kicking the Heir of Blood’s ass right in this very moment.”

Karkat raises an eyebrow and pretends not to be interested in the information. Eridan had said they needed to gather all the info they can on what was going on in The Other Side, as Roxy and Davesprite have dubbed it. They only knew a handful of people thus far, one of which loved to kick around Karkat’s head and rearrange things.

“Yeah?”

“He seems annoyed at being constantly slowed down, haha.”

In his gut, he has a feeling that he’s not getting anything that the Seer doesn’t want him to know. This is tactics. Information-feeding. Battlefield strategies for Three-Player Space Chess. In his head,
he’s hopeful that even if it’s being spoonfed to him, he’d still be able to use this to his advantage somehow.

“So you’ve got the Heir of Blood busy?”

“Yes.”

“And you know his physical location?”

“Yes.”

“And you actually have a way of fighting him physically and he’s not just some entity that jumps around from one person’s brain to another? He’s not some —” He makes a motion with his hands at this “— disembodied thing or whatever?”

The television chuckles. “No, he isn’t. He’s very alive and very real. His influence is just far-reaching, and he likes sinking into easy gaps.”

Like him. He’s a Blood player. Aspect calls to aspect. Easy gap.

“You’re not on the same side?” he asks, “Or do you just want me to think that?”

“Whatever I say, you’ll think whatever you want to think.”

They had a point. He told them as much.

The burst of static that came was amused. “Are you sure you don’t want to go to sleep?”

“I probably can’t even if I tried,” Karkat says. He closes his eyes and puts the pillow over his face again.

“We can knock you out.”

That sounds pleasant. Still. There’s every possibility — actually, no, fuck possibilities. Kanaya and Eridan are getting loud with their argument in the other room.

“I feel like you really need to sleep for what’s about to go down, Karkat,” the Seer says.

“Are Eridan and Kanaya going to kill each other?”

“Well, they might not if you’re asleep because that would make too much noise.”

There’s another point there. And he’s tired. So, so tired. Of the nightmares and even the ruckus of the waking world right now. In the other room something shatters.

“Okay,” he says, nodding. “Knock yourself out.” He giggles into the pillow at that.

“You’ll be fine, Karkat.” He hears something rustle, maybe clothing, and then feels the pillow being lowered slightly so deathly cold fingers can touch his forehead.

The voice that speaks next doesn’t sound like the Seer’s. When Karkat rouses later, he’ll wish he stayed a bit more awake. “We’ll take care of it.”

And then the Void speaks, and it’s with a force that knocks him out. “Sleep.”
Chapter End Notes

Beware
A friend
Shaped like an
Enemy
9
1

(yes im gonna give you hints and ease you into the codes until i think you've mostly
gotten the hang of it, and then you'll need to solve it on your own ;)

-im mostly active on discord, but still, i appreciate messages so much:
The One-Eyed Man Is King

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

John Egbert watches the rain pour outside.

Moxie is lying down on his lap, asleep, although her ears occasionally flick sometimes, maybe from dreaming, maybe from phantom droplets landing on them through the minute crack between the glass and the frame. He has a hand buried in her fur, forgotten, as he’s more focused on the patterns the water tracks leave.

He’s decidedly trying not to think about what everything they’ve just talked about means.

There was the part with Loki destroying an entire town, and he’d immediately thought Vriska and then shoved that thought away. It’s not the same, not exactly, even if it does remind him of her. For one, there’s their place in the hierarchy and how they’ve taken to it - both up high, but Vriska seems to love her place, and Loki, if him letting go was any indication, seems to just abhor it (and John thinks, wonders why that is).

And it shows. He never flaunts it around the Safehouse. He just goes through his days, reading and studying and researching, occasionally starting a prank war, but he doesn’t rub it in the other tenants’ noses that he runs the place, and if John is being honest, he does. He plans everything, makes sure everything is going smoothly, sets up systems. Yes, he promotes silly stuff sometimes, but he never resorts to violence to settle petty fights about mutants and non-mutant around the Safehouse either.

Although, that might just be because his ire is nothing compared to Mrs. Harrison’s. John can swear the woman can set a sword on fire just out of rage if she set her mind to it.

John laughs at the thought for a moment. Moxie stirs in her sleep.

“Heya. Go back to sleep, girl,” he cooes, petting her head softly. She just licks his hand. He sighs.

He’s about to tell her to go to sleep again when her ears suddenly stand on alert, and she looks towards the stairs. He follows, and Rose is standing there, looking deep in thought.

“Hey,” he greets.

She waves a hand back before she fiddles with her arm warmers, pulling them over her hands as best as she can.

“Everything okay?”

“Cecil’s awake,” she says, “He says his head feels like someone hijacked into it and ran a program and then just ripped out the flash drive without safely removing it.”

“Yikes.” John winces. “That’s one hell of a headache for that sort of metaphor.”

“Yeah.” Rose chuckles a little. “James says he saw two of Cecil for a moment.”

John raises an eyebrow. “Yeah?”

“Mn.” Rose sits down on the stairs and rests her elbows on her knees, staring at the floor, frowning. “It was like looking at a fractured mirror, apparently. One of them was Cecil and the other was
also…Cecil, but not."

John pauses for a moment. “He said the same thing about – ”

“The pool master.” She nods, then, “And me.”

John frowns and adjusts his glasses when they almost slip with how fast he turns. “What?”

“He told me that, once. I told Loki. I think I forgot to tell you, and I think Loki thought it required further investigation before presenting you with half-baked theories and insufficient information.” A pause. “I think he said the same thing about Jade once.”

“Oh,” he says, trying to process it for a moment. “Do you know what it is?”

“I suspect it’s horroterrors,” she says. “I don’t remember how we got rid of it. I don’t even know if they ever leave completely.”

That’s a reasonable assumption. He nods. “You think it’s horroterrors with Cecil?”

She laughs, a little louder this time. “They have a Seer of Light, why not a Seer of Void? Complete the set.”

“But is it?”

“I don’t know,” she admits. “You’d think I’d recognize whoever gets possessed by horroterrors, but there’s the fact that I’ve never met anyone else possessed by horroterrors, and I don’t think I even can recognize it if it happens.”

“So we have no idea?”

“No.”

Damn. John leans back in his seat a little. Moxie shifts and buries her snout into his stomach and huffs. Her breath tickles and he giggles. He moves her back a little and ignores the way she somehow seems to pout.

“What about the pool master?” he asks.

“I don’t know about that either, they’ve seemed uninvolved so far,” she says, “Although if they’ve grown up with the Palmers, I’d say psychic abilities aren’t a stretch.”

“Do they have abilities?”

“No,” she says, and the admission seems to take years off of her. “That’s what baffles me. They’re clean. I can’t sense anything from them and I’ve been sensing – no, seeing a lot since we got here.”

“More than what you usually did in….” He trails off. His aversion to the game is getting ridiculous.

“Yes. It’s like everything’s been turned on and put into overdrive.”

“Oh,” John says, “Can you control it?”

“Yes, if I focus.”

“Good. It’s not tiring, is it?”
“It was, at the beginning. I’m mostly used to it now, and looking after James is easier than being around so many people all the time,” she says, “Reminds me of home, somewhat.”

Ah. John remembers he grew up in a regular suburban neighborhood; Rose grew up mostly isolated in a fancy house by a waterfall.

“Did you miss New York though?”

“I always miss New York,” she says, smiling a little.

John smiles back. “Welcome home, then.”

“Good to be home.”

The air lightens for a moment, and John can imagine for a brief while that they’re not on the brink of something that might be dangerous, something that might tip over the scales of an unseen background war, something that might destroy whatever precious fragile thing they’ve built here.

John’s still out of place, but he’s starting to carve a life out for himself in this wrong, wrong, wrong universe, at least.

It’s not such a crime to want, is it? People wanted all the time. They want fame and money and love and lust, but John – everyone here, really – they just wants some peace and quiet and maybe a little place they can play pranks and take care of dogs and binge X-files in. It’s a bit of a mockery, he thinks, that the universe does love to take the most mundane dreams away. Aspiring singers and performers get more of a shot, but there’s people sitting out in decrepit homes suffering when all they want is a good meal. It’s basic human right. It’s such a simple thing, a bit like a breath of air, but too often neglected.

*You’re a funny dreamer aren’t you, boy?*

John sniffs, and frowns because the air smells like blood. He sneezes. It might be that his nose is a little stuffy, but the next time he tries to sniff, that scent of blood is gone.

Rose frowns, as if sensing his unease. “John?”

“Nothing,” he says, looking around a bit, letting the breeze waft around the room to see if he can feel anyone. There’s no one there that shouldn’t be. “Nothing,” he repeats.

He stares at the floor for a moment, deep in thought.

And then Moxie stirs, and he sighs and resumes carding his hand through her fur.

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Loki sends Sapphrel and Ruben back to Saph’s bedroom miles off across the country, but not before convincing a very confused Sapphrel to lie to their friend that they’re not in New York. With the whole debacle of the green sparks and Cecil having a fugue and collapsing (Loki thinks the term that should be used here is *possession*, given that Cecil didn’t appear to be in control of himself when he spoke, unlike all the other times, but there’s two types of possession – that of a medium’s, in which someone *channels* another being into them; and, well, actual possession, and since Cecil’s said, the second he’d woken up, that it felt like his brain was *hijacked*, Loki’s betting on the second sort – which also unfortunately means someone got past his shields, and he’s getting rather annoyed of all his precautions being torn down effortlessly; if he’d been younger, he would have loved the
challenge, but other things are at stake here, sadly), he’s not keen on trusting anyone and anything outside the Safehouse, especially not if he hasn’t had a chance to review them himself.

And with the timing of Saph’s ‘friends’ suddenly visiting, Cecil’s possession, and the mention that Loki already knew ‘them’, clearly plural…well, this is either a very clever set up to make it seem like there’s a threat but it’s actually a red herring, or Saph’s friends are traitors all along.

Not that Loki blames the kid since he’d made the choice to alienate them from the War Council despite them being his secretary, essentially. And they never asked questions either. He wonders, for a moment, if it’s somewhat related to how he and the others couldn’t remember the name of their visitor. Out of sight, and out of mind. An easy working, given that he’d used it on Tony Stark when he’d visited.

He shouldn’t keep Saph and Ruben too far away either, just in case, but if Saph’s family found them missing, there’d be trouble and questions, and no one wants to deal with it, so he’s had to return them. Aside from James’ stray comment, there’s not really concern for either of them.

Loki’s more concerned about everyone in the Safehouse. They’re obviously agitated. Dave is letting off steam in the training room, Rose had gone downstairs a while ago, Jade is with James and the rest of the dogs, since Moxie, as always, has decided to go to John, who’s just thinking blankly while looking out at the rain. Loki knows the feeling of having the rug pulled out from under you – when you think you’ve got everything understood and you’re fine, but it turns out all your nightmares have arrived to bite you in the ass.

Cecil’s gone back to sleep, Kevin is stress-sewing, Elizabeth is out to pick up her husband from the airport (she’d called him Anthony, if Loki remembers correctly), and Graham’s gotten food duty since everyone else is either too shaken to. Not that Loki is shaken. He’s just theorizing, and it needs all of his focus and brainpower. He’s rarely shaken.

Okay, so maybe he’s a little pissed that someone can one-up him in terms of spells and stealth and keeping everyone in the dark. Maybe he’s tired of constantly having his efforts undermined. Maybe he’s also sick of having his wards being poked around and thus having it rubbed in his face that he can’t take care of what little he has even if he’s capable of it.

But he’s not shaken.

And anyone with a flair of dramatics is bound to mess up sooner or later. There is a wisdom in the quiet, in the simple and in secrets.

There’s also two ways it could go – either the dramatics goes wrong and it’s also dramatically noticeable, or it’s so surprising that everyone’s too focused on being shocked at the fire and the explosion, and the mistake is shoved away into the deepest recesses of sensory input.

Dramatics has its pros, but Loki’s sharp enough to notice the cons.

He finds James in the solarium, looking out at the pouring rain, one hand on the glass. It’s the flesh hand, he notices. He makes sure his footsteps are audible when he enters the room.

James turns, curious, and greets him with a slight nod.

“What did you mean,” Loki starts, “When you said you could see two of Rose?”

“Ah,” James says, metal arm coming up to scratch the back of his head, “It’s probably just leftovers from whatever HYDRA did to my head.”
“Perhaps,” Loki says, “But enlighten me. You saw what happened earlier today, and you said you saw two of Sapphrel as well.”

James looks like he’s deliberating whether to tell Loki whatever he knows, judging from the set of his jaw and the sudden tenseness of his shoulders. Rose would have been better suited to this, then.

Loki watches as James turns to look at the rain again. “Rose is a good kid, you know.” His fingers start tapping on the glass softly. One, two, three. Nervous habit.

“Yes,” Loki says, “She’s a bright girl.”

“Also likes to psychoanalyze people within an inch of their dreams,” James says, smiling for a moment, clearly fond, “But, she just does that to deflect things. To hide. You know how it is.”

Loki thinks for a moment that, yes, he does, and then thinks James has never really spent that much time in his presence just talking, but he’s picked up on it anyway. Observer’s advantage, perhaps.

“We go out a lot so I can jog with the dog sometimes,” James continues, “She’s made a few friends, and it’s funny to see how she runs circles around them when she thinks they remind her of herself.”

“Is it really?”

“No,” James says, “Kinda sad. Kinda like you, I guess.”

Loki says nothing, but slowly nods.

“Look after her, okay?” James says, “I don’t really know a lot about whatever bullshit is up with magic and mutants, but something’s going on and there’s not really a lot a guy with a metal arm can do against it.”

“You’re the Winter Soldier,” Loki says.

James winces a little. “Was. Not really anymore and I – don’t really like that name.”

“What do you prefer?”

“James,” he says, “I don’t remember Bucky Barnes. I don’t want to be the Winter Soldier. James is…good for now. It’s where I feel like I am, you know. Kind of like how you feel like you’re Luke Winters instead of Loki of Sassgard or whatever the hell you call it.”

Loki’s lips quirk up for a moment. “Asgard.”

James waves a hand, and seeing someone just dismiss the Realm Eternal with such casualness makes Loki laugh.

“Sometimes people have to do what they have to, to figure out who they are,” he says, “Leave home, maybe.”

“I didn’t leave home.”

“Yeah, you dropped from it dramatically.” When Loki looks unamused, the man snickers. “I guess I’m just kind of there too. I didn’t run away or shit, but definitely had to start from scratch. I’m doing pretty well for a guy who sees in twos sometimes.”

“That might not be anything wrong with you,” Loki says, “Perhaps it’s something HYDRA awakened when they converted you into the Winter Soldier. Do you remember if the Winter Soldier
saw in twos?"

James frowns, and then shakes his head. “No, I don’t. Guess you have a point there.”

“What is it, specifically, that you see?” Loki asks.

“Uh.” Scratching the back of his neck again. “It’s like – mirror shards. Like you’re looking at the same person, but there’s just fractures of them. Only normally, you know it’s just the same person since they’re looking at you with the same expression, the same movement, the same clothes, but the mirror shards just displace them a little, yeah? This one’s different.”

“How so?”

“I dunno, different clothes, different movements, different expressions, but the same person. It’s like the mirror was broken and then halved, and on one side you see what you should be seeing and on the other, you see what you shouldn’t.”

“How do you see Rose?”

“One is her,” James says, “The other is…colder. Darker. She’s got weird light around her but she looks like a black hole.”

Loki can feel the way the piece clicks in his head. It was night, and they were talking, and he asked her where she’d found the power running under her veins, power that once upon a time he would have killed her for to steal. She’d told him she was desperate and that someone had killed her mother.

(“Wherever did you find it?”)

It’s still under her skin, so it’s no surprise James can see it. Rose and…whatever’s inside her that’s already a part of her.

“You too, actually,” James says, and Loki frowns further.

“Elaborate?”

“There’s you and then there’s…also you. You’re quite similar but not really,” James says, and then makes a vague gesture, “It’s hard to explain.”

“And why have you never told us this?” Loki asks, and then tries to backtrack, since he’s not trying to scare James off here, and the man is new to the War Council. “You did point out Sapphrel’s.”

James pauses, looks over Loki’s shoulder, and says, “Because this is the first time you’re doing it right now.”

“You’re stressed,” John helpfully points out, when he comes back to the council room to find a good place to think quietly.

Loki’s already there, leaning back in his seat, boots (who the fuck wears heeled leather boots indoors? Loki, that’s who, and John’s long stopped questioning that when he saw the guy with boots that looked like it had actual gold on it) up on the table, elbows propped up on the chair’s arms, hands steepled as he was deep in thought.

John’s got Moxie excitedly trotting behind him as he enters, stump tail trying to wag and tongue out.
She briefly greets Loki by jumping up and nipping at his tailcoats spilling over the edge of his seat and Loki absentmindedly pats her head before returning to his original position.

“Mm,” he says, then, “Excuse me, John, what were you saying?”

“You look stressed,” John repeats, floating over to sit on the table, right across him. Moxie settles down at his feet, happily flopping down on the carpet.

“I’m not.”

John snickers. “Sure thing, Loki. What’s wrong?”

Loki sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose. “You know I tend to keep things in another fold of space, yes?”

John blinks. Fold of space? He’s probably talking about all the times he keeps throwing things in the air and it disappears in a flash of green light. Talk about dramatic. “Yeah? I guess?”

“And?” You kinda lost me there a little.” He chuckles, nervous, “I’m not used to space magic and all that.”

“Right.” That seems to calm him down a little, at least. “Well, that very space that should only be accessible to me has been broken into.”

Oh.

John shifts. Not really knowing what to say to that, other than the fact that it confirms that someone really is messing with them, and someone who goes as far as breaking into Loki’s pocket space. “Oh,” John says, carefully. And then something clicks. “Didn’t you make notes and everything? And threw it there?”

“Yes,” Loki says, “And when I went to check those notes, they weren’t there.”

John feels a cold settle in his gut. “Oh,” he says, again. “It’s whoever’s doing this, isn’t it? The memory loss. Cecil.”

Loki nods and sighs. “There’s too many threads and while I can and will connect them all, I’m getting rather irritated at people trying to get in the way every time.”

Yeah, and it sounded like they were targeting you somewhat,” John says, playing with the hem of his jacket. “Or, I dunno, it just sounded like it, the way they phrased it. You already know us.”

“That was certainly addressed to me, yes, but I wouldn’t say targeted.”

Loki looks hunted, John thinks, for the brief moment the man entertains the thought and then banishes it away just as quickly.

“Had the All-father found me, I suspect punishment would have been something more – what would be the appropriate word for it – dramatic? Drawn-out? Story-driven? He does love narratives with lessons at the end, but sadly life doesn’t work that way at all.”
“People don’t have character arcs,” John quotes, smiling, remembering. Loki raises an eyebrow but doesn’t ask.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if he went for a quiet approach, and involve Midgar – humans along for the ride, but I doubt he would have been able to override something across universes. At least not without access to it in the first place,” Loki says, and then sighs.

John wants to pat his shoulder, because he’s clearly overthinking a few things, and Loki just proves it when he says, “Although, just because I’ve never seen anything about SBURB in the library archives, doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist. Father kept the secret of my lineage for years, so this wouldn’t be the only thing he’s kept in the dark. And there’s also the possibility of SBURB hiding under another name. You said it was SGRUB for the trolls, yes?”

“Yeah,” John says.

“Too many variables and possibilities,” Loki says.

“Cecil having a vision couldn’t have stirred you up that much,” John says, “You’ve been looking after him for weeks.”

“Yes,” Loki says, “And then whoever got into his head addressed me personally.”

“Loki, what’s really wrong here?” John asks.

He watches Loki frown at the table, waits to see if it bursts into flames and then counts the seconds before Loki gives up on incinerating wood via vision alone and says, “I talked to James about him seeing in two.”

“Oh. Okay,” John says, “Maybe it’s a Seer thing.”

“Another völva?” Loki tilts his head a little.

“Might be.” John shrugs. “Rose said Kevin would have been a Knight of Light, and Cecil would have been a Seer of Void. Cecil’s the one who’s shown a lot of vision-y things so far.”

“I’ll need to talk to Rose about the structure of your – what did you call it? Classes?”

“Well, roles, really. Dave and Rose are the ones who understand a lot of this. Rose because she just really studied into SBURB, Dave because he’s had this creepy ass puppet all his life and because his alternate self was his sprite.”

Loki takes a second to remember information. In the mess that is SBURB, that recall time is impressive. “Spirit guides, yes? The game gives you some sort of programmable energy orb?”

John giggles at this. “Kinda, I guess. I didn’t really stop to study how it worked, but that’s a cool way of seeing it. Ghost orbs. But anyway, yeah, his alternate self – well, at that time I guess, just his regular self – jumped back in time to warn him and let him make other choices, and then merged with his sprite.”

“And I suppose Dave made different decisions leading to your current timeline, and thus the timeline where the other Dave came from became an alternate one instead, but became obsolete and closed to his present reality since he was stuck in the sprite; and since he’s made sure the choices this time were different, that timeline technically never happened?”

John blinks. “You’re fast.”
“I try. But that’s the case, yes? Time travel to undo mistakes, and the creation of another timeline in the process, but erasing your own timeline.”

“Yeah.”

“And that also proves that two of one person is plausible at the same time.”

“Well, two versions of them, yeah, but not necessarily that they’re the same, I guess,” John says. “Davesprite always felt like he wasn’t really Dave, even if I guess, he was originally the Alpha Dave, but since he made sure our timeline would happen, he forfeited being Alpha Dave? It’s all confusing.”

“A noble sacrifice,” Loki says, “He forfeited his place to make sure another version of him and his friends would live despite if his relevance would be seen as lesser to theirs.”

John’s never really thought about it like that, but he supposes it makes sense, if the universe had decided that there should only ever be one of one person in it. Except SBURB does love to break the rules, especially when it glitches out.

The light is back in Loki’s eyes though, and he’s probably theorizing faster than John can keep up already.

“James said he saw two of Rose, but the other self was probably whatever dark magic she’s got inside of her that has birthed another personality entirely.”

“Oh, that,” John says, “Yeah, that was bad.”

“You saw it happen?”

“Walked right beside her and talked to her about marriage, haha,” John says, “She has a girlfriend so that’s just awkward to remember, to be honest.”

“Oh? I didn’t know Rose had a girlfriend.”

“Ah, yeah, Kanaya didn’t…drop here with us. At least, I don’t think she did,” John says, feeling sorry for Rose for a moment, “I hope she does eventually. I can tell Rose misses her.”

“We’ll keep an eye out then,” Loki says. “Thank you for talking with me about this, John, it helps.”

“What? Rose’s girlfriend?”

Loki laughs, and it’s still such a strange sound, but it’s not unpleasant. “No, about the game. I don’t quite understand a few things since it’s rather extensive, but I’m getting there. Do fetch Rose if you’re going to go out later.”

“Will do,” John says, hopping off the table. Moxie stands, alert, and they’re both about to leave when Cecil staggers into the room, holding his head and focusing on the floor, wide-eyed.

John immediately helps keep him upright when he almost falls. “Ceec? You oka – ”


John just stares. So does Loki, and Cecil yells, “Paper, please.”

Loki stands and waves a hand in the air, a pad of paper dropping into his palm – probably teleported from somewhere in the house, with blue borders and watercolor sunflowers on it – as John guides
Cecil to one of the seats.

Cecil grabs the pad immediately, then lets out a groan of frustration when he realizes he has no pen. Loki waves a hand again and drops a glitter purple pen onto the table. Someone was going to have to mourn their stationery after this.

But it’s enough, and Cecil seizes the pen, rips off the cap violently and tosses it across the room, where it hits the wall and rolls under the table from the rebound. He writes, stabbing into the paper, and John’s confusion grows and grows as he scribbles down numbers and more numbers and more numbers. When John steps away for a moment, he can see that Cecil’s eyes are glowing a little, but with a malicious dark red tint. There’s a bit of blood pooling at the edges of his eyes and under his nose.

“Shit.” Loki puts a hand on Cecil’s shoulder, quickly drawing runes in the air. He turns to John, expression tight. “Go get Graham and a medicine kit. Cecil’s going to hemorrhage at this point.”

Shit. John nods, snatches one last look at the paper where Cecil’s writing and crying blood onto now, before taking off in a gust of wind, Moxie at his heels. He thinks, for a brief moment as he runs the numbers through his head again, that they look like a pattern, repeating over and over and over, looking more frantic and deranged.

Sapphrel stares at their phone, kicking their feet back and forth, heels hitting the bed in a rhythm. Ruben is plucking his guitar to it as he waits for his laptop to finish getting itself out of loading hell and finally save his assignment. He’d have to do it all over again if the thing crashed, and Sapphrel winces in sympathy at the thought. Coding is a bitch.

Their best friend is relaxed, at least, probably forcing himself not to go off the handle worrying since he’s already lost time (fucking Loki, Saph swears to – fuck Odin too – whoever was listening) and is just keeping his frustration at bay with mindless music.

“Something wrong?” Ruben asks, when they’ve been staring at the phone for around ten minutes without blinking.

“Nothing,” they say, “Just a glitch, I guess.”

“What is it?”

Saph snorts, fond. Overachieving IT students. Go figure.

“Chat client’s also frozen in loading hell.”

“Aww shit, that sucks,” Ruben says, spinning his chair to face them, “There’s a bug going around, maybe.”

Saph wrinkles their nose. “That was awful.”

“You love it.”

“Nah,” they say, “It’s gonna take longer to unfreeze itself at this point with your puns.”

“Stone cold, Saph.”

“I hate this.” Sapphrel sticks out their tongue at him. “My puns are way better.”
“You got those from me, how dare you.”

“A hundred percent original, how dare you,” they laugh, and then flop back onto the bed, raising their phone up. Their hand slips and the phone hits their face.

Ruben snickers.

They pick the thing up, pouting. “Rude.”

“Please, that was funny.”

“Rude,” they repeat, and are dismayed when the chat client appears to have been exited when they’d magnificently dropped their phone onto their nose. They sigh and navigate to reopen it again, and then another chat client pings. What’s it called – Pesterchum. Or something. It’s a funny name but Saph’s not gonna complain about the other Safehouse residents’ choices. Especially not when John loves to purchase kigurumis from them to prank Loki with.

It’s a message from archimageChaos.

They sigh, louder this time.

“What is it?” Ruben asks again, already strumming something up since he’s lost his metronome.

Saph relaxes a little. *What a catch, Donnie.*

“Loki messaged. On that app you made,” they say.

Ruben preens, and spins around in a full circle in his chair.

“You should seriously get an account here, dude. Get in on the gossip.”

Ruben laughs. “There’s no gossip.”

“Yeah, well, suffer with me,” Saph says. They open up the message and blink. “Huh.”

“What’s the gossip?”

“Oh, plenty. And nasty, nasty stuff. Don’t wanna corrupt your innocent ears, Ruby.”

“Shush, just spill,” he says.

Saph giggles and rereads the message. “He wants to know if either of us are well-versed with number ciphers.”

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Chapter End Notes

*lmaw yes the last part is a very blatant hint that there’s a number cipher but fret not, i didn’t include it in this chapter. this was just a heads up. congrats to everyone who figured out the ciphers last time!*
The scene that greets Steve Rogers when he gets to his apartment is straight out of an action movie. Or, a sitcom, depending on how he looks at it.

There’s Kanaya, waving around her chainsaw while yelling threats at a mutant who looks like her, except for maybe the hair and the fins and the horns. He’s got a rifle with him, barrel aimed straight at her chest. A human girl is beside him, and she’s brandishing a – is that a katana? She’s brandishing a katana, tip pointed at Kanaya’s neck. Beside the human girl is a huge orange bird. He’s got a sword too, although his body language tells Steve that he’s reluctant to hold it, or at least reluctant hold it as a threat against Kanaya.

There’s something familiar about that face, that hairstyle and those glasses –

“What the fuck,” Tony says behind him, repulsors still alight, and then everyone in the room turns to both of them.

Karkat is on the couch, appearing to have slept through all of this, pillow over his face.

“Wait a fucking minute,” Tony says, “They look like – ”

The boy with the rifle fires first, bullet hitting the arc reactor square on, although it bounces off, ricocheting around the room, and everyone ducks until the boy with the wings swoops into its path and slices the bullet in half when it hurtles towards him.

“Fuck,” Tony whispers. “That was cool.”

The boy with the wings tips his head in acknowledgement.

“Steve,” Kanaya breathes out, relieved, “Thank the empress you’re finally home.”

“Kanaya,” he says, still surveying the room, surrounded by children who are obviously children but aren’t any less dangerous. “Who’re your friends?”

Kanaya frowns. “…excuse me?”

Tony has taken on a defensive stance behind him, clearly sensing the shifty atmosphere. The boy with the rifle is looking at both of them with a glare, teeth bared and looking very, very sharp, fins flattened against the sides of his head, although the girl with the sword looks rather conflicted on whether she should be threatening Steve.

The boy with the wings hovers protectively behind her, but not raising a weapon. In fact, he’s sheathing the sword straight into his chest, which raises alarms in Steve’s head but he appears to be fine.

“Hey,” the girl with the sword says, and Steve has to blink as he looks at her face, because she has pink eyes. “You’re the guy in the spandex!”

Steve pauses.
Behind him, Tony laughs. “Yes,” he says, “He’s rather known for that. Captain Spandex, man with the shiny elastic plan.”

“It’s not spandex,” Steve says. And, well, despite the fact that it’s a lasting joke on the internet (Jade had showed him and he’d put his face in his hands and sighed, and he’d showed Tony and Tony had known about it all along – probably was responsible for it – and laughed so hard he got cramps), it really isn’t spandex.

The girl just snickers. “It’s been a while.” She lowers her sword, and he sees it flicker into shadows and then out of existence. Tony lets out another expletive behind him. “Kanaya said you’d been busy.”

“I – I was,” he says. And then, because this was all getting really confusing, and he really didn’t want to have to fight children, “Can all of you put away your weapons so we can talk about this civilly?”

He sees Kanaya glare at the boy with the rifle. The boy glares back.

“Okay,” Steve says, “Kanaya, to the end of the room.”

Kanaya looks at him, jaw clenching, but she does as she’s told, although she makes sure to keep her chainsaw out and aims it at the boy’s direction.

“You,” Steve motions at the boy, then to the wall opposite where Kanaya is standing, “Other end.”

“I don’t –”

“Do it.”

The boy’s fins flick back and forth, agitated, and the girl with the pink eyes puts her hand on his shoulder, gentle. “Just do as he says, Eri,” she says.

‘Eri’ growls lowly, but not at her, staying focused on Steve, before trudging towards the wall obediently. He still has his hands on his weapon as well.

Minutes later, Steve Rogers has everyone in the room in timeout, all four of them standing by a wall – the ones awake anyway, as Karkat by default is spared since he appears to be dead to the world and passed out magnificently on the couch, unresponsive to even Tony trying to shake him awake; Steve lets him be, as the dark circles under his eyes show that he needs the sleep – while Steve and Tony stand at the center of the room, in case the kids all try to run at each other.

Well, only Eri and Kanaya appear to be the ones who want to do that anyway. The girl and the bird are patiently waiting.

“Okay, firstly,” Tony jerks a thumb towards the boy with the wings. “I think bird boy’s glitching out or there’s something wrong with the suit today, because his wings are phasing through that wall.”

The girl giggles, and the bird winches his wings in before stretching them out again, this time knocking over figures and photo frames, as his wings have decided to not phase through anymore.

He pulls them back in quickly when Tony startles a little and says, “What the shit.”

“He’s a sprite,” Eri says, impatient and irritated. “Can you both start talking now so I can get out of this blasted hivestem?”
“He’s a what now?” Tony asks.

“Sprite.”

Steve is lost. Tony often isn’t, but the way he tilts his head makes it look like he’s also just as lost, albeit with a bit more curiosity in his stare.

“Who is he?” Kanaya asks this time, pointing to Tony, and Steve answers before Tony can squawk indignantly from a bruised pride.

“Iron Man,” he says, “He’s a friend from work.”

Kanaya nods, although she still eyes Tony warily.


“I do not understand what you mean by ‘philanthropist’.”

Despite himself, Steve laughs. Tony just takes off his face plate and looks absolutely betrayed. He starts talking about his charities, his projects, his fundings, and Steve has to step in again before he completely loses Kanaya, who has probably been living under a rock. Or was kept in the shadows so no one would touch her, and now she’s gotten lost in the outside world and she doesn’t know what to do.

He shouldn’t be keeping her in here, he thinks. She’s just been here for weeks now. No wonder she was getting restless and stress-sewing, occasionally trying to trim their neighbors’ potted plants at night when she thought Steve wasn’t looking. She’s probably already successfully done it, since he’d been away for a while.

“He’s a friend from work and let’s leave it at that,” he says, “Now, why don’t you introduce yourselves?”

Girl with the pink eyes is Roxy, boy with the rifle is Eridan, and the big orange bird is –

Steve stares at the boy’s face when he introduces himself. It’s a silly name, and Roxy immediately corrects him, clearly in a way that’s old habit at this point, but something suddenly clicks. The boy looks familiar, even if he looks like he needs a haircut, and the angles of his face are sharper, older, and the coloring threw him off, but it’s him. Steve has seen this boy once, in his brief trip to the Safehouse – this is the same boy who sat near the door and made a sword appear from thin air.

“Dave Strider,” Steve breathes out, trying to put names to faces, recalling everything he can about that peek into Jade’s home.

The boy flinches.

Roxy frowns. Eridan bares his teeth. “I told you.”

“We could be misunderstanding this,” Kanaya says, hissing at her fellow mutant. When she turns to Steve, her expression softens. “Steve, how do you know Dave?”

“I don’t know him per se,” he says, “Not personally. I know his friend, Jade.”

Davesprite – or Dave, whatever he’s called – snaps his head up towards Steve. Roxy draws in a sharp inhale. Steve turns to her, and misses the look on Kanaya’s face, an expression so fragile and
hopeful he wouldn’t have said anything else for fear it would break.

“Wait, backtrack,” Roxy says, “But you talk about – about Dave like he’s here – ”

“He is here,” Steve says, still confused, but he sees it a little, her resemblance to Rose. Older sister? Possibly. “He’s at the Safehouse.”

Roxy looks like she stops breathing. And then she looks down at the floor, shaking, and puts a hand to her mouth, like she’s trying not to make a sound.

Steve suddenly feels that sensation of cold water being washed over him again. He feels like he’s intruded on something private, something he shouldn’t be seeing, and there’s too much to catalogue – Eridan’s barely-hidden concern for Roxy, Roxy’s hope and joy and grief, Davesprite’s shock.

He’s not supposed to be here, in this narrative, in this story; this isn’t right.

And then he frowns at the thought. Where had that come from?

(“Do you ever feel like you’re out of place in the world?”

“Yes.”)

“Rose,” Davesprite suddenly blurts out, “Is she here?”

Steve doesn’t know who or what Davesprite is, but he looks just like Dave. Maybe he’s some triplet of theirs who’s just gotten separated, who was mutated too differently but still looked like his siblings anyway.

He nods. “Yes.”

Roxy chokes back a sob.

Kanaya, when Steve turns to her, is wide-eyed. Her shoulders have sagged, like she’s stopped thinking about holding up something for so long, and she’s staring at him, but he knows she’s not really seeing him. She’s seeing far, far off, and there’s jade tears forming at the edges of her eyes.

“Hey, Cap,” Tony says, putting a metal-gloved hand on his shoulder. “Think maybe we should sit these kids down and talk?”

They should.

That’s how they all find themselves sitting around Steve’s small kitchen table, sticking too close to each other as there’s barely any room, and also since they all look like they’re still reeling from what Steve has said, for whatever reason, and need the support of someone familiar beside them.

All their weapons have been put away (disappearing into thin air and Tony’s really itching to start asking about that, but is thankfully sensitive enough of the emotional turmoil that’s somehow drenched the room), with the exception of Tony, whose weapon is his suit, although he’s taken off the helmet, at least. Steve’s made them all hot cocoa, and they’ve each got their own mugs as they sit and stare at the table, contemplating things, and resisting the urge to run out of there and find their friends.

First things first though, Steve thinks, as he clears his throat, gently turning everyone’s attention to him. He asks for their names and how they got here.

And then chaos erupts again.
Kanaya Maryam spends – used to spend, anyway – her mornings wrapping herself up in dark blankets and climbing out of the window, up to the rooftop of their hivestem. She makes sure she’s silent, and makes sure Steve and Karkat are both asleep, although she’s also aware that Steve is more observant than he lets on. She’s thankful he hasn’t called her out on her little dawn excursions, but it’s mostly harmless anyway, so she doesn’t worry too much.

The beauty of New York is that, while it’s a loud, dusty, polluted city, it’s bright. It’s bright and shiny and wonderful and it never, never sleeps, even when it does. At night, buildings light up in all sorts of colors, flickering and strobing and flashing around, happily declaring their existence to the world. At dawn, when everything’s just a bit more silent than it usually is, the sunlight hits glass and steel and shatters into a rainbow of rays, bouncing off of more buildings, setting the entire city alight in the silence of the early morning.

And Kanaya – Kanaya can see it all, perched on top of a modest, but high little hivestem, wrapped in cloth so no one looking would see her face too clearly, or would just simply pass off the grey skin as the dimness of the hour. Rainbow drinker vision was different from humans’, see, as an argument in the meteor had settled before, and Dave had once compared her night vision to a cat’s.

Her daylight vision though, it’s splendid, and she can’t even describe it with words. She’d tried once, to Rose, how if she really, really opened her eyes, she’d see shades of colors all over the place, fracturing in the light and bending in the darkness, in a way more vivid than humans ever could with their limited sight. Rose had thought it fascinating, and Kanaya had never told her how beautiful she looked in the light.

She always wants to reach her hand out, to touch the light, whenever the sun’s rays would reach her building. It would be warm, and it would be welcoming, and it would be – home.

But she doesn’t, otherwise she’ll risk herself and Karkat getting caught, as the daylight also means that the humans will wake up. So she climbs down the pipe, slips into the open window and pretends she’s just woken up in time for Steve to cook breakfast.

Steve brings her food and cloth and sewing materials, and she’s thankful for him noticing that she’s been quite high strung these days. It’s not through any fault of his. He’s proven himself quite trustworthy – reeks of it, in fact – or maybe Kanaya’s just so tired that she’s immediately grown attached to the first person who’s even fussied over her.

Here’s the thing about caring too much about everyone else: no one cares about you.

It’s not some sort of worn and used line on the internet for people to cry about, it’s just how things work. When you constantly fret and fuss and take care of others, their perception of you is that you are constantly fine, and constantly okay, because how else would you be able to take care of everyone else when you’re also as big of a mess as they are?

Kids, especially, are of this mindset. This is why parents are oftentimes idolized and seen as untouchable beings, when really, they’re as fucked up as everyone else is. Sometimes more.

For someone like Kanaya Maryam who’s always had the tendency to fuss over people (and being seen as the town auspisticism bike), who hasn’t had the luxury of parents, although her Mother Grub
did her best, this viewpoint is something she’s been on the receiving end of.

Before Eridan royally fucked up, he’d always had the habit of going to her to talk, as irritating that had been. The same happened with Vriska, although the girl had her reasons, and Kanaya still bristles at the memory of it sometimes. Karkat, for all his empathy, rarely asks after her. Very rarely. Although she is thankful when he does, and that he’s mellower with her than most people.

They forget she’s a kid too sometimes. And being a kid, and growing up – it’s hard and nobody understands.

So she has to step back and berate herself too often when Steve comes into the picture, bringing her things so she can take her stress out on it, asking if she’s eaten or if she’s okay, apologizing that she can’t move as freely as she should be able to in this city. This is someone who cares, someone who fusses over others as much as she does, someone who sees that Kanaya, at heart, is still a child, who doesn’t need the responsibility of the world on her shoulders even when she’s chosen to take on it herself.

Eventually, she figures, fuck it, he’s harmless, and just lets that slow trust settle into her gut and build, and laughs and smiles when Steve gets confused about something she or Karkat does. She calls him frequently when he’s suddenly away on work for days on end, and tries not to break too many utensils while eating when she’s staying in the same room as Eridan Ampora, with Karkat refusing to sleep because of his dreams, and meanwhile Steve is off who knows where, always telling her he’s busy in that robotic, half-dead voice, that she’s almost convinced he’s being mind-controlled.

She tries to look after Karkat as best as she can, because it’s something to do, and it’s something familiar and Karkat is so used to it - so used to the concept of parental affection from what Dave’s told him, in fact - that she’s not going to get told off for coming on ashen. In her spare moments of not being stressed at the condition of her hivehold, she thinks this is something she and Steve have in common, fussing over people because it’s something to do.

He’s a caretaker of the city. A protector. A hero. Maybe not like what they had on Alternia, as their ‘heroes’ were people who just culled all those the Empress deemed too dangerous because they were too different. He’s a hero for everyone, she supposes, choosing no race or code or blood color but protecting freedom and peace from whoever threatened it.

But that’s his job. Outside of it, he’s not required to fuss over people, but he still does it anyway, with the way she sees him pay attention to her and Karkat both, and to the people on the street in the brief moments she looks out to see him go to his job. Little kids swarm him, and while he looks like this tires him sometimes, he still pays attention, and he cares.

Kanaya, outside of her job of making sure the troll race is saved, is not required to fuss. In fact, most days she doesn’t want to anymore, because what’s the use? But this is familiar, and it’s comforting, and it’s something she doesn’t even have to think about too much because everything is muscle memory at this point. In the midst of falling in an unfamiliar human city and being made to stay inside the hive because of humans picking off mutants (which she’d come to understand as people who sometimes only looked a little different from them, and she hadn’t corrected Steve after their third discussion as to what a mutant is in both their cultures, Kanaya skirting around the fact that she wasn’t really human), and Steve suddenly bringing home Eridan, Roxy and Davesprite, and then leaving, it’s something she feels like she has control over.

She thinks to herself this is probably what losing her mind feels like, this sense of freefall and losing control. And then she laughs, because she’s never really been one to worry too much about control, but the stress is getting to her anyway.
So she fusses. Karkat is stubborn, and Eridan says nothing. If he does, Kanaya just replies in short, clipped answers, or venomous spats, and then Eridan bristles and Roxy paps him so he calms down. Or, whatever is the human equivalent to that. Probably just reining him in before he does too much damage.

When they find that painting of John Egbert in Steve’s room, too many things rush into her head at once. Too many implications. Where and when had Steve seen John? Was it possible they’d fallen into an Earth that was before John’s SBURB session and John was here, only younger? The painting didn’t portray him younger, so that was a bust. If, on the off chance Steve had seen John because he was here, who else was? Their friends? The rest of John’s session?

Was the Batterwitch here?

And then Eridan starts spouting off conclusions, and Kanaya pulls out her tube of lipstick to unsheathe her chainsaw.

She doesn’t blame Roxy for coming to Eridan’s aid. The girl is simply too loyal, and Kanaya knows that feeling. Davesprite is too loyal to her that he looks conflicted.

Eridan has that panicked look in his eyes that reminds Kanaya of herself, although she’d never admit it. That look that says he’s finally found something that could hold him down, something worth losing, something stable, and then here’s a wildcard that might just take it all away. This game, whatever it is, going on in the background, and the possibility that Steve Rogers might just be in on it, and that all of this threatens his friends’ safety.

He’s changed, she thinks.

And she understands, but she’s not about to let go of the hope that Steve might be just as clueless as they all are, so she raises her chainsaw and her voice and tells him to stand down.

It’s like the game all over again, only she has no visions from Skaia’s clouds, and Aradia isn’t here to guide them all from behind the curtain and put all the chess pieces in play. The world is falling all around Kanaya, and Karkat is dead asleep on the couch (and her brain repeats dead dead dead dead dead dead dead he’s dead) and a stranger breaks into the house along with Steve – Steve who has finally, finally come home.

Steve is here.

And so is Rose.

It’s all Kanaya can do to not break under all of that.

“What do you mean this is the first time you’ve seen us?” It’s Roxy who’s asking, thank everything, because if Eridan had been the one to, Kanaya’s not sure she’d have enough self-restraint not to slam his head onto the table. Her hands have been twitching the whole time, claws scraping against the ceramic. She knows Eridan would have just interrogated Steve and she knows she wouldn’t like that.

She’s running on first reactions right now. She’s got no time to think. Too much is happening and she can’t grasp at anything well enough or make it stop.

Davesprite, at least, beside her, looks just as lost as she is.
“I didn’t bring you here,” Steve repeats again, and Kanaya understands – *the one who brought them here was an imposter* – “I was at the Safehouse. I was bringing a civilian there.”

“Are you sure you saw Cap?” Iron Man – Tony Stark – says. “Not just a cosplayer or whatever?”

“That man looked exactly like you.” Roxy splay her hands onto the table, a gesture of honesty, “Down to the shield and the spandex and everything.”

“Not spandex,” Steve mutters, and then, “I’m sorry, but whoever that person was –” His fingers curl in on the mug handle tighter “ – that wasn’t me. I was at the Safehouse. Tony knows I was at the Safehouse.”

Imposter. Someone knows where Kanaya and Karkat are, and that someone had brought the others here. Kanaya shifts, anxious.

“Not until now I didn’t,” Tony says, leaning back into his chair and crossing his arms. “Your comm burnt out.”

“I tore it out, actually,” Steve says.

Tony pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs. “Okay,” he says, “Okay, how about you spill whatever else you think we should know about? And how the *fuck* did you even manage to look like you had a burnt ear when you came back to us?”

Steve takes a sip of his cocoa, and then derails that conversation. “So you said you were brought here by me?”

In Kanaya’s head, Eridan’s voice whispers: *He’s in on it.*

“Yes,” Roxy says, exasperated, “And he knew right where to go to. He brought us here, and then left, and then never came back since.”

“I didn’t bring you here, but I was busy after I brought a civilian to the Safehouse,” Steve says. “Which conveniently lines up with the time you were brought here.”

“Busy with what?” Kanaya doesn’t even recognize her own voice with how hoarse it sounds. *Playing a game?*

Steve licks his lips, deliberating. “I don’t think too much stress is good for all of your right now, so let’s just try to sort out what we have, okay? I promise to tell you later, but I’m not going to agitate all of you further.”

“We’re not – I’m not agitated,” Eridan grits out.

Just to stop her thoughts from getting too loud, Kanaya kicks his shin under the table.

Steve holds the table down before it can move too far from the movement. “Kanaya.”

She doesn’t look up at him, and instead just keeps staring at her mug.

“Imposter,” Tony finally says, apparently brushing aside Steve avoiding topics easily to focus on this first. “A shapeshifter, maybe?”

“Time travel?” Davesprite asks.

Steve looks thoughtful, Tony just shakes his head.
“No one’s invented time travel yet,” Tony says.

Davesprite gives him a bitchface.

“She’s successfully lost their humans there, but Kanaya knows this is the right track, and she really
doesn’t want to focus on the possibility of Steve turning out to be a backstabbing son of a bitch, so
she nods. She can barely even remember their previous discussions about this through her shock.

Roxy turns to Eridan.

He sighs. “I don’t know shit about this Earth, how am I supposed to answer that?”

“Make up your goddamn mind, Strider,” Eridan says.

“Okay, what we have to sort out first,” Roxy says, “Is whether this is like normal Earth-weird or if
it’s SBURB-weird.”

She’s successfully lost their humans there, but Kanaya knows this is the right track, and she really
doesn’t want to focus on the possibility of Steve turning out to be a backstabbing son of a bitch, so
she nods. She can barely even remember their previous discussions about this through her shock.

Roxy turns to Eridan.

He sighs. “I don’t know shit about this Earth, how am I supposed to answer that?”

“I didn’t sense any loops that needed to be closed,” Davesprite says, “Although that man’s timeline
was definitely fucked with.”

“How so?” Eridan asks.

Kanaya moves her hands to her mug and starts tapping a finger there, listening. The warmth is
helping her keep her head, at least.

“You know how I went back in time, but it wasn’t a loop? It was just a full jump, and I didn’t have
to close anything because I had to change shit, and I stayed?” Davesprite says, “That sort of ‘fucked
with’.”

“So,” Roxy says, “It’s possible that Steve jumped from the future and he’s, what, derailing our
timeline and staying?”

“It’s a possibility,” Davesprite says, “Although it was also just a bit different.”

“Make up your goddamn mind, Strider,” Eridan says.

“I am trying.” He shifts his wings and waves a hand about. “Okay, the thing with it is that it feels
like that? But his timeline’s already been fucked with. He’s not the one who went back to fuck with
it, not like I did – I came back in time, changed shit, boom, alternate timeline. No, something else
messed with his timeline, and that mess was already there before he jumped. That’s what’s different
about it.”

“Maybe,” Davesprite says, and shrugs.

“Okay, let’s say it’s SBURB-weird first,” Roxy says. “Shoot, Davey.”

“Okay, let’s say it’s SBURB-weird first,” Roxy says. “Shoot, Davey.”

Dave sighs, although it’s more from stress at the situation instead of at the nickname. “That man was
not a time player.”

Roxy groans, Eridan clicks his tongue and Kanaya holds onto her mug tighter. Oh.
“Ah, shit,” Roxy swears.

“Okay, okay, hold up.” Tony raises his hands, and Kanaya can practically sniff the confusion and curiosity off of him. “Are we talking about your situation or a really extensive session of DnD?”

“What the fuck is a dee-en-dee?” Eridan asks.

“Something,” Davesprite says, “We’re talking about our situation.”

Tony frowns. “Doesn’t sound like it.”

“It’s really, really complicated,” Roxy says, her usually air of patience strained, “But please, we’re just trying to make sense of this. Just trust us for a moment. If it really wasn’t Steve who brought us here, then it’s either time travel, or a shapeshifter like you said, or – something else.”

That doesn’t seem to help, as Tony just looks more like he wants to wrangle some answers out of all of them, the table included, but Steve is listening. Observing. For a brief moment, Kanaya wonders what he knows.

“What would even allow time travel for non-time players?” Eridan asks.

Roxy presses her lips together. “John.”

Steve tilts his head. Everyone else aside from Tony leans forward to listen.

“He changed the timeline,” she says, “Terezi helped him.”

“Yeah, you did mention that a while ago,” Davesprite says, “You said she gave him words to jog his memory or some shit.”

“Okay, I’m pretty sure this is a DnD session meeting.” Tony starts to stand.

Kanaya watches as Eridan’s fins flick in annoyance. “Sit your ass down if you wanna help. Otherwise, fuck off.”

She kicks his shin under the table again, this time mostly out of spite, because she wants to move this along as much as he does, but she’s not about to admit that to herself or to Eridan.

Steve just sighs. “Go on.” He motions at Roxy.

“I don’t remember if he ever told me how, but he was able to change the timeline, because originally, everyone – ” She stops, draws in a breath and tries not to cry. “Originally, everyone died.”

Kanaya tries to imagine it, everyone, dead, bleeding out, torn apart. Karkat, maybe strung up by his insides or burning to death. Rose, stabbed through her middle.

She gags.

“So he changed it,” Davesprite says, “That’s what that shift I felt was, then.”

“Okay, but how did he do that?” Eridan asks, “And it’s not John this time unless he knows how to change faces or something.”

“I don’t know, maybe Spandex Man here found a way to time travel like John did.” Roxy sighs. She runs a hand over her face for a moment. “I don’t know. I don’t – I’m not an expert on this, okay? I relied on what Callie told me and Callie never told me this.”
Kanaya’s visions never told her this either. She sinks back into her seat, processing the information, trying to sort through her own turmoil to face the situation at hand.

So, something might happen in the future. Something big enough that maybe Steve will find an ability that would make him time travel because he had to bring Eridan and Roxy and Davesprite to the hive. It’s probably a crucial thing then, and Kanaya has to adjust her behavior to be more accommodating of that.

She raises her mug to her lips and takes a sip. She can do that. She’ll draw the line at Eridan fucking up, though. And then she can saw him in half again, timeline at stake or not.

But then again, this is all speculation. They might be wrong about it.

“That’s for SBURB-weird,” Kanaya says. She waits as everyone turns to her. “What about Earth-weird?”

“I don’t know about shapeshifters,” Davesprite says, and turns to Tony, who then sighs and steeples his hands together.

“I,” Tony says, “Have no idea where to start, but let me tell you about shapeshifters anyway. As long as you promise to explain what the fuck you were going on about earlier.”

“Take us to the Safehouse,” Kanaya says, surprising herself by how steady her voice is, given that seeing her friends again is at stake here. “We’ll tell you. Take us to the Safehouse.”

She waits for the others to object. They don’t.

“We were planning to, anyway,” Steve says.

“We were?” Tony asks, turning to him.

“Where else were we going to hide – ” He stops abruptly. Kanaya frowns slightly. He continues on, slower this time. “Where else were we going to hide Kanaya and Karkat? I can’t have them stay here forever.”

Tony pauses for a moment before sighing. “Yeah, the tower’s going to be up to its gills in security, anyway, so yeah, you’re going to the Safehouse.”

Kanaya nods, breath coming out of her too fast in relief. The others also seem to relax.

Finally.

“But first,” Tony says, “Let’s talk.”

The chessboard battlefield is clean this time.

It’s still dark, like it’s still stuck in the middle of a void, but instead of red light and pinpricks of eyes staring down at him, the cloud dusts scattered above the sky are in shades of blue and green. It looks like a proper sky, Karkat thinks. Maybe somewhere in deep space, with its nebulae and its stars and floating debris that don’t compose of hanging bodies or severed body parts.

There’s a faint melody playing, a bit like a music box, and Karkat’s shoulders sag as he just sinks into it. Into that feeling and that music and that peace. He hasn’t felt like this in a long while.
He lays down, and doesn’t even know when he’s done that, and closes his eyes and sleeps. And he actually sleeps this time. No dreams within dreams or hallucinations or heirs made of blood to disrupt his rest, and when he stirs - feeling like he’s had a good shower and a filling meal and has been wrapped up in so many warm blankets - that music box is still playing, and he sits up to look at the field.

He wonders if it’s the lighting that makes the tiles look purple and yellow.

“Hey.”

He looks up, and sees a familiar, infuriating face above him, but he’s so doped up on rest that he doesn’t even have the energy to be pissed.

“Hey,” he says instead. “What’s that?”

“What?”

“That music?” he asks. It’s probably what’s helped him sleep.

“Oh,” the person says, and shuffles awkwardly. “Does it bother you?”

“No, it’s – ” He tries to find a word for it for a moment. Entrancing? Captivating? Harkening? Too dramatic. Calming? Too simple. “Peaceful,” he says instead. That was a good way to describe it. He doesn’t even know how long he’s slept, and he hasn’t had that good a rest since he stopped using slime.

“Ah.” The Green-Penned Bastard seems to like that, at least. Then, to themself, “He’s really outdone himself then.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a lullaby,” they say.

Karkat wraps the blankets – oh, wow, when was he given that? – around himself closer. “For me?”

The Green-Penned Bastard laughs. “I suppose. For anyone who listens and needs rest, or should rest,” they say. “Even gods need rest.”

“Oh,” Karkat says, “I didn’t ascend.”

“S’okay,” they say, “You don’t need to. You’re doing great. You just really need to take care of yourself more.”

They sit down on the field along with him, and then decide to just plop onto their back and spread their arms, close their eyes and sigh. “I haven’t had a lot of sleep in a while either.”

“Why?” Karkat asks, turning to face them.

“Chess is tiring.”

He takes a while to try and remember the game, coming up with faint memories of online versions of it. “I didn’t play a lot,” Karkat says.

They nod. “I didn’t either, but I had to learn,” they say, “And well, I’m only moving on luck so far.”

Karkat winces. Luck’s never on anyone’s side unless you were a light player. Or Vriska. Whichever.
“Hah, it’s fine,” they say. “Do you want to sleep more?”

“Can I come back here anytime I need to?”

“If we can bring you here, yeah, but it’s gonna depend on your state of mind too, you know?” They start motioning with their hands, and for a moment Karkat is reminded of Dave, talking too fast and getting too excited about things. “The more agitated you are, the more the Heir of Blood can get into your head. He likes finding easy gaps. Blood player, easy gap. Tumultuous mental state, easy, easy gap.”

Karkat scratches at his cheek. There’s not really a lot he can say to that, and he’s pretty sure when the high of getting actual sleep wears off, he’ll be back to flipping this Green-Penned Bastard off, but maybe they can settle a truce for now.

“I’ll try to get you here when you need sleep,” they say, sitting up.

Karkat nods, and watches as a raven perches on their shoulder, leaning over to their ear to whisper something. The matching raven – he doesn’t know which one this is - perches on his shoulder and whispers, “Wake up.”

“Karkat?”

Karkat – flinches.

He hasn’t heard that voice in a while. No, he has, but it’s not him. He has, but it’s Davesprite. And Davesprite’s voice is older, slightly deeper, more world-weary and worn out. He’s only heard this one in faint memories, and even then, those were quickly fading, because the funny thing about memories is that the harder you tried to cling to them, the more distorted they became, and Karkat couldn’t quite remember what Dave’s voice sounded like.

The raven whispers more urgently. “Wake up, wake up, wake up.”

“Karkat,” the Green-Penned Bastard says, looking over his shoulder and frowning. “Wake up. Don’t cling to this dream now.”

“Wake up,” says the raven.

“Karkat,” says Dave’s voice, and Karkat, feeling like he’s been drenched in a sudden cold that smells suspiciously like blood, slowly turns around.

Dave is standing there, on the other side of the field, exactly as Karkat remembers him looking like.

“Karkat?” he says again, and he sounds broken; sounds like the breath has been knocked out of him. “Karkat, is that you?”

Karkat draws in a breath. “Dave?”

“Oh, god.” Dave laughs in relief, and he sounds like he’s about to cry. “It’s you. It’s really you, I – ”

“Karkat, wake up!”

The raven and the Heir say that at the same time and Karkat feels a cold hand on his shoulder, yanking him back, from the field, from his sleep, and into the reality of the waking world. The last thing he sees is Dave’s face warping into something more hateful, into someone he doesn’t recognize, and then he tastes rust on his mouth.
He wakes up gagging on his own blood, rolls off of the couch, and retches.

Chapter End Notes

the road to answers is paved with a whole lot of confusion bc Team Chaos in the background is making a mess
Skaia is Dead; Long Live Skaia

Chapter Notes

emetophobia tw
war violence tw
blood tw

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Karkat is aware he has a lot of scars on the insides of his cheeks, as chewing on the flesh with his freakishly sharp teeth (Aradia had blunt teeth, he remembers) is commonplace, from nervousness or accident. He’s tasted his vile blood too many times, and it’s disgustingly metallic. Iron red.

(They used to call him candyblood but there’s nothing sugary about him or the sludge that goes through his veins, and he laughs, in a fit of hysteria, hacking spit and phlegm and more blood onto the carpet.)

This time, however, his blood doesn’t taste like metal. It doesn’t taste like rust. It tastes absolutely horrid, like sewage, and Karkat thinks he can feel something squirming close to his diaphragm. He starts coughing up chunks of flesh along with the blood, clutching his stomach as he does so. The bile is making his mouth burn and his eyes water, and it doesn’t help with the revolting taste lingering on his tongue. That squirming feeling suddenly intensifies, except this time, it’s moved up to his throat, and he chokes.

“Karkat – holy fuck.”

Is that Steve? The bastard is finally home.

Karkat holds onto the couch and digs his nails in, ripping straight into the stuffing. There’s hands on his shoulders, pulling him back when he almost collapses face-first into his own sick, and gathering his hair up so it doesn’t get in the way.

He convulses violently as that squirming in his throat moves. It feels like it’s crawling upwards, and Karkat tries to breathe through his nose, which proves to be a mistake, because then he’s just snorting up his own blood and everything burns. He thumps at his own chest, vainly trying to clear his airways.

Roxy kneels behind him and says, “Fuck it,” before hitting his back hard, and Karkat pukes out a massive, squirming worm that makes an awful sound as it drops to the puddle below him.

At first glance it looks ink-black, but then it thrashes, and turns its head so that it can bare its row upon row of knife-sharp teeth at him, and he notices the dark red shine on its body as it moves.

It screeches.

He feels Davesprite’s arms loop around his middle and pull him backwards, taking both of them to the air, and then sees Kanaya pull out her chainsaw from her lipstick tube and smash it down onto the worm, blade tearing into the floorboards in a loud whirr. The worm thrashes still, rearing to try and bite at the chainsaw. Kanaya digs the weapon in harder.
“What the hell is that thing?” Roxy’s pulled out her sword from her sylladex, glancing at Karkat like he knows anything about what’s happening. He doesn’t. And even if he does, all he can do right now is cough, and he promptly does so, drops of blood landing on Davesprite’s arms.

The worm screeches again and wriggles free through the uneven gap Kanaya’s chainsaw is making through the rickety floorboards, and it shoots itself towards her.

“Kan, get down!”

Kanaya does as she’s told, dropping to the ground, as Eridan fires a round off at the worm. The force of the bullet manages to nail it to the wall, but it’s unfortunately still alive. Eridan fires at it again, right where its head is, and it lets out another high-pitched shriek as the bullet pierces through it.

“Kan, get over here,” Eridan says, rifle still aimed at the worm, which is already trying to get itself free from the bullets. Kanaya keeps her head low as she does, chainsaw blade down to the floor, never taking her eyes off of the disgusting, squirming thing.

“What is it?” Davesprite asks.

“I don’t know,” Kanaya says, “But it’s going to have to be destroyed all at once if we – ”

“Step aside.”

The voice is a new one, and Karkat weakly turns his head to see a man – or at least, he thinks it’s a man – in a red and gold suit of armor raising a hand towards the worm’s direction, palm facing it. There’s blue light growing at the very center of his hand, accompanied by a high pitched whine as it continues to brighten, and everyone else looks at it, confused, before they take a step back as their fight or flight response kicks in.

The blue light is suddenly fired at the worm on the wall, faster than anyone can blink, blasting off plaster and wood as it explodes onto its target. Karkat screws his eyes shut, just as Davesprite moves his wings to cover them both, and seconds later, he smells the scent of something burning.

“Ah, hell.”

He opens his eyes slowly, just as Davesprite sets him down and tucks his wings in so he can see what’s going on. The room is bathed in a small cloud of dust; Roxy is coughing, Eridan has his scarf pulled up to his face as he surveys the damage with a frown, Kanaya draws herself up from her crouch to her full height and retracts her chainsaw before dusting off her skirt.

Steve Rogers looks at his burnt wall in dismay, but says nothing and only goes over to see how much he’s going to have to repair.

And they’d already spent whatever money he had left in the house, Karkat thinks for a moment. Hah. Whoops.

“Karkat?” Steve asks.

Davesprite catches him when he staggers as he tries to turn to Steve too fast.

“Are you okay?”

“I wonder, Rogers,” he wheezes, still unable to stop himself despite it all.

Steve blinks and then chuckles, nervous. “My bad.”
He sinks to his knees, slowly, and carefully wipes the blood off his face with his shirt. He’s going to need to throw this out, but he has no plan of keeping anything he’s wearing today anyway, not when it’s stained with his own muck and he’s just coughed out a nearly-indestructible worm that’s somehow found its way into his body without him knowing.

Something in the Earth food he’s been eating, maybe?

The man in the red and gold suit retracts his faceplate to stare at him, and Karkat thinks the goatee looks absolutely ridiculous. “I’m guessing you don’t make a habit of regularly throwing up giant leech-slugs?”

Karkat glares.

“Figures. Would have loved to get a sample of that one though.”

“Knock yourself out eating wherever that came from,” Karkat says.

Kanaya kneels down next to him to inspect his face, and then his mouth, before sighing and wrapping her arms around him.

He grunts and tentatively hugs back.

“You were asleep for two days,” she says. “We tried to wake you up but you wouldn’t.”

Karkat stiffens, and then remembers his time on the chessboard battlefield, sleeping away for such a long time that he actually felt rested, and the lullaby, and then –

And then Dave.

“Kanaya,” he says, trying to keep his voice steady as he pulls away, “Kanaya, I have to tell you something.”

Kanaya tilts her head, but nods, motioning for him to continue.

He doesn’t get to, because the familiar compelling voice of the purple radio filters through the room.

“Ward the apartment.”

Everyone turns to it, sitting innocently on the coffee table, untouched by the dust floating around the room or the plaster that’s burst from the shot wall. The man in red and gold points to it, incredulous, and looks at Steve, questioning. He doesn’t get a word out either, because the voice is frantic, but firm and commanding.

In a second of clarity, Karkat thinks that whoever hears it would immediately surrender their free will and agency.

“Ward the apartment if you don’t want him to get in here!”

“Who?” Steve asks.

“Just do it, Rogers.”

There’s a sudden rigidness that overtakes Steve; his eyes dull, and then slowly clear as the voice’s magic relinquishes control back to him. Then Steve is running to his room to grab markers and tossing it at the man in red and gold, and they both start writing while the voice dictates runes for this and that.
Kanaya tries to lead Karkat to the bathroom to clean him up, but the radio tells them not to go anywhere that’s still unwarded, otherwise they’d be dealing with more than leech-slugs. Karkat thinks he’d rather not risk it, as much as he hates taking orders from the radio. Then again, the last time he did as it said, he got some sleep. Just didn’t wake up too well.

He sits on the couch, knees up to his chest, and waits for everyone else to finish what they’re being told to do. He closes his eyes for a moment and breathes in, and is thankful when no horrid, mutilated, grinning face is staring at him through closed lids.

“Karkat?”

He isn’t even aware he’s fallen asleep for a moment. He blinks up at Kanaya, who is smiling softly at him, comforting. “Come on,” she says, “Let’s get you cleaned up.”

Steve and the other human are arguing about wards, about whether Karkat needs immediate medical attention, and about the radio which has just suddenly appeared and is thankfully not disappearing into the ether yet like it usually does. It just sits there, the light of its eye insignia still on, like it’s staring at everyone in the room.

He gets to the bathroom and sits in the tub obediently as Kanaya cleans his face with a damp rag, and then tells him to get the shower running while she fetches him some clothes. He makes a disgruntled noise but does as he’s told anyway, pulling the shower curtain closed as he washes up.

He gurgles too much water to wash the vile taste still lingering in his mouth. When he’s done cleaning up and is dressed, he grabs Steve’s mouthwash and almost chugs it down but remembers the last minute that he’s not supposed to do that. It doesn’t quite get rid of everything but at least he can smell and taste spearmint rather than dead blood.

When he gets back to the living room, someone’s already tacked a handkerchief over the hole in the wall, the furniture’s been pushed aside so the area can be cleaned, and everyone else is gathered in a circle on the floor – with Davesprite even wearing Hal so he can join the meeting -with the purple radio in the center.

Kanaya moves over to make room for him. Karkat sighs and sits down.

The second he does, the questions start all at once – about what’s going on, why the radio’s here, who’s behind it, what just happened – and he can already feel all that rest he’s had in the past two days starting to drain away. Which in itself is a feat, as he’s only just getting tired when he’s already thrown up blood and an ungodly worm.

He wonders if he can go to sleep right here, and if that would just make him puke worms again upon waking up.

“Quiet.”

He feels it, that pulse of magic that just compels everyone to shut up. And they immediately do. Karkat shifts, and finds that no, he really doesn’t have the drive to talk much right now either.

“I’ll need you all to calm down and coordinate your questions; otherwise, we’re going to get nowhere.”

Mouths open and shut, unsure; looks are shared; shrugs are given; hands are waved in a *you go first* gesture. Kanaya turns to Karkat for a moment, and he shrugs. She nods to herself, taking the initiative.
“The worm,” she says, “I’d like to know what that was first.”

There’s murmurs of agreement around the circle.

The radio lets out a short burst of static. “*That was a bloodleech.*”

Red-and-gold-man, whom Karkat realizes he should really learn the name of, frowns. “A blood what?”

“A bloodleech,” the radio repeats, “**He uses it to hold onto his victims, especially as a last resort because they’re slipping through his hands. They tend to eat through someone’s soul before working their way through the internal organs.**”

The man snorts.

Karkat imagines the radio to be rolling its eyes. “*Oh come off it, Stark, you’ve seen way more than just a bit of gobbly-gook for talk about souls to deter you.*” Then, clearly addressing everyone else, “What else do you children think is put in dream bubbles?”

“I don’t know what dream bubbles are, sweetheart,” ‘Stark’ says, but the others just frown in concentration.

“We do,” Roxy says, “It’s where the dead go.”

“The dead don’t go anywhere.”

“It *is where the dead go,*” Eridan says, looking up at him. “I was there.”

Silence. Stark frowns. “Near-death experiences are just images –”

“Kan here –” Eridan motions towards Kanaya with a wave of his hand, and Kanaya nods in agreement, “– sawed me in half with that chainsaw of hers once. I was as dead as the dead got.”

Attempting to kill a bloodleech together seems to have made them strike a temporary truce. It’s better than nothing, Karkat supposes, and he shares a look with Roxy, who just looks amused and winks at him.

Stark eyes Eridan, skeptical. “You don’t seem sawed in half to me.”

“I saw him dead, he’s not lying,” Karkat says, and gets a challenging look before the human looks at everyone else.

“Wasn’t there,” Roxy says, “I never met Eri before the island.”

“Same,” Davesprite says.

Stark tuts. “So, two out of four.”

“Five.” Davesprite points to the glasses on his face. “Don’t think Hal ever saw Eri –” Eridan elbows him for that and he grits his teeth and snickers, even as he rubs at the sore spot. “– Eridan be bisected.”

Steve tilts his head. “Hal?”

“AI,” Dave says, then carefully passes the glasses over to Steve, who puts them on slowly.
“Oh,” the man says, after a few minutes. “Oh, okay. He’s an AI alright.”

“What – really?” Tony asks, “On a cloud drive or something?”

“No, he says all of him is on here, and every other back-up’s been destroyed in The Reckoning.” Steve sounds like he’s awkwardly reading off of whatever Hal’s typing. “And also that if Mr. Tony Stark could be persuaded, could he pretty please fix his glasses because some asshole knocked him onto a street.”

Davesprite rubs his jaw. Roxy winces.

“Although, building him a body is just fine. Opposable thumbs seem all the rage these days.”

Tony Stark snorts.

“That would be cool,” Roxy says.

“Okay, back to the topic at hand.” Steve takes off the glasses to hand them back to Dave. “What are dream bubbles?”

“That’s also way off topic,” Eridan says, then nods to the radio. “Anything else about bloodleeches we should know?”

“He –”

“Who’s he?” Kanaya cuts in.

“The Heir of Blood, of course.”

Karkat clenches his fist. He notices his friends tense up, while the adults just look at the radio strangely.


“He mostly uses them as a last resort because it eats up what makes its targets – well, its targets. Their life, their soul, their blood. What makes them who they are. Their feelings and emotions, especially,” the radio says, “Ingenious creatures, really. They empty not only the physical body but also the entirety of the person itself that even dreamselfs are affected. It burrows itself deep into its hosts, and we’ve tried to get them out when we could but, sadly, our attempts haven’t been successful.”

“Oh. Nasty.” Roxy makes a face.

“It’s a bastardization of the Heir’s abilities.” The radio sounds almost disapproving. “The ability to not only step into someone’s head, but become them, and be so in tune with someone that he can just tweak anything, and the target’s being would just accept it because it’s made to think he’s a part of them – ugh.”

“Wait, you said no one’s gotten it out,” Davesprite says, then looks to Karkat. “Is – is Karkat –”

“Oh, no, Karkat’s alright,” the radio says, and then laughs. It sounds slightly hysterical. “The Heir of Blood uses blood connections, see, he doesn’t put something of his own creation into you. He uses what you have, what’s in your blood, to turn it against you. But – well. Karkat’s blood isn’t very standard for trolls, is it?”

Karkat blinks. Slowly. And then opens his mouth and closes it like a beached up fish.
Eridan throws his head back and laughs.

His mutation. Of course. The ugly thing had been able to make him break past a memory spell, of course it was going to just make his body reject some eldritch horror made to eat his insides. Maybe his blood is too weak, or too stubborn, or just too defiant of whatever the Heir of Blood had tried to do to it and decided to kick out an unwanted visitor.

He takes a moment to appreciate it. Maybe his shitty mutation isn’t as shitty as he thinks it is.

“That’s good,” Kanaya says, smiling. “Although you are sure he’s fine, given that you speak of this like this is an unprecedented case?”

“Yes, I’m sure he’s fine,” the radio says.

“How?”

“Because the Heir of Blood is livid,” it laughs, “He’s getting rather tired of having us intercept the nightmares he’s giving Karkat, and now even Karkat’s own body rejects his machinations. Which is neat, by the way, so thank god for you mutation, Karkat. He’s pissed, and our Bard is having a great time kicking his ass.”

Karkat meets Kanaya’s gaze for a split second. Bard. That’s another thing they needed to keep track of. And from how the radio is saying it, it sounds like the sides are clearly defined – them and their Bard and their Heir, against the Heir of Blood and his demon soul-sucking leeches. Their Heir (not the Heir of Blood; the one in green and had that look in their eyes like they hadn’t slept in a while and had gravity-defying hair) had been getting on his good graces for helping him sleep, and had pissed off the Heir of Blood a lot.

Still. It’s best to be cautious about these things.

“Your Bard,” Eridan starts, and then sighs. “Firstly, do we all agree to ask questions regarding SGRU - SBURB first?”

“Fine with that,” Roxy says.

Davesprite shrugs, content with being quiet. Kanaya nods.

Karkat waves a hand. “Go right ahead.”

“You still haven’t explained what a sblargh is,” Tony says.

“You haven’t taken us to the Safehouse yet,” Kanaya says.

He crosses his arms. “Blood boy here was sleeping like a rock and we couldn’t leave him behind.”

Karkat raises an eyebrow, clearly offended, despite the fact that he’s thankful they haven’t left him behind.

“And you shouldn’t be trying to get out of the apartment for a while either, not unless you want leeches in you.”

The man sticks out his tongue in disgust. “Okay – no. Never mention leeches again, please. And how are we going to get outside this ratty apartment?”

“You said your Bard was taking care of it,” Steve says.
“Are you really going to risk it, Rogers? You step out that door, you give our Bard a hostage situation.”

“Ah,” Steve says, and nods. “Your…Heir of Blood doesn’t mind distance, does he?”

“You’re taking to this really well, are you some secret nerd or something?” Tony asks.

“If something can use blood, or whatever the radio was talking about, to turn it into a leech, I think a lot of things are possible here.”

“Finally, someone sane. Thank you, Rogers.”

“This is not sane talk.”

“We’ve met a god, Tony,” Steve says. Karkat shifts his attention there, as does everyone else. “We’ve stopped an alien invasion led by a sorceress. We’ve been around Thor. Does that sound like sane talk?”

Gods rained from the sky in SGRUB so really, it is sane talk.

“Thor, first of all, is an alien. And it’s just really conceited of humanity to think they’re the only beings this side of the universe, so yeah, that’s sane talk.”

“Got that right,” Eridan mumbles. Beside him, Davesprite laughs under his breath again.

Steve doesn’t hear him. “We’ve also had what you call the glowstick of destiny control people just by tapping at their chests. Turning blood into leeches from a distance doesn’t sound too farfetched.”

“It does if – ” Tony pauses. Then, to the radio, “How far away is the Heir of Blood?”

“Judging by your altitude and trajectory of the moon, I’d say – pretty damn far.”

This time, Davesprite snorts, and then turns away to try and hold in his sniggering. Even Kanaya smiles, amused.

“Somewhere very far away, on the edge of the universe. Not the Void, no. Horrorterror-edge of the universe. We’ve been considerate enough to keep our squabbles there,” it says, “Although at a moment’s notice, he can just come here. He has the means. He stole the means.”

“Is it the chessboard?” Karkat asks.

He feels eyes on him. Not just from everyone in the room. Maybe from far, far away too. From that edge of the universe where an Heir fights a Bard, and from the trees where corpses are mounted on and hung from.

“Yes,” the radio says, but not without hesitation. “The chessboard.”

“Skaia?” Kanaya asks. “The battlefield is a chessboard.”

“Yes.”

“But Skaia’s not – ”

“Skaia is dead,” the radio says, “And no, I don’t mean it got destroyed in The Reckoning or whatever inanity about it fulfilling its fate by failing to defend itself or about the Dersites winning, I mean – Skaia is dead.”
“That doesn’t really clear things up for us.”

“Let me clear it up then. Close your eyes.”

Karkat shifts uncomfortably. He watches everyone’s hackles rise up. Roxy plays with her sleeves again and Eridan’s glaring at the radio again. Davesprite pulls his wings in closer and Kanaya sits up a little straighter. The human adults even look a bit defensive.

“I’m not going to do anything to you – aside from, well, talk. But I need you to see this for yourself. Do you want to know what happened?”

He does.

The battlefield had looked vast, but clearly not as vast as it’s supposed to be. Skaia is a planet, for the Empress’ sake, but somehow Karkat gets the feeling that the battlefield had been isolated and cut-off. Maybe to keep something in. Something that is unfortunately very good at getting out, and even at the times when they could corral it, could find a place to sink its claws into.

(“He likes finding easy gaps.”)

And those trees. They didn’t even look like they belonged in Skaia. It looked like something had grown on the land and taken over. Turned it into its hunting ground and then its lair, where it kept its corpses after the fun.

The clean battlefield isn’t its current state, he knows. It’s that bloody chessboard, with the trees and the corpses and the gore.

Skaia is dead.

The radio repeats its question.

“How do I know that?”

“Do you want to know what happened?”

Eridan shakes his head slowly. “I’d rather not risk it.”

“We’re not your enemies.”

“How do I know that?”

“It’s out there up in space, right?” Tony asks suddenly, “This battlefield or whatever this is?”

“Yes.”

“Ah,” he says, then looks to Steve like he’s undecided.

Steve, at least, looks like he’s mulling it over.


The radio’s insignia seems to light up a little brighter. “Then close your eyes.”

“Wait, we don’t even know what this thing is going to do,” Eridan says, “Are we really going to risk that?”

“There is a possibility it’ll just knock us out,” Kanaya says, surprisingly, “And avoid all other questions.”
“Then let’s ask,” Karkat says, throwing his hands up. What the hell. If they’re finally getting answers at the risk of being put to sleep, then so be it. He’s tired of dancing around everything. “Shoot.”

Tony immediately takes the chance at the signal. “What are you doing here?” he asks the radio. “You were in my tower, and I know you have freaky shit going on with you, but you got here without even making a noise and without transportation, so unless it’s teleportation – ”

“It’s teleportation.”

The man stutters, and then stops. Then raises a finger questioningly, but the radio beats him to it. “My travelling – or, the radio’s travelling is a mix of skills. Teamwork at its finest. But the basics of it is that it’s teleportation.”

Tony closes his open mouth and nods, despite the fact that he’s still clearly trying to swallow the revelation that teleportation is real, just so the others can have a crack at asking. Then again, by ‘freaky shit’ he’s probably seen the radio do a lot more than reversing damage and slamming back into his hand.

“Who are you?” Steve asks.

The radio laughs. “I do wish I could say you already know us, but sadly, no. You don’t. You will soon, if everything works out well.”

“Are you planning on contact in the future?”

It laughs again. “Nothing is set in stone, Steve Rogers.”

“Did you drop the others here?” Davesprite this time. “Rose? Dave?”

Karkat blinks.

Dave?

“Yes.”

He inhales sharply.

“And I believe Tony Stark has promised you a trip to Safehouse after this.”

The Safehouse.

A half-forgotten conversation between human mutants. One of them had been a water psychic.

He reels at the implications, trying to catch his breath and focus on the situation at hand. The Safehouse isn’t just some run of the mill hideout the children had talked about. The Safehouse is a place where his friends have been hiding in. The Safehouse is just a trip away.

All this time.

All this fucking time.

“The bloodleech was inside Karkat for a while.” Kanaya puts a hand on Karkat’s arm in a comforting gesture even as she speaks. “Did it damage anything?”

“Troll physiology is considerably tougher than human physiology, if our consultants are to be believed.” There’s a bit of mirth in that voice, the sort that comes with someone says an inside joke.
“I’d say just be sure, but Jane Crocker is currently too out of your bounds for now.”

Davesprite raises an eyebrow. Roxy almost leaps at the radio.

“You know Jane?” she asks.

“As for the bloodleech, I’d just like to warn you of one thing if you don’t want the Heir of Blood to gain more ground than he already has.” The radio continues on like it hasn’t heard her, effectively diverting attention. “Karkat wasn’t the only one who got targeted.”

The excitement in the air abruptly ceases.

They all look at the radio expectantly, the adults more concerned and everyone else more panicked. Bloodleeches are practically death sentences, if Karkat’s understood this right, and he’s only been saved due to his mutation.

“How long do victims die of being…I don’t know, infected?” Steve asks.

“It depends. The other target is a psychic. A very powerful Seer. I’d say he’ll hold out long,” it says.

“Do we have to kill the Seer?” Eridan asks. Kanaya punches him in the ribs immediately and looks satisfied when he hunches over in pain. He’s filling up his abuse quota quick today.

“No, I’m going to ask you to save him.”

Eridan groans. “You just said –”

“I’m going out on a limb here and ask Karkat to just try to see if he can do it.” The radio actually slowly turns, bathed in green light for moment, to face him. “You’re a Knight of Blood after all – and don’t worry about being unascended. You’ve got enough weapons in your repertoire to be able to do something.” The radio sounds subdued, Karkat thinks.

Sad. Afraid.

Desperate.

“Let’s just say I know what it’s like to lose a brother,” it says, and Karkat thinks, you shouldn’t be saying that. This sounds like a secret. Off-script. Because the thing with listening to this radio is this: everything it says has been calculated beforehand.

Karkat knows this. The others never believed him before, although Eridan had been on to something when he’d said to take everything with a grain of salt. Karkat isn’t well-versed in war tactics, but he is well-versed in emotion and sincerity.

The radio speaks in professional, almost cheery tones, sometimes. It speaks in a way that makes you think it’s self-assured and knowledgeable, and it is. It holds things over your head to make you run after it, when it’s really just dangling the leftovers and everything else is in the background, in the big picture, while it distracts you with small, seemingly brilliant details to prevent you from really piecing it all together.

It’s spoonfeeding information to let the players dance to its tune, to its favor, and that’s exactly why Karkat, for all the good the Heir of Doom has done for him, can’t trust it. He’s not stupid.

This is the first time the radio has sounded sincere, though. It sounds – tired. No, not tired. Sorrowful.
“I would rather not have his brother see him deteriorate and die,” it says, “So please, please try.”

Karkat licks his lips. They were chapped. “How long has it been since he’s had the leech?”

“Very, very recently. The Heir of Blood sent him a message by a vision, a bit of a thing to shake some trust. He thought it’d be better to attach a parasite to the vision this time.”

He nods. He can try, maybe. He doesn’t even know what he’s supposed to do, but he can try. He’s supposed to be a Knight. Maybe Davesprite can teach him. Maybe Dave.

“Who is it?” Roxy asks.


“Cecil is a friend of Jade’s,” Steve says, turning to Tony. “Pepper mentioned him too. You know, the –”


“I don’t know.” Steve turns back to the radio. “But he did predict the missile attack that almost hit his college.”

“Wait – back up.” Tony raises his hands. “The very same attack with the missing missiles? The one where you said your friend – lovely Jade, I’m guessing – had a psychic friend? I-can-see-the-future psychic sort of friend?”

Steve nods. “Yes.”

“This Palmer boy with the leech is the psychic friend?”

“Yes.”

“Well, fuck damn,” Tony says, “I’ve been wanting to meet this kid since forever and some weird DnD homebrew class is giving him parasites. That’s not very polite.”

“But we can save him?” Roxy asks, “I mean, is there a chance?”

“I don’t know,” the radio says, “I genuinely don’t know. I don’t – this is out of my hands. Out of my jurisdiction. And nothing is ever set in stone. All known accounts of bloodleech infection has resulted in deaths despite attempts to stop it.” It pauses. “But we’ve never had a mutated blood player on our team going up against the Heir of Blood either.”

“So,” Roxy says, “Karkat’s a wildcard.”

“And might be our best shot,” Davesprite says, sharing a look with her. “We should hurry though.”

“Yes, so I’d be glad to wrap this up quickly. Anymore questions?”

Everyone looks to everyone else, inquiring, but at most, all they answer with is vague gestures. There’s not a lot that comes to mind when they’re suddenly dropped with the news that they have to save someone from being hollowed from the inside out.

“Good. Now close your eyes.”
Karkat’s eyes slide shut without his permission, and he stiffens, but doesn’t make a noise, even as he hears a few surprised gasps.

The radio’s voice suddenly doesn’t sound like it’s being filtered through the speakers anymore. It sounds close, alive, and here.

“Sleep.”

He hears rather than feels his back hit the floor as he collapses, and hears a series of other thuds, no doubt of the others as the drop down along with him, prone and vulnerable on the floor. He doesn’t feel the impact or the pain, doesn’t see stars swarm his vision, and doesn’t feel that shift from consciousness to lucid dreaming. It’s not like waking up on Prospit, or like waking up on the battlefield after he wades through drowsiness for a moment. It’s just like closing his eyes and waking up somewhere else, completely uneventful.

When he opens his eyes, he’s staring at a light blue sky littered with white clouds, and a chessboard battlefield.

In the beginning of Skaia, as with all beginnings, there had been nothing.

This is because the game hasn’t been even played, so there’s just stasis as the universe itself waits, and slumbers, and hopes that its players will finally fill in their roles and bring about (Ragnarok) the new cycle of life. A rebirth. A new world.

Or at least, this is what the voice in Karkat’s head is saying. It’s slightly disorienting, hearing a voice resonate around him despite knowing that there’s no one in the area, and a voice that’s also being broadcast straight into his mind, as he looks at everything. The others aren’t here, and even Karkat feels like he isn’t here. It’s a bit like a dream, he supposes, but he’s a bodiless entity, watching everything proceed. The great big mouth in the sky, the omniscient deity – he shakes his head, or at least tries to, in an attempt to focus.

The story being told is standard to how all games start: players find the game, the play it, they slowly prototype things and there’s battles here and there as gates are opened and lands are entered – but the main part here is Skaia and what happens to Skaia. Because, of course, this is what they asked for. The answer to what happened to Skaia.

Karkat notes that this isn’t the full thing at all. Just a part of it. Spoonfed, cookie-cutter information.

But Skaia.

And what happens is this.

Skaia is prototyped to its fullness, until it’s a vast planet, with its checkerboard battlefield and its two warring kingdoms, both fighting to the death in a vain battle that already has a predicted winner. Nobody watches this battle, of course, save for Karkat, but even his attention begins to wane as he watches the skirmish from where he is (and that’s really hard to pinpoint right now). Soldiers die, and numbers are replenished, and comrades see comrades suffer, but they’re fodder, and no one remembers them. Karkat’s sure no one even asks for their names, not even the players themselves.

In the midst of all that, that battle to the death in the background while the main players whittle away at their destinies and their quests and their adventures, something stirs in the land.
Karkat doesn’t know where it comes from.

 där)

At first, it feels like a shifting, and then it’s a shockwave, until it’s a full shaking of the very foundations of Skaia itself. The fight rages on still, and no one even pays attention to what’s happening, until there’s cracks on the ground, and waves of blood come from the horizon and crash down to flood the battlefield and drown everyone in it. Karkat sees the carapacians panic and attempt to swim, but fail, as the corpses of their fallen shoot out of the water to drag them under.

That’s not really what happens, he thinks, or the voice makes him think. Not literally. It’s just an exaggeration. A quick visualization. The corruption of Skaia had happened by degrees, until everyone drowned in their own filth and blood, turning on each other in a gruesome massacre.

“What’s the point of showing me this?” he asks.

The blood in the field sinks down, lower, and lower, until there’s nothing left but a floor of red, and a mountain of rotting corpses. The stench makes Karkat gag.

And then – there. This is the point.

Someone walks into the field, back straight, regal, self-assured.

He carries the crest on Blood on him.

“What –”

It’s the Heir of Blood.

And then on the opposite side of the field, there’s other people, stumbling in, looking around horrified, retching, crying.

One of them looks familiar.

“The Heir of Doom,” Karkat murmurs. He thinks – no, he knows the others will not remember seeing the players when they wake up, and while he will, the only face he sees clearly here is the Heir of Doom’s. The rest are just shades of themselves. Vague impressions.

“What did you do?” he hears the Heir of Doom ask, and they sound afraid. “What. Did you. Do?”

Karkat feels a chill crawl up his spine, and hears whispers that he knows don’t belong here. (What are you telling them, what are you showing them, what are you doing, C e c i l ?)

There’s no answer to the Heir of Doom’s question, but instead the Heir of Blood’s shadow just stretches, far off behind him, until it looks like it’s some thin, sickly, one-dimensional thing on the blood-stained ground, which then crawls out of the floor and stands right behind the Heir of Blood, claws settling on his shoulders.

Karkat notes that he can’t see the man’s eyes.

“What happened?”

(Corrupted)

“Skaia?”
He’s heard of sessions turning out wrong. He’s given John’s universe cancer, for the Empress’ sake. But he’s never heard of it being corrupted like this.

The monster (denizen) behind the Heir of Blood motions at the opposite end of the field, and Karkat sees the Heir of Doom straighten, standing their ground. They start to speak, and it’s a name, Karkat registers, but he doesn’t quite hear what it is.

“– don’t make me do this,” they say. It’s all he catches.

The monster cradles the Heir of Blood’s face lovingly, and Karkat gets the impression of cracks on skin, infection-like (stop stop showing them this), as the man smiles and flicks a hand at his fellow Heir’s direction.

Karkat feels the breath being punched out of him, just as the players on the other end of the board react similarly, and he feels an anger start to burn through his skin and then –

And then he wakes up, sweating, despite the fact that it’s cold. So, so cold, in fact, that his breath mists and he feels himself shiver again.

He sees the others start to sit up, similarly sweating despite the freezing temperature. He looks around and notices that the windows have frost on them. One of them is broken.

Davesprite is trying to shake the cold off of his wings.

“What the fuck,” Tony says, as the ridges on his suit light up to melt off the thin sheet of ice on the metal. “What the hell was that?”

“A vision,” the radio says, still there. Karkat had expected it to be gone the second it finished showing them things. He sits up and feels glass shards underneath his palms. He looks down at the floor. What the fuck? “Or, well shared thought, anyway.”

“A what.”

He turns to the direction of the door, ripped from its hinges and swallows thickly. Kanaya notices his alarm and turns as well.

“Was that the Heir of Blood?” Roxy asks, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand. She’s sitting with her back to the open doorway, and she’s still focused on the radio. “Not the weird guy. The one who was there with us.” She looks at everyone else, and her eyes look wild when she meets Karkat’s gaze. “There was someone in there with us.”

“I felt it too,” Eridan says, “Some sort of…unnerving presence.”

“He didn’t want it shown,” Karkat says, “That. He didn’t want it shown.”

Everyone slowly turns to radio, Kanaya included, even as she tries to process the implications of a ripped-off door. The radio’s eye insignia dims for a moment before lighting up to normal. “Yes,” it says, “Psychic links are vulnerable to someone well-versed in exploiting connections.”

Kanaya shifts. “Did he get any of us?”
“No.”

Karkat lets out a breath along with everyone else, shoulders sagging.

“But he tried to. Physically. He couldn’t get in, but projectiles aren’t him and can easily break things.”

Oh.

Karkat searches around for whatever projectile had been used and catches sight of a bottle in the corner of the room, broken, spilling its contents onto the floor.

“He really didn’t touch you. He was fought off.”

He eyes the frost on windows again.

“So we’re safe?” Steve asks.

“For now. Re-do the wards – no.” The radio pauses, and then, “Go to the tower. Roxy, I’ll need you to pull the Void over everyone. Do it in two groups. Head to Stark Tower. No offense, Steve Rogers, but your flat can just be easily burned to destroy the wards.”

“I understand,” Steve says, and turns to Roxy. “Can you do that? Whatever…that is.”

Roxy hesitates for a moment. Then she nods. “I can try.”

“The Safehouse,” Kanaya says, “Why not there?”

“Because I don’t need you jeopardizing the position of the rest of your friends. They have one link to the Heir of Blood already and we can’t keep him out forever!”

The burst of magic that accompanies the raised tone nearly flattens everything in the room, and Karkat has to remember not to clench his fists so he doesn’t injure himself on the glass shards.

The radio sighs. It’s just static.

“I’m sorry,” it says, “I’m tired. I’m scared. I’m – ”

Another pause, like whoever’s behind the radio is reshuffling papers. “Our Mage is a brilliant man. He likes to experiment, and he likes to build. Likes to figure things out. He made us something that you’d probably understand as a teleporter, just in case we needed to escape from unsavory situations.”

It’s painful to tell this. Karkat feels it, in that near-imperceptible wobble on the radio’s voice.

“We destroyed the Heir of Blood’s when he…turned against us,” it says, “So he ki – he stole someone else’s. But not before – ”

He imagines the Seer wiping their eyes, trying not to cry.

“We’ve been warding everyone up their gills in magic and trying our best not to let him touch any of you. Please do not let our hard work go to waste. We know what we’re doing, and trust me, you would rather we never get involved with each other’s lives.”

“But you are,” Karkat says, “Too late for that.”
“I know, Vantas. But it’s best to keep everything to a minimum.”

The light of the eye insignia is dimming again. Karkat sighs. Time to clean up then.

“Now go to the tower,” the radio says, as a parting command before it leaves, “We’ll continue our chat there if the bastard doesn’t kill us all.”

And then, before Karkat can even blink, it disappears in a flash of green.

Chapter End Notes

...surprise and happy end of part three?
this is like 7193 words long guys. i bled for this. it's the third longest chapter and i want to cry
“Walk with me,” says the Heir of Doom.

There’s about two things Karkat does when he has nightmares - run for his life, or get rescued by the Heir of Doom or their borrowed ravens. He doesn't like either option, but he doesn't like this new one presented by the Heir either.

He shifts on his feet, and the Heir reaches out a hand and smiles.

“Walk with me.”

Karkat does nothing, and still the landscape changes. It shifts, from the battlefield, to a forest, to a city, to a home; and Karkat realizes that the story will steamroller on whether or not he chooses to put trust in the Heir or not.

The Heir smiles still, unblinking, and Karkat, figuring he can fight this small, fragile, tired Heir, or outrun any Heir of Blood and all his bloodleeches, takes that small, cold, human hand.

The land breathes.

_____________________________________________________

This is what Karkat’s dreams look like.

_____________________________________________________

“What am I seeing?” Karkat asks, as the scenery changes with every step he takes.
“Sessions,” the Heir of Doom says. Both their left feet step into an ocean and their right feet step into a desert. “Some alive, some dead.”

“Did you destroy them?”

The Heir stops and turns to him. Around them, the waterfall continues to thunder on. It is dark, as there is no moon or sun in sight, and the pendant hanging from the Heir’s neck shines blue.

“What makes you think that?” the Heir asks.

Karkat feels the hand holding his. It's small, and corpse-like, and ridden with so many scars from knife cuts and accidents and war wounds, probably pre-ascension. But it's alive, and it's somehow still comforting. Tired eyes look at him and Karkat sighs.

“I don't think that,” he says.

“Thank you,” the Heir says. “That's very kind of you.”

Karkat continues to walk along with the Heir. They pass by lands of endless bone and sand, of vast fields with eerie whispers, of never-ending oceans and rain.

“How did you find these places?” he asks instead, stumbling over as his foot sinks into snow, letting go of the Heir’s hand as he tries to catch himself.

The Heir helps him stand up when he falls forward. “I didn't.”

“The Heir of Blood did?” Karkat asks.


“Ah,” Karkat says. He gets it. “How long have you been following him?”
The Heir of Doom breathes out a heavy, heavy sigh. “I don't remember.”

“How old even are you?”

“I don't remember.”

Karkat studies them for a moment, but knows it's futile as godtiers stop aging at the age of ascension. The Heir has been ascended for a long, long time.

“Do you even remember anything before the game?” he asks. He straightens and brushes the snow from his sweater.

The Heir just laughs. “Come on,” they say. “We have things to see.”

Karkat mutters a complaint under his breath but follows anyway. “Where are you taking me?”

“To sightsee.”

He stops in his tracks. “Seriously?”

“Field trips are educational, Karkat,” the Heir says, and motions around them. “What do you see here?”

“Snow,” he says, and kicks a foot to send a bit of it flying. “Lots of it.” The place tickles a memory but it's probably just somewhere similar.

The Heir's look softens, like they know. “It's not the Land of Frost and Frogs, no. But somewhere similar. It belongs to a friend.”

“This is a planet?” Karkat asks.
“Yes. Now come with me.”

He tries his best to, but being unable to fly isn't helping a lot with him trying to match speed with the Heir.

There is a hill up ahead, overlooking a cliff with sharp points of ice dotting it. If Karkat falls off the edge, he'd be skewered, so he tries to stick to solid, even land as he walks. The Heir chuckles, but doesn't seem too worried.

“Do you hear it?” they ask.

Karkat frowns. “Hear what?”

The Heir of Doom smiles and puts a finger to their lips. “Listen.”

Karkat tries to. There's nothing.

He tells them as much.

The Heir hits their head slightly. “No, just listen, you fool.”

So he does. He closes his eyes and tries not to think of anything else. Just tries to listen.

There is a sound, not unlike drumbeats, beneath his feet.

“Where are we?” he asks, when he opens his eyes to catch up to the Heir, as they appear to have started flying off again.

“A friend's land,” the Heir says, and motions up the hill, where there's a tree that's still somehow bearing its leaves, which are a deep rust red.
There's a figure underneath the tree, Karkat realizes, with grey skin, and large horns curving over her head and up to a sharp point.

“Oh,” he says.

Blank white eyes stare at him. She looks nothing like Aradia, or even Damara, but bears the same symbol over her shirt. Maybe a distant ancestor.

“Hello, -”

She's speaking the Heir's name, but Karkat finds he can't hear it.

“Hello, Anjye-we,” the Heir says, easily slipping into Alternian. The honorific rolls off their tongue easily, and Karkat wonders exactly how long the Heir has been going around, learning languages out of necessity.

The troll - Anjye-something; Karkat's not close enough with her to tack the honorific at the end of the syllables - inclines her head.

“In case you're wondering,” she says, addressing Karkat this time, “My session’s very alive. It just appears my grandsire has the same tendency as I do to hold onto life when we don't have it.”

Ah. He’d figured.

“Anjye-we, you've been doing well?” the Heir asks.

“Gladly so, just resting,” the rustblood says. “Have you been well?”

“Not very,” the Heir laughs. They motion to Karkat. “Helping another session, as you see.”

“This one closer to your roots, yes?”
The Heir actually flinches. Karkat raises an eyebrow.

“Did the voices tell you that?”

“No, Baia-we did.” She laughs and hovers, the ghost that she is, and flies up to the branches to sit on one of them.

“Ah, Ba-naha,” the Heir says, shaking his head. How involved has the Heir been to be addressing these people with titles of close friends?

“Gifted seer, that boy,” the troll says. “He’ll be coming here soon, so make your request quick.”

“We're just sightseeing, Anjye-we,” the Heir says. “I wanted to show Karkat the lands the Heir of Blood has taken for his conquest.”

“Ah, ji-ga.” The troll tuts. Karkat wonders if it's a name or an old, old curse, the way she spits it out. “He’s still at large, then?”

“He's never stopped,” the Heir says, softly, “I couldn't - I'm sorry.”

The ghost troll looks down at them for a moment, and then says the Heir's name again, tender. “You've done well.”

“I haven't.”

“My session is still viable for victory because of you,” she says, “I think it counts.”

“Thanks,” the Heir says.

The troll, the Megido-granddam, if she even uses that name - Karkat doesn’t know how far she is up the line - hops off the branch, and takes the Heir’s face in her hands to press their foreheads together, a gesture of comfort. Karkat wants to look away.
He doesn’t, or rather, can’t, as the ghost breaks away from the Heir, and reaches up to touch Karkat's forehead.

The world explodes behind his eyelids.

He sees it, movie reels of events, from a session’s start to the struggles to the almost-victory and the unforeseen corruption from the Heir of Blood’s sudden intrusion. Someone shatters into a thousand pieces. Someone cries. And Karkat's screaming, screaming for his friends even when he knows they aren't his friends, because in the moment, he's not Karkat. He's reliving these memories of an ancient Witch of Time, and it hurts.

He heaves in a stuttering breath, and doesn't even know that the troll has stopped touching him.

“That's what he did,” she says, “To us. To countless others. I can imagine what he's starting to do to your session.”

Karkat shakily wipes at his tears, still trying to separate himself from the vision that feels more memory than vision. “He's - yeah.” He sighs, giving up on words. He’s so tired, suddenly. Like he’s lived a thousand perigees instead of his measly number of sweeps. “He's doing it again.”

“A conqueror who never rests,” she says, “God save him now, he's trying.”

Karkat tilts his head, confused. He doesn't know if they're both talking about the same thing.

The Heir gently tugs on his sleeve. “Karkat,” they say. “We gotta go now.”

“Save the boy, Karkat,” the troll says. She's a small thing, even smaller than Karkat, but somehow Karkat still feels loomed over. “He'll be useful. But I fear you can't save him by your own strength.”

“The - the Seer?” Karkat asks. He remembers what the radio had said. The powerful Seer afflicted with a bloodleech.
“The game teaches teamwork,” she says, like he hasn't said anything, “So learn it.”

Karkat looks down at his feet, at the snow, and wonders exactly what she means.

They walk through fire and blood and wind and metal, and then land in another place built primarily out of ice. Karkat hugs his arms around himself and thinks the Heir's friends must have a pattern of being icy, or have an inclination for intersession conquering.

A bit like Lord English, he supposes. He wonders if the Heir of Blood has destroyed one version of Lord English. He hopes so. That'll be the one good thing he's done.

The… thing - he doesn't know what it is, with its cymbals for hands and its rows of razor sharp teeth - inclines its head and rasps, the sound like clashes of more cymbals, of a dissonant orchestra. “The Heir of Blood was birthed for a purpose.”

The Heir of Doom swats at it half-heartedly. Not that it's effective, because in addition to looking monstrous, the thing is gigantic, and if it decides to, it can clap its cymbals with both of them in between and crush them.

“Don't tell him that,” they say, “He's not supposed to know yet.”

“Ah. Building a narrative here, are we, - ” There it is again, the Heir's name, but Karkat can't hear it. Why is he the exception, when all the people the Heir has helped know their name?

“Yes,” the Heir says. “But you know how some things have to be carefully timed and revealed.”

“You've learned,” the thing says, “How's the Bard?”

“Ever busy,” the Heir says. “I tell him to wind down, but he doesn't listen.”
A passing entity, with odd appendages that stick out every which way at angles, stops to laugh. “Kiss him on the neck.”

The Heir frowns. “No.”

“I wasn’t gonna tell you to rip his throat out,” the thing says, reaching over to tap the Heir’s cheek with a sharp claw. It’s a knife, Karkat realizes, a blade with hinges for joints, intricate markings all over the flat metal.

“I think he’d appreciate keeping his throat seeing as he needs it,” the Heir says, “And I quite like his singing.”

The angled creature and the one with the cymbals look at each other as if to say, Hah, Bards.

There’s a high-pitched sound from up ahead, resounding pleasantly all over the icy terrain. Both creatures turn towards it. Even Karkat harkens. It’s beautiful.

“Ah,” the Heir says, “Time to get back inside?”

The creature with the cymbal-hands clashes its instruments together. “Yes. See you later, - ”

Karkat’s getting really sick and tired of never hearing this kid’s name.

“He made that, you know,” the angle-thing says. Karkat takes a moment before he realizes he’s the one being addressed.

“The Bard?” he asks.

“Yes,” it says. Then it flies off into the huge castle in the distance, made of ice and snow.

Karkat wonders what they even are, and what version of the game they’re even playing, if they were playing at all and this wasn’t horrorterror country.
The Heir sneezes and sniffs. “They’re not human, obviously.”

“What are they?” He’s not even going to ask how the Heir had known what he was thinking.

“Something,” the Heir says, “That you have no business knowing.” Then they grab Karkat’s arm and start pulling him through the knee-deep snow. Off in the distance, Karkat sees something that appears to have green leaves for hair flying towards the castle. He decides maybe he really has no business knowing these things.

“I get it, you know,” he says. “The Heir of Blood is evil and takes over sessions like the Condesce takes over planets. You stop him. I get it.”

“Do you, Karkat?” the Heir asks. They let him go and turn to face him. “Do you really?”

“Yeah,” he says, hugging his arms around himself, not out of the cold. “I get it.”

The Heir touches his hand, and their necklace pendant flares a bright blue. In the next blink, Karkat is standing outside the castle, and he tries not to fall over.

“Do you get it, Karkat?”

The Heir is pointing up to the top of the castle gates. The gates’ bars are made of ice, standing tall and proud over them both, and as Karkat raises his head to look at where the Heir is pointing, he notices the crusted blood on some of the bars.

And then he gags, and clutches at his stomach.

On the very top of one of the bars of the gate is Jack Noir’s head, impaled, brain matter and blood staining the ice red.

“Do you get it, Karkat?” the Heir asks again.
Karkat turns away from the gates and doesn’t say anything.

He hears thunder rumble overhead. The Heir straightens and puts a hand on his shoulder. “We have to go.”

When he doesn’t answer, still trying to clear the image of an impaled head from his mind, the Heir shakes him. “Karkat, we have to go. You need to get out of here. You need to wake up. They’ve sounded the alarm already. This is not a good place to be anymore.”

“What is he?” Karkat asks. The thing earlier had said that the Heir of Blood had been birthed for a reason. The Heir of Doom is trying to tell him something without saying it outright, maybe to avoid catching the attention of things they shouldn’t be talking about, what with how the Heir of Blood had reacted when the Seer was showing him and his friends the vision of Skaia’s ‘death’. “What is he, Heir - ”

“Karkat.”

Karkat looks up. The Heir of Doom slaps a hand on his forehead, and his vision flickers and blackens out as his eyes roll to the back of his head.

“Wake up.”

He does. He wakes up in cold sweat, in his new room at Stark Tower, where the lights are off, and there’s nothing in the shadows, but he feels like he’s being watched anyway.

He falls back onto the mattress and huffs out a breath. Damn the Heir of Doom.

(coward)

Chapter End Notes

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edit: YES the chapter title is a cipher. did you actually trust me to give you an easy time

HAPPY APRIL FOOL'S I HOPE YOU LIKE MY GIFT TO YOU I APOLOGIZE
I'VE BEEN SPENDING TOO MUCH TIME IN ARGS

This chapter isn't really a 'proper' lullaby chapter (if you've noticed, it's like, 2k words instead of the usual 4k above), and the characters here are inside jokes (the monsters in the other session Karkat visited him is...my friends' demonsonas, this is a bit of a gift), so I spent so much time debating with myself whether I should post this or not.

Also i don't know if i should delete this chapter after a week, but some of the later readers might want to have a crack at the fun even after April Fool's so. Hm. Please let me know what you think, because I can always archive this chapter at my tumblr!
“What are you doing?”

The young man is standing over the sink, filling up a sizeable glass bowl with water, humming a tune as he does so. It’s a calming piece that reminds Aradia of lullabies and puts her at ease despite the fact that she’s never seen someone fill a glass bowl and not drink it or smash it over someone’s head. Must be a human thing.

The glass bowl glints in the light. “I’m filling up a fish bowl,” the young man says.

Aradia takes a moment to connect that fishes for humans must be treated like pets. “Oh,” she says. She wonders what Earth-fishes are like. Maybe deadlier than Alternia’s. Maybe softer. Maybe it depends. The bowl looks like it can fit the young man’s head in it. “You don’t have a fish.”

“I’m expecting a visitor,” the young man says. He shuts off the faucet when the glass bowl is almost full and then goes to the living room to set the bowl somewhere. Aradia follows him and watches him frown in confusion as he seems to debate where to put it.

Then he decides to hand the bowl over to her for a moment. “Hold this, will you?”

Aradia tries her best to not let it fall.

The young man goes around the living room, passing a hand over the coffee table, the couch, the shelves, the dresser – apparently none of these meet his standards, and he stands and puts his hands on his hips. It just makes him look funny.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“I’m trying to sense things,” he says, “Like I said, I’m not a very powerful natural seer, but I do have good intuition.” Then he laughs. “Lucky intuition, you can say.”

“What are you looking for?”

“Where my visitor is going to arrive,” he says, then gets on his knees and starts patting parts of the floor. Eventually, he gets up and says, “This is ridiculous.”

“Um.” Aradia shifts the bowl in her arms. “Won’t they arrive through the front door?”

The young man laughs. “Oh, sadly no.”

He holds his hands out in front of him as he goes around the room again, and then stops when he’s right behind the couch.

“Oh!” he says, “Aradia, dear, would you fetch me a pen? Place the fish bowl down first. There should be one by the dresser.”

Aradia does as she’s asked, placing the fish bowl down on the coffee table and then pulling out the top drawer of the dresser. There’s a yellow glitter pen there.

She hands it over to the young man and he crouches down, marking a huge X on the floor. The
glitter seems to work on making it noticeable as it shines in the light. The young man then pushes the couch aside, a bit to the right, and then grabs the fish bowl to place it directly on the X.

“There,” he says, satisfied with whatever he’s done. Aradia doesn’t understand a thing of what just happened. “Do tell Sollux not to knock this over until our visitor arrives. I should construct a barrier around here too, while we wait.”

“O…kay,” Aradia says, watching him as he goes over to the shelf to start gathering books, probably to stack them in low walls around the fish bowl. “Can I ask what this is about?”

“We’re going to get a visitor!” the young man repeats. It still doesn’t make sense. “I don’t know when they will arrive, specifically, but I know they will arrive.”

“Ah,” she says. She can understand that, at least. Visions, intuition, foreknowledge - although he seemed to rely more on natural gifts than ones graced by the game, so maybe this isn’t SGRUB-related or anything.

She helps take down books from the shelf and joins him as he constructs the walls around the fish bowl, putting a reasonable distance between the books and the bowl itself. Sollux catches them both like this, blinks, and then grunts.

“I’m not even going to ask,” he says, heading straight to the kitchen for coffee.

“Thanks,” the young man says, rather cheerfully.

Sollux snorts. “That’s not some weird prank or social experiment, is it?”

“You said you weren’t going to ask.”

“Just wanted to know if that’s a test as to how long all of us could withstand not knocking that bowl over.”

The young man giggles. “No, silly, it’s not. It’s just supposed to be here. You’ll understand when it happens.”

The only answer is a series of clinks in the kitchen as Sollux hunts for spoons.

Aradia stands up to get more books from the shelf. “By the way, you never did finish telling me about what happened with your friends,” she says. They’d been telling stories over games of chess, with the prize for winning being the permission to ask any question and the other must answer it truthfully. It was a little unfair, given that Aradia and Sollux could both ask the young man, but he could only ask one of them. He hadn’t seemed to mind, though.

“Right,” the young man says, “Are you up for another game later, then?”

“Sure,” she says, “Don’t have anything else to do here, do we?”

The young man chuckles. It’s so calming and bright. “Nope,” he says, “Nothing to do at all except to wait.”

Moving to Stark Tower is a lot harder than initially planned. Mostly because it’s raining, and partly because it’s absolutely nerve-wracking to wait for Roxy to come back so the second group can be on their way, and not knowing if the Heir of Blood would decide it’s a fine time to kill them all.
The radio doesn’t come back, not that any of them expect it to, but still, Karkat would have appreciates the effort.

Thankfully, they’re all able to get to the tower just fine, and after several medical scans to make sure he’s alright, Karkat’s given his own room, which he immediately collapses in once he’s made it to the bed. He gets weird dreams, because since when has he not had weird dreams upon getting to Earth, but wakes up in cold sweat with no understanding of what’s just happened. Seeing as nobody’s awake at three in the morning, he makes his way down to the kitchen, asking the tower’s AI to help him get there. (It reminds him of Aradiabot, a little, and he realizes he misses Aradia something fierce. She’d been one of the better ones on their team. He wonders where she is now. Probably still wandering dream bubbles if nobody had gotten to her.)

He fixes himself several sandwiches and lets the AI lead him to one of the glass walls, watching the rain hit the panes and drip down far below. He sits and watches the grey outside, not even shivering. Somewhere out there is someone who needs his help.

He wonders for a moment how he’s doing, this Cecil, if he’s alright or if he’s already showing signs of being infected by a bloodleech. His psychic ability buys him time, the Seer has said, but Karkat doesn’t know for how long, but he knows he should move fast if he wants to help. And, well, he does. Because he’s not about to just let someone die when he can help.

Not that he knows how, but he’s going to damn well try.

There’s another war that’s going on out there, and he’s caught up in the middle of it even when he’d rather not have anything to do with it. But he’s here, and so are his friends, and – if the radio is to be believed – so are Dave and the others.

Dave, right.

How long has it been since he’s been dropped here? How long has Dave been here, for that matter? And John, Jade and Rose? Is everyone here? Just scattered all over the planet, until they could all find each other? Did the Heir of Doom make sure of that? Or were they all supposed to land in one place and the Heir of Blood just scrambled them around?

He doesn’t know. And he’s unsure who to trust at the moment. He takes a rather huge bite of sandwich in irritation.

He’s sick of the fighting. He’s already been dealing with the game for years. He’d rather not have another repeat, and he’d rather not be pulled into another session again.

“Hey kid.”

In a second, his sickle is out, and he’s turned to brandish it at whoever has walked into the room. The human, Tony Stark, has his hands up in a gesture of surrender. “Okay, alright, I’m not here to fight you or anything. Cool your jets,” he says. Karkat glares at him for a second before putting his weapon away and shoving the rest of his food into his mouth. Tony chuckles. “That’s still cool, you know, pulling your weapons out of thin air. How do you do that?”

“What kind of idiot doesn’t know how to work a sylladex?” he asks.

Tony just frowns. “A what?”

“Wow. Human and brain dead. That’s got to be a record.”
“What on earth is a sylla-thingy?” the man asks, “What country are you even from?”

“It’s called none of your business, you’ve probably heard of it,” Karkat says. “And you’re a grown-ass man who can’t work a sylladex. Amazing.”

“I have never heard of that,” he says. “What is it? Weird technology from your mystery country?”

Karkat levels him with a look. “You people have sylladexes,” he says, “Don’t lie to me. Dave had one. Jade and the other had ones. Roxy has one. You can’t be the only one who doesn’t have a sylladex.”

“O…kay,” Tony says, “I have no idea what you’re on about. Maybe some more weird DnD stuff you and your friends keep talking about.”

“I have no idea what a dee-en-dee is,” Karkat says. He’s probably heard Dave talk about it once and forgot.

Tony snickers. “You’re kidding.”

Karkat’s expression stays deadpan.

“Okay, you’re not,” Tony says, going to the mini-fridge in the corner to grab a can of something. Karkat can’t read it too well in the dim light. He hopes it’s not soda. He hates those things. “I still have no idea what you and your friends keep going on about.”

“You haven’t held up your end of the deal yet,” Karkat says.

Tony walks over to him and sits, uninvited. Karkat grunts and moves to make room anyway.

“Yeah, well, a lot of other stuff to deal with. Like, whatever that vision-thing was and the whole ooga-booga that’s going on with the radio,” he says, “I’ll figure it out one day.”

“It’s just magic. There’s nothing to figure out,” Karkat says.

Tony takes a swig of what he’s drinking and is silent for a moment before he speaks again. “You know I’ve seen gods, and a radio that keeps coming back no matter how much I destroy it, and apparently, bloodleeches and vision-sharing, but it’s definitely still possible to explain all that with science.”

Karkat snorts and raises an eyebrow at him.

“Probably advanced science, because I wouldn’t be surprised if whoever the people behind the radio and everything are aliens, kinda like Thor. But! Still science,” he says.

“Sure thing,” Karkat says. “The radio keeps coming back because there’s a Time player involved.”

Tony blinks. “A what?”

“A Time player,” Karkat says, “I don’t know if it’s the Seer themself or if it’s another player working with them, but there’s a Time player. Davesprite – ” He points a thumb to the general direction of the guestrooms “ – is a Time player.”

“Uh-huh,” Tony says, taking about gulp from his drink again. “What’s usually the stats on that?”

Karkat huffs and runs a hand over his face. “This isn’t FLARPing,” he says, “It’s an actual game, okay? The kind that destroys universes to give birth to new ones.”
“That sounds awesome, actually, and extensive. You know, maybe we can get everyone together for a campaign when you’re done with everything.”

Karkat resists the urge to brain him with the plate he’s got on the floor. “Whatever. We’ll be out of here as soon as we find the others anyway.”

“Oh,” Tony says, “Not so sure about that actually.” He makes a motion at the ceiling, and a holographic screen shows up in front of the couch. “You ever heard about the Safehouse?”

“Not really,” he says. When Tony motions towards the screen, Karkat stands and goes to it. It enlarges, and he sits down on the couch to read it.

He’s fluent enough in the human English alphabet to figure out that these are news reports. He scans through them slowly while Tony continues talking.

“They’re running the Safehouse, your friends. Pep talks about them sometimes, so does Happy,” he says, “I’ve never met them, but if they’re making a bunker in the middle of New York just to help people, I don’t think they’re going to leave that responsibility easily.”

Karkat slowly frowns as he reads on. Tony’s right. Apparently, the Safehouse has been in operation for quite a long time, a year and a few months already, and if the others have already been here that long that means they’ve settled down quite well. He wonders exactly how long they’ve been here, as they couldn’t have set up the Safehouse the second they’d stepped foot on Earth.

“So best case scenario, you go to the Safehouse and stay there until we can work out something with S.H.I.E.L.D that’s not gonna have them nabbing every mutant off the street.”

Karkat flinches.

Tony gives him an apologetic look, not that he turns to see it.

“You can stop cullings?” Karkat asks. He looks away from the screen and it disappears.

“Stop what?”

“Cullings,” Karkat says, “You said mutants get grabbed off the street. I’ve heard from Steve too, and I’ve always thought they were cullings or something similar.”

“Cull – I have no idea where you’re from, but we don’t *cull* mutants, kid,” Tony says. He sounds genuinely disturbed. “Like, sure, there’s hate crimes but – ” He seems to give up on his words and just finishes his drink and sits down beside Karkat.

Karkat waits while he gathers his thoughts. “S.H.I.E.L.D’s just been taking them off the street lately. We don’t know what for, but they’re doing it, and we’re going to get them out. As soon as we can. But with whatever is up with you saving this Cecil kid, I have no idea what situation we’re going to have to take care of first.”

The human sighs in exasperation and leans back on the couch. “God, I wish we could split up in teams or something. I wish we even had a plan to begin with.”

“You don’t have one?”

“Nah,” Tony says, and then barks out a laugh. He looks tired. Too tired. “Spent way too long trying to take down that wall, and then it turns out we have a mutant under incredibly high surveillance that’s suspiciously uneventful. Steve seems determined to save her, and I think I get it, considering,
“you know.” He motions towards Karkat. “You guys.”

“I don’t get it,” Karkat says.

“You know, more mutants like you. Mutants specifically with your mutation.”

He frowns further. “The green-penned bastard dropped Kankri here?”

“Kankri? No, who’s that? I meant – ” He motions to the ceiling again, and then makes a few swipes when the holographic screen comes up.

Karkat watches him work, getting increasingly bored, but then sits up straight the second Tony pulls up the files for him to see.

“I’m talking about this specific mutation. The grey skin and the teeth and the weird horns,” Tony says. Except Karkat’s not listening, because he’s staring at the photo on the top left, in high definition and so incredibly well-rendered, that he’s sure he’s not hallucinating.

She looks tired, he thinks, but she’s alive. She’s very alive, just like Eridan is, and he thinks oh god, this is way more of a mess than I first thought it was.

He’s aware his jaw’s probably dropped, but he can’t be bothered to pick it up while Tony turns to him and asks, “Do you know anyone named Feferi Peixes?”

In the end, they had to get help. Graham had taken one look at Cecil and said first aid wasn’t going to cut it, because that much blood didn’t look like it was going to stop soon. Loki alerted the pool master and their friend, before carrying Cecil and skywalking to the nearest hospital while Jade teleported everyone in turns. They’d scared a few nurses with the sudden arrival, but being well-known faces had helped, and they got Cecil checked up. The poor boy had passed out the second Loki handed him over to be looked at.

The bleeding had stopped quite easily, and aside from anemia, exhaustion and loss of appetite, the doctor had said that there was nothing life-threatening.

At present, everyone’s in the hospital, scattered around the hallway outside Cecil’s room, as they’d all decided to have him admitted just in case - the regular mealtimes would help too, since he wouldn’t be able to skip eating anymore, the stubborn boy - and milling about the cafeteria to get food.

“So, he’s going to be alright?” Kevin asks Loki for the third time, still staring at his brother as he sleeps.

Loki nods. “Yes,” he says, not really knowing what to say. He’s not used to comforting. Thankfully, Kevin says nothing else and just takes his brother’s hand and holds it.

Outside, there’s a flash of green. Loki steps out the room to see Jade with Saphrel and Ruben in tow, her last passengers. She straightens out her jacket as they both stagger away and try not to puke from disorientation.

“Oh okay,” she says, “Now I’m starving. No one interrupt me while I go to Sunny’s to get food, please.”
She disappears in a flash of light again, and Loki watches Ruben dry-heaving, amused.

Elizabeth brushes past him to help the poor boy sit down.

“Tante Eliza,” Sapphrel hoarsely mutters, still trying to get a greeting out. “How was the airport?”

“Fine, dear,” she says. She lowers Ruben to the bench before going over to remove Sapphrel from where they’re trying to meld into the wall. “Anthony’s out on a food run. Hospital food can be awful.”

“I love you, you’re a saint,” Saph says, and then collapses onto the bench, listing to the side and almost pitching Ruben off as soon as Elizabeth drags them to take a seat.

“I didn’t know she was your aunt,” Loki says. He inclines his head to acknowledge Elizabeth, and meets Saph’s scathing glare. Thankfully, the unspoken threat isn’t carried out as Ruben retches again, and Saph immediately puts a hand on his back to rub circles and coo at him.

“I’m not,” Elizabeth says, “It’s just – it’s habit. They’ve always called me that out of respect and it never wore off.”

Loki takes a second to think about how he doesn’t really know how long Elizabeth has known the other children. Or how long the children have known her. They’re all friends around the Safehouse, and they all treat each other as – family, or something close to that, he’s not just going to throw that word around – but he has never really known about where they’ve come from. He knows he has no right to go prying, but there’s just something that feels…off.

Like there’s something else that’s supposed to be there. A certain closeness. Certain events. But it hasn’t happened, so now the story’s gone off-beat, has gone off the tracks. There is something missing, he thinks.

Or maybe not missing. Maybe there’s something that’s there that’s not supposed to be there.

He watches Sapphrel pull Ruben up and make him lean back against the wall.

“You okay?” they ask.

“Yeah, I’m – I’m fine. God, my professor is going to kill me. I think I finished saving my report. I’m not sure. I’m going to flunk – ”

“Okay, okay, Ruben – Ruby, listen. It’s fine. It’s going to be okay. I’ll finish your stupid report.” They untie their scarf from their neck to wipe at his face. He looks flushed from the dizziness.

Loki almost feels guilty for calling them over, but it’s genuinely an emergency.

“Is Cecil okay?” Ruben asks, holding the scarf to his face with a trembling hand. Saphrel’s kneeling on the bench trying to get the hair out of his eyes.

“He’s fine,” Loki says. He pulls out a folded piece of paper from his pocket and hands it over. Ruben almost drops the scarf to take it, but Saphrel makes him hold it in place and snatches it out of Loki’s grasp. “I’ve tried having the others see that, but they didn’t seem to know what it was. I’m not entirely well-versed in your Midgar – Earth cryptography.”

It burns him to admit it, but humans have plenty of ways to go about concealing messages, and he’s only gotten the grasp of the more common ones.
Saph sits down, crossing their legs underneath them, and Ruben leans over to take a look as they unfold the paper.

“I saw you writing in numbers once. You work with software, yes?” Loki asks.

“Yeah, I do,” Ruben says, and frowns when he looks at whatever Cecil’s written. 

Loki’s looked over it plenty of times. On the bloodstained paper, in messy, panicky handwriting that’s almost torn through the thin flower-patterned sheet, is:

who’s behind this who’s the 22152342
13444343154141111411232134443431541411114112321344434315414111141232

Both Ruben and Saphrel’s frowns deepen.

“Uh-huh,” Ruben says. “This – is not what I work with.” 

Loki clicks his tongue. Ah, well, the hard way it is, he supposes.

“He wrote this?” Saphrel asks. Ruben takes the paper away from them. “Cecil wrote this?”

“He had a vision,” Loki says.

“That…doesn’t look like a normal vision,” they say, concern flickering in their expression. “He’s never bled before. He never bleeds. You’re sure he’s okay?”

“Just a bit of hemorrhaging, but it’s stopped. He’s exhausted,” Loki says.

“The doctors are taking care of him, dear. Don’t worry,” Elizabeth adds.

Saphrel seems to relax at that, shoulders dropping. They nod.

Loki reaches out to take the paper away from Ruben. “We’ll have to do some research, then, as no one seems to know –”

“What? Wait, no. I said I didn’t work with this, but I didn’t say I didn’t know it,” he says. He glances up at Loki briefly. “This isn’t binary code, if that was what you were getting at.”

“You know what it is?”

“Yeah, I do.” Ruben lowers the paper, and Loki almost steps forward in his excitement. He’s promised himself he’d figure out exactly what is going on. This might be a lead. “It’s a Polybius cipher.”

He tilts his head, unfamiliar with the term, but Saphrel suddenly puts their face in their hands and groans. Curious.

“You have got to be kidding me.”

Elizabeth laughs. “Ah. I thought it looked familiar.”

Ruben pats his best friend on the shoulder gently. “I know you hate it, Saph, but apparently, Cecil got a vision of it.”

“No wonder he bled, I hate Polybius,” Saphrel says.
“I’m not familiar with the term,” Loki says, “What is it?”

Ruben draws a square in the air. “It’s a cipher. Uses a grid and everything – I think it’s way easier to show you. I’m not good with words.” He looks down at the paper. “And, I mean I hate doing these things manually, but maybe I can give you an example. Find a phone that’s not dead and some reception, and look up a decoder or something and we’ll get this done in a minute.” Then he ribs Sapphrel, elbow barely touching them. “You wanna help?”

Sapphrel actually narrows their eyes at him. “No. Go eat that piece of paper, I’m not doing anything with it.”

Ruben laughs.

“Is it that difficult?” Loki asks.

“Not at all,” Elizabeth says, while Sapphrel continues to mutter and Ruben tries to console them. “You see, these two used to have a habit of passing each other encrypted notes just for fun. Sapphrel just really hated Polybius.”

“I switched to something else after they superglued all my shoes to the floor of my room,” he says, and gets a punch to the shoulder for it. He just laughs again.

“Curious,” Loki says, “You two are interested in cryptography?”

They both pause and awkwardly shift in their seats.

“Well,” Saph starts, scratching their cheek. “I mean, it’s cool. And handy. But we mostly just…used it ‘cause his mom didn’t really like him hanging around me.”

“We sent each other notes instead. If they looked like gibberish, she left them alone. Thought it was unimportant.” Ruben shrugs.

“We never got out the habit,” Saph says, steering away from the topic. “Tante Eliza catches the notes sometimes.”

“Well, it was hard not to, when you roped the Cecil and Kevin into it.”

Ruben snickers suddenly. Sapphrel just looks apologetic.

“Yeah, anyway, just - give me paper. Get me a good phone. I’ll have your decryption in a bit. I’ll show you how it works.” Ruben says. He fishes his own phone out his jacket and shakes it. “Mine’s dead.”

“I’m like, on 2%,” Saph says.

There’s the sound of rapid footsteps going their way, and they both look up to see Rose and James headed towards them. James is holding a paper bag and eating a bagel. Rose looks alert, and seems relieved when she finds them in the hallway.

“Hey, Rose,” Ruben says.

“Hello, pool master, er – ” she pauses, appearing to have forgotten Ruben’s name. “Rock,” she says. Sapphrel doubles over laughing.

“Apologies. I forget sometimes,” she says, and then turns to Loki. “Is everyone here?”
“In the hospital, yes,” he says, “Except for Jade and Elizabeth’s husband.”

“Ah.” Rose turns to Elizabeth. “Is he on his way here?”

“Yes, dear. He’s just out on a food run,” she says.

Rose nods, and then opens the door to Cecil’s room. There’s no one else there aside from Cecil and Kevin, and she frowns.

“Where’s Jade again?” she asks.

“Sunny’s,” Loki says.

“Dave and John?”

“I believe they’re both in the cafeteria.”

Rose already has her phone out, texting Jade. Loki frowns.

“Is something the matter?” he asks. He takes his own phone out to alert everyone else to return, and behind him, Elizabeth messages her husband to hurry.

“I have a bad feeling,” Rose says, “And I’m not about to take chances.”

Dave and John arrive about ten minutes later, and Jade in half an hour. Elizabeth’s husband is almost running down the hallway when he makes it, and finally properly meets everyone. Rose pulls Loki aside while introductions are being made, as Dave’s doing a good job taking up the man’s time as they both compare their sunglasses.

“Is everyone here?” she asks, turning to the Cecil’s room door again, silently counting the brothers along as she does a headcount.

Loki frowns. “No, there’s supposed to be thirteen of us, counting Elizabeth’s husband.”

“Who’s missing?” Rose pauses, then, “G. G’s missing. Where is he?” She turns around, trying to search for him.

He’d been here a while ago. He’d been the one to alert them that Cecil needed help, after all. Jade had skywalked him along with the rest of them.

She had, hadn’t she?

Rose clenches her fists briefly. “We need everyone here,” she says, “I just have a bad feeling, it’s – it’s like something I’ve felt before, but I can’t figure out where I’ve felt it before. It’s just there. It’s – ” She runs a hand through her hair and sighs.

“He’s around here somewhere,” Loki says. “Perhaps in the cafeteria as well.”

“Well, we need to find him,” Rose says. “Otherwise, he might be in danger.”

She turns on her heel, about to walk back downstairs, when she sees Graham shaking hands with Anthony and already making conversation while John is laughing at something he’s said. She blinks. Loki just lets the tension leave his shoulders.

Graham adjusts his glasses. “Is something wrong?”
“Nothing,” Rose says, sighing. “Just relieved. I need everyone to stay together so we can keep track of you.”

Graham looks to Dave, who looks to John, who shares a look with his sister. Everyone turns to Loki after a moment.

“I’m not quite sure what is going on, but I suggest we listen to her,” he says, “Clearly, we’re dealing with something we’re not familiar with, and if Rose feels something is off, I think it would be best we heed that feeling.”

He sees Elizabeth’s husband bend down a little to whisper to her, and she answers. Probably explanations.

Rose nods, and then opens her mouth to say something, but then the lights overhead start to flicker.

Loki looks up at them. They don’t stop.

“Uh,” John says, and takes a step back. “What’s going on?”

Saphrel’s already got their back pressed to the wall. They look ready to run. Loki takes into account everyone in the hallway. Five of them are merely human and can’t defend themselves. Cecil and Kevin are still in the hospital room.

Dave flicks his hand out and catches the katana as it materializes out his sylladex.

“I love ghosts,” John says, “But please don’t be a ghost.”

Jade’s ears flick down for a second as she sniffs the air. “It’s not a ghost, I think.”

The lights are flickering faster this time, and Loki takes a step back, ready to defend, when they all go out at once.

The hallway is plunged into complete darkness, and he hears the murmurs of the other patients and visitors, as it seems even the room lights have gone out. The murmurs start getting louder, and doors are opening as people start to get out, taking their phones with them to at least get some light.

“Did the whole floor’s lights go out?” John asks.

“The whole hospital’s, maybe,” Dave says.

The nearest light that shines is James’ phone when he turns it on. Loki blinks as his eyes adjust to it, and he takes note that everyone is still accounted for when James slowly moves his phone to check.

And then the phone turns to the direction of Cecil’s room door, which is suddenly open, and there stands Cecil, with a grin so wide and so sharp it looks like his face will split any second, and eyes so completely black, Loki thinks he’s staring into nothingness itself.

Chapter End Notes

HAPPY HOMESTUCK DAY

[here’s a continuation to April 1st's joke]: vdfulilfhkludssduhqw.wxpeou.frp
(yes, there's a part of this that's included in the patreon version, but i cut it out of here for reasons)

Also, I'm not deleting the last chapter because people might want to try and solve things on it - and as you've noticed, it served as a bit of training for future polybius codes; so to the people who solved it, you know what to do - and also there's one of the fleeting characters there that I might (not final yet, but I just might) use for future chapters, just for fun and as a gift for a friend. That said, take everything you read from it (and from all the outside links it leads to) with a grain of salt. Happy tinhatting.
Cecil tilts his head, like a bird surveying its prey, still grinning. He laughs, and the voice is his, alright, but Loki thinks he can feel the undercurrent of something else there.

Neck still bent, Cecil turns to him. “Boo.”

That pulse of energy that ripples from him is there again, exactly like it had been when Loki had once felt him accidentally spread it out in an effort to defend himself, but it’s not just compulsion in there. There’s a psychic energy that takes Loki and everyone else standing in the hallway off their feet and slams them into the walls, hard.

Stars burst behind Loki’s eyelids as he screws his eyes shut in pain. Someone chokes out a gasp. He feels himself be dropped as whatever energy has gripped them dissipates, and his knees hit the bench painfully before he fully falls over onto the floor. There’s a series of sharp noises overhead, and he feels glass rain down on him as the lamps all explode.

He slowly pushes himself up, thankful for his constitution being stronger than the humans’, but then feels something heavy on his head, and he stops, still looking down at the floor. He doesn’t move, even when his eyes have adjusted to the darkness and he can see the bits of glass that have fallen right by him. He can see Cecil impatiently tapping his foot as he continues to hold the sword over Loki’s head.

Loki stays as still as he can.

Something tackles Cecil out of the way, and the katana he’s been holding clatters to the side. Loki immediately gets to his feet to see Dave pinning the boy to the floor, and then suddenly, Dave’s been slammed up into the ceiling by nothing. He hits an already-broken lamp and lets out a grunt of pain. He doesn’t fall back down.

His aviators do, and Cecil tramples them underfoot, crushing the glass. He leaves a bloody print on the floor when he walks to where Dave is still pinned up.

He holds out his hand, and the katana flies into his waiting palm. He barely gets to hold the hilt before he throws it up, and it sails to the ceiling, riding on psychic energy, and stabs Dave straight through his stomach.
Rose screams. “*No!*”

Cecil makes a motion at her, and she’s flung further down the hallway. Loki loses sight of her in the darkness, but he hears the screams of bystanders as they watch the fight.

“All, stop!” That’s Jade. Cecil just straightens his neck and tries to do the same thing to her, but she teleports out of the way and reappears behind him, gripping his arms and pulling them behind to restrain him.

He’s a powerful psychic, Loki knows. Much more powerful than his brother, in terms of sight, and apparently, in telekinesis.

“Jade, I wouldn’t —”

Jade suddenly lets Cecil go and doubles over, clutching her stomach. She coughs, spitting flecks of blood onto the floor. Cecil starts walking towards Loki, ignoring her as she lets out another gasp of pain at whatever internal organ he’s managed to rupture in her digestive system.

Dave falls from where he’s pinned to the ceiling. Gravity remembers its rules, and he slides down further on his sword until only the hilt is sticking out of his belly while the blade has driven itself through his back. The noise he makes reminds Loki of all the times he’s been on the field, watching soldiers be run through by their own weapons.

“John,” Loki says, stepping forwards to block Cecil’s path. “Get everyone else out of here.”

John doesn’t need to be told twice, and Loki feels the wind pick up, and hears footsteps quickly get away from where he is.

He’s facing down Cecil, black-eyed and still smiling at him.

“All, he says.

“All’s not home,” is what the thing wearing his friend’s face says, “Although I’ve always wanted to meet you, Silvertongue.”

“Funny that, I didn’t think I was wanted anywhere at the moment,” he says, “Let him go.”

“No,” it says, “I don’t want to.”

Loki holds his hands out for a moment, ready to summon his blades, and then – stops. He cannot guarantee that wounding the physical body would let the possessor leave it, and other than that, this is Cecil. He’s not going to risk everyone’s else’s wrath for hurting one of their friends.

He’s not going to risk Cecil’s life.

The thing pretending to be Cecil seems to understand, and it laughs. “Oh, you do grow soft, don’t you Silvertongue? All the time. Even when things are different, some things never change.”

“Get out,” Loki says, feeding magic into his voice.

The imposter just laughs. “This is still Cecil’s body, and this is still Cecil’s soul – and you know, the boy really does underestimate himself. I’d target Kevin because he’s got his own set of talents, but hey, maybe I’ll shake it up this time around. You wanna know what Cecil can do with just his mind, Loki?”

Loki takes a step back, ready to retreat. The thing raises Cecil’s hand towards him. “This.”
It’s like being suddenly plunged underwater. Loki feels cold wash over him, and hears a high-pitched noise suddenly rise in his ears, a bit like audio feedback ringing through speakers sharply due to faulty set-ups. He staggers, and feels his eyes droop, feels his limbs grow heavy, like he’s going to sleep but is half aware of what he’s doing.

“Draw your blade, boy,” it says, in Cecil’s voice, and Loki pulls his blade out of thin air in obedience, and realizes, oh.

Complete compulsion. The ability to run over someone’s agency and get them to do exactly what Cecil wants, a natural skill so powerful it matches Loki’s own, except Loki mostly depends on observing mannerisms and figuring out what the right thing to say is, and feed his words a little magic to make it effective.

This is different. This is just pure energy that makes people want to listen.

Cecil opens his mouth to speak and seems to pause, and then frown. Loki waits, and tries to push through the compulsion with his own magic, lifting up mental barriers, trying to focus. Cecil beats him to it, unfortunately, and says, “Hold it to your neck.”

He does it without hesitation, pressing the blade to his skin until it draws blood.

A ball of light whizzes past his side and hits the floor right by Cecil’s feet. The boy jumps back, nimble, just as it explodes.

Loki sees Rose’s shadow before he sees her, and he takes a few seconds just to turn to her to see why, still trying to fight through Cecil’s command.

There’s white fire around Rose, and her hair has gone brightly pale, drifting around her face as if the wind is about her, buoyed by the energy of her pure anger. Her eyes are pure white, glowing, and her skin has gone grey. He remembers a conversation by the window, so many nights ago, when he’d asked her where she’d found the demons under her skin.

Rose is baring her teeth, and they seem sharp.

She snaps her fingers, and Loki feels that wash of cold again, only this time, he feels himself fill into his limbs, willpower finally returning to him.

Cecil hisses, and flicks his wrist. Rose is flung to the wall, and she screeches, sounding inhuman. White fire blazes to life around Cecil’s feet, and he immediately backpedals.

Loki skywalks the small distance from where he’s standing to where Jade is currently doubled over on the floor, croaking in pain. If he can get her checked and healed, he can quickly save her from internal bleeding. Dave’s more of a problem, as he’s losing blood, and fast. At most, he’ll last an hour if they manage to stop the bleeding, but his stomach acid is going to eat through the rest of his organs if Loki doesn’t hurry.

He picks Jade up, wrapping an arm around her middle, and then slides over to Dave, taking advantage of the blood on the floor and ignoring the way it stains his jeans. He puts a hand on Dave’s shoulder, and in the next blink, they’re in Cecil’s hospital room.

It’s just as dark as the hallways, and he quickly lets go of Jade to lay Dave on his side carefully. He looks around, checking for where Kevin is.

He’s not pinned on the ceiling, thankfully. Loki stands. Kevin’s not sitting by the bed – he leaps over the bed when he finds the boy’s body crumpled on the floor, unconscious, and bleeding from the
side of his head, but otherwise, not life-threateningly harmed.

There’s another blast of light from outside.

Cecil’s angry voice is shouting with the undertones of malice. “This isn’t the first time I’ve killed horroterrors, you worthless degenerate!”

He prays Rose doesn’t kill Cecil, or that whatever’s possessing Cecil doesn’t kill Rose, but he’s got to take care of the humans he’s got here first. He presses a hand to Kevin’s temple and heals up the gash there, and gives a jolt of consciousness to the boy’s mind. He wakes up, slowly, disoriented.

“Get up, hide,” Loki says, helping him up. Kevin sits up, confused, but stands and shuffles his way over to the other side of the bed, trying to get to the corner.

He lets out a small squeak when he sees Jade and Dave. “W-what –”

“What do you remember?” Loki asks, rushing over and helping Jade sit and lean back against the foot of the bed.

There’s an angry yell from Rose outside. Kevin flinches.

“Cecil…” He trails off and turns to the open doorway, where’s there’s smoke and fire and light. The next explosion rocks the entire floor.

Jade is coughing as Loki brushes the hair out of her face. “D-Dave first,” she says, “He’s bleeding out. Help him first.”

“Did he do that?” Kevin asks.

Loki keeps his hand on Jade’s stomach instead. He can fix her internal damage better because she’s not bleeding out. Dave will take time — time Jade doesn’t have — and he needs to work on them both, but better to help the one who can be healed quicker.

“Cecil, I mean,” Kevin says, plowing on. When Loki ignores him still, he almost yells. “Loki, did my brother do this?”

“That’s not your brother,” Loki says.

Kevin flinches.

“That’s something else controlling him,” he continues. He says nothing else and lets his magic try to search for the damage in Jade’s system, and finds it half a minute later. Burst kidney. This will be messy.

Kevin marches towards the doorway.

“Kevin, stop.”

Loki and Jade turn to where Dave is on his side, wheezing. The pool of blood underneath him continues to spread, and he coughs weakly.

“That’s not your brother,” he says, repeating what Loki has said. He tries to sit up and slips, crashing his shoulder onto the floor painfully. Jade’s ears flick back at his pained whimper. “That thing is going to kill you,” Dave says.

Kevin takes in a deep breath, and then straightens his back, standing tall and proud. “Dave?” He
turns back at them, and for a moment, Loki thinks his eyes are glowing brightly - not with a Seer fugue’s lights, but of something else; it feels as if light itself has condensed in him for him to bend it as a weapon, and he’s a beacon in the darkness the hospital’s drenched in. “Stay alive.”

It sounds like a command. Dave tries to sit up again, and this time Loki gently pushes him back down.

The boy coughs again, and yells for Kevin to get back inside the room.

“Whatever’s possessing Cecil hasn’t killed him yet. It had the chance to,” Loki says, trying to be reassuring.

“He got lucky then,” Dave says, “Luck doesn’t last, Loki – ”

“His brother is still in there,” Loki says. His mind is working fast, and he’s trying to focus on several tasks at once, so he carefully chooses his words. Jade is breathing shallowly, and he needs to move fast before he loses them both. “He’s the reason Kevin is still alive, I think.”

Dave quiets. He turns his face so it’s hidden from Loki’s view, and he starts to shake as he heaves in a sob.

Loki doesn’t say another word and focuses on healing Jade. First, he condenses his magic into her burst kidney itself, willing it to knit itself back together, then slowly but carefully eliminates everything the organ has spilt into the rest of her system. It takes him more than half an hour, and in that time, he almost loses Dave, but he keeps a hand on the boy’s leg to feed magic into him as well, keeping him conscious and slowly healing his wounds. He can’t do it all at once without taking the sword out and precisely sealing up the impaled digestive tracts.

He’s sweating harshly by the time he’s finished healing Jade. This is well within his abilities, but he’s also had to keep pulling Dave back from the brink. The boy needs a blood transfusion, and fast.

Outside, Rose and Cecil are still duking it out, but faintly, so they seem to have moved to another area, and Kevin’s run to join in the fray a while ago. Loki hopes he really is still alive.

Jade huffs in a few breaths and tries to stand as Loki moves on to Dave.

“Is he going to be okay?” she asks.

Loki presses his lips to a thin line. He slowly grasps the hilt of Dave’s sword.

“I don’t know,” he says, “But I can try to do what I can.”

Jade puts a hand to her mouth, and then nods, eyes glassy, and disappears in a flash of green light to go help Rose.

Loki steels his jaw. Time to save a life.

Rose is half-conscious at the moment.

Horrorterror possession is not something she’d recommend to anyone, and she barely remembers the first time it happened, but right now, she’s very aware of how she moves her hands, how she scratches Cecil’s cheeks open with her nails, how she throws another ball of white fire at him with a scream of rage.
Of course, that also means she feels every moment Cecil breaks her fingers with a tilt of his head, but that’s a small price to pay for consciousness.

She’s lucid, even as she feels the horrorterrors thrumming under her skin. They’re angry, she thinks, and so is she, because her brother’s been hurt, but it’s not blind rage lashing out for the sake of lashing out. If she has to describe it, it feels like a partnership, like they’re working together, because the horrorterrors are pissed, and Rose is their conduit to getting back at whatever’s wearing Cecil’s face right now.

She has to wonder for a moment, exactly what this thing is, and what it’s done, but then Cecil screams: “This isn’t the first time I’ve killed horrorterrors, you worthless degenerate!”

She actually balks for a moment, but the realization catches up with her fast, along with the familiar feeling of a magnetic force yanking her feet out from under her, and she cracks her head on the floor and bites her tongue.

It feels thick in her mouth, and she curses, and slowly gets back to her feet, letting the dark energy help her stand through the pain. It’s killed horrorterrors. No wonder, then.

The question is, how?

Furthermore, who and what is it, that it could have such an ability? That it even took the time to kill horrorterrors. For survival? For necessity?

For fun?

She’s not sure if she has a connection to the horrorterrors that’s not rooted in magic, but she thinks she can feel a faint pulse of yes.

Rose shudders.

Then she crouches down and leaps at her opponent again.

It’s not Cecil, she knows that. She knows that the poor boy is just suffering, probably trying to fight his way through whatever’s overtaken his body, so she’ll apologize when she’s ripped out the thing that’s hijacked his mind and torn it to pieces. She’ll take him to Loki to be healed, and then she’ll make sure the thing that’s stabbed her brother will never come back to haunt them again.

Important? the horrorterrors seem to ask her.

She takes a punch to the throat, and responds by kicking up as she bends back and puts her hands on the floor to use the momentum of the punch for a flip. Her foot hits the underside of Cecil’s jaw. Thank the norns for the resiliency of godtier bodies.

Important. Is he important?

The horrorterrors aren’t talking to her anymore, she notes. They’re talking amongst themselves, and Rose doesn’t know how she knows this, but she does. They’re giving her space, giving her room to understand and operate even as she leeches off their powers to use it as her own.

Time sees to freeze as a thought hits her with overwhelming clarity.

They’re welcoming her.

They’re giving her room, not because she is just a puppet, but because they consider her a part of
them now. They know she is necessary, and they aid her not in the way they aid something they’re
possessing, not like last time. They aid her and let her keep her identity, because this time, they need
her help, and she needs theirs.

It’s symbiosis.

They seem to trill as she finally gets it.

She tries to think, as hard as she can, that yes, Cecil is important. She feels the horrorterrors’
understanding run through her mind, and their resolve to help.

She has to dodge a kick by crouching down, and rolls to side. She reaches out for the horrorterrors
again and asks why they want to help.

*Evil,* they say, *Evil you cannot even imagine.*

She frowns, but then has to halt her thoughts and focus on the fight as Cecil attacks again. He throws
her against the wall by sheer will, and she sees his nose start to bleed. His physical body can’t take it.
She claps her hands together and whispers a few words Loki’s taught her, and he’s blown back by
an explosion of fire at his feet.

She stands. Cecil throws her to the side again.

It goes on like that for a while. They both attack, dodge, and make each other crash onto surfaces,
hard enough that a normal human would have passed out or died.

But Rose isn’t really human; she hasn’t been for a long time. And Cecil – well, she just hopes his
physical body will hold out after the fight.

And then, a long, long while later, Kevin arrives, and Rose reaches out for him, yelling, “*No!*”

Cecil turns to his brother, grinning, and then…

Then he stops. Does nothing.

*There,* the horrorterrors say. *There, love. Brother. Stay your hand.*

Rose runs and tackles Cecil to the ground then, and he’s brought back to awareness and shrieks.

She lands a punch to his eye, his head snapping to the side, and for a moment she feels a similar fire
in him, a bit like the magic of the horrorterrors that’s with her now. She frowns, pauses, as Cecil
seems to zone out again.

Infighting?

*No.* The horrorterrors are spreading out, she thinks. *Help. He still has love in his heart.*

Rose doesn’t understand. She doesn’t do anything as Cecil just lies there, slowly frowning, and she
sees his eyes flicker. Literally flicker, from the reddish-black that’s taken over it to the cold light
that’s currently glowing from her own.

She stands, slowly, and takes a step back.

Cecil grits his teeth and sits up, eyes still flickering and screams, at nothing in particular.

“Cecil?” That’s Kevin.
“Shut up!” Cecil is scratching at his head, nails raking down on the wounds already opened on his cheeks, making more blood drip down to his chin. “Shut up, shut up, shut up shutupshutup – ”

Rose keeps her hands out, ready to attack just in case, but then Cecil suddenly looks up at her with glowing eyes, currently mirroring hers.

Oh.

So that’s what she felt. And then she frowns again, because the horroretters said that he had love in his heart, but Rose remembers her possession to be fueled by unbridled rage.

You loved your mother, still.

She flinches.

And then Cecil’s eyes snap to reddish-black again, and he grits his teeth, and throws himself at her.

Loki’s got Dave on the bed, both his hands on the boy’s wound, eyes closed in concentration as he tries to heal the damage as fast as he can before the kid bleeds out.

In hindsight, he really should have researched blood transfusion spells all those years ago. He’s not even sure they exist, so perhaps he’ll have to invent them, but clearly, they’re necessary in battle. Most people die more from blood loss than fatal stabs to the spine.

He’s thankful that he’d restocked on potions after his pocket space got ransacked, and he’d managed to grab the nearest one that’s currently acting as a stand-in for anesthetic, and a few bottles for antibiotics. Dave had almost choked while drinking them down, but he’d pulled through – unfortunately, the anesthetic one was strong enough to knock out an Asgardian, so Loki’s had to keep the boy awake again.

He’s not a doctor, and he might be enough of a healer, but this is a human he’s dealing with. One with sturdier constitution from being a god, but a human god still. Loki’s not sure he’s going to wake up again if he passes out, so he’s not taking any chances.

The sword had gone through the boy’s GI tract, so he’s going to have to fix that too, or else Dave’s going to spend a whole lot of time in the hospital until he heals, being fed through a tube. He doesn’t think anyone would appreciate that, Rose especially.

Dave coughs weakly again. He’s shaking.

Loki’s already gotten the exit wound fixed, because skin and veins are easy to work with, but internal organs? Not so much.

“Where are they?” Dave croaks.

“Don’t talk,” Loki says, “The more your diaphragm moves, the harder it is for me to fix the damages.”

Dave actually laughs. Loki wishes for a moment he’d snatched at least one apple of Iðunn.

“I’ve lost a lot of blood, Loki,” Dave says, “And John’s evacuated everyone else in the hospital, right? No doctors, no nurses…”
Loki frowns and concentrates his magic on stitching the boy’s intestines back together. Once they’re sealed up, he starts eliminating all the waste that’s spilled into places it shouldn’t have.

“It would be Heroic, I think,” Dave says.

“Dave,” Loki says, magic faltering for a second. He’s so exhausted. This is not his expertise. He can heal broken bones, little colds, little coughs – he’s not well-versed in abdominal trauma, at least not in practice. “Don’t leave your sister alone.”

“Do you miss your brother sometimes?” Dave asks. He really shouldn’t be talking, both because he’ll aggravate his injury and because his injury’s fatal enough that he’s at death’s door. Maybe it’s just him being a godtier, whatever that is. Maybe it’s him being stubborn.

Loki doesn’t answer for a while. He’s gotten all the waste and the acid out. Only a bit more to go until he can close the top layer of skin.

“Loki.”

“Yes,” he says, still reluctant to admit it. “Very much.”

Dave nods, and closes his eyes. “Maybe you’ll see him again,” he says. He doesn’t sound like he’s talking to himself. “When you do – maybe, you know, just maybe – maybe talk to him. Forgive him. Ask forgiveness. Whatever. Just talk. And you don’t have to be your usual eloquent self about it. Sometimes the most important conversations have the fewest words.”

Loki’s seen people die on the battlefield. He’s gone on adventures with Thor and his friends. He’s fought battles for Asgard. He’s seen soldiers fall and never get back up. He’s seen families mourn. But he’s never been at their side, he’s never had someone he knows actually die, right there in front of him. He’s never heard them talk, and sound so heartbroken from all their regrets.

“Dave,” he says, “Stay alive.”

Dave doesn’t answer.

Loki feels cold.

“Dave – ”

There’s a bright light, shining suddenly underneath Dave that Loki has to shut his eyes from it. He keeps his hands on the now-shallow wound on the boy’s stomach, almost just resembling a nick of a knife, and quickly feeds the rest of his magic into it. Maybe if he’s fast enough, whatever this is won’t take Dave away. No Heroic deaths, whatever that means, and no sacrifices. Rose will not lose a brother, everyone will not lose a friend, Loki will not fail –

He realizes his eyes are watering from desperation. He always fails, and he always keeps on failing.

He opens his eyes slowly as he feels the skin underneath his fingers smoothen out, like it’s never been broken, and pulls his hands away. He doesn’t want to see if Dave’s still breathing, or not breathing, rather, so he takes a step back, and focuses on the light.

He takes another step back, and then another, and notices that the light isn’t just something that’s enveloped Dave, but forms an insignia on the bed, bleeding out onto the floor. It resembles a gear, he thinks, and remembers the first time he’s met Dave when the boy was still wearing his ridiculous red-on-red outfit, with that same symbol on his chest.
There’s a hand on his shoulder, and he whips around, blades in hand in a flash of green, but is shoved aside. In the dim light, he’s not sure who he’s seeing, but from what he can make out, he knows it should be impossible. He freezes, surprised, and the figure walks over to where Dave’s still asleep.

“You never learned blood transfusions, did you?” the person asks.

Loki opens his mouth, but takes too long to answer, so they just wave a hand at him in dismissal.

“That’s fine, I’ll handle it.”

That makes him frown. “Who are you?”

He gets a grin in return, sharp and mischievous. “Exactly who you think I am, Loki.”

He’s aware that there are more people behind him now. He doesn’t know how they’ve gotten there, and when, but he still takes on a defensive stance. They all ignore him and gather around the bed where Dave is. When Loki moves forward, one of them pushes him back again.

“We’re here to help, don’t worry.”

“Put him to sleep. We don’t have time to argue with him,” the first one says.

Loki starts to protest, but one of them, who looks so painfully, painfully familiar, but with scratches all over his eyes, says, “Sleep.”

And he passes out, dropping to a heap on the floor.

Chapter End Notes

I KEEP FORGETTING TO MAKE A NOTE OF THIS BUT I’VE BEEN MEANING TO:
YOU SEE THE SHIP TAGS? THIS STORY ISN’T PRIMARILY ROMANCE, IN CASE YOU HAVEN’T NOTICED, SO LIKE - JUST A HEAD’S UP.

Anyway, haha, the mess gets messier. We’re not gonna see the answer to the Polybius in a while, and I’m so excited for the next chapter but we’re not seeing that until next week so :c

And I’m so glad that godtiers have sturdier constitutions than humans because then I can botch up injuries a little (I...might have forgotten how impalement injuries work right after I used it for another thing just last month. Wow).

HAPPY 4/20 TOO!

(Also I edited this a little wired on caffeine and might have made errors. Please point them out so I can fix them, thanks!)
The young man’s visitor still doesn’t arrive, but an unexpected letter does. If Aradia’s had thoughts about their generous host being in league with whatever made that wall of blood somewhere in the corner of the universe, they’re all washed out by the way he seems to pale at seeing the tiny scrap of blood-stained paper inked with half-incoherent gibberish. And he’s already a little ashy, so that’s a feat.

She watches him from the stairs as he grabs the letter off the coffee table, hands shaking, reads it over and over, before he rushes to go find a scrap of paper and a pen. Once he has these in hand, he poises the yellow pen over the pad and then – does nothing.

He sighs, and leans forward, shoulders sagging.

He drops the pen onto the table and puts his face in his hands. Defeated.

“What’s wrong?” Aradia asks.

He doesn’t even flinch, which means he’s long been aware that she’s there but has just been under too much stress that he’s opted to ignore her. “Nothing,” he says, voice muffled.

“That’s clearly not nothing.”

He lifts his head and smiles for a moment, and it seems strained. “Nothing you should concern yourself about, I mean.”

She raises an eyebrow. “I ended up here for a reason, didn’t I?”

“Ah,” he says, and laughs, but spreads out his palms. It’s not just honesty that he’s trying to show. It feels more like giving up. Like he’s held onto something for so long, and Aradia’s just arrived at the right time to see it break.

“They…” He pauses and licks his lips, chapped, as he tries to find his words. “They want me to help. Somehow.”

Aradia tilts her head. “Your friends?”

“Yes,” he says, “But I can’t. I can’t leave this place – I mean, I can, but…”

“He’d get you,” she says. She’s heard enough of his story that she’s able to piece a few things together. “And he’d probably kill you again.”

He gives her another strained smile, and as he leans back into the couch, his body flickers, from that of a perfectly healthy young man’s, to an absolutely mangled corpse.
His right arm is missing, torn off, from the way the skin and the muscle are frayed from the stump. His right leg has most of its flesh shredded, exposing bone. There is a huge chunk missing from his neck, and a hole that’s gone straight through the center of his collarbones. There are marks all over his cheeks and eyes, and his eyelids have been carved out, his sockets empty.

His sweater and pants have also flickered into his old Knight’s garb, faded, and just as torn and bloody. Its insignia can’t be seen from the amount of blood there.

“By the Empress,” Aradia breathes. She’s seen violence and the corpses left behind by it, but she can practically taste the malice that drips with this particular murder.

“This place is warded,” he says, “Our Mage made sure of that. He couldn’t save me from death, so he’d save me from nonexistence. The Heir of Blood can’t get here.”

“What about Lord English?” Aradia asks.

He laughs, still somehow able to speak with his torn-out throat. “The Heir of Blood was birthed for a purpose.”

Aradia frowns.

The young man gets up and starts pacing, leaving a trail of blood all over his carpet. It’ll probably go away as soon as he remembers to change his corporation again.

“I have a job here. Even if I’m hiding. Even if I’m like…well, this,” he says, “And I’m – I’m done with fighting. I hate fighting. I hate the war, Aradia, I’ve been waist-deep in it for so long.”

“How old are you?” Aradia asks.

“I don’t remember,” he says, and he says it with a sort of mirthless air that makes Aradia’s stomach drop.

“How long has it been since you and your friends started the game?” she asks again, even though she knows the answer will be –

“I don’t remember.”

“くそ,” she mutters under her breath.

“I don’t remember how long it’s been since I’ve died either,” he says, “Time’s even harder to tell in dream bubbles, even if it doesn’t pass at all.

Aradia nods. “What’s your job here, in your bubble?”

“Since it’s warded, it’s a perfect hiding place for ghosts,” he says, “They bring me souls here sometimes, and I protect them. I help them remember and come to terms with their death. I guess, after I died, I took on a role similar to yours – but funny, isn’t it, since you took on your role after you came alive.”

“Funny that,” she says.

“Yeah.” He stops his pacing and folds his hands behind his back as he finally flickers to his bloodless state. Aradia definitely prefers this form. Less disgusting to look at. “Funny that.”

“Where are the ghosts?”

"
“They usually leave,” he says, “After their war is done. And understandable, as they’d rather live in
t heir own dream bubbles anyway.”

“Ah,” she says. “So you’ve been here as a liminal space for a long time?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you friends visit?”

“Not for very long,” he says, “And not all at once. I haven’t seen my brother – ” He stops suddenly
and looks down. Goes back to the couch to sit.

Aradia shifts on her feet. “Who killed you?”

“A friend,” he says. “A very dear friend.”

It’s not betrayal in his voice, to her surprise. Just…sadness. Sadness akin to a loss, like he had been
the one to experience the death of a loved one, instead of the one being killed.

“And you don’t remember when?” she asks. He shakes his head. “Or where?”

“Oh, that I know,” he says.

“Where, then?”

“In the arms of my brother,” he says.

Aradia closes her eyes slowly. “I’m sorry.”

“You should tell him that. He kept screaming and I couldn’t even see him, because I didn’t have my
eyes anymore. Hah.” His laugh comes out as a bitter huff. “I’m sorry, I just – I miss him. I wish I
could help. But goddamn it, I’m scared, Aradia.”

She doesn’t blame him. His corpse bears the evidence of what he’s gone through, and if he’d died in
the arms of his brother, that meant he’d been alive and alert the whole time he’d been torn apart like
prey.

Aradia makes her way down the steps, slowly, and sits beside him on the couch, putting a hand to
his shoulder. “It’s fine to be scared.”

“I-it just feels like a betrayal, you know?” He puts his face in his hands again, tired and shameful.
His breaths come out in sobs. “They need my help, and I can leave this bubble any time I want, at
the cost of just risking myself again. They’ve been out there fighting for years. And I’m too scared to
go out.”

He curls in on himself, suddenly looking small and fragile, and Aradia realizes as his shoulders shake
that he’s actually crying now.

“You’ve fought your battles. I think you’re owed a peaceful afterlife,” she says, easily slipping into
her role as a wandering ghost’s guide.

“Hah!” He wipes at his eyes furiously, even though his tears are still streaming down his face.
“There’s not going to be a peaceful afterlife as long as that thing is still roaming the universe.”

Aradia turns her attention to the scrap of paper on the coffee table. She looks to him, silently asking
for permission, and he waves a hand at her to go ahead. She picks it up and studies it, and frowns
when she sees it’s really gibberish.

“What do they want you to do?” she asks instead.

“There’s too many people they need to look after,” he says, “And they say – they say the Heir of Blood’s already gotten some of their wards incapacitated. They need more people on board.”

Her frown deepens. She puts the scrap of paper down. “And they need you back on the field,” she says, mostly to herself. “What are you supposed to do, exactly?”

“If I remember how we did things before correctly, a lot of it has to do with herding.” He’s wiping at the tear tracks on his face now, sniffing. “Sometimes, the people we need are scattered all over the place. We need to bring them together, at the right time, and the right place. It’s just tactical theatre, really.”

She nods, and then turns to him. She’s never quite understood the expression ‘having a certain gleam in the eye’, but she supposes that’s what she’s doing right now; she has a certain gleam in her eyes, and the young man immediately gets what she’s trying to say without words.

He opens his mouth, closes it, and then shakes his head vehemently. “No. No. Absolutely not. If I’m not getting out of here for fear of my life, and I’m already dead – ”

“I don’t know what happened between preparing to fight Lord English and then finding myself in the middle of nowhere with Sollux alive,” she says, “But I know I can get answers.”

“Aradia,” he says, “This is not your war to fight.”

Aradia laughs. “A while ago, you were saying Sollux and I would have to leave eventually.”

The young man looks down at his hands. “Now I wish you didn’t have to do that.”

“Your session got tangled with mine,” she says, “I think that means this is also my war as much as it is yours.”

“Aradia, I’m too scared to fight with you,” he says.

“Then stay here,” she says, “There’s bravery in being a guide too.” She glances at the fishbowl, hidden behind the walls of books, and smiles sadly.

He sighs. “I can’t send them a message, anyway,” he says. He reaches up and pats at his collarbone. “I don’t have the means to anymore.”

“What do you mean?” Aradia asks, eyeing the placement of his hand. A missing necklace?

“He stole it from me,” the young man says, “That was why he killed me. I wouldn’t give it up.” He backtracks at Aradia’s confused look. “Our Mage made us necklaces that would allow us to skywalk - teleport everywhere in the universe, so long as we knew where it was.”

“Oh,” she says.

“We took the Heir of Blood’s when he went rogue,” he says, “In retaliation, he stole mine, and killed me to get it.”

“But tortured you in the process,” she says, bile rising to her throat.

“That’s pretty much when everyone else realized he’d really gone off the deep end.” He leans back
on the couch again. Aradia lifts her hand off his shoulder.

“They were able to send you a message,” she says, “They’ll find a way to get your message back.”

“My answer’s just, ‘I’m sorry, no. I’m too much of a coward.’ And that’s not a good message to get.”

“You can tell them I’d be happy to help,” she says.

His expression softens. “Aradia.”

She says his name then, cheeky, and he laughs despite it all. He takes the pad of paper and the pen, and then starts writing down his answer. The sentence is coherent, thankfully, and Aradia understands it and smiles.

“I’ll need to brief you and Sollux on everything if you’re serious about this,” he says.

“I am,” she says, and stands. He looks like he’s regretting agreeing to this. “I’m gonna go get Sollux, okay?”

“Yeah,” he says, running a hand over his face. “Yeah, okay.”

She makes her way towards the stairs again, and then turns back to him for a moment, smiling warmly. “Hey,” she says, and he looks so, so tired and old, despite the fact that he clearly died so young. “It’ll be fine.”

He just nods. “I hope so, Aradia. I hope so.”

Rose kicks Cecil right in the stomach, and he keels over, hissing. His eyes are flickering, and she yells at Kevin to hurry up before his brother loses it again, but he probably can’t understand it given that she’s still shrieking like a horrorterror. Jade, who’d arrived earlier in a flash of green right in the middle of the fight (and had almost gotten hit until she teleported herself a few ways off), puts her hand on Kevin’s shoulder, and they both reappear behind Cecil.

Kevin wraps his arms around his brother’s middle, and Cecil squirms, screaming.

“Arms – arms, Jade, help – ” Kevin tries to avoid Cecil’s flailing, and Jade grabs the boy’s arms and pulls them down, hands sparking with green arcs of electricity as she channels her First Guardian capabilities.

Cecil knees her in the mouth. She grunts, digs her nails into his arms, and then spits out blood to the side, growling.

Her ears are flattened on her head, a show of aggression, and more green sparks are flying all around her. Cecil doesn’t seem to back down, also baring his bloodied teeth. His nosebleed has gotten worse, and he appears to be crying blood now. Rose knows his physical body isn’t going to hold out long under all that strain.

Come on, hurry up, she pleads the horrorterrors. They send her back a pulse of annoyance, and a
note that they are trying their best here.

“Cecil.” Kevin looks like he’d rather bolt, what with Jade and Cecil looking ready to murder each other right there, but he holds his place, wrapping his arms around his brother tighter. “Cecil, please stop. Please, wake up.”

Cecil doesn’t listen.

Rose steps up behind Jade and lifts her chin, a warning.

“I’m not scared of you, Lalonde.” The voice that comes out of Cecil’s mouth is still different, slightly two-toned.

She tilts her head.

He laughs and coughs up blood onto his shirt.

“Cecil,” Kevin says again.

There’s the flicker in his eyes again, and this time the horroterrors’ hold lasts a little longer.

“Kevin, keep going,” Jade says.

“She’s not going to last long,” Cecil says when the red-black has returned. “Your brother’s not gonna last long.”

“You shut up. He’ll last long enough to kick you out of his body, you dick,” Kevin says.

“You’re so sure of that?”

“I’m very sure of that. I’m not his brother for nothing,” he says.

Cecil’s head turns to him and smiles that unnervingly wide smile of his. “Then I’m sure you know your brother’s suffering a massive internal bleeding right now,” he says, “Oh, and a hell of a concussion. That, along with his dehydration and starvation and fatigue…” He tries to shrug, but with his arms being held down, it looks awkward. “Well.”

“Shut up.”

“Don’t want to,” Cecil says, “Isn’t this what your brother is known for? Talking and talking and talking – he’s rather talented at it.” He pauses, and then says, "Let me go."

Rose immediately snaps her fingers the second she sees Kevin and Jade freeze as Cecil’s hold washes over them. When horroterror magic has overridden his command, Jade sighs in relief, while Kevin just swallows thickly, grasping the gravity of the situation, of facing off against his brother when there’s no holds barred.

Cecil spits at Rose and gets blood on her shirt. “Piké twa.”

Rose looks down at the bloodstain in disgust.

“Get. Out,” she says.

“No can do,” Cecil says.

“You probably can’t pilot a dead body for very long.” Jade says, “Especially not when Cecil’s fighting you too.”
“No, I can’t,” he says, turning back to her and ignoring the second part of what she said. “And excellent suggestion, Jade. I’ll just have to make this a dead body, shouldn’t I?”

It’s like time stops all over again. Rose begs the horrorterrors to hurry up, and she feels the flare of their anger, but ignores it, pushing on for them to work faster, or else there’s going to be a corpse in this hallway.

Jade’s eyes widen. Kevin stiffens. Rose raises her hand, glowing with white light, but it’s only a threat, because if she strikes now, Cecil’s a dead body either way.

“By the way, Rose,” the thing in Cecil says, blood dribbling down his chin, “I’d say I’m sorry for your loss, but then I’d be lying.”

Then he opens his mouth and bites on his tongue, hard, while Kevin screams.

The blood spurts all over Jade, and all over Kevin’s sleeves. They both freeze for second, and then Kevin lets his brother go, screaming incoherently in his panic, while Jade’s shaking hands are still on the boy’s arms.

Rose stares in shock, the white fire around her dying down as the horrorterrors focus all of their effort on Cecil. The reddish-black of the possession leaves his eyes as the horrorterrors take the place of whatever’s been puppeteering Cecil this whole time.

Rose blinks then, feeling herself finally come back, with nothing else taking up space in her mind and feeding her more magic. Cecil is choking on his own tongue and blood.

Jade is still staring, blood all over her glasses.

“Help!” Kevin is crying, ugly tears streaming down his face. He’s shaking. “Help! Someone – please, for the love of god, help!”

Cecil is convulsing, trying to take in gasping breaths through a throatful of blood, which isn’t helping. White fire is sparking around his fingertips.

Rose kneels down beside him, and starts writing runes in the air. “Okay,” she says, “Okay, alright. We’ll take care of this.”

Kevin, not listening, is still desperately calling for help. But the hospital’s been evacuated by everyone else. They’re alone, unless someone comes back in to assist from hearing Kevin’s screaming.

She tries to remember all of the lessons Loki’s taught her, tries to remember if she’s read anything about people choking on their blood because they’ve bit off their tongue, and berates herself, because no, she hasn’t read anything on that.

She’s always wanted to be a psychologist. This isn’t her field. She reads and reads, but this is one of the subjects she hasn’t chanced upon.

She wipes at her tears and grits her teeth. “Jade,” she says, and when Jade doesn’t respond, she shakes her friend’s shoulder. “Jade.”

“Yes?” Jade asks, sounding out of it.

“Jade, I need you to go outside and alert whatever staff you can find that the threat has been neutralized, but we have two people injured,” she says, “Cecil and Dave. Please. Make no mention
of the possession, or they’ll point fingers. Please. Hurry.”

Jade jerkily nods, still looking like she’s not quite focused, but then disappears in a flash of light.

Kevin’s hand scrabbles for his brother’s, and he squeezes it weakly, shaking. “Cecil, stay alive,” he says, “Please. P-please.”

Rose swallows thickly and focuses on doing what she can, which isn’t much. Her tears are coming down faster now as Cecil’s movements start to slow.

Kevin is wailing.

“Poetic, isn’t it?” someone says behind her. She stiffens.

In the darkness, she can’t see anything clearly, and the voice makes a chill run down her spine. Kevin looks up, slowly, but all he does is cry.

“Look at your eloquent little speaker and that powerful tongue of his.” Footsteps, getting closer. The barrel of a gun presses to the back of Rose’s head.

“Stop it,” Kevin finally grits out, but it’s weak and small.

“I spared you this time, Palmer,” the voice says, “You had best be grateful.”

“We have nothing to be grateful for,” Rose says, “You – ” She can’t say it. She can’t dare to say it. She knows Loki has her brother in Cecil’s room, and he’s fixing him up. He might still be alive.

“I killed your brother?” the man finishes for her instead.

“I will rip your throat out,” Rose says hoarsely, feeling the familiar energy of the horrorterrors returning again.

Cecil tries to take in a shuddering breath. His eyes are still lit up, so he may have a fighting chance yet.

“Go away,” Rose says, and helps rolls Cecil onto his side so he at least spits out the blood. She doesn’t know if it will help much, but she’s hoping. Her hands are shaking, and she realizes that one of them is right on top of Kevin’s, when she sees the glow emanate from both of their hands.

Kevin’s eyes are bright and angry.

“Go away,” he repeats after her.

A Knight and Seer of Light, facing down the stuff of nightmares in a dark hallway, while both of their brothers are fighting for their lives. It sounds like the beginning of a bad joke. A terrible, terrible joke, because it’s not funny, and it’s not supposed to be funny.

The light is getting brighter.

There’s a red flash, and Rose looks down to see the insignia of Time right below Cecil. She inhales sharply. Dave? Slowing down time for Cecil to survive a little longer?

The cold metal behind her head pulls away, and she hears the annoyed click of a tongue, and then feels the oppressing presence behind her disappear. Seconds later, she hears footsteps, panicked and fast, from the hallway ahead, right where Dave and Loki should be. There’s a flash of green behind her. Jade.
Kevin slumps over as the light between their hands fizzes out, and he cries. Underneath them, the red mark of Time also fades.

Steve Rogers arrives to visit her and her friends hours later. Rose spots him as soon as he’s right in the hallway where she is, and when he says, “Hey,” and holds out his arms, she actually clings to him and sobs.

He pats her back softly in comfort, mindful of her bandaged injuries, she’s actually taken a lot of damage, and she lets herself freely cry.

She has not let herself cry this much in years. She remembers her mother’s death, she remembers getting herself so drunk in the meteor and letting her problems drown her instead of the other way around, she remembers one night in the Safehouse when she’s realized she might not see her other friends again.

But she hasn’t felt this helpless in a while. Not in a long, long time, and people need to remember, that even the smartest and bravest of leaders and warriors break down at a certain point.

Steve Rogers says nothing and just holds her. After a while, she sniffs and eventually breaks away, mumbling her thanks and looking down at the floor.

He gives her shoulder a comforting squeeze, and then turns to hug Jade when she runs over, blood still all over her shirt and glasses. Jade stands beside his sister, expression closed off and blank.

Tony Stark swears behind him when he spots Jade’s bloodied state. “What the hell happened?”

“We got here too late,” Steve says, and he sounds angry at himself. “That’s what happened.”

Someone had, in fact, phoned the Avengers, but given that it had been a surprise attack, and a very small one confined only to a hospital, verification had taken a while, and the team had also taken some time to assemble. Or at least, that’s what Rose has heard. She has suspicions.

The time had been useful to them though, as Jade had managed to teleport James, along with the pool master and their best friend, back to the bunker before S.H.I.E.L.D’s people had arrived (and while the original plan had been to have the duo look after James, especially after he’d been shaking from hearing all the explosions inside the building while everyone was running downstairs, it looked like the man would have to take care of them, because the pool master had been hyperventilating and crying before they’d left, and their best friend looked helpless trying to console them), and the staff had gotten back into the hospital to quickly assist with Cecil and Dave.

Some of the lights are still busted, but patients have been moved to more well-lit areas. Rose is glad, mostly because she doesn’t want to keep staring at the blood on the ceiling and the floor.

The place is crawling with reporters, although thankfully, security has been trying to keep them from approaching any of the Safehouse crew. From what Rose has heard, the official story is that someone had attempted to attack the whole crew while they were here for Cecil, who was already sick, and they evacuated the whole building, and fought off the attacker, even while two of their members took huge damages.

Rose has a lot of questions, because some things don’t make sense, but she’s too tired right now to get her brain fully running.
She does know that the other Avengers are also here, minus probably Thor, and that S.H.I.E.L.D. agents are here too, to take a closer look at things. Which means that they might be able to take them all in, for interviews, or interrogation, whatever they want to call it, and maybe not let them out, because they’re mutants.

She knows it’s paranoia talking, but at this rate, she’s not taking any chances.

“Steve, you didn’t know,” Jade mumbles into his shirt. Her glasses must be digging painfully into her face, but she’s still not pulling away. Rose hears her sob. John puts a hand on his shoulder, and she moves one of her own hands from Steve’s back to place it over her brother’s.

“Jade, protecting New York is our job,” Steve says, “You’re kids. You shouldn’t have to fight.”

Jade just laughs bitterly.

“It was about time someone decided to target you,” a woman says, and when Rose turns, she’s facing the Black Widow, standing just beside Tony. Rose decides she’s really too tired to deal with this right now. “Considering you’re one of New York’s strongholds.”

Rose just hums. Buttering her up, right in front of Tony Stark too. She giggles when she sees the man’s flat, unamused look.

“Did you see what they looked like?” Romanov asks.

“It was dark,” Rose says, “Ask anyone. The entire hospital shut off its power.”

“Inside job?” Tony asks, sharing a look with Romanov. She crosses her arms and turns to Rose.

“All I know is that he had a gun,” Rose says, “And he pressed it to the back of my head.”

Tony curses again.

Romanov just raises an eyebrow at Rose, but Rose just says flatly, not even trying to look and sound dead because she really is so exhausted that she just wants to sleep, “I wish I knew more about what’s going on.”

The woman studies her for a moment, and then, deciding she’s not much use when she’s emotionally drained, turns away, maybe to go find evidence or someone else to interrogate.

Rosecatalogues everyone’s location. At least everyone from the Safehouse crew still here in New York is just sitting in Cecil’s room, as they boy’s operation has already finished, and he’s still on rocky waters from all the beating he’s gotten (and she feels her stomach turn at that), but at the very least, at the moment, he’s alive.

Jade finally lets go of Steve, takes off her glasses and rubs at the lenses frantically with her sleeves. John sighs, and gently takes them out of her hands.

“Jade,” he says.

“I panicked,” she says, “There was so much blood, and I panicked.”

“It wasn’t your fault, okay,” he says. Then, after a while. “You almost died too.”

Steve looks down at that.

Rose just sighs. She’s lost count how many times today she’s done that.
“You know,” Tony Stark says, keeping his voice low, “This wasn’t how I imagined first meeting you guys.”

She gives him a small smile. “Likewise, Mr. Stark.”

“Don’t worry about your friend and your brother, I’ve got them covered.”

Rose’s shoulders sag. She hasn’t even thought about the bills. In the middle of worrying whether her brother is going to live, she’s forgotten about that.

He’s still in the ER.

She feels her eyes heat up again. “Thank you, Mr. Stark.”

“Hey, it’s okay, kid. It really is our job to keep people safe but - ” He looks towards the door of Cecil’s room. “Looks like you had to step in this one time.”

“I don’t know what he wants from us,” she says, forgetting Tony might not know what she’s talking about.

“Some people…” he says anyway, “Some people just want bloodshed, I guess.”

She nods.

“Your brother’s operation still isn’t done?” Steve asks. Beside him, John’s managed to calm his sister down. She’s still shaking a little, but she’s stopped fiddling with her glasses, and has put them on.

“Yeah,” Rose says, “That’s Cecil in there.”

As she’s turned to Steve, she misses the way Tony Stark’s expression morphs to surprise, and how he sends Steve a look.

“Can we…” Steve trails off.

“Might as well,” Rose says. “Come on.”

She doesn’t know why she does it. She knows there’s nothing nudging her to do it, to invite him and Tony in the hospital room. She knows there’s no compulsion from an outside force. When she looked back at this later, she figures it’s just luck. She figures she’s just tired, and Fate does spin in mysterious ways sometimes.

She opens the door. Kevin is right beside his brother, still wiping at his face as he cries. Mr. G and Mrs. H’s husband are asleep, both on opposite sides of the room, each passed out on their own chairs. Mrs. H herself is on the opposite side of the bed, hiding Cecil’s face from view. Everyone else has taken the mattresses that the nurses have brought in earlier and have huddled on the floor, fast asleep from fatigue and stress.

Loki raises an eyebrow from where he’s sitting beside Kevin, hair askew, dark circles under his eyes already, bloodied sleeves pulled up to his elbows.

“This is Cecil?” Tony asks, motioning to the bed.

“Yeah,” Jade says.

Rose pulls Steve aside, tugging on his sleeve for a moment, while Jade follows Tony to see Cecil, John close behind her.
“Rose?” Steve asks, keeping his voice low.

“He could control people,” Rose says, whispering. Loki is staring at her, green eyes sharp and alert and questioning, but she holds his stare. “He didn’t have to come here directly to get things done.”

“The blackout,” Steve whispers.

“He made Cecil bite his own tongue off,” she grits out. She draws in a breath and holds it, trying not to cry.

Steve nods stiffly. “We’ll get him, Rose.”

She lets him go then. “I appreciate it, but don’t make promises you can’t keep, Captain.”

He says nothing, and goes to Tony’s side.

Loki stares at her for a moment longer before looking away, turning to Cecil again, and then the heartbeat monitor. Rose gets the message. They’d talk later.

She sinks down in the chair by the wall and puts her face in her hands.

Chapter End Notes

i'm gonna see infinity war tomorrow and i can't stop vibrating - and i'll also be very tired when i get home so HEY ADVANCE CHAPTER WHOO HOO
I'm The Only Friend That Makes You Cry

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There is a huge aquarium in one of the rooms.

Tony Stark has had it built ever since he’s seen Feferi Peixes. He doesn’t know when she’ll get to use it, but he’s promised himself that she will, and when Tony Stark sets his mind on something, then Asgard help everything that wants to stop him, because the man would halt at nothing, save for maybe a threat to the people he cares about – because everybody knows threatening Tony himself doesn’t really do anything – to get what he wants.

Of course, the existence of Eridan Ampora had been a surprise, but seeing as the troll is also a seadweller (he’d guessed as much from the fins and the gills), he’d been more than happy to lend it to the boy. Eridan had looked at the aquarium with a look of suspicion, especially while it was still being filled up with water, and then just looked disgusted when Stark suggested fake algae and rocks and corals like in actual tiny aquariums for pet fish.

Still, Eridan had climbed in it to sleep, although not before, Karkat noted, putting a hand on the glass and whispering something that vaguely sounded like “Anshu”, the way people usually do when they forget something due to how busy their schedule is, and something reminds them of something very, very important.

So on the day Tony Stark reveals Feferi Peixes’ location to Karkat, that aquarium is where Karkat is currently storming towards, pajama pants too big on him nearly making him trip as he hurries. Roxy is on a sofa beside the aquarium, fast asleep, a thick, open book about marine biology on her lap, and Davesprite is sleeping on a pile of blankets on the floor, a hastily-made nest.

Tony is right behind Karkat, trying to get him to stop, but Karkat marches up to Eridan’s aquarium anyway and yells, “Eridan!”

Eridan doesn’t stir. Davesprite does, immediately taking to the air and unsheathing the sword from his chest. Tony makes a face at it, still disturbed at the action. Roxy blinks and croaks, “What?”

Karkat tries again. “Eridan, wake up!”

Roxy starts to sit as he raises his hand. “Wait – no, no, don’t hit the glass – ”

Karkat hits the glass with his palm three times, rather forcefully. The effect is almost instantaneous. Eridan’s eyes snap open, solid violet, and he darts back quickly, moving through the water with ease. His fins flatten on the sides of his head, his gills open to let out streams of bubbles, and he bares his needle-sharp teeth and his claws. And then he shoots forwards until his nose is almost touching the glass, and he’s right in front of Karkat. All this, in less than a second.

Karkat is so surprised he actually takes a step back and mutters old, old profanities in his mother tongue.

Eridan tilts his head, and when he blinks, his eyes are back to normal. Or, well, as normal as Karkat’s ever seen it. With yellow sclera and violet irises and everything.

He swims up to the top of the aquarium, just as fast as he’s moved before, and heaves himself up so he can start climbing down the ladder on the side.
“Holy shit,” Tony says, “What – what are you?”

“A highblood,” Eridan bites out, voice still throaty from being so rudely woken up. He hops off the ladder and onto the mat under it, and grabs the towel slung on the rack to dry himself off. Karkat has to give it to Tony, the man builds things with preparedness in mind.

“A what?”

“It’s nothing,” Roxy says. She picks up the book on her lap and closes it gently. “You’re lucky Eri’s not some common fish, Kar. Don’t stir the water like that.”

Karkat wrinkles his nose. “Kar?”

“Okay, but what’s a highblood?” Tony asks, and then gets distracted when Davesprite lowers back to his nest and puts the sword back in his chest again.

Eridan waves a hand vaguely and ignores Tony. “She does that, you get used to it.”

“You like being called Eri,” Roxy says.

“Trust me, Rox, I’d rather be called Your Highness, but you’re stubborn.” Eridan drops the towel back to the rack, standing in the middle of a cold room, on a rainy dawn, in a wetsuit, not even shivering. “Now what do you want?”

“Eridan, he found Feferi,” Karkat says.

Now, when breaking news to friends, whether it be good news or bad news, people often like to build suspense first. The reason for this, usually, is not because of some innate sadism that wants to see people squirm – and the reason for the ‘usually’ is because there are some people who like to see people squirm at the discomfort and terror of not knowing something. The fear of not knowing something, not knowing if it’s bad or good, causes people to be anxious, or nervous, or be a bit of both. Because people, when they feel suspense, often immediately think of bad news.

So people would usually categorize building suspense as a bad thing, but really, when one looks at it from another perspective, it’s not.

When someone goes to their friend and says, “Hey, I have some news,” that is a small way of creating suspense, because then the friend says, “Oh, is it good or bad?” And most of the time, people think it’s bad news, and so they prepare themselves for it. When it’s bad news, their hearts drop, but they’ve already prepared themselves somewhat (but the truth is, no one can really prepare themselves for bad news – heartbreakingly devastating news, like the death of a loved one). When it’s good news, they feel relieved.

But the important thing here is that when you give people a head’s up for something, they expect something is coming, and they prepare themselves for it. They don’t know what’s coming, but they won’t be too surprised when something is thrown at their feet.

Unfortunately, Karkat Vantas has not created any suspense, or given Eridan Ampora a heads-up, so the news dropped at his feet comes completely out of left field, and had Eridan been psychically inclined, all the building’s circuit breakers would have burst the second he heard the words leave Karkat’s mouth.

“What?”

“He found Feferi,” Karkat repeats, pointing to Tony.
At this point, Eridan’s brain has to reconcile Karkat’s words with his thoughts, as all people do when they process shock, and he does nothing, so Karkat frowns in confusion. Does Eridan not want to find Feferi?

He understands that they’d had a bit of a nasty split regarding their moiraillegiance – and at this, he glances at Roxy, but that’s none of his business, and she doesn’t seem bothered, so either she doesn’t know troll culture too well or she’s just nice, or maybe Karkat’s just misreading the situation – but he hadn’t thought it had extended to grudges that would have him just leave Feferi locked up.

He looks like he’s changed. Somewhat. Oh, he’s still a right bastard, but Karkat had seen the way he’d tensed whenever something threatened Roxy or Davesprite, or even the stupid pair of glasses they passed around.

In Karkat’s experience, it takes a lot for someone who serves only his own safety to care for the safety of others. But he’s read Eridan wrong before, so maybe he’s reading him wrong now.

Eridan frowns. “Excuse me, what?”

“Eridan,” Karkat says. From the corner of his eye, he sees Roxy stand. “This human found Feferi. She’s locked up in some high-security facility – ”

That turns out to be the bad thing to say, because Eridan launches himself at Tony, claws out, but is thankfully intercepted by Roxy, who tackles him to the ground, effectively knocking the breath out of him.

Tony just takes a step back, but barely blinks. Used to danger then, Karkat notes.

“Dave!” Roxy yells, and Davesprite immediately shields Karkat and Tony from view, flying in front of them, wings spread out. Tony lets out a small, “Hey!” and tries to stand on his toes to see over the wings, and then walks to the side to get past Davesprite’s wingspan, which is rather impressive.

Karkat just drops to the ground to see what’s going on, and while some of Davesprite’s feathers still get in the way, he’s seeing enough. He’s obviously underestimated Roxy’s strength because the girl is keeping Eridan pinned to the ground, a knee on his stomach, and hands on his wrists while he thrashes, yelling. He’s not even holding back, Karkat notes, not minding that Roxy can be hurt, and he’s livid.

“Where the fuck is she!” he yells, legs kicking. Roxy digs her knee into his stomach harder. “Stark, I will tear your throat out – ”

“Why is his default setting to anger immediately going off and attacking people?” Davesprite mutters, and Karkat wonders how often this has happened.

“Eridan, calm down, and let them explain,” Roxy says, voice stern, but Eridan isn’t listening.

He’s not listening, and he’s forgetting his friend is trying to restrain him. He grits his teeth and manages to pull one hand out from Roxy’s grasp and swings –

Karkat clenches his fists, not out of anger, but out of fear and shock. He hears Tony draw in a sharp breath, and hears Davesprite unsheathe his sword again.

Eridan is frozen, staring at Roxy. Karkat glances his hand, the one that had scratched at Roxy, and breathes out a sigh of relief when he sees there’s no blood there. He hasn’t hurt her.

That doesn’t make the ‘almost’ be okay.
Roxy has her head turned to the side. Karkat can’t see her face. He doesn’t know her well enough to be able to guess her reaction.

Davesprite walks over to them, slowly, and lifts his sword directly over Eridan’s head.

Eridan doesn’t even look like he’s noticed, still staring at Roxy, and then at his hand, like he’s seeing blood there. Karkat wonders for a moment if he would have been disgusted by the color of her blood, had he drawn it. So unnatural. So off the hemospectrum. So human and beneath a highblood like Eridan.

“Roxy?”

Karkat – Karkat blinks. Eridan sounds afraid.

Roxy finally turns to him, and Karkat sees that she just looks tired. Her cheek is markless. But the way she’s staring down at her friend, it looks like she might as well be wounded. Still, she pushes Davesprite’s sword aside, but he just moves it to Eridan’s neck.

“Dave,” Roxy says, “It was an accident.”

“Roxy, he’s killed his friends before,” Davesprite says. Karkat’s almost inclined to agree with him, except the expression on Eridan’s face looks like surrender, and Karkat watches him as he drops his head to the floor and bares his neck.

“Dave,” Roxy says, “Drop your sword.”

Davesprite doesn’t move.

There’s footsteps by the doorway, and when Karkat turns, there’s Steve Rogers and Kanaya, glowing in the dim light.

Steve looks to Tony, while Kanaya looks at where Eridan is on the floor, Davesprite’s blade at his throat, and Roxy, looking disappointed. It doesn’t take Kanaya a minute to piece everything together.

She moves lightning fast, grabbing Eridan by the hair so that he slips out from under the sword that nearly cuts into him, and Roxy is knocked off of him and onto the floor. All Karkat sees is a blur of light, and then Eridan’s smashed to the wall, so hard that the concrete actually caves in, a web of breaks forming on the surface, and Kanaya’s holding him by the throat with her hand. Her nails dig into his skin, drawing violet blood.

Eridan doesn’t move. Doesn’t squirm like he did earlier. Doesn’t try to pry Kanaya’s hand off.

His self-preservation instincts are kicking in, but gasping for air is all he’s doing. He’s not fighting. At all.

Of everything Karkat’s witnessed in the past few days, this is what unnerves him most.

Eridan’s chest is rising and falling, getting faster as his body is begging for air. His gills are opening and closing, but that just makes the blood Kanaya’s drawing pour out faster. He looks down at her, weakly, but still does not make a move to defend himself.

Karkat sees Kanaya frown, just as confused as he is.

Roxy runs to Kanaya and tries to pull her off, but she doesn’t budge. “Kanaya – please.”

Eridan glances at her, at her cheek where his claws would have easily tore into her flesh. Kanaya
stiffens, and then looks at Roxy.

Karkat gets it, suddenly. He sits up. Watches Kanaya click her tongue and let Eridan go. He slides down the floor, sitting with his back to the wall, barely keeping himself up, breathing harshly.

“Jegus, Eri.” Roxy drops to her knees to check at the wounds on his neck, and he struggles to keep his eyes open. His attention keeps straying to her cheek.

“JARVIS, prep the med bay,” Tony says.

Steve hits the lights, and Karkat has to close his eyes at the sudden brightness. When he opens them, finding that he’s raised his hands to shield them from the light, he sees Eridan slowly reach up at Roxy’s face.

He looks ashamed.

Karkat looks away.

“We can’t risk infighting,” Steve Rogers says, making his way over to where Karkat is. He holds out a hand, and Karkat, just so he doesn’t have to see what Eridan is doing, takes the man’s hand. He stands. Kanaya makes her way over to him and keeps her eyes on the floor.

“Kid was probably shocked. Reacted badly,” Tony says, motioning to where Eridan and Roxy are. When Karkat chances a glance, Eridan has his arms around her, and he looks like he’s crying on her shoulder, mumbling apologies. He looks away again.

“Doesn’t excuse it,” Kanaya says.

Steve looks to where they are. Karkat resolutely looks down, following Kanaya. She puts a hand on his back.

“No, it doesn’t,” the man says. “Let’s just bring them both to the med bay. And then we’ll talk about this over some food.”

Karkat nods. That sounds good enough.

Davesprite flies out of the room, wings flapping a little too forcefully.

Tony puts his face in his hands and sighs. This is a mess.

It’s a little jarring to see an Orphaner huddled under several blankets, bandages around his neck, one grey hand peeking out from under the layers he’s wrapped in just to reach out to Roxy. The human’s gracious enough to sit beside him, both hands taking his own, a thumb running over the thin scars on his knuckles from years of hunting and fighting, but Karkat has no idea when it’s going to last. Maybe until the day breaks, when Eridan’s less fragile and more ready to own up to what he’s almost done.

Once, Karkat would have never expected him to own up, but from how he’d reacted earlier…

Davesprite huffs and his wings shift, irritated. He’s sitting on the far end of the couch, several feet away from Karkat.

No talking gets done that night. Mostly because Kanaya and Davesprite are too angry to focus, and
Eridan’s unresponsive. Roxy’s face is carefully blank, eerily resembling Dave’s, and Karkat remembers these two are actually related. And Karkat – well, Karkat’s not sure how he feels. Feferi is here, they just need to bust her out. Eridan’s dangerous, just like Kanaya’s continuously warned him, but this behavior is so out of place he’s knocked off his feet in shock, but he knows after that wears off, it will be replaced by anger.

Eridan doesn’t climb back into his aquarium when Steve dismisses them all, seeing that they’re all too tired. He does gently – gently – pull Tony aside to talk to him about something, and then Karkat sees him and the man disappear into the – what’s the word, elevator? Elevator. They disappear into the elevator, and Karkat doesn’t see them until much, much later.

Only Tony comes back later, and he talks a bit to Steve during breakfast, but Eridan is nowhere to be seen. He’s still nowhere come lunch. Nowhere when Tony and Steve start arguing about plans to break Feferi out. Nowhere when they get a call that some hospital is under attack. Karkat doesn’t listen to the details.

Davesprite is fussing over Roxy. Or trying to, but she mostly waves him off, because she’s actually fine.

“I’m not going to say I told you so,” Kanaya says, but mindfully keeping her voice low.

Karkat just sighs and looks out of the window again. It’s stopped raining, thankfully, and they’re so high up no one will probably notice that they don’t exactly look human. Steve and Tony have gone out earlier to attend to whatever business they’d been called to do.

“I don’t think she’ll take it well,” Karkat says, “You know, despite it all.”

Kanaya pauses, but then nods. “I noticed he’d grown up,” she says, and then glances back at where Davesprite and Roxy are also talking in hushed tones. “But I didn’t think it was this much.”

“He’s just lost his friends in one fell swoop again,” Karkat says. And how ironic, he thinks, that Eridan should lose friends when he’s trying so hard to keep them.

“That’s his own fault,” Kanaya says. “He’s grown, but he’s got a way to go, still.”

“Yeah,” Karkat says. He leans forwards, nose inching closer towards the glass as he stares down at the humans. He’s so high up that they look like ants. He can see the traffic, tightly-packed with stalled cars and irritated drivers. “Yeah, I guess.”

Tony Stark and Steve Rogers come back very late in the evening. Karkat’s lounging in the living room sofa while everyone else is in their rooms, and he’s staring at the ceiling trying to think. He doesn’t like overthinking much, but he finds it’s the only way to sort out his thoughts these days.

Also, he’s not really quite willing to risk falling asleep yet, even with the bloodleech out of his system. He wonders why the Heir of Blood hasn’t struck them in retaliation yet. Maybe he’s gotten his ass kicked a little harder than usual?

He sits up when the human adults step into the room, not even bothering to turn on the lights.

“You’re awake,” Steve says.

“Hey,” Karkat says in acknowledgement. The man looks weary as he sheds his jacket. Tony doesn’t even bother to take off his coat, and instead just snaps his fingers and rattles commands at JARVIS that brings up several holographic screens in front of the couch Karkat is sitting on. He scoots over as Tony flops down, only giving him a nod as greeting.
“Couldn’t sleep?” Steve asks as he comes up behind Karkat.

Karkat laughs dryly. “I’m not really big on sleep since…” He makes a motion with his hands. Steve nods in acknowledgement. Tony gags as he remembers.

“That was still incredibly, incredibly disgusting,” Tony says, “Remind me to never get on DnD guy’s bad side.” He swipes at his screen and Karkat sees Feferi’s face show up on the projection.

“We’re already on the Heir of Blood’s bad side,” Steve says, “And he’s moving fast.”

Karkat frowns. “What do you mean?”

“About that, let’s maybe get everyone here first so we can have a meeting and not have anymore surprises,” Tony says, and then motions at the ceiling. “JARVIS?”

“Yes, sir.”

The lights in the room slowly come on, and Steve goes to the mini fridge in the corner of the room to get some water before everyone else gets here.

“Where’d you put Eridan?” Karkat asks, turning his attention to the doorway and the elevator beyond it.

“Ah,” Tony says. He flicks his wrist and the holograms disappear. “Basement.”

Karkat blinks. He starts to say something, but Tony beats him to it.

“He asked me to, shortstop. Don’t go picking fights now.”

He tries not to say anything back. Clenches his jaw so tight, his gums hurt from the way his teeth grind.

Kanaya sits beside him when she arrives. Davesprite sits with Roxy, and he’s got Hal’s glasses on instead of his usual aviators. Karkat notices the book Roxy’s got hugged to her chest as she stares at her feet, clearly still in need of sleep. Marine Biology.

Same book she’d had yesterday.

The elevator opens to let Eridan out, and everyone’s attention is immediately on him. Kanaya and Davesprite glare. Tony and Steve look guarded. Karkat just stares.

Roxy meets his eyes and then looks down at the floor again, and then starts reading through her book like they’re not supposed to be here to talk.

Karkat’s never really seen Eridan be unkempt before, not even on the meteor. He’d still had enough vanity to keep up his appearance even with their isolated situation and their limited supplies. He’d kept himself clean and presentable, and walked around with a haughty attitude that just grated on everyone else, and Karkat had thought that if his appearance didn’t do the showcasing, then his personality would make up for it. If the lowblood areas’ food supply been the size of Eridan’s ego, they would have been fed for over five centuries.

But currently, Eridan’s just in an oversized sweater and pajamas. No wetsuit. No coat. No scarf. No glasses. His hair is too long than Karkat’s used to seeing it, and it’s sticking up all over, making it look like he hadn’t had a good night’s sleep from tossing and turning. It’s far beyond the discomfort of not having the luxury of sopor, Karkat knows.
Steve motions for him to sit. He stays standing, shifting on his feet.

Tony clears his throat. “Okay, so – you guys know we found Feferi, right? She’s your friend?”

Kanaya starts to say that she used to be Eridan’s moirail, but then decides having to go through the hassle of explanations isn’t worth it, so she just nods and says yes.

“Yeah, well, she’s in a cell in a S.H.I.E.L.D base. They’ve got her locked up tight, and she’s good for now, but as soon as the pending requests to strap her down to a lab table get approved, she’s gonna be in danger,” he says.

Karkat crosses his arms and lets his nails tap a rhythm against his skin, agitated. Nobody in the room is thrilled with the idea.

“And you’re going to get her out?” Kanaya asks.

“We need a plan,” Steve says, “A distraction, a scapegoat, and a way to hide her.”

“You could collapse the whole base,” Davesprite suggests, “Pretend she was killed in the rubble, or the fire, whatever. But that’s too many casualties.”

“Unless we find a way to guarantee everyone gets out, that’s a lost cause,” Steve says.

Davesprite shrugs.

“We’ll find something soon,” Tony says, “Hell, we need to find something soon. Our time’s gonna run out sooner or later.”

“Then let’s go try to save her now,” Kanaya says, “Show your building plans or whatever. Plot out distractions.”

“There’s something else time-sensitive we also need to get to.” Steve leans his elbows on the top of the couch’s backrest, just so he could put his face in his hands and sigh. “The Seer that the radio told us.”

“He’s got a bit of time, doesn’t he?” Kanaya asks.

Tony and Steve share a look.

“He’s – We think the Heir of Blood was what attacked the hospital earlier,” Tony says. He waits for everyone to put their full focus on what he’s saying, patiently observing the shift in their body language. “Piloted this Seer kid’s body like a goddamn puppet. Had him bite off his own tongue. He almost choked on his own blood.”

Davesprite swears under his breath. Roxy looks a little wide-eyed.

“Probably also hijacked a member of the hospital staff,” Steve continues for him, “The hospital’s power got shut off.”

“Attacked some of the Safehouse residents,” Tony says, “Who I guess are your friends.”

“Are they alright?” Roxy asks. “He didn’t get any of them, did he? Well, aside from – ” She cuts herself off abruptly and doesn’t continue.

Tony pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs. “Dave Strider was still in the ER when he left,” he says, “If he survives, he’s probably not even going to wake up right away. Not with that amount of
bloodloss.”

Karkat feels something in his stomach tighten painfully. It feels suspiciously like dread.

“He was…” Roxy pauses, licks her lips, and then tries again, “He was what?”

“He got stabbed,” Steve says, “Or – well, impaled is the better word for it. With his own sword – ”

Several memories go through Karkat’s mind at that, of him and Dave building Can Town with The Mayor, while the boy was rattling off a story as he drew roads out of white chalk, talking about how he’d found his brother dead, stabbed with his own sword. How his brother was a hero and it would be a massive honor to go out like he did.

“– the blade cut straight through him. He lost a lot of blood.”

“Broke several ribs too,” Tony adds, “So that’s gonna be nasty.”

Karkat’s nails are drawing blood from his arm, and for the first time in his life, he doesn’t mind. Kanaya doesn’t care he’s a mutant. Eridan’s will to survive just left him the second he’d realized he’d almost killed one of his friends. There is no point to caring about blood color anymore.

Dave had almost died. Might still be dying, in fact.

“He’s – he’s in the hospital,” Roxy says, slowly, like she’s unfamiliar with the pronunciation of the word from only having read of it or told of it. “And you don’t know if he’s going to survive?”

Steve takes a while to answer, but eventually, he does. “No, we don’t.”

Roxy draws in a heavy breath and nods, tears at the edges of her eyes. Then she gets up from her seat and storms out of the room, footsteps so hard and loud that Karkat is surprised the floor hasn’t broken yet. She actually slams her palm on the elevator button. Maybe the resiliency of godtier bodies lent to strength too, and she’s broken the panel.

“Hell hath no fury than a mother scorned,” Kanaya mumbles, to which Tony’s head snaps to her direction and he says, “Excuse me, she’s what?” But Kanaya says nothing else.

“So the Heir of Blood’s already struck,” Davesprite says, the only one actually calm out of all of them, probably from being too used to seeing dead versions of himself.

“I thought we had more time,” Karkat says.

“Before Cecil dies, yes,” the sprite says, “The Heir of Blood drains someone of essence, but – he’s a blood player. Not only that, an Heir. Of course he could control people before he kills them completely.”

“Yeah, well, he’s almost killed Cecil today too, so I don’t think his primary goal is to possess the kid,” Steve says, “To shake us up?”

“To botch our mission before we even start it?” Kanaya offers.

“Divide us, maybe,” Davesprite says.

“Can’t we try to do both things at once?” Karkat asks, “Free Fef and get the leech out of this kid?”

“We can do that as soon as we have a plan,” Tony says.
Nobody’s got a plan. Karkat turns to Eridan. He looks away.

“We can split up and do both things at the same time,” Davesprite says, and adds, “As soon as we have a plan, yes, but we will have a plan.”

Tony shares a look with Steve again, and then just goes back to pulling up more files on the screen.

“I hope so,” Steve says. “I really hope so.”

The thing about nightmares is that they don’t stop and disappear when you wake up.

This is something Loki has learned from a young age. One can feel as if their blankets are swallowing them up, can feel them wrapping around their neck tight to choke the air out, can feel their heart try to stop itself out of sheer fear. And one can be wide awake and alert, and aware that it’s not a dream, not anymore.

When Loki was young, he used to hear stories about the war between Asgard and Jotunheim, and how the monstrous Jotuns would eat children who wandered around at night too late, or stayed up past bedtime, or didn’t obey their parents. Of course, he was smart enough to know no Jotun could get past Heimdall, at least not easily, and not if they weren’t here for war, so he didn’t fear being devoured. Thor didn’t either, as the boy had promised he’d slay the monsters on sight.

When Loki’s arm turned blue in the middle of the fight on Jotunheim, he’d been wide awake and very aware, but all the memories of a thousand years of being told that his kind were monsters, and that his not-brother had vowed to destroy them, had snapped back to him with the sharpness and ferocity of something pulled taut and suddenly let go. And then he was having a nightmare, eyes wide open.

Dave is still in the ER. Cecil might never be able to talk again. Or walk, or move, or play and laugh with his brother and friends, because he’s sustained so much damage from being kicked and punched and thrown around. Or wake up, depending on how much blood he’s lost. The kids are around the room, asleep and tired, but they’ll wake up soon enough from fits of nightmares. Loki knows how this goes.

He’s also wide awake, and he knows he’s not going to be sleeping soon.

There’s a ringing in his ears from the headache that’s drilling its way into his eyes as he tries to push at the spell woven on him, cast the second he’d woken up from being compelled to sleep. That, along with the fact that he absolutely must break through the spell, will be more than enough to keep him awake.

Well, that and the knowledge that he’d almost let two children die. One of them still might. This isn’t Asgard. This isn’t some realm with advanced medical facilities that can heal fatal injuries in a few minutes. This is Earth. Poor little backwards Earth, with all its tiny humans scurrying around just trying to live. Lovely innovative Earth with all its creations and its effort and its spunk and will to just keep moving, even if it’s falling behind on some aspects.

But he’s not really keen on dwelling on that, so when Rose’s friends leave – Steve Rogers and Tony Stark, after the captain gives Rose and Jade comforting pats on their shoulders – he stands from his chair and motions for her to follow him. She does, and when they turn the corner, he reaches to touch her arm, and they don’t step into the next hallway.
They’re on a bridge, somewhere where it’s nighttime, with the wind whipping about them like the warning of an oncoming storm.

Loki doesn’t bother pulling down his sleeves, immune to the cold. They’re still crusted with Dave’s blood. He carefully thinks about what he’s going to say, reining in his temper, as he looks down at Rose.

She doesn’t let him get a word out. “We need their help.”

He scoffs. “No, we don’t.”

“Loki,” she says, “Steve Rogers has been in the Safehouse already. There is no point in letting him stay out. Jade trusts him.” She pauses. “I trust him.”

“What are they even going to contribute?” Loki asks. “They know nothing of what we’re dealing with.”

“Do you?” Rose asks.

He keeps his mouth shut.

Rose narrows her eyes slowly. “Loki, do you?”

He turns away and moves to lean his arms on the railing, looking down at the water below them, rushing fast. A few years ago, he’d let himself go and fall from a bridge.

“Loki.” Rose puts a hand on his arm, and it takes all his willpower not to flinch. “Loki, what do you know?”

He still says nothing.

Rose throws her hands up, exasperated. “Alright, you talk about how we have to be careful about trusting people but you don’t even tell us everything. And you expect us to want to keep being in the dark.” She puts her hands on her hips, and doesn’t even look like she’s aware of what she’s doing, what with her anger surfacing. “That’s – that’s great. That’s just great, Silvertongue. I suppose you expect us all to just sit back and let you take the reins.”

“I do not know everything, and I do not want to put forth any unconfirmed theories,” he says, “If I do, plans will be configured to faulty knowledge.”

“Faulty knowledge is better than no knowledge at all,” Rose says, “At least it can be corrected. At least there are steps to getting to the truth.”

“It’s too dangerous.”

“My brother is dying!” Rose’s voice has risen to a shout, and in the emptiness of the area, it echoes around, carried by the wind, by the river’s current, by Loki’s guilt. He doesn’t look at her, because he knows there are tears in her eyes.

She grits her teeth and grabs his arm, white fire sparking on her fingertips. “My brother is dying because you decided that it was better we didn’t know everything – because you were scared that you’d be wrong about something.” Her voice is getting nasally. “Because of your disgusting, stupid pride.”

“Rose.”
“I trusted you,” she says, “I trusted that you knew what you were doing, and I didn’t question it.”

“I didn’t know this was going to happen.”

“And if you’d told us everything, we would have pointed out a few possibilities, wouldn’t we?” she says, “Or do you think we’re not capable of that? Is that it?”

“Rose, your anger is getting to you.”

The fire fully bursts around her hand, and Loki’s survival instinct kicks in, his natural aversion to heat wanting to get away from the flames, and he yanks his arm away, taking several steps back.

“You don’t get to tell me that,” Rose says, pointing a finger at him accusingly, “Admit that you just didn’t want to be wrong, so you never told us anything, just in case you’d made a miscalculation, and now look what it’s cost us.” She motions her hand around. “Kevin’s almost lost his brother. He could still lose his brother.” Her voice falters, and her irises disappear as light overtakes her eyes, but she’s crying, and she still sounds like Rose rather than the demons under her skin. “I-I could lose my brother.”

Loki’s lost a brother. The only thing is, it’s his fault, and he could have done something, but he’d been the one to let go.

“He’s the only family I have left,” Rose says. She doesn’t seem to be talking to him. Her hand, still outstretched, trembles. “I didn’t have a father. I never knew my mother well. H-he’s – ”

Loki doesn’t know how to comfort.

The fire around her hand goes out, and she wipes at her eyes, suddenly looking small. Suddenly looking thirteen. Her sobs are choked off, like she’s trying not to make a noise. It’s a habit, Loki knows. He knows how it feels like, to want to cry but not want to let anyone hear it, for fear of being mocked, or scolded. He knows what it’s like to want to appear strong when you’re really the farthest thing.

He’s spent a lot of times huddled in the corner of his room doing the same thing, after all, when he’d been a child.

He takes a small step forward and puts a hand on Rose’s shoulder. She shoves him off harshly, and he feels something in him break.

“If whoever’s behind this is after us, it’s for a good reason,” Rose says, “And they’re going to affect the rest of the city when they come after us. We were lucky no one had seen Cecil attack. At least…”

She trails off. He knows what she’s thinking. It seems too good to be true, that no one had seen Cecil. The dark could be given credit to that, but there had been people standing out their rooms. It doesn’t add up. And he knows why.

“The Black Widow was there,” Rose says, “If there’s another attack like that again, one of us will be blamed, and the entire Safehouse is going to be in danger. And you know the Safehouse is more than just us.”

He says nothing. There is nothing he can say to dissuade her.

“If that happens again, they need to know it’s not us.”

“They can hardly believe it’s magic,” Loki says.
“They believe in your brother, don’t they?”

The silence that follows is tense.

Their silences have long ceased being tense. Or at least, that’s how it’s supposed to be. They’re student and teacher, and while Loki will never admit it, Rose has also somewhat become a little sister to him. They could read for hours and understand the joy of just silently sitting and getting lost in their books. They could argue about anything and run circles around each other. They could talk about magic and never get bored (and if he’s a little bitter Thor has never been like this with him, he keeps that to himself too).

“They’re not going to believe in universe-breaking and universe-birthing games,” Loki says, “Or time travel. Or dreamselfs.”

“We could try,” Rose says. “I could try.”

Loki starts to say something and then thinks better of it.

Rose huffs, and then wipes the rest of her tears away, standing straight. “We need them on our side,” she says, “I can trust Steve at least.”

She turns on her heel and kicks off the ground, taking to the air.

Loki speaks before she can get very far. “I wasn’t the one who saved your brother.”

Rose stills.

“He’d lost too much blood,” he says, “I don’t know how to rejuvenate blood. There’s too much to take into account. Blood type. How much a person has lost. How fast they’re bleeding out. I was scared to try right there. I could have killed him.”

When she still doesn’t turn, he continues.

“All I did was stitch up what had been cut. I sealed up a body that had been drained of most of its blood. That’s all I did and it was worth nothing. For a second, Rose – ” He hesitates. “For a second, Rose, he didn’t move.”

He hears her breath hitch.

“And then there was this…flash of light. Red light. And I saw – ”

“The Time insignia,” Rose says. She finally turns slowly, lowering down to the ground. Her eyes are wide. “That appeared under Cecil too. I thought it was Dave.”

“It wasn’t,” Loki says. “That belongs to Time players, if I remember correctly.”

Rose stares at him for a moment, violet eyes wide as her mind pieces everything Loki isn’t saying together. “Loki, what do you know?”

He looks down.

She makes a noise of irritation. “This again – ”

“I can’t tell you,” he says.

“Loki!”
“Rose, I can’t tell you.” He meets her eyes then, and hopes she gets what he means. He opens his mouth and tries to talk, about exactly what had happened in that room when Dave had stopped breathing, but he just chokes on air and coughs, bile rising up his throat.

It clicks and she moves forward, hands out and ready to catch him when he staggers. “Stop, stop.”

He tries to catch his breath, swallowing the bile down. It burns his throat and he shudders. “I can’t,” he says again. “They won’t – they made sure I can’t.”

She nods then, not quite looking at him as she thinks about this. “I see,” she says. She stays silent for a moment, and then looks out to the river. “I think I’d better get back to the hospital.”

Loki takes a few seconds, but knows his attempt at an apology - trying to give her what little he knows - hasn’t really worked, and he’s just going to hope that Rose will even consider trusting him again. He nods and puts a hand on her shoulder. She disappears in a flash of green light.

He sighs and moves back, leaning on the rails of the bridge. He’s so tired.

He figures he should visit James, at least. Maybe he can sleep in the bunker, somewhere away from New York, away from his friends, away from the hospital where two children are fighting for their lives.

There is a man on the porch.

Winston doesn’t know him.

Or, well, he should, really. He knows that smell, and he knows that build, and that face, but somehow, it just feels like there is something off about him. Something wrong. Something that is there but should not be there.

He tilts his head, staying on the steps of the stairs while the rest of the dogs swarm the man. The front door had opened easily enough, and that had pinged the first bell on Winston’s danger meter.

He is a dog, yes, but he is a dog with keen instincts for things that should be beyond dogs. While the rest of his friends sniff and run about, he tends to watch people, tends to study them, tends to observe. The halfbreed – Jade – had once told him he was weird once, and he’d told her that maybe she’d been missing out on things, and she’d understand things a lot more if only she’d take time to just sit and watch as people went by, instead of hurrying about like everyone else. She’d gotten a thoughtful look on her face at that.

It’s only because he observes so much that he knows there is something off.

The others don’t notice, of course, and lift their heads for friendly pats, and lick the stranger’s hands – because he’s a stranger no matter how familiar he might seem, no matter how familiar he might pretend to be – but Winston just stares. Beside him, the cat settles itself, blinking glowing eyes at the man.

It looks up at him and blinks again. Flicks its ears.

Winston goes up the stairs and doesn’t look back at the man. The cat follows.

He makes his way to one of the hallways in the house. There are plenty, and it’s easy for a new dog
to get lost, but Winston knows how to navigate this house in his sleep. He settles on one from the west wing, and then sits, waiting, while the cat sits across him with its still-glowing eyes.

It knows, he thinks. It knows something is off.

The cat mews softly. He inclines his head down, and then lowers his body until he’s fully lying down on the carpeted floor, his jaw resting on the flat surface.

He watches as the cat slowly walks to him, and the pats his snout with a small paw.

Had anyone been looking, they would have seen a dog and a cat disappear in a burst of green sparks.

Chapter End Notes

hmm i usually do like ten chaps for one part, but this seems like a mini part in itself made of five chapters - and this chapter is like 7k so wow. ANYWAY, we will not be seeing the answer to that polybius in a while (everybody who solved it keep it hush hush before HOB breaks into your house and eats everything you love) so enjoy another small break, go over and reread if you want to, and happy tinhatting!
Meanwhile

Chapter Summary

The adventures of Dirk and Damara, while the Safehouse crew and the Tony and Steve Babysitting Show were dealing with their own messes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The man is definitely suspicious of him, but Dirk likes to think he’s pulling off the whole ‘tourist’ thing rather well. He’s a sunburnt boy in anime shades with clothes stolen from a stranger’s closet (not that anyone knows that), and he hasn’t had a haircut in months, nor has he seen a packet of gel, so he’s taken to lobbing his hair short with his sword whenever it gets too uncomfortable. He’s not really any good at it, so it’s an uneven mess, but he’d be damned if he didn’t at least pretend he’s doing it on purpose.

So he looks like some hipster tourist trying out some styles. Not that Dirk’s sure, exactly, of what a hipster is. That had been long before his time – a time that he’s now flung into, it seems – but maybe it confuses people as much as it confuses him, so he’s blending in quite well.

The man looks like a tourist too. To Dirk, at least. He just looks like he’s spent more time here in the port than Dirk has. And if all goes well, Dirk’s not going to be spending time on this port anymore, and maybe do what he’s heard happen in the movies Jake had been so fond of – smuggle himself and Damara onto a ship. He just needs to convince Damara to go along with the plan. A plan he’s also unsure of, and he’s only considering because he’s getting tired of moving out in the open in small distances, but it’s the best he’s got.

He doesn’t quite like it, the feeling of just settling for an unsteady plan, but he needs to move when he’s got a troll with him, in an apparently troll-less Earth.

“So, uh, say that again?” the man asks, in perfect English. Definitely a tourist.

“Do you know anywhere that can fix a sylladex?” he asks. He’s lost count how often he’s had to ask that.

The man levels him with a look, and then asks, “Where are you from?”

“Not from ‘round here, that’s for sure,” Dirk says.

“You sound Texan. Bit of an accent there leaking through.”

He remembers Dave for a second, the boy offhandedly mentioning where he’d been from during one pocket of peace and awkwardness in the short time they’d spent around each other.

Dirk doesn’t have much of an specific accent, as he’d learned language mostly from books and movies, and thus his vocabulary and intonation are skewered, but if the man says he sounds Texan (maybe he'd subconsciously tried to imitate Dave's accent), he'll roll with it.

“You got me,” Dirk says, “Thing is, I brought my sylladex here with me, and I’m not quite familiar
with this place.” He says, and then, just in case, “It’s a small thing I’ve been working on, sir. Might confuse people a bit. I forget to give context sometimes and just assume most folks know what I’m talking about.”

“You dabble in engineering then?”

“Oh, yeah,” he says. This is steadier ground. “I love building things. Once designed an AI modelled after my younger self. You can imagine how that turned out.”

“Hopefully better than how Tony Stark did when he first started out,” the man mutters, and then, “I’ve been around the best of the best technology in New York, but I’m sorry to say I don’t know what a sylladex is. Can you show it to me?”

Dirk sighs, adjusts the bag on his shoulder. He’d stolen that one too, from a kid. It has the logo of a blue-red-white shield with a star at the center on it. “Nah, I think I’ll pass, sir. Personal project and all that.”

The man looks like he’s about to say something, but Dirk bows. “Thanks for your help, Mister…?”

“Coulson,” the man says, “And you sure you don’t want me to take a look at that sylladex?”

“I’m sure.” He says, gives a polite nod, and starts off to where he knows Damara is probably drinking someone under the table. Girl’s got the alcohol tolerance of a demigod, and they’ve found that people freshly off the boat and away from the sea don’t really mind that she obviously isn’t human, on account of them seeing weirder. Dirk hasn’t asked what they mean.

Just as he’s expected, Damara is, in fact, drinking with some people just a few ways off the port. They’re lucky it’s already night time, and she doesn’t need to put the hood of her cloak up.

Her drinking buddies are all red-faced, and two of them are singing off-key while one is laughing her head off at nothing in particular. Damara’s just swirling the rum in her bottle, looking very pleased with herself. She waves a wad of bills at Dirk when she spots him. They’d betted, then.

“Can you tell her to slow down? She’s gonna get poisoning at this rate.” Someone says. Oddly-dressed, but Dirk’s not an expert of this era’s dress code, so he shrugs it off.

“Megido-san, you really do need to lay off the alcohol,” Dirk switches languages effortlessly.

Damara snorts and then looks him in the eye as she chugs down the bottle.

The red-haired man, the one who’d spoken earlier, runs a hand over his face and sighs, exasperated. “Mutants,” he mumbles under his breath.

Dirk raises an eyebrow. Maybe there were trolls in this Earth, after all? But Damara’s not a mutant, obviously.

Damara’s already finished her bottle and is trying to look for another. Dirk hurries to her side and swats her hand when she tries to reach for a half-empty one left by a sailor who’d passed out.

“That’s enough,” he says.

“It’s enough when I say it’s enough,” Damara says.

Dirk huffs, and then swats her hand again when she tries to take the bottle. She glares at him.

“I’d listen to him, really,” the red-head says. Dirk glances up at him for a moment. “I mean, I know
travelling folk when I see some, and you two look like you need to go somewhere.”

“Yeah.” Damara clicks her tongue. She knows full well the stranger can’t understand her. “Off this planet, maybe.”

The stranger gives her an odd look, and then shakes his head, most likely just thinking she was actually talking about where she and Dirk were headed.

They don’t really have a destination. Dirk knows this, but moving is something to do and it’s all he can really do right now, so it’s what he focuses on. He doesn’t have the luxury of having an entire island to himself to sort his thoughts out and plan a course of action.

“You know,” the man says, “I know you’re both doing fine on the ports here, but mutants aren’t really…common here, so.”

Damara frowns. “I’m a rust blood, not off-scale.”

“Mutant might mean something else here,” Dirk whispers to her.

The man continues, a little nervous, but clearly well-meaning. “If you could sail to New York, there’s a lot of mutants there. You wouldn’t have to hide under cloaks a lot.”

Huh. Dirk glances at Damara, who’s just staring at the stranger like he’s offended her. New York. The Coulson guy had mentioned that earlier. New York. Maybe they had a lot of trolls there? He adjusts his bag again as the strap starts to slip.

“Where’s that?”

“Miles from here,” the man says, “Although I can call in some favors if you want.” He scratches his cheek, suddenly bashful. “I know I must sound like a trafficker, but I just understand how you feel. I have friends who’ve had to move because they were different from everyone else.”

“Because they had grey skin and horns?” Dirk asks.

The man laughs. It sounds fond. Dirk’s never fancied himself a good judge of character, especially at first meetings, but he was good enough. That laugh sounds friendly and mirthful, glad as one remembers their friends.

“Well, a different sort,” the man says, “The sort that control elements and see the future?”

Dirk turns to Damara just as she turns to him, and they share a look. Psychics? Although, the man hadn’t answered to the description of trolls. So maybe he’d been talking about something else. Psychic humans? He wouldn’t discard the thought aside. If trolls had psionics, why couldn’t humans?

“Wanna see something cool?” the man asks. His hair falls over his face in a way that covers his other eye, and Dirk can see bandages peeking out from under his bangs. Maybe an accident. His visible eye does light up with an excitement of showing a secret to a stranger.

Damara shrugs and waves for him to go ahead before Dirk can say anything, and the man cautiously approaches, kneeling in front of her. Dirk slowly curls his fingers, ready to receive a sword from his sylladex if the man tries anything funny.

But he just reaches out to a bottle, the one Damara had discarded earlier, and presses his fingers to it. Red light glows from his fingertips, and Dirk watches as the bottle slowly refills itself, from the
bottom up. Damara fixes her gaze at it, curious, and the man pulls away his hand as the bottle is once again filled.

“Mutants like that,” he says, and he says it like a secret, but Dirk isn’t quite sure he gets it.

“In New York?” Damara asks. Her English is choppy and her accent is thick, but she’s been trying to learn and she’s catching on scary fast. Dirk’s seen her pick fights more than once, throwing the most eloquent insults he’s ever heard someone say.

The man nods. “In New York. I have friends who moved there.”

Damara purses her lips to a thin line, thinking. Dirk moves the bottle away from her in case she reaches for it.

“I think we’re good here,” Dirk says. Psychic humans are good and all – and he can’t deny it’s possible when one’s just demonstrated abilities in front of him – but he’s not about to immediately act when he hasn’t verified the information yet.

Like the man’s said, he had sounded like a trafficker. There’s a possibility he’d just lock both of them up and sell them off somewhere. He’s read horror stories on the internet before the game had started. If it comes to it, he and Megido can make their way to this New York by themselves.

The man shrugs. “Think about it,” he says, and then starts gathering up the bottles to clean them up. “You’d best turn in for the night too. It’s gonna get cold.”

Dirk inclines his head politely, and as does Damara, and they both leave the man as he cleans up after the mess left behind. He’ll have a time getting his crewmates back to their homes.

A few minutes later, Dirk remembers something else Dave’s said. His sister, he’d said, was from New York.

They’ve got enough money to get them enough food to last at least two weeks, so they’ll survive fine until that time, and once they run out, they can go start pickpocketing again. That, or Megido strikes up another bet with a bunch of haughty fools who think she can’t hold her liquor. Dirk doesn’t exactly approve of this, but it’s not like he can stop her. Besides, he thinks she likes showing off to the humans that she’s way better at them at drinking.

He’d asked her once, how she’d never gotten even buzzed at alcohol, but she’d just shrugged. And then one other time, when Dirk had treated them both to a rare indulgence of orange soda, she’d started giggling hysterically like she was drunk.

Funny how biological differences work.

“What New York?” she asks, testing the syllables out carefully.

“I don’t know where that is,” Dirk says. Beside him, the seagull whose wing Damara broke a while ago, sits, anxious. It’s just been flying around with them, watching, sometimes sitting close to Dirk when it’s feeling particularly brave. Dirk doesn’t know why. He’s pretty sure it hates Damara, and is
only sidling up to him when it finds him because while it can fly, it’s not back to its full hunting capabilities yet, and depends on him for scraps of food.

He hopes it’ll go fly its way back home, soon, somehow.

“Some help you are,” Damara says, scoffing and biting into the bread she’s holding. When the seagull tilts its head at her, she finishes it off in a couple of bites, clearly starving, and makes a shooing motion at it. It flaps off the opposite roof.

“You already broke its wing,” Dirk says.

“Well, it’s healed. It needs to go mind its own business.”

“It’s lost,” Dirk says, “Because, again, you broke its wing. And we have to nurse it back to health.”

“You could have left it to die.”

Dirk frowns. “No, I couldn’t have.”

Damara shrugs.

He sighs through gritted teeth and tries to go back to their previous line of conversation. “Just because I’m from Earth doesn’t mean I know how it looked like several centuries ago.”

“So you’re temporally-displaced,” she says, tutting. “Lovely.”

“You’re dimensionally-displaced.”

“And that’s my excuse for being of no help.”

Dirk takes off his glasses for a moment, rubbing at his eyes tiredly. “Had this Earth been mine, it would have been easier to navigate,” he says, “There’s a lot more people here. And there’s a lot of places I’ve never grown up with.”

Damara hums. “Why’s that?”

“The Batterwitch flooded my Earth,” he says.

She’s silent.

He presses on. “I grew up on a waterlogged planet. I don’t know a lot about the Earth’s original geography. Aside from Pangaea or whatever that used to be. I couldn’t exactly ask anyone aside from Roxy.”

“Couldn’t you look it up?”

“I could look up anything the Batterwitch hadn’t had purged off the internet, but just because I know a few names doesn’t mean I know specifics,” he says, “You know what Earth is, right?”

“Obviously.”

“Do you know how to get from the north pole to the south pole?”

Damara gives him a flat look.

“Exactly,” Dirk says, “I know a few things. Doesn’t mean I know my way around this place, and
there’s a lot more humans around here, so we have to be careful. And you still have to survive.”

“We know about New York,” Damara says, suddenly.

Dirk slowly turns to her, curious. He fiddles with his glasses, restless. “What’re you thinking?”

“What do you know about New York?”

“Not much,” he says, “Only that Dave once told me Rose was from there.”

“Hm. Who’re they?”

“Ectobiological children,” he says, “Didn’t spend a lot of time with them, didn’t talk a lot about New York. So I’ve got no idea what New York is.”

“We can go there.”

Dirk frowns. “We don’t know what’s waiting there.”

“That human’s idea of mutants is a little skewed,” Damara says, “But it’s something we can work with.”

“No, it could be a trap.”

“You’re acting like we can’t fight.”

“Even so, we can’t go in blind,” Dirk says. He wipes his glasses on his sleeve and puts it back on his nose. “We need a plan, we need something to fall back on in case something goes south, and in case you haven’t noticed, we’ve been surviving day to day without an idea as to how we can get off this planet.”

“I have a plan,” Damara says, “We go to New York.”

“That’s not a plan, Megido-san.”

“Pray tell, then, Strider, do you have any better ideas?” she asks

He shuts up at that. He doesn’t really. Of course, he can always just try to fly out of the atmosphere, but there’s Damara to account for, and the humans would definitely notice him darting out towards the sky. And if they do manage to get to space, Dirk isn’t familiar with this solar system either. For all he knows, planetary alignments are different before the Condesce’s reign too.

Or perhaps the Condesce has a base in one of the planets, and flying there would just be jumping straight into a fiery pit. And then there’s the issue of there being no food in space, and Damara needs sustenance to survive.

Not for the first time, he’s thankful for godtier bodies.

“If you want a plan so bad, go kidnap that human, have him tell us everything he knows,” she says.

“No.”

“He’ll be useful. He knows New York. He knows about the mutants. He has abilities himself,” she says, and Dirk doesn’t miss the thoughtful look in her eyes as she says that.

“We’re not kidnapping anyone.”
“You wanted a suggestion for a plan, and that’s my suggestion for a plan.”

“We are not,” Dirk repeats, “Kidnapping anyone. And I’m still not sold on the idea of going to New York, wherever that is.”

“I am,” she says.

He folds his hands together and looks down at his lap as his brow furrows in thought. Mutants, the man had said. Mutants who had abilities. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Do you want me to read your mind?”

“Megido-san.”

“T ook you a while to catch up,” she says, “Mutants with abilities could equal to godtiers who got dropped here, just like us.”

“That guy said his friends had moved there.” He starts running his thumb over his knuckles, rhythmic. A nervous tic. “If they were godtiers – from my session or from the other human session – do you think they were dropped here, only earlier, and moved there?”

“It’s possible,” Damara says, “The problem is, how long have they been here on Earth, if that theory’s correct?”

Dirk pauses for a moment. “We’re not going to New York,” he says, standing, and then interrupts before Damara can protest, “Yet. I need to look a few things up.”

She waves a hand at him, irritated. “Go look it up then. Break into another house or something. You’re resourceful.”

He scoffs, pulls off his bag from his shoulders and shoves it into her hands. “Yeah, whatever. Go find someplace to hide. See you on the port tomorrow.”

“If I don’t get off this island by myself first from your indecision.”

“I’m not indecisive,” he says. He raises his arms up in a stretch and feels his spine pop. “I weigh my options carefully and plan according to each outcome.”

“And you keep weighing and never act,” Damara says, “Indecisive.”

“Prepared.”

“Paranoid.”

He glares at her. She laughs.

“Get that head of yours working, Strider-san,” she says, “And trust me when I say we have to go to New York.”

He wants to quip that he has no reason to trust her. Again and again he’s thought that they both know that, and for all the times they’ve both looked after each other now, they’re both aware it’s only because Dirk is the only person Damara can trust, and Damara is the only person Dirk can trust. The second it stops being that, Dirk’s hightailing it out of there as fast as he can and praying that Damara’s telekinesis somehow doesn’t catch up to him.

But he settles for shaking his head and hopping off the roof, taking flight. He doesn’t turn to see
Damara slide down the pipe to go find someplace to stay the night.

The seagull watching them bounces up to his feet as he lands on the opposite roof.

“Hey, buddy,” he says.

It caws at him softly, and he wonders for a second if it’s gratefulness that’s making it stay. No matter. He has an idea for how to break into a house.

“So,” he says at the bird, “I’m gonna need your help.”

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He finds New York.

On the internet, of course. He finds cheap flights (that they can’t afford or fake, so sneaking on board is the only option that’s really feasible here – Dirk considers the whole ‘stowing away on a boat’ plan again) and finds photos; it looks like a loud and angry and polluted city he would probably be very overwhelmed in. He’s already had a hard time adjusting here, so he doesn’t think he’ll fare well in a big city.

Still. It’s something. It’s a lead. It’s a goal and his mind has immediately latched onto it. It’s a point of surety in the months he’s spent wandering around unsure of what to do.

On one hand, Damara’s drinking buddy could be lying and would sell them and their organs to the nearest black market possible, but on the other, he could be telling the truth, and not too long ago, maybe Dirk’s friends really were here. Maybe this was a weak point in this universe that Dirk was able to fall through here from where he’d been before.

Not that he remembers what happened before. Thinking about it always makes him frown, anxious. What did happen? And how had it affected Damara, who technically hadn’t even part of their merged sessions?

New York, he thinks, eyeing the screen of the latest laptop he’s commandeered for the night. It’s been almost a week since he’s started his research. Perhaps the answer is in New York...

He squints at a thumbnail of a video posted on Youtube, of what looks like a missile that’s half consumed by green light. There’s a few stray green pixels here and there, and they’re either from bad editing, or the flash of green has been so bright that it’s managed to distort the camera’s clarity. The title says Disappearing Missiles in New York.

Dirk clicks on it, not knowing what to expect.

And nearly drops the laptop.

The video is dated early October 2013, so it’s possible that it’s only been a few weeks since this has happened. Dirk will rest easy knowing this did happen early October, so he looks the incident up on news sites and comes up with more than twenty articles, all of them confirming that several missiles had disappeared during an attack in New York, some of them strategically reappearing near an enemy ship to eliminate it. There’s speculations of it being teleporters from SHIELD, crafted by
STARK Industries and still unreleased to the public (not that the public would have much use for it, and certainly no one wanted thieves to have their own teleporters), but from what Dirk can see, it looks more like –

“Space magic,” he breathes.

He looks up more articles, about New York attacks, and for the rest of the week, he reads up what he can about the city that even though he’s sure he’d get lost in it, he figures he might be able to keep himself safe if an attack ever happened while he was in the middle of the street.

It helps that there’s something nearly everyone in the articles knows and talks about, even when they don’t say anything too incriminating about it. Like a beacon, sticking out to him almost unnaturally.

The Safehouse, they call it. Maybe he and Damara could duck in there for a while?

But there’s something suspicious about it, something else that sticks out to him. The Safehouse, according to several blogs he’s combed through, is known to nearly everyone in New York. Now, this could just be a case of everyone not putting forth information, because, *duh*, everyone knows where and what the Safehouse is, and what it does.

But it might also be something else, and Dirk’s gut says it’s something else. There’s something about how people mention the Safehouse, and nothing else about it. Not who runs it. Not how it’s built. Nothing substantial about it at all other than it’s the safest place in New York, and it can be counted on when there’s an attack.

If it’s so popular, then journalists should have crowded there to get a few interviews, especially when it was first established.

Speaking of when it was first established, Dirk tries to look up its history, and finds that it’s only been operating for almost a year. It’s relatively new, then, so hype for it wouldn’t have wound down.

Maybe this earth’s culture is a bit different than what he’d read up on when he’d been younger. Hell, maybe he interpreted it wrong. But there’s still that suspicion swirling in his gut, that something is not what it seems.

Maybe he should do more research. More research would ensure that he’d plan better, only – well, Damara won’t be too pleased to hear him badger for more time.

And she isn’t, when he tells her.

“*You’re suspicious of what?*”

“Of the Safehouse and how it operates,” he says, “They’re well-known, but it’s like their information is also well-hidden. Very carefully tailored, you might say.” He pauses for a moment, thinking his words over. “As if it seems like there’s a lot of information about it, but when you actually dig, there’s nothing of substance, and it’s just hiding behind the image of being well-known.”

Damara stares at him for a moment and then looks away, as if exasperated. “You are paranoid, you know that?”

Dirk frowns. “I have a hunch, and I am not about to ignore it.”

“And the space magic you saw?” Damara asks.

He quiets.
Then, “Might be from another session.”

“That’s better than nothing. We can form an alliance and get out of here, and then each be on our way. I don’t see the problem.”

The problem is that something seems wrong about all this. Something is missing, something is out of place. It’s not necessarily evil, but it’s just…different. And Dirk wants to scratch at the itch to see if it’s nothing or if something nasty is going to crawl out the other side.

“I’ve already been asking Ben about getting to New York, anyway,” Damara says.

Dirk – Dirk almost falls off the roof from surprise. There goes trying to make plans, he supposes.

“Ben? No honorific?”

“He’s a friendly enough boy. Shy. Timid. Bit quiet, but more than willing to talk about New York. Insisted he thought it was weirdly formal for me to tack on an honorific and that first-name basis is fine with him,” Damara says, “Not that he’s stopped respectfully addressing me by my last name.”

“You haven’t corrected him.”

Damara almost smiles. “No, why would I?”

Dirk pinches the bridge of his nose. He’s been doing that a lot lately.

Beside him is their tag-along bird. Damara’s still antagonistic towards it, and it’s already been a while, so Dirk doesn’t think that’s going to improve any time soon on account her getting used to its presence. He likes the poor thing though, and it seems to have grown attached to him as well.

He sighs as the bird rubs its head against his leg, comforting.

“Ohay,” Dirk says, “What did he say?”

“One of his friends is a highblood,” Damara says, and then frowns, shuffles her words. “No, rich, I meant. High-ranking in your society.”

Dirk nods. “So, not a troll, just a high-ranking human?”

“Yes. I don’t know the word for it in your language.”

“Aristocrat,” Dirk says, “But you can just say rich.”

“Okay. Rich,” Damara nods, testing out the word on her tongue. “Rich, and helps mutants to get where they want to go. Apparently, earth’s definition of mutant is just different from mine, and it’s not skewered at all. Just cultural differences.”

“Yeah, I looked it up,” Dirk says, “Eyes of different color – ” He’s very aware how he slots into that category “ – low melanin, a couple of extra limbs.”

“Psionic abilities, completely different physical form,” Damara continues for him. “And his friend’s a mutant too, but has been able to hide it well and avoids questions because status is a powerful thing.”

“As an aristocratic outcast. I’ve read that story somewhere,” Dirk says, chuckling.

“I tried to read a book like it,” Damara says, “A few days ago. But I couldn’t quite decipher the language’s symbols yet.”
Dirk hums.

“Anyway,” Damara continues, “His friend helps mutants get to places, and this isn’t the first time they’ve sent mutants over the sea to get to New York.”

“Why New York?”

“I don’t know,” Damara says, “Maybe it’s a bit of safe place for mutants. You did mention a safehouse.”

“That’s for attacks,” Dirk says, “Unless…”

Unless of course, the reason for the Safehouse’s secrecy is because it was a meeting place for mutants, which are still looked down upon on this earth.

It fits. Not very well, but it fits somehow, and it’s a possibility.

“Before we finalize anything,” Dirk says, “Can you ask your friend if he knows anything about the Safehouse?”

Damara nods, and then grins. It says, I told you so. “Considering it?”

“I wouldn’t have researched New York if I wasn’t considering it.”

Damara stands up, laughing. It doesn’t sound too mirthful, but it sounds arrogantly triumphant. “I’ll ask him,” she says. “Don’t worry too much about it, Strider-san. We just need to get to New York.”

“If it were only that easy, Megido-san,” Dirk says, “If it were only that easy.”

It's too convenient. It's too damn convenient. That's what Dirk is currently trying to tell Damara right now. She's already talked to her friend, who had happily arranged a meeting between them and the rich benefactor who'd apparently had a bleeding heart for mutants, and it was too convenient.

Something will drop, Dirk thinks. And he doesn't want to be there when it does. Damara can dive headfirst into danger all she wants with her disregard for her - or anyone else's - safety, but Dirk would rather stay alive for the small chance that his friends are in fact here, and that he can find them. If it means going about it the long way, then so be it.

Damara is about to lose her patience with him though, not that there was a lot of it to begin with.

“Listen here, Strider-san,” she starts, breathing in deeply like she's stopping herself from strangling him right here, “You wanted a lead - you wanted a place to start, I got you a place to start.”

“A very risky lead that might be a dud.”

“We are getting nowhere flitting about these islands and you know it,” she snaps, and then takes in another breath to steel herself. Her teeth are flat but Dirk has no doubt she will tear his throat out if she decides he is slowing her down, but Dirk can't bring himself to be afraid. “If it is a dud, and it turns out to be dangerous, we show no mercy.”
“There could be two of us and many of them.”

“They're humans,” Damara says.

“Dangerous in their own right,” Dirk says.

“They haven't met me,” Damara says, with an air of finality. “We’re going to that meeting. And I don’t care if you think it's too convenient. At this point, Fortune owes us for sticking us together when it's the worst thing it could have ever thought of.”

“Oh gee, thanks,” he says.

She sneers. “You've stretching my mercy thin, Strider-san.”

“Accounting for our safety, but I'm not getting any gratitude for that, am I?” Dirk says.

They both stare each other down, the air between them thick with contempt, and then Dirk backs down first, because arguing isn't going to get them anywhere. They've been getting on each other's nerves lately, much more than usual. Where Damara would have silently nodded or occasionally pushed his buttons because of her need to lash out even in the smallest of ways (pent up anger will do that to you; you try to be civil to those who are innocent, but in the end, when there's nothing to focus that hate on, you destroy everything in your path for the sake of catharsis), she's openly snapping at him, and he's only been able to take so much until he's wanted to defend himself, somewhat.

But they need to stop. If they're ever going to get anywhere, they need to stop.

“Okay,” he says. “I'm sorry.”

Damara doesn't say anything.

He sighs and sits back down. They're at the docks today, and there's barely any ships in the harbor. “I did a little digging about New York.”

She glances at him for a moment, and he figures that's a good enough response.

“Mutant abductions are common in New York,” he says, “Or that's what people are theorizing. There's been missing reports of mutant children, but it seems like the cops are turning a blind eye to it. I don't know how reliable my sources are, as I'm not familiar with the internet of this era, but with the number of articles I've combed through, I'd say it's something.”

“And you're afraid we'll be brought there to be abducted as well?”

He shrugs. “Might have some connection.”

Damara thinks for a moment, lips thinning out and gaze nearly burning a hole into the concrete floor underneath them both.

“Strider, why are you really afraid?”

He pauses for a second. She hasn't tacked on an honorific.

“I'm sorry?”

“Why are you really afraid?”
“I -” he starts, and then doesn't continue. He doesn't know how to.

Why is he afraid?

Because this planet is big and it's easy to get lost? Dirk lives and breathes for challenges, and he'd easily take this one on. The risk of this being a trap and so he'll never see his friends again if he puts himself in danger? A while ago, he wouldn't have batted an eyelash at the danger, and instead charged head-on with several plans, always confident he could succeed in this.

It would have been like a game. It's always been like a game to him, no matter if he has to take things into his own hands to ensure the overall success of it, it's just a game to be won. A challenge to be overcome.

Except.

He frowns. It looks more lost than angry.

“I don't know,” he says. “I don't know.”

Damara looks at him for a second, looks through him, and then stands, brushing dirt off her pants. “Then figure it out, Strider-san,” she says, “Because until then, I lead. Someone lost can't help another to find their way.”

And then she walks off, to who knows where, leaving Dirk staring at the stormy ocean by himself.

They're going to meet Ben today. It's already past Halloween - Roxy's favorite holiday, Dirk remembers - and today, Ben's back from the sea and he's going to take them to see his friend.

Dirk hasn't said anything in protest since the last time he and Damara had argued, and instead has taken to stealing a phone and tracking news about New York on it. The arguing won't get them anywhere, and as much as he hates to admit it (so he rarely does, and just ignores it and does what he thinks he has to do) , Damara has a point. Dirk has been so overwhelmed at overthinking things that he can't really focus on anything right now. Most days, he thinks he does and then - well.

Perhaps Damara's been paying closer attention to him than he's expected. If only maybe to overthrow his self-appointed role as leader of their duo even when neither of them have talked about it.

Ben is a few minutes late to their meeting place, which is fine, really, because he might have had to stay a while lifting crates, so both of them have time to sit around in silence and kick their feet back and forth.

On the roof of the nearest building is the bird who's taken a shine to Dirk lately. It's presence is the smallest bit of comfort Dirk can afford right now.

He wonders where it will go later, when Dirk's going to New York. If he goes to New York.

Once again, he hopes it goes home. At least one of them in their ragtag trio of a troll, a human and a bird deserves to go home.
Damara gets to her feet suddenly, and Dirk turns to where she's facing and -

“What the hell happened to you?” he asks.

Ben laughs, a little sheepish and nervous, and brushes strands of red hair away from his only visible eye.

“Nothing,” the man says, “Bit of a fight.”

“Hell of a fight,” Dirk says, looking at his broken arm and bandaged leg, as well as the plaster on his cheek.

“It's fine,” Ben says, “Do you still want me to take you to - “

“Yes,” Damara says, and the man nods, cheerfully motioning for them to follow him away from the docks.

“I don't like this,” Dirk whispers as they walk, too many paces away from Ben so he can't hear them.

“You've said that before,” Damara says.

“No, look at how injured that poor guy is,” Dirk says, “Was it a fight or an accident?”

Damara frowns. “It could have been an accident - why are you so suspicious of everything?”

Dirk has to carefully choose his words for his answer. “I don't know,” he says. In his loss for words, he lets himself switch back to English. “Something just doesn't feel right. It's just a hunch, but it's really strong. From the Safehouse, to how convenient this is that it almost seems like it's planned, to…that.” He motions to Ben's injuries. “I just feel it, like it's in my gut, like it's in my - “

Soul.

He stops himself. Examines the feeling again. He's not good with feelings, he's barely had an example of them after all, and he's mostly had to fabricate them until they felt like an automatic response, but this feels genuine. This feels instinctual.

He sees Damara look like she wants to put a hand on his shoulder but is hesitating. In the end, she lowers her hand and shakes her head. “We can defend ourselves if we need to,” she says, and then, softly, “You're not the only one who wants to see their friends.”

She goes on ahead, following Ben who hasn't stopped to look at them, and Dirk stares at her as she gets farther and farther away.

And then - then he blinks, and he feels like he's lost a bit of time. Not a lot but not too little either, and this time Damara and Ben are farther away but they're calling for him. He can't even clearly remember why he'd stopped, or what he'd been thinking about that he'd been so distracted, so he immediately runs to catch up with them.

Above them, a few meters away, a bird watches and sees everything. A hand gently pets its head, and it tentatively lets it, still too weak to fly. It stays deathly still and hopes the hand will not see it fit to snap its tiny, fragile neck.

Chapter End Notes
BREATHE
it's been a while and this is the latest chapter i have that i'm sure about, so please bear with me as i try to find my notes and my footing on where we are plot-wise

And remember when Cecil sent Coulson on a false lead to the Caribbean :)c

oops, coincidences happen >:)c

(also please tell me at least one of you read the title like 'MEANWHILE madison is grappling with the fact - ' because that would make my day please)
There’s a lot they have to catch up on in terms of understanding the situation, but the young man has tried to teach Aradia and Sollux everything he deems important, and everything he can remember about what happened before he was killed, even though he’s getting more reluctant to share his knowledge as more time (or not-time) passes in the bubble. If they’re to work together, Aradia expects to be told everything – that may not be possible for now, since everything she’s being told is coming from someone whose knowledge stops at his time of death, but it’s a starting point. And they haven’t even exhausted the young man’s memories yet.

And they still haven’t gotten a response from the young knight's friends.

Aradia’s fully on board and invested at this point. Sollux is more hesitant but if Aradia is going, then he is too. The young man is restless - he’s afraid and guilty, which Aradia thinks is understandable, especially since they’ve already sent the message and are tensely waiting for a response that may not be positive.

But if Aradia has to convince him one more time that this isn’t a mistake, she’s going to pull her own horns out.

At the moment, the young man is cooking, which seems to be his own form of stress-relief, and Aradia isn’t complaining even if she doesn’t need to eat, because Sollux does, and as far as stress-relief techniques go, this is one of the healthier options.

“Can I ask you something?” She’s already asking, but she can’t help her own curiosity. While she knows the young man’s story, she knows nothing about him. Nothing about his personal preferences, nothing about what he likes and what he doesn’t, nothing about the things a friend should know.

Aradia likes to think they are, at least, friends.

The young man smiles and nods. “Go ahead.”

“What’s up with the tarts?”

That gets her a laugh. An actual, head-thrown-back cackle that she can’t help but smile at even if it’s probably borne out of nervousness.

“I was expecting far more personal questions, so that was a surprise,” the young man says, “Can I ask why that in particular?”

“You said you hated them, but -” Aradia motions to the tray he’s just freshly made and set on the table she’s sitting by as she reads her book.

He seems to sober up, wiping his hands on his apron and sighing. He looks away, turning to the sink. “I do.”

“So why do you keep making them?” Aradia asks.

The young man slowly makes his way to the chair next to hers, pulling it out and taking a seat. He
continues to wipe his hands absent-mindedly, and as he stares at the table’s surface, his eyes flicker to hollow sockets for a second.

“My brother liked them.”

The weight of that answer drags a ball of nervousness into Aradia’s stomach, and she nods, grave. “Oh.”

“I really hated them because I ate too much of them once as a kid,” the young man says, “But my brother liked them a lot, so I…” He trails off, and waves a hand.

“I’m sorry I asked.”

He snorts, plastering on a strained smile. “Don’t be. The way I introduced it to you, you had to have wondered,” he says, “I also hate pasta spaghetti. The very sight of it makes me heave.”

Aradia laughs. “I’ve never had that, but I’m guessing you’re not going to be making it for us any time soon?”

“Not a chance,” he says, leaning back. Then, softly, “Maybe the others will, when they finally take you out of here.”

The silence that follows is uncomfortable, which is telling. Aradia tries to focus on her book again, but ends up glancing up at the young man too often. It’s clear he misses his friends and family, but – Aradia really doesn’t know if she can drag him out with them either.

Perhaps if she found a life player. But then again, he’d have to abandon his post here.

The fishbowl is still waiting in the living room. It has miraculously not gathered dust since they’ve set it up there.

“Do you think they planned it that we’d end up here?” Aradia asks, “Your friends?”

The young man chuckles. “I think they had other plans,” he says, spreading his hands, “And then you ran off and tore it up to shreds, and it was just their luck – or mine, perhaps, working in their favor, because even in death, we still are a team – that you ended up here, when you were so close to one of the Heir of Blood’s infected battlefields.”

“Infected,” Aradia says, testing it out. “You say it like it’s some kind of disease. Like what he’s done is…”

“Some form of sickness?” the young man asks, “You could say that. I suppose…” He quiets down for a moment, bringing his hands up to the table to study his palms like the answers are there. Behind him, the pot is still cooking away, the stove burning bright underneath it.

“I suppose he was brought into existence to punish us. Turned into some fancied-up metaphor that’s supposed to teach us all a lesson. Skaia is fond of punishing its players for their hubris.”

“You said he had a purpose.”

“Yes.”

“You haven’t gotten to that yet.”

The young man offers her a pained smile, but says nothing of that. Instead, he says, “The blood is sacred.”
Aradia frowns. “I don’t – I don’t understand.”

She knows from experience that blood is sacred. Her entire culture revolves around the blood caste system. Fuchsias were close to being deified, violets were next to them, purples were royalty and blues were aristocrats. The lower you were on the system, the lesser your worth, and Aradia knows that more than anyone. As a child, she’d sometimes found herself wondering if The Sufferer had been correct to question this system, for what was blood but something that kept their bodies running? They weren’t the same color, yes, but let a person bleed enough and they die all the same. She’d wondered how any of her grand-dams had gritted their teeth through all the prejudice, and she’d wondered that again after Vriska had paralyzed Tavros – she always was fond of pushing him around, confident in her blood status.

“I’m sorry,” the young man says, “I didn’t mean it like that. I meant it was sacred in a sacrificial way.”

“Oh,” Aradia says, her expression clearing. She hadn’t even realized she’d been glaring at her book. She closes it and sets it down. “No, I’m sorry, my brain just went straight to Alternia.”

“That’s not any surprise,” the young man says, “Alternia’s system always was unfair.”

“Have you been there?”

He shrugs. “Not really.”

She senses she’s not going to get any clear answers from that, so she tries to backtrack, tries to find something she can expand on. “The blood is sacred?”

“Skaia is fond of its stories,” the young man says. And again, in a softer voice, he says, “And its punishments.” He gently pushes his chair back and forth so it rocks, slowly, as he talks. “The life of every living thing is in the blood, and that is why the Lord commanded that all blood be poured out on the altar to take away the people’s sins. Blood, which is life, takes away sins.”

“You’ve lost me again,” she says.

He draws in a breath. “There’s a lot to talk about here, and I feel as if to understand a story in its entirety, we must start from the beginning.”

“When your friends and I will work together, they will tell me everything, yes?”

“Everything’s a lot,” he says, “You might pity someone too much and it may cost you your life. They don’t – they can’t have that on their hands. Not again. We’ve put too many people in danger.”

She supposes that’s fair, but she doesn’t like it.

“What can you tell me?”

“I can tell you that we made a mistake,” he says. He sounds tired again. “A grave, arrogant one. And someone had to pay the price. Someone had to be our sacrificial lamb.”

It clicks, somehow. Aradia knows little of Earth’s legends and stories, but that, coupled with what he’d told her – it fits, and she can see a picture form. One scene in a series of many. “Blood, which is life, takes away sins,” she echoes.

The young man nods slowly.
Aradia’s palms feel cold. Maybe this isn’t as black and white as she’d initially thought it was. Maybe there’s something else she’s missed. So many details that she’s missed, and he’s right, everything is a lot, but she has to know.


He doesn’t get to answer, because Sollux is running to the kitchen, a scrap of paper in his hand.

“Oh,” he says, looking between them, the young man half-slumped over in his chair, and Aradia looking frantic. “Guys, we got a response.”

*Finally.* Aradia still needs answers, but she’s gotten a response from the rest of the young man’s friends, and this is a start. She waits as Sollux takes a seat beside her and slides the note over to her, already decoded. The boy had been studying ciphers alongside her after all.

The young man doesn’t turn their way, only runs his fingers through his hair as he tries to compose himself. “What does it say?”

“It says they’re going to visit soon,” Aradia says, “They want to meet us to confirm things, I guess. Or check that you haven’t been murdered again.”

Sollux grins at that, and the mood lightens as Aradia and the young man find themselves laughing. “Should we send them a response?” he asks.

The young man shakes his head. “No. Let’s just wait for them,” he says, “Does it say anything else?”

“Well, uh...” Sollux lifts the letter up to squint at it. “It’s asking if we’re really sure about this, and how would we feel like about going to somewhere called – “ He has a hard time pronouncing the next word “– Asgard?”

The meeting with their possible benefactor goes surprisingly well. They’re brought into a considerably huge house with a pretty garden out front and a view of the ocean out back, and are introduced to a soft-spoken, amiable human whose name has already slipped Dirk’s mind. He’s already decided he’s not going to address them by name, only by title, because it will be clear that he doesn’t remember, and thus might offend them from this lapse in politeness.

Their benefactor doesn’t seem like the person to be quickly offended though.

Still, he’d rather play it safe, considering they’d been generous enough to give him and Damara their own rooms, and Dirk has already passed out in his own room for four hours earlier that day, body suddenly realizing it was incredibly tired, and that a comfortable mattress was the ideal place to sleep in.

He hasn’t been called down for anything, so it’s fine. He has enough time to get changed (they’d been given clothes too – this human was rich as hell) when he wakes up from his nap, and enough time to snoop around the house. If he listens to his manners, he has no right to do that, but if he listens to his paranoia then he has to risk looking the gift horse in the mouth in case its teeth are spikes (he knows he’s butchering that saying but hey, it fits).
He doesn’t find anything out of the ordinary, but he does take note of a few things. For a house belonging to someone wealthy, there’s no servants at all. In fact, aside from Ben (who’d immediately been pulled aside by their host after introductions were made and living spaces were distributed, so he could be patched up and coddled - there’s probably something going on there that Dirk is not going to butt in), there’s no evidence of anyone else living in the house aside from its owner.

Which would explain the light sheen of dust around some of the things in the house, he supposes. Maybe the human liked living by themself and cleaning around to clear their head? Maybe Ben helped when he stopped by? And of course, when you’re cleaning by yourself and still have things to do, you can’t get to every single surface, so there’s bound to be a few parts you’d miss.

Dirk still can’t help but feel like the house is aged. Or hastily cleaned-up.

Why are you so suspicious of everything?

There’s plenty of reasons to be. But there’s photos all around the house though, and it shows their host with their family. They look younger, of course. In a lot of photos, they’re still a child, or a teenager, but it’s unmistakably them. The question is, where are the rest of the family? Perhaps this is a vacation house, and they’d just inherited it, and they prefer to live in it by themself? A young isolated heir? It’s possible.

Dirk wouldn’t blame them, if every book or film he’s read and seen is correct. A lot of young heirs feel stifled by their rich family and often seek out a place of solace for themselves, some even going as far as wanting to make a name for themselves without the fame that comes with their family’s legacy.

Not that he’s an expert or anything.

He finds Damara in the backyard staring out at the ocean, and beside her, his little seagull friend.

It immediately flaps over to him, landing on his shoulder, when he closes the backdoor.

“Hey buddy,” he says, raising a hand to gently run a finger over its head, and it leans in close. “You followed us here too, huh?”

“It’s following you everywhere,” Damara says. She sounds calmer than Dirk’s ever heard her. Maybe the ocean really does things for everyone.

He walks over to her, leaning his arms on the fence beside her. “Let it,” he says, “It’s got no one else at this point.”

“And when we go to New York?”

Dirk pauses. “You’re really set on that, huh?”

“There’s nothing else we can do at this point,” she says, “We’re already here, and that human’s already making preparations for us to leave as soon as we can, as discreetly as we can.”

“And if we run into trouble?” he asks.

Damara shrugs. She’s strangely calm today. He wonders if it has something to do with plans going well, or maybe she’s just glad to have someplace decent to sleep. There’s no sopor to dunk herself in, but maybe comfortable beds are enough.

“Then we run trouble through,” she says.
Dirk snorts. “Poetic.”

“I try.”

“Really though,” he says, and as he exhales, he almost expects his breath to mist. It’s cold here, and the sun has already set as he’s spent most of his time asleep or exploring already. Soon, they’ll have dinner, and he’ll probably have to talk to their host again, and he hopes he’ll survive that. “Do you think we’re doing the right thing?”

“I don’t know,” Damara says. It’s as honest as she’s ever been with him. “I hope so.”

“That’s all we have, isn’t it?” He huffs out a sigh. “We keep hoping so.”

“We’ve always been hoping so, Strider-san,” Damara says. She straightens and rolls one of her shoulders to ease out the burn in her muscles. “Since we’ve been playing the game, we’ve always been hoping.”

And she’s been playing the game since long before him, he realizes.

The reality of how long this SBURB session has been for her hits him. The reality of how long each session is, really. While he’s only been dealing with his own session for – what, a few years, at most? – there’s others like her whose games never properly finished, and thus, never really ended.

They just get scratched, and its players are thrown in the back burner, forever in stasis.

What kind of existence is that, he wonders, to forever be floating in the void, reliving the same memories over and over again. Passing through possibilities, but being unable to take any steps forward to turn them into realities, being unable to claim a life and a second chance.

This is her second chance. It’s a blessing and a curse.

And Dirk’s unfairly lucky that he’s never needed a second chance to begin with. Or perhaps he does, to fix his mistakes borne out of arrogance, thinking he can singlehandedly lead a team to victory when Skaia teaches teamwork.

“Yes,” he says, “You know, you have some real wisdom to impart sometimes when you’re not angry.”

“I have real wisdom to impart to those who take the time to listen,” she says, and snaps her fingers so close to his face he has to flinch back. She’s laughing the entire time she goes back into the house, amused by his bewildered reaction.

He’s quick to learn that their benefactor doesn’t stay in the house a lot.

They give him and Damara keys, show them around certain parts of the house to tell them how a few things work (and old technology is fascinating to Dirk), but most days, they’re out doing who knows what. Not that Dirk is complaining. He has an actual computer now, he has a steady internet connection, and he doesn’t have to worry about where he’s going to sleep for the night or what he’s going to eat. It’s a stroke of good luck.

Suspicious good luck. When he brings it up to Damara, they end up arguing, and then fighting, and
then not talking to each other for days. They’re still not talking right now, in fact. Damara wants to
move forward and Dirk wants to sit tight and think, and both qualities are good, but Dirk is aware
they need to strike a balance.

And it must be insulting to her, when she’s worked hard in approaching Ben and getting them this
deal, and for Dirk to suddenly want to back out from it. He feels shame burn from his cheeks to his
ears as he thinks about this.

He’ll apologize. Maybe later, when his own anger has cooled off, and Damara’s not intent on
ignoring him.

For now, he’s busy continuing his research. In the past week, he’s already trawled through a lot of
sketchy forums that talk about the Avengers and the Safehouse, and conspiracy theories about the
missing mutants. They’re government experiments who’d escaped and were being reclaimed, some
said. Or are actual threats and sleeper agents being discreetly wiped off the map.

It’s a little wild, if he’s being honest, how people of this era think. He’d imagined them to be a bit
more different, but since he’s just shown up here, he has a lot to learn, and learn he will. He has time.

He signs up for more than a dozen forums and keeps track of them as the days pass, keeping tabs on
anything noteworthy and trying to cross-reference them as best as he can. He asks questions and
sometimes he gets answers and sometimes he doesn’t.

Damara continues to say nothing to him when they pass by each other in the hallway, but she has
stopped glaring, which is a good sign.

One night, when he’s still up and awake from combing through another shady site, he tries to go
down to the kitchen to get himself a glass of orange juice and some leftover pizza. The hallways are
dark as they’d turned off the lights, and with the house being sizeable enough to be lost in, he finds
himself wandering through hallways he’d been told were private.

One room has light peeking out of the crack under its door.

They hadn’t been given keys to this one. He shouldn’t check it out, but his curiosity is telling him to.

He ducks down, slowly, and creeps on the balls of his feet, light and nimble, making no noise as he
approaches the door. It’s firmly closed, and if he has to guess, it’s probably locked, but he won’t risk
getting attention by trying to jiggle the knob open. He lowers himself down onto the floor, thankful
he’s decided to ditch the shades for what was supposed to be a quick trip to the kitchen, and trying to
peer through the crack. It’s not easy, and he doesn’t get anything clear but a strip of light trying to
burn out his retinas, but he does hear things.

He hears their benefactor, and he hears Ben, and he hears other people.

When had their host gotten home? Or sneaked in this many people without Dirk hearing the gates or
the front door open?

“He did what?” That’s their host’s voice. They sound panicked yet exhausted.

“It’s fine, we took care of it.” Ben, this time. “Really, just –”

“No. No, listen – we angered him –”

“We constantly risk angering him. This is not unprecedented. This is not your fault.”
Dirk raises an eyebrow, attention captured. That’s a new voice. It has a bit of an accent, and it sounds strained and exasperated.

“Palmer’s tongue got cut off!”

There’s a harsh slap, someone’s palm hitting a table, and then silence. Dirk wants to move to a more comfortable position to get the burn out of his shoulder, but he doesn’t want to get found out.

“I’m just —” A sob. “I’m trying my best to fix this, and every time something goes right, we have to work twice as hard to patch things up. One of these days, we’re going to miss something, and it’s going to bite us right in the ass.”

The new voice speaks again. “If it’s any consolation, we already missed one thing.”

Another pause.

“…you know, we’re friends, but sometimes your humor makes me want to punch you in the face.”

There’s a few laughs, and Dirk listens intently, trying to pick out how many people are in the room. Five? Six?

The next voice that speaks makes Dirk harken, and that sets off another warning bell in his head. He’s had a lot of those recently. It’s captivating, like it’s laced with magic. It makes him want to listen.

It sounds young though.

“Strategically, that puts…how should I call them, our team? Their team? Team Chaos Extended?”

“The Safehouse Crew?” Ben asks.

Dirk’s brain is running overtime committing everything he’s hearing to memory.

“Okay, that works,” the nice voice says, chuckling, “Strategically, that puts them at a disadvantage because even on our end, we rely a lot on my abilities. With Cecil down, they’ll have their ability to compel halved, but they still do have Loki.”

“This is such a trippy thing to be talking about,” says another voice. It sounds muffled.

“You’re telling me,” says the one with the accent.

“We’ve been at this for centuries, guys,” Ben says.

“Yeah, but it wasn’t – it wasn’t this session,” says the muffled voice.

There’s a shuffling. Dirk can see something moving on the floor, feet walking over to a seat.

“How can you be so calm about this?” asks the host, softly. “I don’t even care about strategies right now. We almost lost two people.”

“But we didn’t.”

“But we could have,” they say, sighing.

Another pair of feet are moving, stopping near the loveseat. “Angel,” the accented voice says, “We didn’t. And you’re allowed to feel awful about this, but you can’t keep blaming yourself for it every
"I'm not supposed to be doing this," Angel says – and Dirk runs the name over and over in his mind. He doesn’t know how it feels. It doesn’t feel whole, somehow. Every soul has its own identity, see, and names are part of those identities. This is why names have power. And this name doesn’t fit in right, but it doesn’t feel false like whatever name their host had introduced themself as to Dirk, the name Dirk’s already forgotten. "This isn’t my function. This isn’t how I’m supposed to function."

"We’ve all had to work outside our limits more than once," Ben says, also walking over. "But we get by. Teamwork at its finest, yeah?"

There’s a few moments of sniffling and muffled sobs, and Dirk feels like he’s intruding on something private. A tender moment between whoever these people are, but he’s so close to finding something out. He could listen until they’re done, or he could even open the door and see who’s on the other side.

He looks up at the doorknob for a second.

"Okay," says Angel, voice shaky. "Okay. Run what we have by me again. We need to think this through."

"Cecil’s condition is stabilized, but he hasn’t woken up yet," says Accent. Dirk needs to make up names for them so it doesn’t sound so clunky in his head. "It’s either because of the drugs, fatigue, and the blood loss – in which case, that’s normal – or because of the exhaustion from the bloodleech and then being possessed by horrorterror."

Horrorterror?

"We can’t check on him, can we?"

"We can, but we’ll have to be careful. I imagine everyone else is on high alert right now, Kevin especially."

There’s another heavy pause.

Angel switches to another topic. "We’ll just have to hope he’ll be fine then. How’re Tony and Steve doing?"

"They’ve been visiting the hospital frequently, but they return every night to the tower."

"Good," Angel says, "Although I imagine they’re in quite the dilemma of having to choose between saving Cecil or Feferi first."

Feferi. Where had he heard that name?

"What else?"

"Dave Strider is also still comatose."

Dirk nearly chokes on his breath.

Dave is here.

Dave is here, on this earth, and he’s hurt and comatose due to whatever mistake these bastards made. How long has the boy been here? Hell, how long has he been in a coma? Dirk finds himself
bunching up the carpet underneath his fist, burst of anger lowering his self-control for a moment. Then he lets the fabric go, silent, hoping that made no noise.

“Any complications when you were working on him?”

Ben’s the one to answer this time. “Loki managed to seal up his injury, but with his blood loss, he was still bound to die, or at the best case scenario, suffer anemia for a few days. We managed to delay time like we did with Cecil and perform a blood transfusion spell.”

“Complications, ‘ben.”

“…there’s definitely going to be some. Like you said, we were working outside of our limits.”

“It’s going to regress?”

“It might.”

“Fuck.”

“Angel?” Accent’s talking again. He’s getting up too, and his footsteps –

Dirk scrambles back. His footsteps are getting closer to the door.

Then they stop, and Dirk realizes that he’s just been found out. He slowly gets to his feet. If he makes a noise, they can follow it and take him down. He needs to get away silently.

There’s a flash of green light behind him, and with his chance to get away dropping to zero, he whirls around, summoning his katana from his sylladex and striking up. The blade clashes against a golden staff held in the hands of the man he’s facing.

The door opens behind him. He’s cornered.

“Angel,” the man says, “Why was it a good idea to use your mother’s old vacation house again?”

“Goddamnit – Strider, stand down!”

Dirk doesn’t turn around, too busy holding his ground against the heavy staff threatening to break the blade of his sword.

“Strider!”

“Put him to sleep,” the man says.

Dirk slides his blade down then, taking the staff with it and making the emerald-encrusted tip of the weapon bury itself into the hardwood floor, piercing through the carpet and throwing splinters in the air. He flashsteps to the end of the hallway, intent on running downstairs, but then remembers that Damara is still in the house.

There’s another flash of green and then his arms are being pinned to his back, sword swatted out of his hand. He thrashes, tries taking to the air, but the one with the nice voice looks at him and says, “Sleep.”

He does. In the morning, he wakes up exhausted and doesn’t remember a thing of what he’s heard.

Chapter End Notes
/rubs hands together like an evil little fly with the lifespan of three days
I know I can't really confirm a lot of things, but hit me with your theories while I bang pots and pans in excitement.
Loki finds everyone asleep when he gets to the bunker. Not that that's any surprise, given the events of the day. James is passed out on the common room couch, tossing and turning. The pool master and their best friend are huddled together on the loveseat not even bothering with a blanket or changing out of their clothes, not that they had any to change into. Loki should probably let them go home for a moment. It's not like they're looking after James as much as James is looking out for them.

And besides, they look like they need the comfort of being in someplace familiar right now.

He doesn't wake them, though. They need all the sleep they can get. Instead he goes to the library to the empty wall across the door, running a hand over it to activate the runes. When the working falls away, he's faced with a shelf full of bottles – back-up potions he's stored in every single bunker he has, just in case he has to hide – and he reaches up the highest level for the bottle of whiskey he has there.

It's not mead, and all it's going to do is give him a slight buzz, but it's better than nothing, and he really needs a drink right now.

He goes to the kitchen to get himself a glass, fighting the urge to just drink straight from the bottle and silently starts emptying the whiskey bottle, staring down at the table as he tries to clear his head. Rose had been angry, and people say things in anger, but even when they say they never mean it, there's always some truth to everything they say.

They’d been almost joined at the hip, what with their love for knowledge and magic, so this – this - (hurts)

- reminds him a little too much of his former life. Of what he's left behind on Asgard. She has every right to be angry, of course, so he wouldn't blame her if she never forgave him and just worked with him to make sure that whoever's targeting the Safehouse will be gone and will stay gone.

He supposes that's the mindset he should be in right now. He should focus on what should be done instead of wasting away mental faculties on drinking. He should move on to the next step, just like he should. Just like he's always done before.

He still finishes the bottle of whiskey.

He doesn't get drunk on it, of course, just a little tipsy, but that's fine because he has things to do.

He checks the wards around the bunker, for James' sake, and when the pool master and their best friend wake up, he lets them go back to the Safehouse for a little bit to get more sleep and some new clothes. He bumps into Elizabeth as he pops by the flat, and then helps her pack clothes for everyone else staying at the hospital while she updates him on Cecil and Dave's status.

Neither of them have woken up. The doctors have said that this is normal, especially since they're still freshly out of surgery and are doped up on anesthetic, but everyone's worrying anyway.

He simply nods, finding he has nothing to say, and then he skywalks back to the bunker where
James is.

And then, because he finds himself suffocating in the tense air there – he and James aren't the closest of friends, after all – he skywalks to the island he and Cecil had talked once, on that one day where everything had seemed awful, but the circumstances felt as if it could be alleviated.

Loki sits down on the sand harshly, kicking up a few grains as he does so. It's nighttime here, and it's cloudy, so it's dimmer than it would be than if the moon had been visible, but he can't bring himself to care right now.

It's quiet here. Quiet and alone and he can pretend that he has time to sort things out and make mistakes he can easily fix.

There's two kids in the hospital who might never wake up.

Loki picks up a rock, not even noticing the sparks of green that race up his arm in his anger, and he tosses it into the waves where it makes a small explosion of a splash. He grits his teeth, frustrated, and then picks up another rock to do the same thing, as if that's going to help him.

It doesn't. Instead it just makes him even more frustrated, and he wants to destroy something. He wants to blow something up. He wants -

There's a faint plop in the water, several feet away from him. The plop itself isn't what catches his attention, but the little head that's poking out of the water, because fishes don't swim this close to shore, and they certainly don't poke their heads out like they're trying to peek up at someone. At least, that's what Loki has read and observed about Earth fishes.

Maybe observing them in restaurants hadn't been the best thing to do to learn about them, though.

*Your highness?* the fish is saying, making popping and pooking sounds as it moves its gills and fins. Loki has to blink before he realizes he's being addressed, and as he cranes his head up a little, he sees that the fish looks disappointed to see him.

No surprise there.

But still, self-loathing aside, how curious.

*Ah,* the fish says, and then turns to swim away, probably thinking that Loki can't understand it.

But he calls out, “Who did you expect?”

The fish stops for a moment, and then turns back to face him. It pokes its head out the water again. *You understand me?*

“Yes,” he says. He wants to stand to take a good look at the fish, but that might spook it away, so he doesn't.

*But you're human, aren't you?* The fish asks, also as equally intrigued as he is. *How do you understand me?*

“Why were you looking for a land-dweller when you belong to the sea?” he asks back.

The fish laughs, in the best way a fish can laugh. *I wasn't looking for a land-dweller at all. His highness would be offended if he'd heard you call him that.*

“His highness?” Loki asks. “A royal member of yours walks on land?”
Yes, says the fish, *But he loves the sea like no other.*

Loki lets himself latch onto this for a moment. It's something new, something odd and it's not something related to his problems right now, so he lets himself think about this. Someone akin to royalty for a fish, who isn't a land-dweller and would be angered at being called one, but walks on land.

“He doesn't happen to be a turtle, does he?”

The fish laughs again and dips down into the water to let out a stream of bubbles. *You're funny,* it says, and Loki gets the distinct impression that it's smiling at him, even with how limited its expressions are, being a fish and all.

“What's your name?” Loki asks. Then, “Do you even have one?”

*Anshu,* says the fish.

The word bounces around Loki's head, for a minute simply sounding like two innocent syllables, but after a moment, the magic of All-Speak translates it to something he can understand. *Ván.*

Hope.

Of all things Loki is looking for right now, it's hope. The very thought makes him laugh for a moment, and the fish gives him an odd look.

“That's a lovely name,” he says, “My name is Loki.”

*What brings you here, Sir Loki?* the fish asks. *You just appeared out of nowhere.*

“I needed someplace to think,” Loki says. “This was the first place I could think of.”

*Do you drop by here a lot?*

“I've been by, once or twice. I just remembered it,” he says.

*Ah.* Anshu looks up at the cloudy sky like they see something more. *It is beautiful isn't it?*

“Yes,” Loki says, then, remembering something else, he says, “The last time I was here, I seem to recall some sort of animal spooking me and my companion. By any chance, was that - ”

*His highness Eridan? Yeah,* Anshu says with a bit of a snicker. *He was protecting his territory.*

“I...see,” Loki says, and looks around for a bit. He stands up, brushing the sand off his pants, and as he turns behind him he notices something tall poking out of the tree line. It looks like a lighthouse. Have there been humans here in the time he has been away? Progress sure is fast. “Where is he now?”

*He went...somewhere,* Anshu says. They sound sad. Longing. They miss this 'Eridan', Loki realizes. *He went to find some friends, I think.*

“And he hasn't been back yet?”

*No,* Anshu says, *He'll take as long as he will take, but I believe he will be back. His highness has proven to be reliable.*

“You trust him a lot?” Loki asks.
Anshu looks proud. *With my life.*

“That's a bold thing to claim, Anshu. A lot of people you trust with your life can easily let you down.”

*He hasn't given me any reason to distrust him yet,* Anshu says, *And I don't think he will.*

Loki studies the fish for a moment. They're a little angel fish. He doesn't know the lifespan of these things, but he's willing to bet this one is rather young, and they've already sworn their soul off to some ruler who's apparently left his people for a journey. Loki hopes whatever that journey, it would be worth it.

“I hope he never gives you a reason to distrust him then,” he says. He's not so cruel as to dash the hopes of one, naive little fish.

*Thank you. I hope you find some peace with whatever's taking up your thoughts,* the fish says, and it takes Loki back a little, hearing such kind wishes from a *fish,* of all things.

Then Anshu dives down again and swims off, presumably back to their reef, leaving Loki on the shore.

He feels a little lighter than when he'd come here, both from the surprise, and the strange conversation.

Hope.

He'd needed a reminder of that.

-  

He spends the next few days just traveling around places, trying to clear his head and focus more, but he does occasionally pop in the Safehouse to see how everyone is doing. He knows it's awfully rude of him to just be flitting in and out but he can't really bring himself to face Rose and others yet.

Not yet.

But he will.

Sadly, on the day he decides that he'll come home, there's another storm pouring and so most of everyone in the War Council is stranded at the hospital, and the only person that he finds is the pool master, and they're sitting in the solarium with their forehead pressed against the glass as they watch the rain fall around about them.

They're not very close friends, Loki knows. The pool master is someone who had once upon a time been more than willing to take orders and not ask questions and Loki had capitalized on that. They had just been there, and willing to help as long as they were left out of the house pranks, and so Loki had recruited them. They weren't in the forefront of Safehouse matters either, so had anyone been compromised, they made for a perfect key for the emergency system. They had been...a tool, for lack of better word, and perhaps Loki should remedy seeing people as tools when he'd hated the thought of being one himself.

They hadn't talked a lot, and they probably couldn't even be called friends, although he's seen bursts of irritation from them that was rightfully warranted given that he constantly caught them or skywalked them and their best friend around at the most inconvenient of times. At least, if anything, they trusted him to not kill them on the spot for shooting him disdainful looks for dragging them
around at the most inopportune times.

They turn to him as soon as they realize there's someone else in the room – which takes about five minutes – and when he gets a good look on their face, he sees that they've been crying.

"Angeles, what's wrong?" he asks, and feels stupid because a lot of things are wrong right now, like two of this kid's friends being stuck in a hospital and them having to go through something so traumatic firsthand.

The pool master – Saph, because that was their name and Loki should start remembering that, damn it – tries to speak, but only sucks in a shaky breath and then puts a hand over their mouth, trying to muffle whatever sob was going to come out.

Loki stands there, awkward, not knowing what to do.

He watches as they look down, trying to gather themself, and once they have, they fix their sleeves from where they've been slipping past their fingers, and the collar of their sweater from where it's bunched up.

"I'm - " They lick their dry, chapped lips, and even that small action seems to take too much effort. "I'm fine. I just - I'm confused, stressed, and overwhelmed and it's been a little too much lately."

"Where's Ruben?"

"He's upstairs, he's asleep," they say, waving a hand. "Didn't see the point in disturbing him, you know?"

"He's your best friend," Loki says, "I'm sure he - "

"He already takes care of me most of the time," Saph says, insisting. "It's fine. I'm fine. I'm fine." They force a tight smile. "What did you need?"

He doesn't need anything, really, he'd just been looking for anyone at all in the house. Anyone to talk to and maybe be on the receiving end of a yelling of.

"Have you been eating?" he asks.

The pool master runs a hand over their face, exasperated. "Yes, yes, I've been eating. Not a lot, but I'm trying. I've tried to sleep too. I am fine, Mr. Win – Loki. Didn't you come here for a specific reason?"

"I was looking for everyone," he says, "But they're all at the hospital today."

"Did you expect anyone to be home?"

"No," he says.

They let out a dull laugh. "You've been running away from everything even when you tell yourself you're not, huh?"

He frowns. "I'm not."

"Mm," they say, "So you had no idea why you came here at all?"

"I had a vague concept of it."
“That depended on whether or not you actually found someone you wanted to talk to, yeah,” they say.

He says nothing.

They turn to stare out at the rain again for a while, silent, tracing the raindrops as they slide down the glass with a finger, and mumbling a lullaby softly under their breath.

Loki finds himself a seat across the room. He might as well get comfortable while he’s here. It’s not like roaming around the house is going to do him any good at this point.

“What were you crying about?” he asks. Again, stupid question.

Still, Saph answers. “Just general confusion, I guess,” they say, “Nothing makes sense these days.”

He can agree with that. He’d thought he had a fair grasp of what was happening and then, things like these happened, and while he knew he had ideas and theories, he was in too much turmoil to actually focus and assess his theories.

“It’s frustrating,” Saph continues, “And I kind of just want it to be all over already.”

Loki looks out of the glass walls, watching the rain along with them. He almost finds himself drifting to sleep before he notices that Saph is walking over and sinking into the chair opposite him, leaning back, tired, staring blankly at the desk between them.

“Something the matter?” he asks.

“If I messed up at something somehow really badly, would you kill me?”

He straightens a little at the sudden question. “Excuse me?”

“If I messed up at something somehow really badly,” Saph repeats, very carefully. They look up at him, and Loki meets their eyes. The dark circles under their eyes are more red than dark, and puffy from all their crying, but it doesn’t soften their glare any less. He thinks for a second that they’re acting strange, but then he corrects himself. He doesn’t know them that well. He’s never thought to pay attention and let himself know them well, so he can’t ever know if they’re acting strange, or if they’ve always been like this, and he’s just noticed.

“No,” he says, “That’s unfair.”

“Not even if my mistake costs a lot?”

“It would depend,” Loki says, “It’s always a case by case basis – where’s this coming from?”

The resolve in their eyes breaks a little, and they look like they’re about to start crying again. They draw in another breath and reach into the pocket of their pajamas, trying to fish out something but fumbling badly with it as their hands are trembling.

Outside, the rain continues to rage, and thunder rumbles. Loki thinks about Thor for a moment, trying to distract himself with even that because he doesn’t think he really wants to know about what the pool master is sliding across the table.

It's the string of numbers that Cecil had written down, right before they'd brought him to the hospital. The blood on the paper has long since hardened and browned. It’s been days, after all. Almost weeks, and they'd had to deal with so much, that they've forgotten about this.
Loki looks at the numbers first, and then the tiny boxes of grids at the very edges of the paper, evidence of trial and error.

“I'm sorry we couldn't teach you how to do it, but I tried to get something done to at least clear my head a little, you know. I wanted to be useful,” they say, “And I hate solving these things, but I can do it, just with a bit more time than it usually takes Ruben to do it.”

Loki studies the scribbles they’ve made, in some horridly colored ink, and at their handwriting that he's come to be familiar with, with all the errands he constantly has them do.

He looks at how they solved it. At their grids, at the encircled letter G, and then as the deciphered message. He leans back in his seat too, and runs a hand over their face.

He doesn't even have much horror to express anymore, he's just tired, and he's confused, and he doesn't know what to even think anymore.

Sapphrel is crying again.

“I-I-I...” They're trying to talk but their voice is breaking, and they look like they're close to hyperventilating. “I don't know what's going on.”

A few drops of tears hit the paper, and they push it further towards him quickly, reaching up again to wipe at their cheeks with their sleeves.

Loki looks back down at the paper like it’s going to change what's written there. It doesn't.

“I tried, over and over, because maybe I had solved it wrong. Hell, I ran it through decoders just in case,” they say, laughing bitterly as they motioned towards the scrap of paper. “But somehow – I don't know, somehow, Cecil got this vision, so that has to be right, that has to be correct! That! That's – that's -”

They fall back in their chair, sobbing fully, burying their face in their hands.

“Angeles,” Loki tries.

“No!”

“Saph, calm down,” Loki says. He knows that calming them down and reassuring them is the right course of action for now, so he tries. “You can't possibly believe what this says.”

He gets hysterical laughter in response. “Oh, I don't know – do you? Because if you believe it, then that basically means I'm fucked, isn't it?”

“We have no proof. I have been keeping track of everyone's movements as much as I can.”

“Well, somehow, I messed up in my goddamn sleep,” Saph says, smacking a hand on the desk, “Somehow, I made this happen, and I'm at fault -”

“There's a possibility that this was written down by whatever was possessing Cecil.”

Saph stops.

Loki pinches the bridge of his nose. It's a half-assed theory, but it's the only one that makes sense and adds up right now. Because he really has been keeping track of everyone's movements. He's not as close to the pool master and their best friend as everyone else, but he has been keeping track as much as he can, and he knows the pool master has only been to school, to the Safehouse, to their awkward
family reunion, and he knows that for an amount of time, they've been sick.

“'It's possible that this isn't a vision at all, and that Cecil wrote this in a state of possession,’” Loki says, “And that he was fighting it. Which explains why the full possession only happened in the hospital. That must have been when Cecil's control finally lapsed.”

“You're just pulling this out your ass.”

“You need to stop heaping the blame on yourself,” Loki says, reaching forward to poke them in the forehead, slightly irritated.

“But Cecil's visions are never wrong!”

“This time, they are,” Loki says. “It's trying to divide us. You handle the emergency system. If it gets us, and then it gets our back-ups, we are done for. It's simple strategy. Do you understand?”

“I'm trying to,” they say. They still haven't stopped crying, and they're shaking now. “I'm trying to so bad, but.”

“It's not your fault. You have nothing to do with this,” Loki says, and tries to feed magic into his voice calm the hysterical human in front of him.

Sapphrel hunches over, crying freely now.

On Loki's desk, there is the letter, and the decoded message says, in Sapphrel's handwriting, the same handwriting that Loki had seen on the margins of the missile guide all those months ago:

who's behind this who's the heir
itssapphrelitssapphrelitssapphrel
-

It’s raining again.

It has been raining a lot in the city lately, and while Mai would rather stay in the Safehouse until the sky clears, there is something urgent that requires her presence here. It requires everyone’s, really, because nearly everyone in the network is here. They haven’t heard anything from the Safehouse radios yet, so they’re assuming everyone there is busy, as they’ve sent a message for a yellow radio, and there’s no broadcast yet.

Still, that doesn’t mean they won’t extend their hands to help those who need help. And besides, they’re not all helpless on their own.

“Is she okay?” she hears her brother ask as they all stare at the girl huddled beneath a stolen blanket. Or, she looks like a girl, but not really. She kind of reminds Mai of that odd boy she’d met by the river once. They’re both rude, and they both have horns, but this girl has odd eyes, and her horns are longer.

The girl, as if hearing what they’re talking about, scoffs, “Of course I’m fine.”

Mai shrugs. “She says she is.”

“Don’t talk down at me, you – ” The girl sniffs the air. “You’re all humans here, aren’t you?”

There’s a few curious whispers, and Mai hears someone start to answer, but there’s a shout from
beyond the bridge, and everyone turns to see five kids sliding down the slope, drenched in the rain, all trying to carry a body between them. It’s another person, older than most of them, by the looks of it, and they look unconscious. They have the same grey skin as the girl huddled with everyone else, but strangely enough, from the numerous gashes she has on her limbs, probably from falling down from someplace very high, she seems to be bleeding –

Teal?

“We got another one!” one of the kids dragging the unconscious stranger yells. A few people step aside so they can pass, and as they do, they break the crowd around the girl with the blanket, so she sees the approaching cavalry.

She draws in a sharp breath and stills, murmuring a name under her breath.

Mai frowns, thinking. First, that grey-skinned boy from a while back, and then a few days ago, this odd-eyed girl, and now, this new teal-bleeding stranger.

Where were they all from? Had they escaped the men in the suits?

As the children carefully place the new stranger on the ground, the girl with the blanket rushes over to her, checking the stranger’s face, and their superficial wounds, and though she looks livid, she looks almost…worried.

Mai turns to the kids who had dragged this person here, all of them shaking the rain out of their clothes. “They were the only one you found?”

“Yeah,” one of them, a girl – Kristina, Mai thinks – says. “They were by the woods. I think they fell from the trees.”

“Or somehow, past the trees, by the looks of it,” another person says. “Look at all those cuts.”

They all turn to the stranger again, and this time, the odd-eyed girl is definitely fussing over them, tearing her blanket into strips to use them as makeshift bandages.

“No word from the Safehouse?” Lester, Mai’s brother, says from beside her.

“No,” she says, “At least, not yet. Do you think they’re okay?”

“I think someone needs to check, but.” He spreads his hands. “We’re kids.”

“That’s never stopped any of us before,” she says. She draws in a breath as she makes up her mind and calls everyone to attention, trying to remember how Mr. Winters had always looked and spoke whenever he was leading the Safehouse crew around.

She steps away from the crowd and raises her voice, and everyone turns to her when they hear her speak, waiting for her verdict.

She looks at the strangers in their midst again, although the conscious girl doesn’t seem to pay Mai any attention. That’s fine. She curls her hand into a fist as she gives out the command.

“We need to get the Mayo Man.”

Chapter End Notes
mayo man
take me by the hand
m a y o m a n

(also yes, the chapter title is on purpose lmao)
He practically has to drag Sapphrel out of the sun room, but at least he manages to achieve the feat. Skywalking the distance from there to Cecil’s room might only make them sick with how shaky they already are, and he’s already learned this lesson while helping Cecil when the boy had started getting his troubling visions.

Cecil. Right. They probably shouldn’t be trespassing in the poor boy’s room, but this is an emergency, and he and Loki have an understanding anyway, they’ve talked about this before.

Anything pertaining to this - they have no name for it, it’s just *This* - is top priority.

He’ll tell Cecil later. He’ll tell him what he’s discovered, because it might put the boy at ease. He just needs to wake up first.

Loki grits his teeth. He *will* wake up.

The front door to the Palmers’ flat is locked, but Loki draws a rune over it, and it easily opens to him, which earns him a very confused protest from Sapphrel, but he just nudges them inside. The living room is less than a mess than it had been the last time he’d been here, which is good, but Cecil’s room is still a wreck. Blankets and cards are everywhere, one plushie has fallen off the bed, and the recycled soda can the boy’s kept on his desk as a pen holder has been knocked over, pens spilling all over the floor.

Sapphrel trips and crashes onto the floor as soon as he lets go of their arm, walking speed too slow to match his that they imbalance as soon as he stops pulling them along. Loki winces.

“Ow.” He hears them mutter and pick themself off the floor as he walks around Cecil’s bed to get to the wall beside it. There’s blank papers scattered by his feet, and he frowns slightly, feeling guilt rise up in his chest again.

He turns to the wall and undoes the working on it.

The wall is covered in papers, tacked and taped onto the surface with everything Cecil could find - pins, duct tape, washi tape, glue - each paper clearly hastily written on and hastily placed onto the wall, the work of a frantic, panicking boy. There’s red ink everywhere, underlining words and encircling certain sentences, putting a few questions marks at some spaces. It’s the sort of conspiracy wall one would see in movies, with red strings and all, and Loki bites his lower lip.

He’d helped Cecil put this together as best as he could, but he hadn’t been there every single time the boy had had a vision.

“What is *that*?” Sapphrel says behind him. When he turns to them, their eyes are wide, the fear and confusion clear in them. They glance at him for a second before they continue taking in the whole mess that is the wall.

“It’s what’s been keeping Cecil awake for nights,” Loki says.

“I thought we discussed everything that Cecil’s been seeing!” Sapphrel says, and then falters, “S-save the part where he...seemed to get possessed and he passed out and…” they trail off.
“There is a lot we haven’t discussed yet.”

“Then why didn’t you tell us?”

“We didn’t want to alarm you.”

A pause.

Sapphrel shifts on their feet, and then finally steps forward to look at the wall closer. Loki sits down on Cecil’s bed, and then decides it’s better if he cleans the room. He steps over the bed and gathers the blankets and the fallen plushie, setting everything in their place, and once he’s done with the bed, he goes over to Cecil’s desk to set it right.

He works in silence, giving Sapphrel enough space and time to take in and read everything on the wall, following the thread that connects certain pieces of paper together. He cleans up as best as he can, and by the time he’s done, the room is better than it is before, as if Cecil had never made a mess in it in the first place.

Loki wishes he still doesn’t feel guilty.

Then he sits on the bed and waits for Sapphrel to speak.

And waits.

And waits.

And waits.

And wa -

“Okay,” Sapphrel says, “I don’t get it.”

Loki looks up at them for a moment and then sighs. He motions his head to the space beside him, lacing his hands together. “Sit. I’ll try to explain.”

Sapphrel studies him. “…everything?”

“Everything that I understand,” he says, “That we understand.”

“Why don’t you ever tell the others this?” they ask.

He turns away and starts cracking his knuckles, mostly as a way to fidget rather than as a threat, but the human beside him backs away a little, so he stops and sighs again. “I will tell them,” he says. “I just haven’t had the time to yet.”

He gets another scrutinizing look, but Sapphrel says nothing and just sits beside him.

“So?”

“So,” he starts, “Do you have any questions you wish to get out of the way first?”

“Yeah, what’s all this about?”

Loki chuckles. “It may be a lot to take at once.”

Sapphrel levels him with an unamused look. “I’ll understand everything better if you start from the
Loki nods and then turns to the wall. “Okay,” he says. He thinks over his words for a moment. “As you know, Cecil was having nightmares.”

“Yeah,” they say, looking down at the ground, “He wasn’t - he wasn’t in a good place for a while.”

“It wasn’t just nightmares,” Loki says, and when Sapphrel looks like they’re about to interrupt, he holds up a hand. “Let me continue, please. It’ll make sense, I promise.”

They nod.

“Thank you,” he says, “It wasn’t just nightmares. They were visions. Horrifying ones, but still visions. The first one - the first one only seemed like a nightmare, and even Cecil thought it was a nightmare. He didn’t pay it any mind. He thought it would pass. And we didn’t pay any attention to it either.”

“Until it seemed to constantly happen.”

“Yes,” he confirms.

“And then Cecil suddenly started - started staying up and wouldn’t eat. He seemed to just be - ” Sapphrel falters. “- obsessed with it.”

“He was trying to make sense of it,” Loki says. “His visions are usually warnings. I don’t blame him for trying to make sense of it.”

“But it doesn’t make sense,” Sapphrel says, motioning towards the wall. “None of this does.”

“It hasn’t happened yet.”

“Still!”

“It might,” Loki says, “It might already be happening now. I don’t know.”

There’s another pause, and then Sapphrel motions a hand. “Continue.”

“Do you recall when the others told us about a game they played, one that birthed an entire universe as a prize?”

“I passed out, remember?”

“Oh,” Loki says, “Yes, you did.”

They laugh dryly. “Ruben gave me a rundown. I’m still trying to wrap my head around everything about it, but yeah, why?”

“With our current setting - with only Earth as a setting, what Cecil’s visions show may be impossible,” Loki says. He stands, and then puts a hand on one of the papers tacked there, one finger pointing to the words Interdimensional Game? written in red and encircled too many times. “But with a game like that, one that would break the rules of the universe to rebuild it - ”

“Oh, no,” Sapphrel says. “No, don’t - don’t break a speech at me with this. How is that even possible?”

“I don’t know,” Loki says. “But alternate universes have always been a possibility. It was something
studied in Asgard, a theory that has always been debated. It is arrogant to think there is only one iteration, one sphere of existence out there, just as it is arrogant to reject other possibilities and trains of thought especially when nothing is proven.”

When he gets no answer, he continues, pointing to one of the papers near the bottom of the wall. It lights up in green. “In his visions, Cecil saw a battlefield,” he says, “According to him, it looked tiled, black and white, as if it was a chessboard.”

Saph nods, and Loki points to another piece of paper to light it up. “In one vision, Cecil noted that the chessboard was clean, and that it looked...smaller. Less tiles. You could have walked to the edge of it.”

“What’s past the edge?”

Loki’s lips turn up a little. “I don’t know.” Another piece of paper is lit up, this one near the very top. “However, Cecil also noted that in most of his visions, the battlefield was bigger. And messier.” He pauses. “There was a lot of blood all over it, and a lot of corpses, all shredded and violently murdered.”

“How violently?”

Loki turns to them for a moment. “Limbs thrown across the battlefield, clearly ripped by something from the body,” he says, “Disembowelment clearly done by bare hands.”

“Bare hands can’t -”

“They can if someone compelled enough to do so would scratch and scratch repeatedly, with enough force,” Loki says, “Possession lends for inhuman strength, isn’t that the trope in your movies?”

Saph puts a hand over their mouth and gags. “T-their own bare hands?”

Loki nods.

“Oh,” they say, “Oh god, I’m going to puke.”

“Perhaps we should stop talking about that part, then,” Loki says, “Simply know that Cecil did not mostly see the battlefield as a good place. It looked exactly like it should be, a battlefield, but in his own words, it looked as if it was...needlessly violent.” His eyes become unfocused as he thinks, remembering the way the battlefields looked like when he and Thor and the Warriors Three had gone out on an adventure, and not one to defend Asgard but to hunt for fun. Monsters slain all over the area, monsters who, while they were considered monsters, were for all intents and purposes simply animals hunted for sport. Animals who had their own families and their own broods to go back to.

Needlessly violent.

“Why would he say that?”

“According to him, it was as if someone just let this happen because it would be entertaining. He said it was a permeating feeling he got from standing on that battlefield,” Loki continues, snapping back to the present. “And he said that he also felt as if this wasn’t what the battlefield was normally like. It was like there some other presence there that changed it. That corrupted it and forced it to be like that.”

Saphrel stills. They turn their attention to one piece of paper with the red word *INFECTED* on it.
“Like it was infected or something?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

“He didn’t know what was infecting it, of course,” Loki says, “We’re still trying to figure it out.” He slowly starts tracing a part of the red thread with a finger. “One notable thing about his visions, of course, is that he saw...certain people.”

Sapphrel narrows their eyes. “Who?”

“He couldn’t remember their faces,” Loki says. “He says it was a bit like a dream. He couldn’t remember their faces, but he did know that he saw them while he was still seeing the vision. And he remembered a few minutes after he saw the vision, but it all seemed to disappear from his memory later.”

“Is there a pattern for how long he remembered?”

“He said it was almost random,” Loki says, “Sometimes he couldn’t remember at all, sometimes it disappeared as soon as he was going to write them down, and sometimes it was a little in between.”

“Huh,” Saph says. “Does he know who those people are? Get a bit of a feeling, I mean?”

Loki pauses again. “He could feel their personality, I suppose. Or, their essence. Their very character. He could feel - no, see the secrets they held, and even though it was all gone when he woke up, he remembered, at least, that he could see into them.”

Saph deflates a little and hunches in on themself.

“Some of it was enough to pinpoint certain people,” Loki says, and watches as they lean forward as he lights up another piece of paper in green. “Himself,” he says, “His brother.” Then he motions to his own chest, “And me.”

“I...see,” Saphrel says, “Does Kevin know?”

“Kevin knows nothing,” Loki says, “Cecil doesn’t want to tell him.”

They frown. “Why not?”

Loki hesitates, then. “This is under our agreement in which you keep secrets, yes?”

“On my mother’s honor,” Saphrel says, raising a hand as if in a promise.

“Cecil saw his brother die in one of his visions.”

Saphrel stands suddenly.

Loki turns to them, patient, waiting for them to process the information, but his eyes are sad.

“What?”

“Kevin died in his visions,” he repeats. “No - I think the term better used here is violently killed.”

“Needlessly violently killed?”
Despite it all, Loki’s lips turn up. They’re catching up. “Yes.”

“W-who - why would -” Tears are welling up in Sapphrel’s eyes again. They’re shaking, and their voice is cracking. “Why would anyone do that, I - ”

“I don’t know,” Loki says, “But we do know we want to do everything in our power to stop that from happening.”

Sapphrel sucks in a breath, and then swallows thickly, making a face, like bile had risen up their throat. They look away, heaving. “Okay, but – but if you’ve been keeping this a secret for this long, why are you telling me?”

Loki turns to them slowly and looks them in the eye. “I have multiple theories.”

“You don’t need to say that all sinister-like,” they say, but he ignores it.

“One of them is that whoever's doing this is cutting off the useful, or cutting off the weak. Devil take the hindmost is still effective when you're cutting down manpower,” Loki says, “Cecil is a Seer.” He reaches up rub at his neck. There is a thin line there, a scar from where he'd pressed his own knife to his skin. “As well as a very powerful silvertongue. Taking him down would be tactical.”

Saph looks ill again. “Silvertongue.”

Loki sees the pieces click in their head. “Yes.”

“That's why they - “ Their hands tremble as they reach up their face, as if to take off their glasses, but they realize they're not there. “ - his tongue - ”

“This is warfare, after all,” Loki says. “It's just tactics.”

“He's a kid,” Saph says. “He's seventeen.”

“That's never mattered in wars before.”

“It should!” They're sobbing into their hands now. “It should.”

Loki listens to them as they silently cry, waiting, but they surprise him by forcing themself to steady their voice.

“Tell Rose,” they say, “I really think you should tell Rose.”

“I will,” he says. Pauses again. “Soon.”

They take a while to answer, but when they do, their voice cracks, and it sounds so small. “Okay,” they say, nodding. “I...I need to take a nap. I need to eat, or something. I’m getting lightheaded. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” he says, “We’ll talk later.”

They nod again, then turn around and move to slide off the other side of the bed, towards where the door is, but as they do, their hand knocks over a pile of cards on Cecil's desk. They topple over in a slope, and one of them flutters to the floor.

Loki reaches over to set the cards on the desk upright while they crouch down to pick up the card on the floor. They laugh.
“Look,” they say, getting to their feet and showing the card to him.

He doesn't know what it means, as he's never encountered this sort of card before – he's handled playing cards before, but these don't look like playing cards – but it's illustrated, and it looks beautiful.

“Two of Cups,” Sapphrel says, “Reversed, though.”

Loki takes the card in his hand and stares down at it. He's only aware Sapphrel has left the room when the door softly shuts behind them.

The lights in the hospital room are harsh and bright, although that might just be because Rose hasn’t had decent sleep in close to a week. God tier bodies easily survive without sleep – any damage done to the cells and internal organs easily repair themselves as a slow death by sleep deprivation counted as neither Heroic nor Just – but that didn’t mean they didn’t get tired. They simply didn’t die. It’s something that would be a useful form of torture if someone were to attempt to tap into it, maybe find a way for their victim to keep healing, and once they’ve healed, break them open again.

Rose reaches up to massage her forehead. Morbid thoughts suit her, but they only ever really become truly morbid when she needs her rest.

Across the room, there is Kevin, asleep by his brother’s side. He hasn’t gone home in days, has refused to, and Rose understands his predicament.

A floor above them is where her brother is currently laid up. She’s just come down to wake Kevin and remind him to eat.

“Kevin,” she says softly, placing a hand on his shoulder and gently shaking it. “Kevin, wake up.”

He doesn’t stir, so she shakes him just a little bit harder. “Kevin.”

“Wh – ” His voice is croaky as he blinks up at her, confused. He turns to Cecil for a second, sees that he’s still asleep, and then turns back to Rose with a frown. “Whass’it?”

“You need to eat,” she says, and he shakes his head immediately.

“No, I, uh. I need to stay here.”

“Kevin,” Rose says, as she’s said many times before over the course of their stay here in the hospital. “You need to stretch your legs. You need to eat. Cecil isn’t going anywhere, if he wakes up, everyone else – ” She motions to the whole room; some of their group is passed out here, while the others are in Dave’s room “ – will get us. It’ll be fine.”

A pinched expression flickers on his face for a moment, and he turns to his brother. He shifts, leaning back in his chair, and as he does, Rose notices that he’s been holding Cecil’s hand this entire time.

Something squeezes inside her chest.

“Okay,” Kevin says. He clears his throat and says, in a louder voice, “Okay.”

Rose nods, and lends him a hand. He staggers as he gets to his feet, legs shaky from days of
Kevin tries to buy only a muffin from the cafeteria, but Rose insists he at least buy more food to snack on later, even if his appetite isn’t too great at the moment. He doesn’t protest, so Rose buys an entire bag for him, and he chews slowly on the muffin he has in hand as they trudge up the stairs.

His breathing starts to get a little ragged on the second flight of stairs they climb though, so he stops for a second, leaning his back on the rail to catch his breath.

“Elevator?” Rose asks.

“No,” he says, almost frantic, and then shakes his head, heaving. “No. No, please. I don’t want – I don’t want to be in confined spaces right now, I’m scared – I – ” He spends a few seconds taking in deep breaths. “I always think the lights are going to go out again and…”

Rose nods, understanding. She sits on the steps instead, close to the rail, waiting.

Kevin eventually slides down to sit and lean forward, resting his forehead on his knees, bag of food beside him. He’s silent for a while, and then after a few minutes, he lets out a small sob.

Rose watches as his shoulders start to shake, and as he curls in on himself as he begins crying.

The hospital is silent. It’s not empty, but it’s so early in the morning that most of everyone is asleep, and the cold from the outside has seeped in through its walls, lending the entire building the atmosphere of a graveyard.

Kevin’s sobs, no matter how small, sound loud in the silence.

“I’m sorry,” Rose says. She doesn’t know what else to say, really.

Kevin takes a while to answer. “It’s not your fault.”

“I still feel like I should say it,” she says, “I had him there. I was fighting him. We were – he was possessed by Horrorterrors and we could have done something but instead, he – ” Rose’s voice chokes off. She puts a hand to her mouth and closes her eyes. “I was hoping all of our troubles were left in the game.”

Kevin shakes his head. “We both know that nothing ever really ends,” he says, “Especially not something so unfinished like that. It’s always going to come back. Unfinished business always haunts you. Comeuppance always finds you.”

Rose nods, letting that sink in. “I wish it didn’t,” she says, and spreads her hands, as if giving up.

“What did we do to deserve this?”

Kevin snorts. “The universe is hardly fair.”

She laughs bitterly at that, thinking of her mother, and of finding a game at thirteen, and how that had destroyed everything she’d loved. “Yeah,” she says, “I hear you.”

They sit there for a while, saying nothing. Kevin forces himself to finish off two more muffins, and then they continue their trek up to Cecil’s room. Rose opens the door for him and is about to simply drop him off there and be on her way, but she notices something black sitting on Cecil’s chest.
She frowns. “What on earth?”

Khoshekh, Cecil’s pet cat, is sitting on the boy’s chest as he continues to sleep, breathing steady but slow. On the chair, where Kevin had been sitting earlier, is Winston, resting his head on the mattress, appearing troubled as he looks at Cecil.

“How did they get here?” Kevin mumbles, too tired to even be surprised.

“They snuck past the receptionist?” Rose asks, joking, but – that’s the only explanation she has unless Loki had decided it was a good idea to skywalk the pets here.

“I don’t know,” Kevin says. He goes over to where Winston is, and Rose follows him, noting the mud on Winston’s paws, and the piece of paper rolled up and tied to his collar.

“At least we know he was somewhere before he got here,” she says, reaching over to take the rolled up paper. It’s wet, maybe from rainwater as it’s been storming a lot in the city lately. As she unfurls the paper, she finds that most of the ink has unfortunately bled, and she’s too tired to make sense of what’s written right now, so she tucks it away for later.

“Khosekh?” Kevin’s petting the cat on his brother’s chest, and the animal turns to him, bright, near-luminescent green eyes fixating on him. “How did you get in here?”

Khoshekh mewls. Unfortunately, however, neither of them understand catspeak, and Loki’s not around, so Kevin just nervously laughs.

“Guess we won’t know for a while, buddy,” he says. He looks at the seat where Winston’s on, but it’s already muddy, so he just sighs and sits on the edge of the bed, looking down at his brother.

“Do you know where Loki is?” he asks Rose.

She stills, and then huffs out a breath. “We had a fight.”

Kevin turns to her so fast she’s surprised he doesn’t fall off the bed. “What?”

“We had a fight,” she says. “I was frustrated with the current situation.”

“Oh,” Kevin says. “Oh. You two are really close. He’s like your brother already, so I was just – I was surprised.”

“Mm.” She nods. “I imagine that’s why he hasn’t been here a while.”

“I thought he was resting,” Kevin says. His shoulders drop, and he turns back to Cecil. “Or, you know.”

“Run off?”

“I’m tired,” Kevin says, “And frustrated too. My thoughts have not been very rational.”

“That’s understandable,” she says, walking over to the other side of the bed to sit on its edge. From where she’s perched she can see Kevin run a thumb over his brother’s bruised knuckles.

“I guess. I still feel bad,” he says.

Khoshekh shifts from where he’s sitting on Cecil, and both of them watch as the cat hunches down to tuck its legs underneath its body, closing its eyes. Even it is tired, and Rose finds herself yawning,
“We should both get some sleep,” Kevin says.

“Yeah,” Rose nods. She knows she’s going to risk nightmares, but she also knows she’s going to just be tired and irritable for the next few days if she doesn’t rest. She stands and inclines her head towards Kevin, bidding him goodbye, and then starts towards the door.

The heartbeat monitor suddenly spikes.

Everything happens so fast, the sudden beep startling everyone to life.

Kevin is so surprised he almost falls off the bed. Rose quickly turns to him as everyone else in the room startles awake at the loud beeping, but notably – most notably, what catches Rose’s attention is how calm Khoshekh and Winston sit at their respective places, as if no loud noise has broken through the hospital’s silence. Around her, everyone is trying to get to Cecil’s bedside, half-running, half-crawling, most of them still drowsy but trying to be alert.

Rose draws in a breath and rushes to the bed.

And then Cecil opens his eyes.

Cecil isn’t very coherent when he awakens, but at least he’s awake. He’s in and out for the first two days, and Kevin is back to never leaving his side, constantly holding his hand. Sometimes he reads to him, and during those times Rose observes that he is calmer. Perhaps it’s the comfort of slipping into his radio host persona, extending to the art of simply reading to his brother. At least he’s finding some comfort in the troubling events of the past few days.

Loki arrives with the pool master and their best friend a few hours after he wakes up. He and Rose only share a look, but for the rest of the two days in which Cecil is still struggling for lucidity, they don’t acknowledge each other more than a few nods, and a passing of a coffee mug.

The animals stay with all of them the whole time.

Whenever a nurse comes to check, they obediently shuffle into the bathroom to hide, and when someone comes to clean, they’re strangely gone, which intrigues Rose, but it’s quite difficult to get answers out of Khoshekh and Winston even when Loki and Jade are already around.

On the third day, Cecil wakes up before Kevin does, and he’s able to weakly squeeze his brother’s hand. Kevin groggily lifts his head up, and he gasps, and Rose looks up from the book she’s been staring at for five minutes, spacing out, at the sound.

Cecil is awake.

He tries to crack a smile, but that’s as far as he gets because Kevin throws himself at him and cries into his shoulder, days of stress and grief finally cracking under the strain of overwhelming relief.

Rose smiles, and wishes bitterly that Dave would wake up too.

They try not to overwhelm Cecil and give him space, but it’s hard not to constantly fuss over him given everyone’s worry over him. They all crowd his bed, giving him gentle hugs or patting his head, before John decides that everyone really does still need rest, so it’s best if some of them went
home to take showers and sleep in proper beds.

He squeezes Rose’s shoulder as he himself prepares to go home.

“He’ll wake up, Rose,” he says, and smiles at her. Rose tries to return his smile, and watches as he dissipates into wind.

She stays with Cecil, sitting by his bedside along with Kevin. He can’t really eat right now, so he’s mostly being fed through a tube, but Kevin can, so his brother is scarfing down food he really needs, making up for days of no appetite. Rose doubts he has any appetite now, but maybe he’s eating for Cecil’s sake, so he doesn’t worry.

Cecil motions with his hands, and Rose tilts her head.

“I’ve eaten, yes,” she says. That gets her a small smile. She waits as Cecil signs again, and then frowns. “That...is a point. I haven’t seen Mr. G all day, but he was here yesterday. I think he might have gone home earlier or something.”

“He did, you were asleep,” Kevin confirms, “Both of you, I mean. He tried to bring Winston home with him, but.” He nods his head to where the dog is sleeping in the corner of the room, Khoshekh on top of him. “Big guy’s stubborn.”

“I still don’t know how he got here,” Rose says, “Or why he’s here.”

“Went along with Khoshekh, maybe?” Kevin says, “I know Khoshekh’s here for Cecil.” He pauses. “Didn’t he have a scrap of paper?”

“It’s in my sylladex, I am – way too tired to attempt to try and read it right now,” Rose says.

Kevin nods. “Fair, maybe later when you’ve had actual rest in a proper bed,” he says. He turns to his brother. “Why are you looking for Mr. G?”

Cecil’s brow creases, and he looks worried. He signs – I need to talk to him.

Rose leans back in her chair, intrigued, and pulls out her phone to begin texting the man. She gets a response two minutes later. “He’s on his way,” she says. “I think we might have startled the poor man, he was making sure everything in the house was in order.”

Cecil looks a little sheepish, but signs that it’s just important.

They don’t have to wait long. Mr. G arrives in about fifteen minutes, and in those fifteen minutes, Cecil alternates between picking at the bandages on his hands and reaching up to pull on a lock of his hair. Kevin has to gently stop him from doing that, and he gives his brother a weak, apologetic smile.

Mr. G arrives and he looks harried, glasses askew, curls all over the place, and his eyes are wide and worried as he looks Cecil over the second he opens the door to the hospital room. His shoulders relax when he sees that Cecil is fine, but then tense again as the boy is now tearing up, making awful, choking, sobbing noises.

Kevin is immediately on his feet, one hand on Cecil’s back, gently telling him to breathe, and Rose is picking up the phone beside his bed to ring the nurse. Mr. G crosses the room in quick strides, ready to help Kevin before his brother chokes, as his tongue is still too thick and swollen in his mouth for him to breathe properly when he’s almost crying.
“Ceec, we need you to breathe slowly for us,” the man is murmuring, one hand behind the boy’s head, cradling him, almost. Kevin is rubbing circles on his brother’s back. “Breathe, Ceec.”

Cecil nods jerkily, and tries to slow down his breathing, but makes more of his awful noises. Mr. G continues to instruct him, gently guiding Cecil’s head so he’s looking the man straight in the eye.

His breathing is close to normal when the nurses finally file in. Rose herself lets out a sigh as they make their way towards Cecil’s bed, but before they can do anything, Cecil suddenly pulls Mr. G forward and wraps his arms around him.

The man tenses, uncomfortable and unused to the affection, but slowly looks down at Cecil as the boy is shaking and sobbing again. His expression falls, shock melting into concern, and then sadness, and he slowly brings Cecil close for a hug.


Cecil’s making small, strained noises, Rose notices, and she feels her chest tighten when she realizes he’s trying to speak.

“What’s wrong, boy?” Mr. G is patting the boy’s head softly. The nurses are hovering around him, but clearly see that Cecil isn’t going to let him go any time soon and as he isn’t choking anymore it’s probably best to let him get all of this out. “You don’t have to talk. It’s okay.”

Cecil’s making shaky motions with his hands, but as he’s still trying to cling to Mr. G, it’s hard to understand what he’s trying to say.

“Easy, Cecil,” Mr. G says when the boy tries to speak again. He gently loosens his hold on him, and Cecil pulls back to put his fingers to his chin and tilt them outward.

*Thank you.* His hands are shaking, and he's still crying, but Rose can't deny that there's gratitude and almost...relief in his eyes as he signs it.

Then he moves his hands again, and Rose frowns at what he’s signing.

*I'm going to help you,* he's saying, *I promise. I'm going to help you. I'm going to save you.*

Mr. G is frowning now too. He turns to Kevin, and then to Rose, but as she has no answers, Rose only lightly shakes her head.

“I – I don’t understand, Cecil,” he says.

Cecil smiles and looks down. He looks sad. *You don't now,* Cecil says. *But you will later.* He nods to himself and wipes at his cheeks.

The nurses slowly help him sit properly on his bed, making him move back a bit as he'd leaned over too much that he’s in the danger of falling over. He lets them, and Mr. G takes a step back, adjusting his glasses before they slip off his face, but then Cecil signs again, still looking at him.

*And I pray that you never will.*
this took so long because i kept rewriting it because i was unsatisfied with earlier versions.
“It’s Dave’s birthday tomorrow,” Rose says. She only notices that the man beside her is Loki after she says that, and she stills, before she decides she doesn’t care much anymore. She’s tried her best to get sleep while she’s in the hospital, but ever since Cecil’s woken up, she’s started being on guard in case Dave wakes up too. She has to be there when he wakes up.

And he will wake up. He’s a godtier, after all, and godtiers heal if they don’t die, although the doctors say that he’s healing quite well and yet at the same time, his injuries also seem to be worsening, and they can’t explain how. It’s like he’s getting better and getting worse at the same time.

She’s woken up from a nightmare more than once, nightmares where that gun that had been pressed to the back of her head had fired, and yet she still didn’t die, because that monster who’d possessed Cecil had wanted her to watch as everyone around her did.

“Oh,” Loki says, softly. “He is?”

“Yes,” Rose says, “Time can be funny, sometimes.”

“It really can,” Loki says, looking down at his hand. “There was a huge gap between the time I fell from the Bifrost to the time I actually landed here, on Mid – Earth.”

Rose chuckles lightly. “Still not used to calling it Earth after nearly two years, huh.”

“I forget, sometimes,” he says, “And I’m tired too.”

“You’ve been losing your accent,” she says, “It’s like you’re starting to pick up everyone else’s, and your speech pattern’s changed too.”

“I suppose it has,” he says, “Although I imagine I still fall into my old habits, sometimes. It’s only been two years.”

“An eventful two years,” Rose says, “A lot has happened.”

Loki nods. “A lot really has,” he says, “I thought it would be quiet here, actually.”

She laughs. “Then you’ve learned your lesson, Silvertongue – Earth’s loud and chaotic. You’d thrive here.”

“I already do, I think,” he says, and then pauses, as if he’s caught himself by surprise. Rose turns to him for a moment and then sighs.

They’re both in a hallway, a few floors below Cecil’s and Dave’s for no other reason than that Rose had been too tired to walk all the way up her brother’s room, and Loki had sat beside her sometime later, but she hadn’t noticed when. She’d been lost in her thoughts, and for some reason thought it had been Mr. G sitting with her until she’d glanced at him when she’d spoken.

She’s still angry, yes. She’s mad he’s withheld information from her when he could have easily handed it over, even if it was incomplete, but right now she can’t summon the energy to yell at him.
“You deserve to have a space to thrive in,” she says. She means it, she knows, but it doesn’t feel like it right now.

“What do I,” he says, flatly.

“Everybody does,” she says, “Provided, you know.” She pinches the bridge of her nose. “I’m sorry, I haven’t been sleeping well again.”

“You should. We’ll tell you when your brother wakes up,” he says.

“I know,” she says, “But I just want to be there.”

Loki watches her, silent, and then turns away. He opens his mouth to say something but hesitates. He does it a few times, until Rose gets tired of watching him imitate a beached-up fish and sighs.

“Loki, what is it?” she asks.

“I…” He hesitates again, and then looks down at his feet. His boots look sandy, and she wonders where he’s been.

“What is it?” she repeats.

“Rose,” he says, and for a while, that’s the only thing he’s able to say, as if the rest of the sentence is too heavy to drag out of his throat. “I – I apologize.”

Oh.

She looks down now as well.

“I apologize for not talking to you, when you trusted me to,” he says, “I know that we both trusted each other to share knowledge so we would be able to inform everyone and plan accordingly, and yet, I withheld information from you.”

Rose says nothing. She lets his words sink in through her fatigue, taking longer to parse their meaning, and letting herself think over her response.

Loki just sits in silence, and from how still he is, he doesn’t look like he’s breathing.

Rose leans back in her seat and licks her lips. She crosses her arms and stretches her legs, and she looks at her worn-out shoes. Her feet are sore from being confined in her footwear for days already.

“I am angry that you didn’t act as I trusted you to,” she says, “And I am angry at the thought that your actions might have caused us to be caught unaware.”

She pauses. Beside her, Loki still hasn’t moved.

“But,” she says, and watches Loki carefully. “I also understand that what happened couldn’t have been prevented even if you’d told me everything.” She turns away. “It still would have happened, and we’d still be in this situation. And I suppose all we can do now is thoroughly study the situation with all the knowledge everyone has on hand so we can fix this properly.”

Loki doesn’t answer, and as she’s turned away, Rose doesn’t see him move, but she feels him lean back in his seat. She lets the tension leave her shoulders. She only realizes now that her muscles there are burning, probably from being drawn together for too long from her nervousness.

“I shouldn’t have yelled at you for that,” Rose says, “At least – not like that. I shouldn’t have implied
Dave and Cecil and everyone else getting hurt was your fault.”

“I still shouldn’t have withheld information from you,” he says, softly, “And I shouldn’t have run away after, either. Instead of being here…as some sort of support, I just stayed away.”

“You needed some time away,” Rose says, finally turning back to him, “We all need that, sometimes.”

“I ran away when I should have apologized,” he says. “I’m sorry for that too.”

She holds his stare for a moment, and after a long, long minute, lets out a small laugh. “We’re both just going to stay here saying sorry for everything we’ve done in the past week or so, aren’t we?”

“I’ve never really apologized for anything in a while,” Loki says, “So.”

Rose laughs again, louder this time, and holds out a hand. She smiles. “Apology accepted.”

He looks down at her hand, and then slowly clasps it in his own. It feels comfortable, like a brother coming home. “Thank you.”

“I’d hug you, but you don’t seem like a guy who’s very into hugs,” she says.

Loki blinks, and then slowly lets her hand go before holding out his arms. He looks awkward, and with every second that he’s doing that, he looks like he’s regretting it, but he doesn’t put his arms down, and Rose laughs when she realizes what he’s doing.

“Really?” she asks.

“I’m not someone who does hugs, no,” he says, “But I think the situation calls for it.”

Rose laughs again, but she scoots forwards and wraps her arms around him, and feels him tentatively hug her. She giggles, and then pats his back.

“Good try, Loki,” she says.

He just shifts back, pulling away first, and then nods curtly. “Good attempt at a hug,” he says.

Rose watches him stand and walk away, possibly to the direction of the cafeteria, just to avoid more awkwardness. She laughs and leans back in her seat. She should probably get some food too.

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Roxy wakes up to Steve on the phone. She blinks, eyelids heavy, and holds up a hand as the lights in the room are too bright for her right now. It takes her a moment to realize that she’s just in the couch near Eridan’s empty aquarium, so it shouldn’t be too bright, but the door to the room is ajar, and it’s blinding her right now.

Outside, Steve is talking to someone, and he sounds just as tired as always. She wonders if he’s been at the hospital lately. The last time he’d visited was a day after he’d announced that Dave was comatose, and he’d tried to visit again with Tony but unfortunately, he and the rest of his team of superheroes (that was still weird to think about) had to hold meetings and check out what actually happened in the hospital that ended up with all the lights in the building getting blown out, one boy possessed, and another stabbed and put in critical condition.
So far, they’ve got nothing other than theories, and the cops have asked all the witnesses everything they’ve seen but it’s still not enough to go on.

Roxy’s watched the news about it. She’s asked Tony to let her, and he’d happily shown her how to get JARVIS to turn on the television for her. She’d watched the news report about the hospital attack and caught glimpses of Rose and Jade and John on some of the footage, and had asked JARVIS if he could replay those clips over and over again until he’d offered to record them for her.

Dave (orange Dave, she means – she does need to find a way to tell them apart now) and Kanaya watch with her sometimes, and they all just stare at the screen, silent. Sometimes one of them lets JARVIS pause the screen so they can take a good look at their friends. Rose’s hair looks longer, John’s glasses look new, and Jade puts her hair up sometimes. Dave’s nowhere to be seen, but that’s understandable. Roxy just hopes he’s okay.

She lowers the hand over her eyes, turning her attention to Steve’s voice.

It’s the usual – someone’s calling him from the hospital, updating him about their patients’ states and what the doctors have been saying; Dave is still asleep, and they still don’t know when he’s going to wake up, and Roxy sighs as she hears that, closing her eyes and bringing up her arm to block out the rest of the light so she can get some decent sleep.

She’s almost passed out when she’s jolted back into awareness at the sudden change of tone in Steve’s voice.

“…really? That – that’s great, when did he wake up?”

Roxy opens her eyes again, slightly more awake this time.

“Oh. That’s good. He’s actually – oh. I see. I forgot his tongue’s been cut off.” A pause. “But he’s fine though? No complications from his other injuries?”

She sits up, careful not to let the pillow that she’s hugged to her chest in her sleep fall off to the floor. Slowly, she gets to her feet, and quietly walks over to the door to eavesdrop better.

Steve sounds a lot more hopeful than he has in the last few days, even if all he’s saying now is just that he’s glad that one of their patients is awake, and that he’s fine. Roxy knows it’s not Dave as she’s heard Steve say he was still asleep, but, still. At least someone is awake.

“That’s great, Jade. I’m so glad – I’ll try to visit as soon as I can. Yeah, I’ll be careful. Alright.” He laughs for a moment. “Have a good evening. Tell everyone else that too.”

She hears him let out a sigh of relief after, and then hears him sit on the couch. She thinks about going back to sleep, and maybe just ask about this in the morning, but then she hears him move, and when she peeks past the door, he’s standing up, maybe to go tell the others.

She might as well ask then.

She hugs the pillow she has in her arms and makes her way into the living room, giving him a small wave. He smiles as he sees her.

“Hey, did I wake you?” he asks.

“No,” Roxy says, sitting down on the couch and yawning. “I just woke up at the same time you were on the phone. Wanted to ask what that was about.”
“Oh,” Steve says. “Cecil’s awake.”

She nods. It’s really not Dave. “That’s good. He’s okay?”

“Better than expected,” Steve says, “Although I guess Karkat still has to help him with...the bloodleech.”

“We don’t even know if he’s aware he’s infected,” Roxy says, frowning.

“Yeah.” Steve frowns slightly. “And there’s the problem of bringing Karkat to the hospital unnoticed. We could always wait for Cecil to be discharged, but we’re pressed for time.”

Roxy chews on the inside of her cheek, thinking. One of the reasons why she hadn’t been able to visit the hospital, despite the fact that she’s the most human-looking of everyone who’s holed up in the tower, was because Steve and Tony had been too busy to take her there – she’s not too good with navigating New York, what with spending most of the time that she’s been here in Steve’s apartment, so she can’t go on her own, even if she wants to. Everyone else would risk themselves going out in public, and they can’t have that, not with too much at stake, so they’ve all just been staying here and waiting.

It’s been pretty boring, even with the stifling atmosphere. They have a lot of room in the tower to stretch their legs and maybe spar a little for some stress relief, but everyone’s been avoiding Eridan as much as they can. Eridan is in the basement and has been ever since the...incident, and Tony says he’s been bringing food to the boy but they haven’t been talking much, and he doesn’t seem to be eating much either. He doesn’t visit his aquarium, and Roxy had tried to find him in the pool, once, but he hadn’t been there.

Tony’s let her have access to his lab, just so she can entertain herself and get her mind off of things.

“This isn’t something you should be guilty about,” he’d said when he’d clicked the lights on in the lab and motioned to the table in a gesture of welcome. “He’s the one who messed up.”

“We’re still friends,” she’d said, “And I know he’s – he’s not the best and he hasn’t had a good track record, but I guess I met him during a time where he was trying.”

So far, she’s made a robotic torso that has actual working joints, but she still has to polish up its motor capacities and then scan Hal’s glasses so she can replicate his memory system. Dirk had made it rather impressive.

It’s been a good exercise in keeping herself occupied, but during nights like these, when there’s not much to do and she’s reminded of what’s been happening, she just gets tired.

She yawns again and lifts the pillow to bury her face in it.

“You should sleep,” Steve says.

“No,” she says, “If you’re gonna call everyone and tell them the news, I wanna be awake for it.”

She lowers her pillow slowly, and when she looks at Steve, he’s giving her a slightly amused look. She narrows her eyes at him.

“I think it’s better if I tell them in the morning,” he says, “I know how much you all worry for Dave and how this whole thing with Cecil’s been pressuring Karkat even if he hasn’t met Cecil yet. And there’s still the situation with Feferi. I’m not going to let you all lose more sleep.”
“I don’t think I’m sleeping anyway,” she says.

Steve sighs. “Roxy.”

“I’m just – restless.” She waves a hand. “I slept most of the day, anyway. It’ll be fine. I’ll just be in the lab.”

He studies her, as if weighing whether or not to let her stay up, and then just puts his hands on his hips and shakes his head. “If I say you can’t stay up, would you actually go to sleep?”

“No,” she says, “I’d just pull the void over me and go to the lab.”

“Of course you would,” he says. “JARVIS, what time is it?”

“It is 9:15 p.m, Master Rogers.”

“That’s not too late, actually.” He points to Roxy. “Don’t stay up until three.”

“That’s too early, Steve,” Roxy says, dramatically groaning.

“I mean it, Roxy,” he says, “You look like you need a lot more sleep.”

“I’m sleeping too much.” Roxy stands and stretches, and then tosses her pillow on the couch even though she knows it doesn’t belong there. “See you later, Cap.”

“And that better be in the morning after you’ve slept.”

She only gives him a salute as she walks out of the room and down to Tony’s lab. JARVIS immediately unlocks the door for her, and she gives him a quick “Thank you” as she walks inside, humming, and makes her way to Hal’s port.

Tony’s repaired him, smoothed out the cracks he’d sported from being thrown to the ground when Eridan had punched Dave, and he looks good as new. He’s even got his own port where he can just comfortably sit while he connects to the internet.

“Hey Hal,” she says. JARVIS pulls up a screen so that Hal can type his response back to her.

Hey, Rox.

She walks over to one end of the table that she’s claimed as hers, where parts of her robotics experiment still sits because she and Tony have had an agreement that no one’s moving this. Dr. Bruce Banner hasn’t visited yet, and so Tony hasn’t had to lie that the neat little attempt at a humanoid robot was his newest science project.

“How’ve you and your internet friends been?” she asks, grabbing the stool from under the table to sit on it. She looks over the bits and pieces of metal on her table, trying to see what she should work on first.

There’s been a few roadbumps here and there, but it’s been alright.

“You got into a fight?”

Something like that.

Roxy laughs lightly for a moment. “That’s funny, kinda,” she says, “Fights have been common in our friend groups, yeah?”
Hal doesn’t answer right away. Roxy picks up her screwdriver and turns the neck on the robot gently as she waits.

One thing I’ve learned about relationships, Hal types, is that no matter how good it is and no matter how much the people in it get along, there’s always bound to be disagreements.

“Uh huh,” Roxy says.

I’m not just saying that, Rox.

Roxy doesn’t look up. Hal erases what he’s typed and the letters that slowly show up on the screen take a while to finish typing, and then erase and retype themselves as Hal changes his thoughts and restrings his sentences. Roxy’s only aware of this from the way the reflection on the table changes.

I know you and Eridan are good friends, he says, and I know that what you’re feeling isn’t really guilt because you have nothing to be guilty about, but worry. You’re a worrier.

Roxy glances up at the screen for a second. “Of course I am,” she says, “Who else is going to worry about my friends?”

We worry about each other.

She laughs. “You have a point there.”

That’s just what friends do, I’ve learned – we worry about each other and we forgive each other for our mistakes, and we wait for the others to forgive themselves and be able to move on and move past that and grow up.

Roxy pauses and then looks down, silent again. “Damn,” she says, “Really going for it, huh?”

I know you worry about Eridan, Hal types, and then takes a while to follow up, like he’s buffering as he’s thinking. But he has to grow up by himself. Being a kid and growing up, it’s hard and nobody understands. But being an adult and growing up is just as hard, because the thing is that you never really stop growing, and you never really stop learning. And it’s overwhelming sometimes, because by then you’ve learned that all your actions have their consequences.

She imagines if Hal had a body, he’d be gesturing around as he spoke, maybe lean back on his hands as he sat on the table, relaxed, and yet look deep in thought. She tries to imagine Dirk in his place, but while the image fits, at the same time, it doesn’t. They’re very different people, she realizes, especially now that Hal has had time to be on an island with a few friends, and time to socialize with those he’s met online – people he’s never met and yet, maybe he’s formed a few bonds and learned from them too.

There’s some things that certain people have to work through. Things they have to realize about themselves, and things that they have to change. And worrying about friends while they do that is natural, but you have to take care of yourself too.

Eridan’s a good friend of yours, we can all see that. I think even Kanaya sees it, and she knows he’s been very different since he’s been dropped to Earth. And because he’s a good friend of yours, I think he’d rather let you take care of yourself rather than worry over him while he sorts himself out.

“Yeah, but it’s just…I hate the feeling of helplessness, Hal,” Roxy says, “It’s awful. I’m a little mad at him because I trusted him not to hurt me and he almost did, but it’s also just horrible seeing him be so guilty.”
I know it’s a terrible thing to say, but I think the guilt is a good sign. Hal says, and before Roxy can protest, he adds: From what I’ve learned from Kanaya and Karkat, and from what he’s told me himself, he never really did guilt before. He was rather dangerous for it.

Roxy considers this, tapping the end of her screwdriver on the table. “So now that he’s feeling guilt, I guess he’s – starting to see what he’s doing wrong and actually learning to regret it?”

Yes, Hal says. He’s growing up, Rox.

Growing up.

Roxy feels like she’s grown up a lot, in the time she’s played the game and in the time she’s spent on the island just learning how to find herself and learning how to look back on her own experiences. She feels like she’s growing up even now, sitting in a laboratory trying to distract herself from the whole mess she’s found herself in, worrying over a friend who she should have yelled at the first chance she’d gotten but didn’t because she’d been too shocked to.

“Growing up, huh,” she says. “I guess we could all do that, a little.”

We’re always doing that.

Roxy laughs. “Thanks for the nuggets of wisdom, Hal,” she says, “Where’d you even learn that?”

If I’m being honest, I’m actually on chat with some of my friends as we speak and I was ‘asking for a friend’, and then copy-pasted some of their answers.

“Oh my god.” Roxy giggles. “You’re cheating.”

It’s just resourcefulness.

“Still,” Roxy says. She laughs again, and finds that she can’t stop until she’s crying, but thankfully, it’s not hysteria, but just genuine amusement. She wipes at the edges of her eyes and sighs. “I love you, Hal. Never change.”

I love you too, Rox. And that weirded my program out to type, but I felt like that was the right response.

A pause.

Dirk wouldn’t respond like that. I can calculate only a very small percentage of the possibility that he’d respond like that.

“Yeah, well, you’re not Dirk,” Roxy says, “You’re Hal. You can weird yourself out every now and then by being affectionate.”

I suppose, he says, Steve Rogers is reminding me to tell you to sleep early.

Roxy just rolls her eyes. “I will, just let me have fun for a little bit,” she says, “Tell him to give me like – an hour or so.”

I will. May I ask what you’re working on?

“I’m not actually sure,” she says, looking down at what she’s got on the table. It looks humanoid, so she knows she was trying to see if she can make a robot that’s as human as possible, and with memory enough to replicate a human’s, maybe better, and that’s why she’d planned to scan Hal but – hm. That’s an idea.
She grins. “Actually, you did express the desire to have opposable thumbs.”

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Steve does tell them the news the next day, which means that they all have to gather around in the living room whether they want to or not (although Hal is still downstairs and he’s just allowed to access the cameras and have JARVIS pull up a screen in case he wants to talk). Not that all of them would rather be anywhere else. It’s only Eridan who looks awkward, huddled in one corner of the couch as far away as possible from the rest of them. He looks thinner now, even if it’s only been a few days. His hair is unkempt, which it never is, as he’d combed it and tied it down even when they were still on the island and he doesn’t have his scarf today. Tony is staring at his gills, even when they remain closed on his neck.

Roxy tries to smile at him but he keeps looking at the floor. She hugs a couch pillow to her chest sadly.

“He actually looks sick,” Kanaya murmurs beside her.

“Yeah,” Roxy says. He does. It makes her frown in worry a little.

Kanaya stares silently, and then sighs, softly. “He’s grown up a lot.”

Roxy only nods, and waits for Steve to start the meeting.

There hasn’t been any call from anyone at the hospital yet as of this morning, so all Steve tells them is the news from last night – that Dave is still asleep, but Cecil, however, is awake and lucid. Karkat is breathes out a little sigh of relief, the pressure to save one life eased as he’s not in immediate danger (for the moment), but he can’t relax just yet as Dave still isn’t out of the woods.

“Any updates on how he’s doing aside from that he’s asleep?” Roxy asks.

Steve weighs his words, and laces his fingers together as he leans forward, hunching, and sighs. “Rose says he’s been getting better, and yet,” he says, “He’s also getting worse.”

“How’s that possible?” Tony asks.

Steve shrugs. “I don’t know,” he says, “But the doctors find that his wounds are healing, but that some part of his internal injuries are also reopening. And he’s losing blood even without bleeding out.”

“Do you think it’s a bloodleech?” Karkat asks.

“It might be.”

He runs a hand over his face and huffs.

“We need to act fast, then,” Davesprite says – Roxy’ll really have to call him that, even if she doesn’t like it. He adjusts his wings awkwardly. It must be jarring to hear a version of you injured and trying to recover at a hospital. Roxy knows it had been unnerving to hear that a version of her had died in the timeline she’d just joined. “Hopefully, it’s not a bloodleech.”

“We should check up on him just to be sure anyway,” Kanaya says.
“But we still need a plan to do that,” Tony says, prompting another round of tired huffs from everyone in the room, except perhaps Eridan, who has stayed silent this whole time.

“We can’t waltz in there easily, not with – ” Roxy is about to say the trolls, but thankfully catches herself, “ – Karkat, Kanaya and Eridan.”

“We can try to disguise them,” Davesprite says, “And you can pull the void over them. The disguises can be an extra measure in case you get tired.”

“Yeah, that can work,” Roxy says.

“I can try to get the staff to let us in,” Tony says, “I’m Tony Stark.”

“We shouldn’t make a scene.”

Everyone falls silent, suddenly, and turns to Eridan, who’s spoken for the first time since they’ve gathered. Eridan shifts, curling in on himself further, and keeps his eyes on the floor. “I’m just sayin’ – if staff hear about Tony Stark, an obvious highblood in your society, badgerin’ someone to get a couple of his friends in, then word is going to spread. And you can say that they’re not going to talk to whoever we should be wary of, but it’s that kind of carelessness that’ll land us in hot water.”

“Not to mention you did say that there was the possibility of a staff member being compromised,” Roxy says, turning to Tony.

Tony shrugs. “You have a point there.”

“Going in as civilians would be for the best, then,” Steve says, “And…maybe going in earlier than me or Tony. We’re still public figures. Even if we just came to visit, heads would turn.”

“Rose and the others would have to expect us,” Davesprite says.

Steve pauses, and then laughs. “I’ve been so tired, I’ve forgotten that the easiest way around this was just giving someone a head’s up.”

He starts to stand, but then Tony puts a hand on his arm. “What if the call’s traced, by S.H.I.E.L.D. or the Heir of Blood?”

“How secure is your phone?” Roxy asks.

“As secure as I can make it,” Tony says, “But even then – my security’s been getting interference from some weirdo who likes too much pink.”

Roxy’s nails nearly tear through the fabric of the pillow she’s clutching too hard. Kanaya sits up straight, and Eridan looks like he’s about to leap from his seat. Davesprite is still, but Roxy can see how his jaw tightens.

Tony frowns, confused. “Does that mean anything to you?”

“Have you been getting messages?” Roxy asks, “From someone who likes to write in pink and does too many fish puns?”

“No.” Tony’s frown deepens. “I’ve just received a card which I burned – ” He starts to look around, before just motioning for JARVIS call up a screen. “JARVIS, if you have footage of that awful card, please play it and pause on the clearest shot you have.”

“What’s been happening?” Kanaya asks, “This interference you’ve been talking about – how’s it
manifesting?"

“When we were trying to get past the security around Feferi Peixes’ files, we kept hitting walls of mutation strings,” Tony says, “The radio, that awful violet thing that I actually miss somehow, helped me crack it using runework. But before that, every time JARVIS and I hit a roadblock, our entire tower system would be shut down, and the lights, the processors – nearly everything would spark out in pink.”

Roxy breathes in slowly, trying to not make herself panic. “In pink, huh.”

“Yeah,” Tony says. “Why, does…do all of you have a vendetta against pink?”

“Not the color exactly,” Eridan says, and leans back in his seat, looking up at the screen. Roxy turns, and so does everyone else, and they all stare at the image JARVIS has paused on.

It’s an ugly card, looking like it’s been drowned in too much glitter, but it just fuels all of their suspicions. And Davesprite’s glow flares a little as he sighs into his hand.

“The Condesce,” Kanaya says. “She’s here.”

“Who?” Tony asks.

“Who’s this Condesce?” Steve asks.

“Not really here, maybe,” Eridan says, “Hopefully. We’d know. We’d see her. You can’t miss her battleship.”

“Excuse me – who are we talking about here?” Tony asks again, but everyone’s talking over each other now, and Roxy’s trying to remain calm, trying to focus, because everything’s more serious than it’s seemed.

“Who’s this Condesce?” Steve asks.

“We still need to prepare,” Kanaya says instead, in response to Eridan, “If she’s here, and if she was trying to stop Feferi from being found, then – wait, who’s keeping Feferi captive?”

“S.H.I.E.L.D is – but who is the Condesce?” Tony asks.

Eridan starts to answer, and so does Kanaya, and so does Hal as a screen is pulled up, but Roxy pinches the bridge of her nose and says, “Enough.”

They all quiet down, startled, and turn to her. She massages her forehead.

“One at a time,” she says, “We have to sort things out first. We have the threat of the Heir of Blood, bloodleeches, Feferi held captive and Dave still comatose, and now there’s…the Batterwitch.”

Tony stands up, and then blinks like he hasn’t even noticed. He starts to sit, very slowly, and then jiggles a leg, fidgeting, waiting for everyone else to calm down and get their heads clear.

“Yeah, Rox’s right,” Eridan says. He glances at her, and she nods, and for a second, she feels as if they’re friends again. Not that they’ve ever stopped. It’s just been awkward. “We do need to sort all of this out. Although, I suggest we find a way to contact Rose and the others first and tell them that we’re visiting.”

“I can tell her in person,” Steve says, “I’ll try to make time for it today. I’ll try to arrange for us visiting them.”

Eridan nods. “Good.”
“You’ll have to tell us in person too, if we want to be fully secure about this,” Kanaya says.

“Another day of waiting,” Davesprite says.

“Better than risking it,” Kanaya says.

“Fair enough.”

Roxy slowly eases her hold on the pillow.

Tony stands again and goes to the fridge in the corner of the room. Steve gives him a pointed look, but he just rolls his eyes and pulls out a can of soda, making a show of popping the tab on it and drinking it. “So,” he says, “This condense person? The Batter-who?”

“Batterwitch,” Davesprite says.

“Batterbitch,” Roxy mutters with a snicker.

“Yeah, who’s that?” Tony says, walking back to the loveseat he was perched on earlier to sprawl on it again.

Roxy opens her mouth, and then turns to look at everyone else. They’re tense, and they meet her eyes with looks that say they know exactly what she has to explain. But they nod, slowly, one by one.

On the screen where Hal had started typing, his letters erase themselves, and instead, the photo of a waterlogged city shows up. Roxy feels her eyes heat up. That’s Dirk’s city, she knows. This is Hal’s memories, inherited from her best friend.

“The Batterwitch,” she starts, and she knows she’s not going to be done explaining for a very, very long time, “Is an interplanetary conqueror from lightyears away.”

Everybody listens anyway.

Chapter End Notes

this took a while because i got lost in the timeline lmao but - small reprieve from everything because it is a time for mending
New York, New York

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Their time in the extravagant house by the ocean passes by in a blur. Quite literally for Damara (and she reckons for Dirk too), as when she stands by the door with her bags packed and her tickets in hand, she feels as if she’s been doused in cold water and has woken up from a long, long slumber. She can’t quite recall the past few days with clarity, only that they’ve been...comfy, as in there were no large mishaps and she’d been able to pass the time in peace and quiet, and she’d been well-rested, but she can’t draw up clear details no matter how hard she tries to.

She knows she’d come to the house for a reason. Had practically talked Ben into bringing them here and had pushed Dirk into realizing he had no clear plans so he should let her take the reins, and she’d done it for a reason.

And it hadn’t been to find her friends, because hah, as if.

She has no friends. Not anymore, and so she knows for whatever reason she had gotten them to room in the house, it was because she wanted to figure something out.

But what, exactly?

She doesn’t have enough time to remember it, as a pair of glasses are being given to her, and she’s being told that this is going to disguise her. These are glamoured glasses that will cast an illusion about her, make her appear human to everyone watching, and that she shouldn’t lose them, although they’ve been made quite sturdy and hard to take off for anyone who isn’t her.

Then she and Dirk are being brought to the pier, and the next thing she knows, she’s on the boat, and it’s been half a day already, and they’re on their way to New York.

It’s troubling. And frustrating, to the point where she has half a mind to jump off the boat and swim back to the island, or break the glasses, but that would be counterproductive. They have a reason to go to New York too, and that’s to see if everyone else is there, and if they know anything about their situation so that they can all get off this sorry excuse for a planet and go back to playing their sessions.

She pauses at the thought. She’s alive now, which can mean that her session might be back in action, but – hm. She’ll have to see how it goes first. But if it is back in action, then she’ll gladly destroy it with her bare hands if she has to.

For now she has to get to New York. Perhaps she can find a way to revisit the house and their nameless, faceless host, but for now, she must focus on the task at hand.

Not a lot to focus on when she’s waiting to arrive in New York, though.

She watches Dirk as he stares down at the water below them. The wind’s been trying to blow off his anime shades from his face since they’ve gotten on the ferry, but he’s still refusing to take them off. It’s entertaining, at least, and she adjusts her own glasses as she continues to observe him as he flicks a stray lock away from his face.

She admits they’re quite useful, and they make her unmemorable to everyone else because she appears to only be a human girl, but perhaps it’s also more than that, as sometimes, everyone’s gaze
just slips over her. Maybe there’s some other magic woven there.

Even Dirk confesses he forgets she’s there, sometimes, which unnerves him.

She hates how she looks in the mirror, all human-like, with soft, soft fleshy human skin instead of the tough troll skin she’s used to. Her neck looks like it would easily snap, and she has no horns anymore. Her eyes are a dark brown and her scleras are white instead of the usual rust and yellow, respectively.

She looks weird.

But at least no one’s looking her way, she supposes, and that’s what’s important. They need to get to New York, and they need to get to New York with no complications, because their papers are fake and their benefactor’s just paid off some people, or maybe talked to them, so Dirk and Damara can get on the boat with no problems. It’s a free ticket to where they’re going, but they both have to make sure not to waste it.

The glasses are annoying on her face though.

“You know you need them,” Dirk says, when he notices her attempting to take them off again. She’s only really supposed to take them off when she’s in her room.

“They’re heavy,” she says, “And I don’t like how I look.”

Dirk sighs, but nods. “I’m sorry that you have to pretend to be human,” he says, in a low voice, “But it’s better than staying in your room for the whole trip.”

“I think I’d rather that – everyone here is too loud for my liking,” she says.

As if on cue, there’s a loud bout of laughter from one group of people across them. Damara frowns and gives Dirk a look, as if to say, See?

He just turns and leans back on the rail with his elbows. “Yeah, it is loud.”

“You don’t like it either?”

“I really prefer the quiet,” he says, “Or, white noise – machines whirring. But that’s just because I’m used to it to the point that it’s comforting.”

“You worked with machines before?”

“Yeah,” he says. He sounds a little proud, she observes. “Designed robots. Designed artificial intelligence. A lot you can do when you grow up by yourself.”

She thinks for a second, that she knows – but then she remembers that once upon a time, she had friends. It’s just a pity she doesn’t really feel like they ever were, now.

“I see,” she says, “They were all destroyed in the reckoning.”

“Not all of them,” he says, “That…bunny survived. The Auto Responder did too.”

“Where are they now?”

Dirk pauses. “I don’t know. I know AR got merged in a sprite with that…weird troll.”

“Pity,” she says, “Perhaps if it hadn’t been, maybe it would have found its way here too.”
“And just sass me, because that was his favorite pastime.” Dirk laughs dryly and runs a hand through his hair. “AR was a bastard, but – I guess in the end he had every right to be alive too.”

Damara tilts her head. “He was alive?”

“He said he was scared to not exist,” Dirk says, and the way he says it, he sounds haunted. Damara pauses just to listen to his silence. After a while, he finally huffs. “Sounded pretty alive to me.”

“Interesting,” she notes. “And you don’t know where he is now?”

“No,” he says, “No more than I have any idea about how we dropped here.”

She hums. As interesting as it would be to meet this AR, she knows it’s probably too much to hope for, and even if they do meet, he’s been merged with a sprite. There’s a possibility his personality has been diluted. That’s a sort of death, she thinks, even if it’s just the unity of two personalities. It’s still the creation of something completely new.

Damara just pushes up her glasses again and pulls her hair back, ready to tie it up. “Pity,” she says again.

Beside her, Dirk nods. “Yeah,” he says, “Pity.”

“Hopefully, we’ll be able to find everyone else,” she says. She looks over her shoulder at where the humans are milling about, laughing and drinking, and she thinks she’d rather like it if she pulled all their tongues out.

It would be funny, to see them squirm, see them choke on their own blood, but that’s not really possible if the cut-off tongue’s not there anymore. They can choke on their shock and their bile though.

It would be great.

Would be fun.

She blinks, and feels that sensation of being doused in cold water again. The way one feels when the fog of sleep has finally left and they’ve woken up.

Those aren’t her thoughts.

Not purely, anyway.

She frowns and taps Dirk’s shoulder.

“What is it?” he asks.

“I’m going to my room,” she says. “We won’t be arriving in New York for several more hours, so, I think I’d rather sleep.”

He nods. “Probably best if you did. It’ll be a long trip.”

She waves back at him, saying nothing more, and starts to her room.

In her head, she thinks she can hear someone laughing, amused.
Her sleep is not restful, which isn’t anything new, but her dreams this time seem a little different. And way worse. Oftentimes, she’s the one who brings about the end upon everyone she knows and once loved, and she’s okay with that. She’s long made peace with that, and she actively seeks that end, praying for it to be a vision somehow. This time she’s just a spectator as something ends.

She doesn’t remember a lot of details when she wakes up – that’s just how dreams work, ever fickle – but she does know she has the distinct impression of violence, malice, a lot of bloodshed, and a hint of sorrow. She doesn’t tell Dirk her dream even when he asks her if she’s okay, when she gets out of her cabin looking disheveled, glasses nearly slipping off her nose. She’s lucky their magic still holds them up even with how they’re precariously balanced.

She fixes herself up and gets food with him, and they talk a bit about how long it will take for them to reach New York. They’ll be there in three hours, before daylight even breaks, which is ideal as Damara still hates the sunlight even though it doesn’t burn her. The sooner they get to New York and find the building that their host had given them the address of, the better. Hopefully everything will easily fall into place and they can get to finding a way out of here and Damara doesn’t have to socialize with any of the humans anymore.

Dirk laughs when she tells him, as they’re both standing over the railing, an hour and a half before they’re supposed to reach the port.

“That’s one motivator to be able to get to New York, I guess,” he says.

“It’s getting tiring, all of this. I’ve barely tolerated you.”

“I’m just glad you stopped antagonizing the bird,” he says.

She hums. “It was a menace.”

“It wasn’t,” Dirk says. “You were just – lashing out at it. Unnecessarily.”

“Because it was feeble.”

“Then all the more reason you shouldn’t have broken its wing,” he says, “It’s called decency, being able to refrain from picking on those who have no way of defending themselves from you aside from a few pecks and flaps.”

She holds her tongue, just for one moment, to think about that.

Then she says, “Decency’s how you get killed.”

“You’re not wrong,” he says, “And I wouldn’t say I’m a decent person, but I’m trying to be.”

Damara scoffs. “Why’s that?”

“Because I want to be,” he says. He pauses, like he’s trying to say something, but it’s not quite getting out of his throat. He settles for shifting uncomfortably.

“Introspection making you jittery, huh,” she says, and laughs a little. Maybe it’s the fatigue. Maybe she’s just tired. Maybe it’s that no one can understand and speak lowblood Alternian on the boat aside from Dirk. “You’re not alone there.”

“Yeah?”
She doesn’t answer, only turns away.

“I don’t really talk about things I think about, I guess,” he says, “I pick things apart sometimes. Try to see them from a different angle. Try to see what they did to me, but then it’s just…”

“Sad and uncomfortable?”

Dirk laughs again. “Yeah,” he says, “Something like that.”

Damara looks down at the water below them and wonders what would happen if she just pitched him over. He’s a godtier, so he’d mostly just come back and be pissed. She wonders what would happen if she pitched herself over.

“Don’t,” he says softly, as if reading her mind.

“I don’t plan to,” she says. She has too many things to do, too many people she wants to knock teeth out of, to just throw herself into the sea. “Trust me.”

“Good,” he says, “We still need to get off of Earth, Megido-san.”

“And then I can finally throw you off of all the boats I want,” she says.

“Good luck.”

“You should have said, have fun,” she says, and snickers. “Oh, Strider, you poor bastard.”

“I think I can defend myself just fine if it will come to that.”

“Maybe,” she says, “Maybe not.”

She reaches over a hand – a human hand, veiled by the illusion that’s currently over her – to knock on his chest, the left side of his ribcage where his frail and feeble human heart would be. “You’re decent.” She says it with a sneer, like it’s an insult, and Dirk only watches as she retracts her hand and stands, going to her room, to prepare her bags.

Ahead of them, the buildings of New York are already visible against the dark sky.

The plan is, from the port, they have to take the bus to even get to the hotel their host told them to go to. From the hotel, they’d be able to do a quick study of their environment, and go where they need to go, and Dirk knows where they should go next. They need to go to the Safehouse, because that’s rumored to be the safest place in New York, and perhaps with a few smiles and some careful hiding of Damara being a troll, they can stay there for a while, at least until they’re able to find someone from one of their sessions.

Their money won’t last, after all, and they need some way of making sure Damara doesn’t starve. Pickpocketing seems like an option, but in a city full of humans where a pair of glasses can easily be knocked to the ground, Dirk doesn’t want to risk it.

He tells Damara as much, and she frowns, but agrees. They’re not in their home turf anymore, so they can’t take any chances (and it’s funny they’d been more comfortable hopping from island to island before, which also wasn’t their home turf, but months in a place gets you to trust its geography
a little). Not in a city that’s apparently frequently attacked by a bunch of dramatic megalomaniacs.

The bus is quiet as they both board it with everyone else. They settle in the back, away from prying glances, just in case, and Dirk props up his bag by the window to lay his head on it, closing his eyes. He’s tired too. Apparently travel fatigue still affects even godtier bodies, although that might just be a psychosomatic thing. He’s not sure.

He still keeps his glasses on despite how uncomfortably they’re digging into his face, and beside him, Damara just tuts, but leans on her bag too as she puts it in the empty seat beside her.

He falls asleep, not that he’s aware of it. He only knows he’s slept when he opens his eyes and they’re sluggish and heavy, and because he’s so tired, he lets them drift back close, the light from outside too bright for his still-drowsy senses. He’s faintly aware that he should be taking note of his surroundings, maybe memorize the roads they’ve taken, but he’s too tired to, so he doesn’t. He doesn’t know if Damara is paying any attention to everything around them.

She does kick his shin when they arrive, and he jolts awake, reflexes on a hair trigger just as always, and she just tells him, blandly, that they’re at their stop. He picks up his bag and gets off the bus with her.

The building before them is large and fancy, made of glass and metal – a skyscraper like the ones on his Earth, except those were dead and empty. Here, everything is loud and alive. There are cars everywhere, and it hits Dirk that he’d just boarded a bus, something he’d only really read about in books and watched in animes, but it was real and New York had a lot of it and he’d just been on one. There are a lot of people here, and they’re all talking and hurrying, going about their lives and not knowing that somewhere, out there, there is a version of their world where all of them are dead under a hundred feet of water.

Damara taps his shoulder and he jumps.

She raises an eyebrow. “Strider?”

“I’m okay,” he says, voice sounding strange. He clears his throat. “Overwhelmed,” he tries, hunting down for the term, but a car is honking behind him and he’s very aware of that noise. “Sensory overload.”

“Still not used to this many people, huh?”

He looks around, adjusting his glasses. A few people are staring at him and his sloppily-cut hair and his anime glasses, and he avoids looking them in the eye (which is easier with his glasses, thank the Empress), but thankfully, none of them stop by to ask and talk. He talks a moment to listen, and just pick apart the sounds of everything from the cacophony he’s hearing, but it’s a little difficult as everything is blending into one, and he just frowns.

“Yeah,” he says, “I’m not used to it.”

Damara glances around her and nods. “I hate this place.”

Dirk laughs. “I’d say maybe it’s not so bad, but I’m starting to hate the noises.”

“We should get inside, then. Maybe it’ll be quieter,” she says.

He nods, shifting his bag on his shoulder, and then turns to the side as something catches his attention.
At the corner of his vision, there is a man. He is tall, wearing a simple black turtleneck sweater with some jeans, and he has long dark hair, and high green eyes. There’s nothing remarkable about him, really. He looks sensibly-dressed, and he looks a little tired, but Dirk can swear that he’d seen him just appear out of nowhere, with a few green sparks from his entrance (and something tickles at his memories at that). A couple of people appear to have noticed too, but only spare him a little wave and then go on their ways.

Damara has noticed, and she mutters something under her breath, but he can’t quite make it out as he’s too focused on the man and the other humans he’s talking to.

There’s two of them, and the smaller human jumps at the man’s sudden appearance and then punches his arm.

“Winters! The hell, you scared me.”

‘Winters’ only gives an amused smile and flicks the little human’s forehead, much to their irritation.

“Rose was getting impatient. She wanted food.”

“I was lost.”

“That’s why I’m here,” he says. Dirk’s attention has snapped onto the name Rose, even though it might just be someone else who share the name. He’s found that the name Rose is common here on Earth. So it could just be a coincidence. Could just be someone else.

But what if it’s not?

“Sorry, Mr. Winters?” the other human says, sheepishly brushing a stray lock of red hair away from his eyes. He looks disheveled, and Dirk frowns because there’s something there that nags at him too, but he finds that he can’t quite place it.

He’s in a loud, loud city, with only Damara for support; he might be so close to his ectobiological daughter and not know it; and now he’s noticed that there’s something wrong with what he recalls. There are things there, and yet…very obviously out of his grasp.

“Strider.” Damara hits his back and jolts him back into reality.

He turns to her, eyes wide, and for a moment, her angry expression falters. Then she frowns. “We have to go inside now.”

“Okay,” he says. He sounds unsure, so he tries again. “Okay.”

The strangers’ conversation is still continuing, and he hesitates, trying to catch just a bit more of it. Damara looks a little irritated, but he reckons that he’s just overwhelming himself on purpose now.

“You do have everyone’s food?” ‘Winters’ is saying. He sounds familiar, just a little.

“Yes,” the little human says, “Just took a few wrong turns.”

“So the food’s cold.”

“It’s been three minutes, and I immediately gave up before we could get even more lost, Luke.”

*Luke Winters,* Dirk thinks, committing the name to memory.

“They can do smart moves, sometimes,” the taller one says.
“I can and will eat all of this in front of both of you and you won’t have anything to eat anymore.”

“Don’t be rude,” Winters says. He pauses and then takes out his phone. “Rose will have my head if we don’t get to the hospital right this moment, come on.”

“Alright,” the smaller one says.

Winters puts his hand on their shoulder, and then places his other hand on the other human’s. Dirk watches intently, just waiting for something to happen, but then, he feels a hand on his own shoulder too.

He turns. There is a man in a black suit in front of him.

Before he can say anything, a badge is being flashed in front of him. He only catches the bold letters spelling out S.H.I.E.L.D. before it’s tucked away.

“Excuse me, sir, but you’re going to have to come with me.”

Another man is also showing Damara his badge, but she’s already talking rapidfire lowblood Alternian at him, and he frowns, turning to his partner. The man sighs and turns to Dirk. “Both of you,” he says, “And I’d prefer it you came with us carefully.”

There’s flashes of light, suddenly, and Dirk notices that they’re being photographed. The man puts a hand on his arm, and his reaction is instant – he doesn’t even think about it, he doesn’t pause for a second to think about what it could mean, he just thinks that he’s already uncomfortable in a new area that’s smothering his senses, and he does not want to be touched.

He accesses his sylladex and holds his katana out in front of him. He and Damara had agreed to store the thing there for the boat trip, because no weapons were allowed on board, and since they needed something to defend themselves with, then they had to take it with them.

There’s stunned gasps from the crowd, and it’s like the whole city has paused to watch. Dirk can feel numerous pairs of eyes on him as he holds out his blade, and the men in suits draw out their guns and point it at him.

“Sir,” the first one says, the one who’d been talking to him, “I’m going to need you to put down the –”

He doesn’t get anywhere because Damara tilts her head sharply to the side and both he and his partner go flying in the same direction, bowling past several civilians. Dirk aims his sword at them, still, as they both groan, disoriented.

He notices that several other men in suits are getting out of cars parked innocently at the sidewalks, and turns to Damara, who nods. She hefts up the bag she’s carrying so she can have a more secure hold on it.

“Run.”

It’s a pity that Loki’s magic is too fast.

In the time it takes for the agent to touch Dirk Strider’s shoulder, it takes even less for him to skywalk
from the city to the hospital, and so he doesn’t see the mess that comes after. He doesn’t see Dirk summon a sword from his sylladex, or Damara throw off the agents with her telekinesis, he only sees white hospital hallways and Sapphrel shuddering from displacement before running to Dave’s room, Ruben on their heels. And he simply lets out an amused snort before following them.

Cecil is currently sleeping in his room below, and as Kevin and Mr. G are looking after him, everyone else is crowded in Dave’s, where the boy still lies comatose. He’s turning a whole year older today, or theoretically would be. Time is funny, after all. Maybe this year is a bit backwards in time for him, maybe it’s not. Loki won’t know until he asks Dave himself, but that’s not an option right now.

“Hey, Loki,” Jade says, smiling and motioning to one of the empty seats. He nods and claims one, settling beside John, while Sapphrel hands the bag of food over to Rose, and quietly asks to excuse themself and Ruben as they deliver Kevin’s and Mr. G’s share downstairs.

“How is he?” he asks.

“Recovering fine,” Rose says, from where she’s beside her brother’s bed, leaning her elbows on the mattess. Without his glasses, Dave’s face is fully visible – unmoving white eyelashes and tiny scars on the bridge of his nose and all. They both look so much alike. “But,” she says, “Like the doctors have said – like I’ve told you, still somehow regressing.”

“They had redo another surgery,” John says, “Which is going to wipe him out a lot more, I guess.”

“They had redo another surgery,” John says, “Which is going to wipe him out a lot more, I guess.”

“Theoretically, if being stabbed by some sort of entity that can possess people doesn’t override SBURB mechanics, then being a godtier should heal him up just fine,” Rose says, and then frowns. She pinches the bridge of her nose. “But he was dying, and it was being counted as…Heroic. I don’t know what happens when you attempt to save someone from a Heroic death.”

Intriguing. He can practically hear the capitals. “A Heroic death?”

“Yes,” Rose says. She moves a hand as she explains. “When you die a godtier, you can only die two ways.” She lifts a finger. “Justly.” And another. “And Heroically. Any other deaths, and you will revive. If you haven’t done anything for your death to be considered Just, and yet also weren’t doing anything for it to be considered Heroic, you are resurrected.”

“I see,” Loki says, “Death has to be earned then.”

Rose pauses and then nods. “Yes. You could say that, yes. I’ve never really thought about it like that.”

“In Asgard, those who die in battle are the ones who die an honorable death. It is a death worth celebrating, in the midst of the mourning,” he says, “Those who die a warrior’s death go to Valhalla.”

“And everyone else?” John asks.

“They go to Helheim,” Loki says, “Humiliating deaths go to Hel. That is why warriors would rather die on the battlefield than go home injured and unable to fight any longer.”

Jade wrinkles her nose and pushes her glasses up. “That’s – not really very nice.”

“It isn’t,” Loki says, and he says it with conviction. How strange, to realize the wrongs of a society you’ve grown up in. How strange to know it for years and yet finally acknowledge it. It’s freeing. “I suppose if they were given a chance to be able to implement a Just and Heroic system, they’d buy
into it, and they’d probably be more at ease, knowing that undignified deaths won’t be counted so long as they could just save themselves from them.”

“It’s still not fun to die a lot,” John says.

Loki looks at him thoughtfully. “I imagine so.”

He looks over at Dave for a moment, and lays a hand on the boy’s arm. He hasn’t really properly visited him in days, not when he’d been steering clear, in case Rose didn’t want him anywhere near her brother. He lets his magic gently search the boy’s stomach, seeking out what needs to be repaired. He looks up at Rose, and she only nods slowly, giving him approval.

He can feel the stitches there, on Dave’s skin, in his stomach lining, and he can see that they’re holding quite well, but there is a wound very, very slowly opening up on the wall of flesh that’s leading to his back. Loki frowns. He remembers he’d tried to heal the exit wound as best as he could when Dave was bleeding out on the floor.

“It’s regressing, indeed,” he says, half-curious. “All the work your human doctors have done on him are holding well, but…the healing I’ve done on him prior to that is unravelling, somehow.”

“Along with the blood transfusion?” John says. When everyone turns to him, he just bumps up his glasses nervously. “All the doctors said the amount of blood in his body was somehow dropping despite him not bleeding out. It’s like it’s vanishing to thin air somewhat.”

Loki glances at Rose. She holds it. She knows. He hadn’t been the one to perform blood transfusion spells on her brother to make sure he’d made it to be taken care of by the surgeons.

“I have a theory,” Rose says, hesitantly. “But…”

“But?”

“I can’t know for sure until he wakes up,” she says, “Although hopefully by that time, all of this would have stopped.”

“Yeah,” Jade agrees. “But he’ll wake up, Rose, don’t worry.”

Rose smiles at her gently. “I have no doubt of that, he’s a tough kid. He’s already survived so much.”

Loki wants to ask more about that, but that’s for later. That’s for when Dave’s woken up and has recovered and doesn’t need to worry about bleeding out on the floor.

“How can I heal him?” he asks.

Rose nods. “Go ahead.”

He inclines his head in thanks, and turns his attention to Dave again. For a brief while, he’s back in a dark room again, all the lights in the hospital out, while Dave is grasping on to the last shreds of consciousness after hours of crashing and being revived by a small electric shock to the heart. He’s back to listening to Dave deliriously talk about forgiveness, and family, and Heroic deaths. He’s back to feeling like the floor just dropped out from under him, and the harsh, cold realization that he can’t ever save anyone is right in front of him.

But the hospital room is bright, and Rose and Jade and John are there, surrounding him, silent pillars of support while he keeps his hand on Dave’s forearm. They don’t say anything, but just wait, and
Loki feels like he can breathe.

He lets his magic close the reopening wound on Dave’s back, and as he realizes that it’s going to keep reopening for the next few hours, makes sure to keep his hand there, even as the hours pass, and as the day wears on. The other children sleep, and he stays awake, magic working on healing Dave, while he tries not to fall asleep from exhaustion.

He’s actually nearly asleep when he feels the twitch.

Loki opens his eyes, slowly, as they’re heavy with fatigue, and notices that Dave’s fingers are moving.

“John,” he says, softly at first, and when John doesn’t wake up, he pushes at the boy’s shoulder with his free hand. “John.”

“Wha’ssit.”

“John, Dave is waking up.”

“What?” John lifts his head to look at Loki, putting his glasses back onto his face from where he’d stored them in his sylladex while he’d slept. He turns to the heart monitor, at Dave’s spiking heartbeat, and then to where Dave’s hand is moving. Dave himself is starting to frown very slowly, like he’s waking up from a bad dream.

“Oh shit.” The chair makes a loud scraping noise when John stands suddenly, and Jade and Rose jump in their seats, awake.

“What is it?” Jade asks.

“Rose, he’s waking up!” John says, lifting off the ground as he excitedly points at Dave.

Rose turns to her brother, whose face is set in a particularly harsh frown, and sits back down again, moving her chair closer and grasping his other hand. “You can do it, Dave.”

The heartbeat monitor is getting louder and louder, and Loki makes sure not to relinquish his magic from where it’s still continuing to heal Dave’s back. He waits, patiently, as Dave continues to stir, but he doesn’t wake up. He only starts mouthing something, as if he’s mumbling, as if he’s –

Like he’s having a nightmare.

He tries not to consider that what’s happening right now is what he thinks it is.

Rose’s cellphone rings. She picks it up and hits answer, and before Steve Rogers can get anything out more than a, “Hey, Rose – ” she says, “I’m sorry, Steve, but something requires my full attention and presence right now, I can’t talk.” And then she hangs up, and pockets her phone again.

She watches and squeezes her brother’s hand as he shifts, groaning softly, trying to keep away whatever unpleasant dreams he’s having right now.

Loki hopes he wins.
At the tower, Steve Rogers looks down at the phone in his hand, disappointed.

“So?” Tony asks.

“She said she was busy,” he says, “Maybe Dave’s in surgery.”

Tony looks to one corner of the room and then shrugs. “That’s a fair reason. We still can’t postpone going to the hospital, though. Who knows when we’ll get another free day, what with everything that’s happened.”

“Yes,” Steve says. He slips his phone back into his pocket and makes his way over to the couch, sighing. “We’ll still have to try to visit her tomorrow. I’ll make an early call.”

“Hope she’s awake.”

“I’ll have to wake her if she’s not. This is urgent,” he says. “That, or she’ll be in for a surprise visit.”

“We’ll have to do a surprise visit, if it comes to it.” Tony hops onto one of his desks and waves his hand to let JARVIS get some holographic screens for him. He’s probably checking the news or something. They’re trying to cover what’s happened to the Safehouse crew diligently. “This Cecil kid’s life is also in danger.”

“She’ll understand,” Steve says. “I’m sure.”

Tony doesn’t look up from where he’s typing onto his hologram, but he smiles. “From what you’ve told me, she sounds like a smart kid. She will.”

Steve feels a bit of pride bloom in his chest. “Yeah, she is.”

They’re silent for a while, but the silence is not awkward. It’s more tired, and there’s an air of camaraderie as they share in that tiredness, so it’s fine. The kids are all scattered throughout the building – Eridan in his aquarium, as there’s no one else in that room right now, and he misses the water (Steve only knows this because the boy had asked Steve to not tell Roxy where he is); Kanaya in her own room with the Bernina sewing machine Tony’s got her (and Steve can tell that Tony’s thinking about maybe moving to making sewing machines too, because that would be fun); Davesprite cooking around with DUM-E in the kitchen; Roxy and Hal in the lab trying to test out the prototype body Roxy is trying to make the AI.

It’s a good day in the tower, which is saying something right now, considering the last few days. It’s been nothing but awkward glances and clipped sentences between everyone else and Eridan, after all, and in fact the only time they’d all actually managed to be in one room and just talk was when Roxy explained who the hell the Condesce was, which pretty much ended up in Tony having JARVIS record everything she said, as well as break out a laptop so he could take notes.

“I haven’t paid this much attention and taken notes since college, and not even then,” he’d said. “But to recap, this Batterwitch is some alien hag who flooded your Earth?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re from the future?”

“Yes.”

“How far into the future?”
“Nearly four hundred and thirteen years.”

“Oh, hell.”

“How is it?” Steve had asked.

Roxy had fallen silent. “Lonely,” she’d said. “The whole place was flooded.”

She’d talked about how the Batterwitch had invaded and how she’d infiltrated the government, slowly at first, and then suddenly, everyone had realized that she’d taken over everything, and the humans had gone near-extinct. Most of the remaining residents with Roxy had been carapacians, she’d said.

“I’m still so confused,” Tony’d said, clearly not convinced. “But keep going?”

And she did, and she talked about having friends, three of them, and they were going to play a game, one that rained meteors down on their Earth so that they could destroy it and birth a new universe, but halfway through, Tony had held his hands up and said, “Okay, this is giving me a headache, can we have this discussion later?”

Roxy had laughed and said yes, and everyone had gotten food, and then everything else was back to the way it was before. Tense silence and awkward conversations, but at least it was…lighter, somehow.

At least Eridan is starting to eat more, and he’s showing up at mealtimes when he’d initially avoided them. Roxy’s worrying less, Steve knows, the more Eridan shows signs of taking care of himself. Even Kanaya is easing up on the boy, glaring at him less and less. It’s good progress.

“Sir, you have an e-mail from S.H.I.E.L.D.”

Tony huffs. Steve returns his attention to the present. “Is it good?” Tony asks.

“Do you ever think anything from S.H.I.E.L.D. is good, sir?”

“No, I don’t,” Tony grumbles. “I’ll read it later. I need food before I can even process what they tell me.”

“It’s not all that bad,” Steve says.

Tony raises an eyebrow, and then scoffs. “Isn’t it?” He stares at Steve for a moment, as if wondering how he can even say that, but then he lets his shoulders drop their tenseness. “I guess I’m just pissed off from what they’ve been doing these past few months. Hard to drop the hostility.”

“And it’s fair,” Steve says, “I still can’t believe they’ve…started kidnapping people off the streets.”

“If they’re being fed information, I can see why but – ” Tony messes up his own hair with one hand, frustrated. “Still can’t help feeling that something is off.”

“If there is, we’ll get to the bottom of it,” Steve says, “But one thing at a time.”

Tony nods. It’s a good strategy. It’s always a good strategy to take one thing at a time. Steve smiles and pulls out his phone to check the time, wondering if they should get dinner since –

There’s a loud crash. Both he and Tony snap to attention.

“JARVIS, where was that?” Tony asks.
“In the laboratory, sir.”

Roxy is there.

“Camera feed, JARVIS.”

The AI automatically opens up several screens, all footage of the laboratory, taken from different angles. Steve runs over, checking all the videos – there’s Roxy sitting on her usual chair, and the robot she’s been working, sitting on the table. It looks fine, and in fact has its head tilted, like it’s confused. Roxy must have already installed Hal in, then. On the floor, there’s a small pool of melted lead, and beside it, a soldering gun. From the angle that takes Roxy’s stunned face as she looks up at another holographic screen, Steve can see that she’s burnt part of her hand.

“Nothing wrong,” Tony says, breathing out in relief.

“Ms. Lalonde’s stress levels appear to be rising, sir,” JARVIS says, at the same time Hal, in the video feed, says, in a monotone, robotic voice, “Roxy, breathe.”

“JARVIS can you show us what Roxy’s watching?” Steve asks.

JARVIS does.

It’s the news, and Steve has to take a moment to read the headline: MUTANTS WREAK HAVOC IN NEW YORK STREETS. He catches up to what the reporter is saying, about two mutants, who were apparently causing trouble in the city and have just been recently caught, apprehended by several people who refuse to answer any questions. He turns to Tony, who slowly runs a hand over her face.

“S.H.I.E.L.D?” he asks.

“Might be,” Tony says. “I need to know if the mutants really were causing trouble.”

“I’ll get reading,” Steve says, but he doesn’t move to go get a laptop right away. He just stays where he is, watching the video feeds, as Davesprite flies into the room and goes to Roxy’s side, gently trying to shake her from her shock. A few seconds later, Kanaya comes in and puts a comforting hand on the girl’s arm, but she remains staring at the screen. Eridan dithers at the doorway, but Davesprite motions for him to come in, and he does, standing beside Kanaya, but making no move to touch Roxy. Instead, he just turns to the screen she’s staring at.

So, Kanaya does the same.

And then Davesprite.

And then Hal.

“Oh,” Davesprite says, sounding small and scared and vulnerable.

Steve turns to the screen where the news is playing. Two children – or teenagers, really, from the looks of it – are being made to kneel on the sidewalk. One of them has light hair, the other dark. They’re both being handcuffed, and one man is trying to usher the camera that’s taking this shot away, but instead, whoever’s taking the shot just pushes past the man, even when he’s shouting threats.

Steve watches as the boy, the one with the light hair, gets yanked to his feet. His glasses drop from his face, shattering on the ground.
“Those glasses look like Hal’s,” Tony murmurs. His eyes flicker to the feed where Hal is. “Oh. Oh, shit no.”

The boy says nothing to the man, face blank. And then the man handling him suddenly goes flying backwards.

“She’s starting again, clear out the civilians and take her down!” someone from the news clip shouts.

The boy runs, reaching forward with handcuffed hands, summoning a figurine out of thin air like that’s going to help him, just as the girl rises to her feet. Some of the men around them have taken out guns, and the boy stands, holding out the figurine as a last resort for protection, while behind him, the girl looks like she’s breathing heavily, tired.

“Everyone evacuate, these two are highly dangerous.”

“Do you think we might get called in?” Tony asks.

Steve takes the hint, but before he can go to get his shield, he sees sparks suddenly go off on the screen where the news is playing and when the boy suddenly crashes to the ground, he realizes the kid’s just been tazed. The girl drops to her knees beside him, trying to shake him awake, and she snarls when the people around her get closer, but she gets hits with the Taser gun as well, and convulses before listing to the side, unconscious.

Roxy’s chair clatters to the floor as she stands up, and both Steve and Tony to the camera feed this time.

“Dirk, get the fuck up,” she says.

On the news, the girl and the boy are being hauled away. Steve notes, just for a moment, and it’s a miracle the girl’s glasses have stayed on her face, although they’re slightly broken now.

“Dirk, get up,” Roxy says. This time, the man trying to shoo the camera crew away are effective. He pushes the camera away, further and further, while the children are brought inside of a van.

“Dirk!”

“Dirk, come on.” That’s Davesprite this time. He sounds small again. “Bro, come on, you have to get out of there.”

But on the news, Dirk doesn’t wake up. Neither of the children do. They’re just tossed inside the van, and the camera is forced to pan to the reporter, who looks shaky at witnessing what’s just happened, before she starts to report again, hesitant.

“Fuck!” Roxy yells, stomping off before just suddenly stopping and putting her face in her hands.

Kanaya and Eridan watch her, looking conflicted, while Hal just stays on the table. He probably still can’t walk.

Davesprite hovers over to her, and when he touches her shoulder, she just sobs and turns, burying her face in his chest. He wraps her arms around her, his wings following suit.

“They know that kid,” Tony says. “Fuck.”

“More people we have to break out,” Steve says. “We don’t have a lot of time.”
“I know,” Tony says, “I know,” He lets JARVIS exit the news feed and the camera feed of the lab.
“I’m betting my entire fortune the new e-mail’s got something to do with those two.”

“I’m getting the laptop then,” Steve says. He’ll call Rose tomorrow, but for now, there’s something else he has to do. “Time to get reading.”

Chapter End Notes

I feel like every chapter is a flaming ball of chaos and screaming so my perpetual mood is just uwu.
Also, I think my schedule for updating ALFG is every other Friday, because I want to update my other fic Heathens too.
Forgiveness

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Roxy is pacing.

Which honestly wouldn’t be that odd – a lot of people pace when they’re worried, after all, because they need to put all of that nervous energy somewhere – except Eridan can see how there’s dark spots that linger too long in the marks her bare feet have made on the Stark human’s carpet. He discreetly drags his gaze away when he spots them, and hope no one’s noticed.

It’s way past midnight by the Earth’s time. He’s only just started to get used to the time here, in New York, where it’s loud and suffocating, and in addition to the light pollution making it near impossible to be able to see the stars, was in a completely different ‘timezone’ thing, whatever that was. He’s sure they had an equivalent of it in Alternia, but it had been called something else.

Around midnight, he’d learned, most humans are already asleep except for the insomniac few. Except this is New York and is, according to Stark, the city that never sleeps.

He sees Roxy stop. She looks down at the carpet, fists clenched so hard, Eridan’s surprised she hasn’t started bleeding yet. Her back is to him, so he can’t see her, but he imagines she’s glaring as much as she can at the carpet.

She starts walking again.

“He’s your best friend,” Stark says, repeating what Roxy had said earlier, and points to the direction of the lab, which is actually several floors below them to the east of the building, but he just points east. He’d called all of them to the living room half an hour earlier (save Hal, who sadly couldn’t really move yet), after he’d finished up whatever he had been doing, while Steve Rogers went to excuse himself to attempt to call Rose again. “That kid with the shades.”

“His name is Dirk Strider,” Roxy says, voice tight. “Yes, he’s my best friend.”

“Strider?” The man motions to the gigantic bird currently sitting (hovering) on the couch’s backrest. “Any relation to, uh?”


“Discount shithead of a brother version, you mean,” Roxy snaps. She turns on her heel to do another round on the carpet. Eridan blinks, and turns to Davesprite, who looks surprised, but then just laughs nervously and shifts his wings.

“Yeah, I – I told you that. Back the island –” Davesprite mumbles the rest of the sentence and Eridan can’t quite catch it. His earfins flick down, disappointed, and he notices Tony’s eyes bright with curiousity again. You’d think the man would get used to his fins moving after a while.

“But, yeah, we’re related through some weird ectobiology BS,” Davesprite says.

“What’s ectobiology?” Stark asks.

“SBURB stuff,” Davesprite says. “This is what you get for trying to skip the lesson.”
“Listen, there was already enough to be confused by.” Stark motions to his head. “And as much as I hate to admit it, there’s things we gotta take time to let sink in because we need to plan carefully.”

“Look at that, he’s learned to throw aside his hubris,” Davesprite says with a snicker. Stark turns to Kanaya, as if to say can you believe this, but Kanaya just shrugs.

Eridan glances between all of them for a moment. He’d known that the others had been getting along with the humans, but how much had he actually missed? He hadn’t really talked to Stark much when he’d brought him food and attempted conversation, and he’d tuned out said attempts at conversation so he doesn’t know if Stark had told him anything about what’s been going on above the basement.

For just a second, Eridan feels that very distinct moment, where one falls a great height, feeling the wind hit against one’s skin harshly, and then suddenly there’s no wind, and there’s no falling, there’s just cold and the sensation of suspension and weightlessness as you crash through black, freezing water, unable to hear, unable to see, unable to register anything at all other than yourself despite how much you want your awareness to reach out to lighter depths.

He feels alone.

And it’s a terrifying feeling, being alone. It’s not the first time he’s grappled with his demons before, and it certainly won’t be the last, he knows, but he also knows what this is a precursor to.

He looks down at his hands, hating how easily it is to imagine blood there. He looks up at Roxy, still pacing, who he hasn’t allowed himself to face in days. He looks at Kanaya, rightfully angry with him, and who’s giving him a curious glance now. He looks at Davesprite who a few months ago he unapologetically would have ripped to shreds, and is looking at him with concern.

“Eridan?”

“Yes?” It’s a miracle he even remembers to answer, but then when he turns to whoever’s asked him, he’s seeing bright pink eyes. The neutral look he’s plastered on his face falters.

“Are you okay?” Roxy asks.

He tries not to look down quickly, tries not to draw attention to himself, and thankfully mostly succeeds. He nods. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

Roxy just keeps staring at him. She looks like she wants to say something, but she only opens her mouth and then thins it out into a line, unable to make up her mind.

Stark clears his throat. “Anyone willing to explain ectobiology to me?”

Eridan looks away, leaning back into his seat. He doesn’t see what Roxy does. Kanaya begins to speak, thankfully sparing everyone from the awkward silence.

“It’s a mechanic in SBURB,” Kanaya says, “An Appearifier – ”

“What is an Appearifier?”

“A machine designed to appearify things,” Kanaya says, clearly attempting to hide her amusement.

“Is that what I think it is?”

“What are you thinking, Mister Stark?”

Even Eridan can’t stop himself from chuckling.
“Teleporter,” Davesprite mutters, “Kinda.”

“That’s such a stupid name for a teleporter,” Stark says, but laughs. “An Appearifier does what?”

“An Appearifier is a…teleporter,” Kanaya says the word with a bit of difficulty but manages, “That can access all of time and space.”

Stark pauses. “A teleporter that can access all of timespace?”

“Yes.”

The man steeples his hands, brings them close to his face as he inhales, and then huffs. “How?”

“Do I look like I invented Appearifiers, Mr. Stark?” Kanaya asks.

Stark throws his hands up. “Then who did!”

“Dude, don’t worry about it, they’re probably not in this universe anyway,” Davesprite says, “Focus on the Appearifiers.”

“But how can it access time? Space, I understand. But time?”

Davesprite shrugs. “I’m a time player and I don’t understand it.”

Stark quiets. Then. “What’s a time player.”

This time Dave raises his head as if he’s about to huff, but doesn’t fully let it out. Instead he just shakes his head.

“Appearifiers,” Roxy starts. Eridan still doesn’t look at her. “Are machines that can access time and space, like Kanaya said. They’re able to transport objects from one place to its platform, so it’s like a teleporter, but it’s a fixed teleporter.”

“Do you know how it’s able to access time?” Stark asks.

“No,” Roxy says, “But honestly, don’t think about it too hard right now, you’ll burst a vein.”

Stark mumbles something about him eventually figuring it out, but he waves at Roxy to continue. She does.

Eridan feels the couch move, and he glances up. Roxy’s sat down.

“Now,” she says, “Paradox space is really fragile, so whenever something that might destroy a timeline occurs, it smooths it out. It fixes its own mistakes, and I believe Appearifiers were made with that detail in mind.”

“Which actually points to the possibility that whoever made Appearifiers knew about the game,” Davesprite say.

Eridan looks up at him, suddenly, because that brings a thought to his head, one that is important enough for him to throw aside his momentary oath of silence. “It’s possible they were the former winners of the game.”

The others turn to him.

So does Stark, although he just looks confused.
“Okay, uh,” the man says, “What does that mean?”

“Whoever wins the game gets to create a new universe,” Kanaya says, “They become the gods of it.”

Stark snorts. “What?”

“Exactly what I said,” Kanaya says. “Whoever wins the game, gets to create a new universe and become its gods.”

“But.” Stark points between the four of them. “You said you played this weird game, whatever it is, unless it’s the internet meme, and you’re children.”

None of them say anything. Eridan knows the implications of it – that children are expected to rule a new universe they’ve just made; that Skaia doesn’t care.

“I’m an adult now, actually,” Davesprite says. “I’m counting all the years I spent playing the game in my timeline, and then the four years on the ship, plus the few more years with everyone else. I’m practically the oldest. I’m older than Roxy.” He jerks a thumb towards Roxy. “And she’s – sixteen when you started the game, right? So now you’re uhhh, eighteen or nineteen, provided you didn’t spend a lot of time in the void or wherever we were before we were thrown here.” He adjusts his shades and leans a bit towards her direction. “Actually, you’re closer to twenty, so we did spend a bit of time in the void.”

“Dave, you’re rambling,” Roxy says.

He shifts his wings.

“Nervous?”

He shrugs.

“How do you know she’s nearly twenty?” Stark asks.

“Time player. I can sense it,” Davesprite says. “It’s not exactly a skill I can do easily – that’s probably easier for Seers, I’m a Knight, or was one – but given how much I’ve had to learn and cheat over the years, I’ve picked up a few tricks, including bypassing Sprite Mystical Bullshit.”

Eridan snorts. “Thank the Empress for that.”

“Sprite Mystical Bullshit is exhausting,” Davesprite says.

“Basically, what you’re saying is that your third eye is open,” Stark says.

Davesprite actually bursts out laughing. “Technically.”

Stark chuckles for a moment, but obviously feels more at ease despite the confusion. “Okay, back to Appearifiers. What does being made with Paradox Space in mind have to do with them?”

“They can’t teleport objects if they’re going to create a paradox,” Roxy answers. “If that happens, the Appearifier creates a ghost imprint instead, which takes on the form of ectoplasm.”

“Slime,” Davesprite says.

“Slime,” Stark repeats, and then snickers. “Wow.”
“It’s that slime that can be used to create offspring, or ectobiological children, if two...let’s just call
them ectoplasmic imprints, are combined,” Roxy says, “A version of myself, and a version of Dirk
had their ectoplasmic imprints taken and combined, which created Dave – ” Davesprite raises a hand
at that. “ – and Rose.”

Stark looks like he wants to be holding a can of beer at the moment, but as he isn’t, he just settles for
fidgeting and then crossing his arms. “Ghost children, then. Kind of,” Stark says.

“Yes, although they’re more tangible,” Roxy says.

“And these ghost children are able to grow up and live just like everyone else. No genetic – or
ectogenetic, I guess – conditions, or mutations, or anything? Complications? Babies conceived
normally already have enough birth complications as it is.”

“They’re able to grow up and live normally, yes,” Roxy says.

“Well, I don’t really have a belly button. At least, when I was fully human,” Davesprite says.

Roxy laughs. “I don’t either.”


“You don’t have Appearifiers here, sadly.”

Stark looks thoughtful. “Maybe not yet.”

“If it’s a universe involved with Skaia, then there’s bound to be an Appearifier existing in it
somewhere, whether past or present,” Kanaya says, “It’s a cycle.”

“Yeah,” Roxy says. She crosses her arms, shoulders lifting defensibly. “I wish it wasn’t.”

“A cycle,” Stark says. “I’m probably asking out of order here and am just going to make myself
confused, but – you said the game births a new universe, but how long does a universe get to live
before a new game has to be begun, and how does it manifest?”

Davesprite slowly sits up straight at that and looks up at the ceiling. “I...actually, I don’t know how
long a universe gets to live.” He turns to Kanaya and Roxy, who shrug, and then to Eridan, who
gives him the same me neither gesture.

“So it can just happen anytime,” Stark says.

“It happened to me when I was thirteen,” Davesprite says, “It was 2009 in my timeline.”

Stark raises an eyebrow.

“Mine was further into the future,” Roxy says.

“So there’s really no set timetable?” Stark asks.

Roxy shrugs again. “Not that we know of.”

Stark frowns and gestures towards the glass walls, where the rest of New York could be seen, just
going about their busy lives, not knowing that somewhere, out there, two children are being taken to
a government facility for who knows what, one more is already in a cell, and two more kids are in a
hospital, not-quite-safe yet.
“Are there signs, at least, so everyone can prepare?” he asks.

“Not that we know of…” Roxy repeats, but she sounds unsure as she continues.

“The game,” Davesprite says.

Stark frowns. “What about it, isn’t it the one that destroys everything?”

“When the game is released to the public, or at least, a copy of it goes out somewhere, it means that Skaia has decided it’s time to create a new universe and destroy the old one,” Davesprite says.

“So we just have to destroy the game?” Stark says, “All copies of it?”

There’s another round of looks being exchanged.

“Well,” Davesprite says, “I’m not sure either if the game is a chance to create a new universe in spite of the old one being destroyed, and that if it’s not played, the old universe will be destroyed anyway, or if the game begins the end.”

Stark looks towards the city again, and then to Dave, and back to the city. “Is there a way to learn more about the game outside of, well, experience? Because I don’t blame you for not knowing much, considering – you know.”

“Rose wrote a guide on it, once,” Kanaya points out.

“So, out of everyone you all collectively know, Rose is the most knowledgeable one about the game,” Stark says.

Kanaya nods. “She may be.”

“Calliope knew things too, but…” Roxy trails off. “I don’t know where she is.”

“Another friend of yours who may or may not be on Earth?” Stark asks.

“Yes.”

“God, how many of you are there?”

“A lot,” Davesprite says, “It’s a question of which sessions and which versions of those sessions are here, really.”

“Excuse me?”

Davesprite only snickers, not deigning to answer, but Stark doesn’t get a chance to ask more anyway, because Steve Rogers steps into the room, cellphone in hand, and Stark immediately turns to him, asking, “So?”

“Rose still won’t pick up,” he says. “I think we’ll have to really pay her a surprise visit.”

“We’re going to the hospital first?” Eridan asks.

Steve nods. “I think that would be the best thing to do. Tony and I have read over what S.H.I.E.L.D. has given us, and we’re going to be having a debriefing this afternoon, presumably about what happened yesterday, so we don’t have much time – and it might be better if we tackled this together with the Safehouse members,” he says, “They do know who the children on the news are, right?”
“If their memories haven’t been too tampered with, then yeah,” Roxy says.

“That’s good then. Although – what do you all think? Hospital first and then S.H.I.E.L.D.?” he asks.

Eridan lets himself think for a moment, mentally stepping into the shoes of a tactician, like he once was a long time ago, FLARPing with everyone else and living up to the title of an Orphaner. He was pathetic at talking to people, but if there was anything he was good for before, it was military tactics. Attending to the closest, equally time-sensitive task at hand would lessen their damages especially since there was a possibility that they could get the sympathies and the cooperation of the Safehouse, and if the Safehouse was as safe as it sounded, then as soon as they had the others out of S.H.I.E.L.D., they’d have a bunker.

Not too bad.

“Eridan?”

That’s Roxy’s voice again. Eridan looks up.

“We asked you what you thought of this plan.”

Ah. He’d spaced out on them a moment there. He really needs to get himself together.

“When would we leave?” he asks, turning to Rogers.

“In a few hours,” the man says, “So it would be best if everyone got ready now.”

In a hospital, executing a stealth mission with everyone when he still isn’t in a mood to socialize.

That’s fine.

“Okay,” he says, “That’ll work.”

Eridan looks clearly uncomfortable with doing this. It’s the hoodie, Kanaya thinks. Eridan is the sort of boy who dresses up, and dresses up fancily, because that, to him, is what’s comfortable. It makes him feel good, and it makes him feel like himself, so he dresses up and moves around with flair, and frankly, it’s a little dramatic, but Kanaya’s a fashion designer, and that’s one thing they both would come to an agreement on, style.

Eridan hasn’t really been dressing up or taking care of his appearance in the past few days. He’s just starting to again, thankfully, and although they’ve had their differences (not really – more like Eridan’s been an asshole) in the past, but Kanaya isn’t cruel, and she doesn’t wish for Eridan to slowly allow himself to be destroyed by his guilt. To think upon and dwell on it for a moment, to be able to move forward, yes, but to slowly and painfully kill himself with it, never.

He’s not doing anything, aside from stand there in the corner in a black hoodie that’s too large, hands stuffed in his pockets, while Tony and Steve relay the plan. In a few minutes, they’ll be having breakfast, and then after that go over the plan one last time, before going to the hospital.

Kanaya watches him as he just nods, going along with whatever everyone else is saying, and then Tony dismisses them and tells them all to go down into the kitchen to help with food. Roxy makes a joke about him burning water, and the man just huffs – banter is light as everyone files out of the
room, and Kanaya slows her steps down until she’s right beside Eridan, who’s lagging behind everyone else.

She puts a hand on his arm and he stops.

He says nothing though, only glancing at the others as they continue to leave, too caught up in a friendly argument, before turning back to Kanaya.

Once the room is quiet (and bless JARVIS for letting them be despite the fact that he knows they’ve stayed behind), Kanaya lets him go.

“Kan,” he says.

“Eridan,” Kanaya says.

“What do you want?” he asks, and winces a little at his stutter.

“To talk.”

She expects him to stand up straighter, shoulders rolled back and head held high, attempt to seem taller than he really is, just like all threatened animals who want to ensure their safety by intimidation do. But Eridan doesn’t do that. Instead he just lets out a small, tired sigh and says, “What did you want to talk about?”

“What happened to you?”

Kanaya doesn’t mean to ask that. She’d expected to say something else, but she blurts that out, on accident, and immediately wishes she didn’t, but even Eridan looks surprised, so she doesn’t take it back and instead pushes on.

“You’ve done worse before than almost harm someone,” Kanaya says, “And don’t get me wrong, I’m thrilled that you’re starting to learn how to grovel like the rest of us who are trying to be decent people, but you never used to do that and then…” She motions towards him. “What’s happened in the past few months before you came here?”

Eridan looks down at his feet, crammed into shiny new sneakers Tony’s got him. “I don’t know,” he says.

“You’re not forgetting those memories, are you?”


“You had friends before.”

“And I didn’t know how to – how to deal with them.” He looks like he’s struggling with his words. He starts picking at the skin of his palms. “How to take care of them. How to keep them, I guess.”

Kanaya raises an eyebrow.

“Look, we’re going to be late for breakfast,” he says.

“Keep going, you’re getting there,” she says instead.

“Kan.”

“Eridan,” Kanaya says, “Seeing you go on a murder spree has made me lose all my respect for you,
there’s literally nothing for you to salvage here, so be brutally honest.”

He actually deflates at that. Kanaya’s never seen him so heartbroken before.

And then he laughs and looks away. “I deserve that,” he says. “I’m actually glad you were honest.”

“Don’t expect any less from me. I still hate you,” she says. “But while that may be, I don’t wish to see you starve and let yourself go either.”

He stares at her for a second, disbelieving. “…thank you.”

She crosses her arms, patiently, shifting her weight back on one foot, while he turns his attention to the floor and continues to pick at his hands.

“I guess, before it was – I’m a violet blood. Close to fuchsia. A seadweller, and an Orphaner. Everyone should have wanted to be friends with me. It was an honor to be friends with me,” he says. “So I thought, anyway.”

He pauses for a while, gathering his thoughts.

“And then the meteor happened and I kind of snapped – I have no excuse for that, I was just being an ass,” he says, “And then I was dead. And then suddenly, I wasn’t, and I was in an ocean in the middle of nowhere, with the friendliest fish and the most loyal school.”

“That was where you met Roxy and Davesprite?”

“And Hal,” he says, nodding. “But before that, it was just the fishes, and it was fun, for a little while. They recognized me as royalty, and Anshu – that’s the name of the friendly fish, they kept following me around and helping me –” Kanaya notes the fond look in his eyes as he says that “– Anshu kept following me and everything was great. That was exactly how everyone should have treated me, I’d thought then but…”

“But?”

“But, not really, I guess,” he says. “It was always in my mind, the meteor. I thought, why did I do that? Because I lost my temper – because I was jealous, I spilled blood? I know it was within my rights being high up the system, but why did I do that? I’ve gotten into fights before. I’ve stopped my hand. Why do something irreversible for one moment I lost it?”

It’s weird, to hear him talk about it like this. Kanaya has tried to see the good in everyone, she knows. That’s why she always makes an effort to help mend relationships, harsh quips about her being a serial auspistice be damned. No matter how bad a fight can be, if there’s genuine love in a relationship, it’s never as bad as it seems. It can always be remedied, so long as everyone is willing to lay down their pride.

But Eridan has always been the walking definition of pride.

At least, maybe he used to be.

“And then I was on the island, I was at sea,” he continues, “It gave me time to think. It was quiet, and I didn’t have to face anyone there. I didn’t have to answer to anyone. It was just me and everything in my head, and too much time on my hands.”

“Time enough to think?”
He laughs dryly. “More than enough time to think,” he says, “I was willing to end people’s lives over one time I lost my temper over something ridiculous.”

Kanaya says nothing.

“They still thought I was their god, their prince or something, and I never let them think otherwise. I’m not going to lie, I fought the war first because I liked Anshu, and because I felt territorial, but somewhere along the line, I just…I realized these fishes depended on me.” He sighs. “They depended on me to fight for and with them. Depended on me to protect them while they stayed in the reef. Depended on me for, I don’t know, support, I guess, because I could see most of them felt safe while I was in the reef.”

“Faith fueling them on through the war?”

“Something like that, yeah.” He nods. “And I guess I thought that, for so long, I thought being someone people looked up to, someone people respected as a higher power, or a higher authority, was just people being praised and worshipped and flattered and they never had to lift a finger for anything, ever,” he says, “But what I was doing, and what I had to do and what I felt like I should do was help protect them, just like they were all trying to protect their reef and school too.”

Kanaya gets it, suddenly. Responsibility. He’d learned responsibility. And learning that always opened up pathways to so many things.

“And just because I was technically capable of more things that the fishes didn’t change a thing. I still had to fight in the war. I still got hurt. They still cared about me like they would any other member of the school. I was part of the school,” he says, “And then I met Roxy and Davesprite, and they were patient with me, even though they shouldn’t have been. Roxy kept – kept trying to talk to me even though I never wanted to talk to her.”

There’s tears at the corners of his eyes now, and he wipes at them furiously.

“I wasn’t even really a god, or a prince, at the end of it all, back at the reef. Just another part of the school who had claws and was significantly bigger than everyone else,” he says, “And I wasn’t a prince or a god back at Alternia for having violet blood either.”

“And you had no right to hurt anyone.”

“No, I didn’t.” He sighs again. “I just don’t want to lose everyone I have now. I promised myself I wouldn’t. And then I fucked up. Again. Because I never know how to control my temper.”

Kanaya looks at him. Really looks at him. At his baggy hoodie and the dark shapes under his eyes, and the small wounds on his hands from how he’s broken his skin from picking at it. He’s a tired boy, not an entitled, violent, megalomaniac anymore. He’s learned, and has been trying, and is still trying.

He stills when she reaches out and pats his head, gently smoothing out his hair.

“You’ve grown.”

Eridan breaks. He brings his hands to his face, furiously wiping his tears away as he starts to sob. Kanaya says nothing, only wraps her arms around him, and listens to him cry.
My internet died (again, sigh) so this was slightly late, but here we are...I tried to write action and instead got therapy wow.
So.

Sleeping was a mistake.

Which, Karkat already knows since he’s been avoiding that for more than one reason lately, but he still fell asleep and none of the assholes he bunks with in this overcompensating tower thought it would be a good idea to wake him up, so he has to register all the bullshit that’s happening in one go.

Which, by the way, is not good for anyone’s psyche. Especially not when they’ve just woken up from a dead sleep.

He pinches the bridge of his nose, huffs, and then decides to forcibly yank on his new hoodie’s drawstrings when that doesn’t satisfy him.

“And you decided not to get me up when this was happening…” He makes a gesture with his hand, right as he says, “Why?”

“You needed the rest,” Davesprite says.

The elegant hand gesture quickly turns into his middle finger stuck up.

“And you needed the sleep, Kar,” Roxy says, patting his shoulder softly as she passes by the back of the couch, having just come from the kitchen. She places a plate of something Karkat’s still trying to remember the name of beside him before sitting on the loveseat adjacent to him. “You haven’t had enough sleep and everyone needs to be in top shape for this mission.”

“Right,” he says. Mission. There was a mission. They needed to go to the hospital, and he needed to help someone named Cecil who was infected with a bloodleech. Dave was also in that hospital in a coma, last he’d heard. And he’s probably going to have to help with breaking out two more people –

He rubs his eyes with the heels of his palms, groaning.

He shouldn’t have slept.

“One at a time, champ,” he hears Stark say.

“How much time do we have?” he asks.

“About an hour and a half.”

Karkat nearly jumps from his seat at that news. He knows he shouldn’t have slept but at this point, someone should have had the decency to wake him up for this when they only have an hour and a half before they needed to go to the hospital.

“Seriously?” He lowers his hands to glare at everyone in the room, and he thinks it’s a pity he can’t glare at JARVIS since he’s disembodied, and at Hal, who’s currently stuck downstairs still learning how to move his arms and hands. “And you expect me not to panic.”

“There’s nothing to panic about,” Stark says, raising his hands and nearly swatting Eridan on the
back of the head from how fast he moves. “It’ll be simple, we’ll take care of the rest.”

“You’re trying to calm me down and it’s not working,” Karkat says, breathes in and then lets it out in a sigh.

He focuses on a spot on the carpet, trying to will it to burn, but it doesn’t, not that he expected it to. Everyone is thankfully just waiting for him to clear his head and calm himself down, since he doesn’t seem to be receptive to any attempt to appease his nervousness right now.

He thinks it’s justified.

He’s about to go on a trip in which he’s supposed to be the only option in saving someone’s life.

He’s done the leader schtick before, and in fact fought tooth and claw for it, and still technically didn’t get it since he never got to do any leading, so for him to suddenly have the spotlight actually on him feels like he’s being thrown in one of those gladiator rings he’s seen in a few human movies so far.

Exactly like those gladiators: small, terrified – seemingly fully armed until the beast he’s supposed to take down comes slinking out the other side of the iron gate, and he finds what he’s been given is the equivalent of a toothpick, when faced against a force of destruction condensed into the form of something on four furry legs.

Everything is a lot more terrifying when it stops being imaginary.

He takes in a deep breath, and tries to put his focus on something else.

There is someone out there named Cecil who’s got some disgusting worm latched onto their soul or whatever, or their very blood, because some guy who couldn’t mind his own business decided this would be a good idea. This person named Cecil only has him as his last hope against this infection, and in fact, this Cecil and their friends might not know they’re infected and would suffer a freak death if Karkat decided not to go to the hospital to help.

And he can’t let that happen.

Anxiety be damned, there is a life at stake.

“Karkat?” Kanaya asks.

“Yeah,” he says, making sure his focus stays on this motivation he’s pulled up to the forefront of his mind for himself.

Life over anxiety. To help over giving in to cowardice.

“I’m fine. Let’s do this.”

“I don’t understand why he’s still not awake,” Rose says.

It’s been about five hours since Dave’s started stirring, and in that time, the staff have been called to check up on him, and at first, everything had seemed promising. “He’ll be waking up soon,” they’d told them, and when Dave started to quiet down, they’d been told that was normal too, as he was
probably still exhausted from constantly being in and out of surgery, but was dreaming, and that was probably what had made him stir, which is a good sign, because it means everything’s okay and everything’s normal.

Rose had cried out of relief, a bit, and Kevin had squeezed her shoulder in comfort and assurance, two children who both have brothers who’ve fought through something that would have caused immeasurable grief, finding solace and strength in the knowledge that they are not alone.

John and Jade had been ecstatic and had run off to find the others to tell them the news, and Dave’s hospital room had been crowded, everyone waiting for something to happen, until the staff declared that Dave had gone back to sleep, and that they should all rest and perhaps not attempt to fit in the tiny room through sheer force of stubbornness.

Rose had agreed to rest. Jade had gone out to get everyone food. John had gone back to Cecil’s room to make sure Khoshekh and Wilson (who were still hiding out and refusing to leave, and Loki had attempted to skywalk them home but Khoshekh had scratched him and made a show of sitting on Cecil’s lap and slow blinking at him like he’s supposed to understand what that means – and he does, he’s not stupid, but still, the scratching was unnecessary) are alright.

Loki had slept, as had everyone else.

And then Dave started to stir again.

Rose had woken up immediately, and she’d woken up with a new energy in her eyes, the kind that comes with a renewed hope, and Dave started mumbling like one would during a particularly bad dream, but the doctors did say he was just dreaming, so this was normal. And Rose had just squeezed his hand, and Loki had woken up to her looking at her brother, just waiting for him to open his eyes and say he had a nightmare.

Until, of course, he started screaming.

“What’s wrong with him?” Rose had asked, after shaking him awake hadn’t worked, nor had slapping him, and the nurses actually had to restrain him because he had started scratching at his own skin that he’d already made deep gashes on his forearms, which are thankfully healing at regular godtier rate.

Dave had screamed, had cried, and his heart rate had spiked so much that Loki had illogically expected the heart monitor to break from how loudly it was wailing. His pupils were dilated, and his breaths were coming in short, but he was not waking up.

“That’s not a seizure,” John had muttered when one of the doctors listed that out as a possible cause of Dave’s sudden fit, after about an hour of people trying to get him to stay down and stay still, and shot him with several syringes of sedatives. “You can’t tell me that’s any form of seizure.”

The staff, sadly, hadn’t had any other explanation for it.

Rose had agreed when they said they were going to do tests on him, and it’s been about two hours since then, although they’re still scheduled to do an MRI on him tomorrow. Everyone’s tears have been exhausted, Jade has held her brother so tight while she cried on his shoulder, and Elizabeth has tried to get the others distracted from the current situation as ruminating on it isn’t going to do any of them any good.

So now, Loki stands, right beside Rose, while she stares at her brother, who is finally back to being peacefully asleep.
She’s holding his hand again, squeezing gently, sometimes tracing the thin scars all over his palms and the puckered up flesh on his knuckles, injuries from a childhood of ruthless, abusive, training.

“I don’t know,” he says. “I don’t know enough about human physiology, at least, not enough experience, to be able to tell.”

“It’s not a seizure,” Rose says. “John’s right. It’s not a seizure.”

“I don’t think the doctors know exactly what happened with Dave,” he says.

“We shouldn’t tell them,” she says, turning to him. “It’s...”

“A complicated matter, I know,” he says. “Do you think it’s that game of yours?”

Rose presses her lips to a thin line. “I don’t know. It may very well be,” she says, “But we’ve never encountered...whatever it was that possessed Cecil.” She turns Dave’s hand over and traces the ridges of his palm idly. “Whatever it was, it was something new. And the horrorterrors hate it.”

“The horrorterrors are creatures of old in this game, yes?”

“Yes,” she says, “You sensed them, before. I got tangled with them when I was angry at Jack Noir for killing my mother.”

“Ah,” he says, a memory coming up at the mention of that. “And it’s been a long while since you’ve encountered them again, yes?”

“Yes.”

“I see,” he says, “Whatever we’re dealing with, we’re going to have to do a lot of research on it, that’s for sure.”

“I can – I can maybe try to ask,” she says, “The horrorterrors, I mean. I can try to ask them what the thing they hate is, and why it’s after us.”

Loki nods. “That seems to be all we have at the moment. I don’t know if I want to press Cecil for answers right now when he’s just been possessed.”

Rose laughs, harsh and unamused. “Possession tends to leave you a little off-kilter, sometimes,” she says. “It makes you feel – I don’t know the right word for it. Used? Robbed? Made to feel as if the walls you’ve carefully built were made for nothing since someone can just destroy them in a completely new way you weren’t expecting and you’re left asking why this happened and why it had to. And it feels unfair.”

In another life, perhaps Loki would have had something to say to this. Perhaps he would have put a hand on her shoulder in solidarity, and Rose would know he meant, I know how you feel, and she’d look up to green eyes that might have been blue, at one point, when he wasn’t himself, when he knew exactly what she meant, about possession leaving you feel like everything you’ve strived for in order to protect the very core of you, your identity, was all for naught.

But this is not that life, and so Loki simply stays quiet and listens.

“But after, it also just makes you feel like something’s wrong,” she says, “Like, because you’ve gotten used to the brief time where something was there and taking up so much space that it feels like it was trying to push your soul out of its rightful place, you start to think there’s something there that’s missing. It takes something, I think. I don’t know what.”
“That doesn’t sound pleasant.”

Rose laughs again. “It’s not.”

Loki looks at Dave, shoulders slowly dropping in defeat. “I – Neither of them deserved this.”

“None of us did,” Rose says, “It’s unfair.”

“It always is.”

Rose snorts. “Yeah – yeah, it always is. I suppose all we can really do is just power through it, or fix it, if we can.”

“I hope we can,” Loki says. He watches the rise and fall of Dave’s chest, the skin in his forearm where he’d scratched deep enough to draw blood and scrape muscle under his fingernails earlier, and thinks, that might be too much to ask for but it shouldn’t be.

Because it is unfair.

Because they’re just children, sitting in a hospital room, in a world that’s not their own, trying to rebuild their lives, only to have it torn away from them when all they wanted was peace.

Rose sighs beside him.

“He’s a strong boy,” Loki tells her. “He’ll pull through.”

“I know,” Rose says, patting her brother’s hand lightly. “I know he is. He’s been through a lot and he’s still here. Whatever’s in his head right now, he’s fighting it.” She’s not looking at him when she says this, and when Loki turns to her, it looks like she’s not staring at anything in particular at all, too deep in her own head, trying to assure herself. “All we have to do is believe in him and wait.”

Loki looks at Dave, at his sleeping form, and he feels an idea kick at him, something he hasn’t done in a while and might be a little too much, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

“I can try to see what’s wrong with his mind,” he offers.

Rose looks up at him.

“I understand it’s a breach in privacy,” he says, “But if there’s any chance of him waking up from me interfering with what’s going on – it’s not a seizure, you’re right; I don’t think it’s any human ailment at all – then I think it’s worth a shot.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“It’s certainly delicate work,” he says, “I have to do it carefully, and I have to not be disturbed – minds are fragile.”

Rose stares at him for a good thirty seconds, before letting go of Dave’s hand and hopping off the stool she’s on.

“I trust you,” she says, and goes to the door to lock it, and to close the blinds on the nearby window.

Loki takes his place on the other side of Dave’s bed, and waits for Rose to sit back across him, as if judging the outcome of what he’s still yet to do.

“Let’s hope that’ll be enough,” he says, and closes his eyes as he puts a hand on Dave’s forehead.
Rose isn’t answering. Again.

Steve puts the phone back into his pocket and sighs.

“No luck?” Tony asks.

“No,” Steve says. He ducks his head a little and stares at the red light on the post ahead of them, before leaning back on his seat and sighing. “She’s probably busy again.”

“Guess we really are paying her a surprise visit,” Tony mumbles, and then turns to the group in the backseats, mercifully not pressed together even despite Davesprite at the very back attempting to winch in his wings as best as he can since Tony’s had the foresight to rent a van.

Steve thinks about him being a soccer mom and tries not to snicker.

“Who here knows Rose?” Tony asks. Everyone’s hands go up. “Oh, at least we won’t be worrying about her thinking you’re all strangers. Let’s see we got - ” He points to Kanaya, “ - girlfriend,” to Roxy, “ - ectobiological mother,” to Karkat, “ - brother’s boyfriend,” he points to Davesprite and then pauses. “You’re the brother, right?”

“I’m another version of her brother. I’m from another timeline.”

“Okay, I’m not going to think about that too hard because I’m going to get pissed off,” he says, “But weird, cross-dimension brother and uh, you…Eri?”

“We talked on Trollian, and don’t call me that,” Eridan says.

“Hal says he should be counted even though he doesn’t have a hand to raise right now,” Roxy says, reading off the glasses on her face. “He’s her uncle.”

“Does she know she has an uncle?” Tony asks.

“Hal says they’ll cross that bridge when they get to it, but he’s happy to have a human niece,” she says.

Tony laughs.

“Are we really just walking in there,” Karkat says, fiddling with the drawstrings of his hoodie. “Aren’t there people looking for us?”

“That’s what the hoodie’s for,” Tony says, “And that’s why Roxy’s coming with you.”

“And us?” Kanaya asks.

“In the car – we’ll tell the others to go down to the parking lot, since there’s less people there and less cameras, but we can’t all march into the hospital without the possibility of being seen, even with Roxy’s – what do you do again?”

“I can take the void and put it over things, or living beings, sometimes,” Roxy says, “I haven’t had that much practice lately.”
“Yeah, that. You don’t become intangible, right?”

“No.”

“Yeah, at this hour, the hospital’s going to have at least enough people we’d bump into if we’re not careful,” Tony says.

“So just me and Roxy upstairs with you,” Karkat says.

“Yeah,” Tony says. He turns back to face the dashboard and put the car in motion when the light ahead turns green again. “It’ll be fine, kid, we’ll be there with you.”

Karkat says nothing, only turns to look out the window, taking advantage of the fact that it’s tinted and no one who doesn’t know what to look for is going to notice him.

Steve tries Rose’s number again. The tinny recorded voice says the line is unavailable at the moment.

“Is there any particular reason a number wouldn’t be picked up?” Kanaya asks, worry lacing her tone.

Steve fidgets with his phone in his hands. “There’s a possibility that her phone battery might have died because she’d forgotten to charge it,” he says, “Or, she has important business to attend to, and she can’t answer right now. But last I checked in, she’s fine, and there’s been no major news about any attacks on the hospital again, so she should be fine.”

He sees Kanaya nod on the rearview mirror, trying to take in the explanation.

“Haven’t you been calling Jade?” Karkat asks.

“Not as often as I should have – her phone line’s busy too, and she’s texted a few times when she notices the missed calls, but she’s also been forgetting to charge her phone or forgetting it around the hospital rooms from the stress,” Steve says.

“Have you texted her today?” Karkat asks.

“Not yet,” Steve says, “You thinking we should tell her?”

Karkat turns to Kanaya, and she lifts a shoulder carefully.

“We might as well,” she says, “She’s the only other member of the Safehouse you have a direct line to, right?”

“Yeah,” he says.

“She might be able to pass on a message, if you can contact her,” Eridan says, “Calls first, since we still are worried about stuff getting tracked. If she doesn’t pick up until we get to the hospital, you might have to text them both.”

“Risky,” Tony says.

“We have nothing else.”

“I mean, we’re just going to show up at the hospital anyway, why bother texting?” Roxy asks. “We can let Steve go upstairs and say we’re here if no one picks up when we get to the hospital.”

Eridan pauses. Then, “That can work.”
Steve scrolls through his contacts and tries to find Jade’s number anyway.

For half a minute, all he gets is her ringtone, and he’s about to end the call for a bit and try again, when he hears a click.

“Hello, Steve?”

The surprised look on his face must be obvious, because Kanaya asks, “She picked up?”

“She did,” he says, softly, holding the phone away from him. He puts it back by his ear right after.

“Hey, Jade.”

“What’s up? I’m at the Safehouse right now, I’m getting everyone a change of clothes.”

Beside him, Tony mouths, ‘put her on loudspeaker’.

Steve mouths back, ‘everyone needs to be quiet then.’

Tony turns to the backseat as quickly as he can to hiss out, “Everyone be quiet!” and makes a slicing motion with his palm facedown and flat towards the ground, at which Eridan gives him an unamused look since none of them were even making noise in the first place.

Steve puts the call on loudspeak.

“How’s everyone at the hospital?” he asks.

“We’re – we’re doing well,” Jade says, and Steve notices everyone in the back freeze at the sound of her voice. He doesn’t know how long it’s been since they’ve heard it. “You know Cecil’s awake. He’s been doing well, and he’s been told that he’s going have to spend a few more weeks at the hospital, and then he’ll have to go to therapy to relearn how to eat and how to talk. He’s fine, overall.”

“That’s good news,” Steve says, breathing a little easily. “Dave?”

Jade doesn’t answer right away.

Karkat meets Steve’s eyes in the rearview mirror.

“He’s actually started stirring,” Jade says.

“He’s woken up?”

“...no.”

Steve pauses. Roxy looks away.

“What?”

“He’s started stirring, and we thought he was going to wake up,” Jade says, “He didn’t. He just kept thrashing and hurting himself.”

Karkat nearly says something and Eridan has to reach across past Roxy and Kanaya to slap a hand over his mouth.

“Did the doctors say what was wrong?”
“I remember one of them said it might have been a seizure,” she says, “Or a...very vivid nightmare, whichever. But at one point, they had to hold him down because he kept scratching himself.”

Davesprite rests his head on the back of the middle row seat.

“How bad was it?” Steve asked.

“Very,” she says, “They’re going to do some tests on him, just to be sure.”

“And he really still hasn’t woken up?” Steve asks, “Rose hasn’t called you to tell you if he has?”

“No, she hasn’t,” Jade says, “It’s been – it’s been tough for her. If I’m a mess right now, she has it worse. He’s her brother. She’s good at keeping herself together, but even the stress from that is...”

She trails off. Steve lets the silence go on for a few seconds.

“Yeah,” he says, “It’s never easy.”

Jade sighs, over the line.

Tony lets the car slow down as they reach near a turn. Steve raises an eyebrow, and then looks at the road when Tony points to it.

“Never is. I just hope he wakes up, soon,” she says. There’s noises from her end, probably from the packing. “Anyway, what did you call for, Steve? Just checking in?”

“Yeah, just checking in,” he says. “Making sure you and your friends are alright.”

“We’re okay. We’ll get through this. Dave’ll wake up.”

Tony raises an eyebrow and taps his wrist. Time is of the essence. Steve looks at the road again.

They can turn and floor it and go back to the Safehouse to pick Jade up, or they can go straight to the hospital.

Steve looks at the backseat.

“He will, he’s a strong kid,” he says, a little absentmindedly as he’s calculating if they’d fit one more person in the car.

Jade can probably shrink everyone else down to make room for her.

“Also, uh, I’m actually with Tony and we’re on our way to the hospital right now – we can pick you up and give you a ride, if you want.”

Jade doesn’t answer right away, and then she laughs.

“Steve, I can teleport.”

He throws Tony a look back and Tony shrugs, mouthing, ‘I tried’.

He has a point with where he’s going with this though, so Steve continues on.

“Yeah, but maybe a regular car ride would ease your mind a little,” he says, “Also, I’ll be honest, we have some friends who want to talk to you.”

Her pause is a bit more wary this time. Tony turns and floors the engine, trying to weave through the
traffic as best as he can. In the backseat, Karkat hits the car door, squished into place by Kanaya, Roxy and Eridan. Davesprite mutters a little ‘ow’ when his wing gets pinned against the door when he hits it from his seat.

“Who?”

“Not S.H.I.E.L.D., I promise.”

“Really building the suspense, huh, Steve?”

He laughs. “I just think it’ll be a nice surprise, especially with what’s going on right now.”

“Mm,” Jade says. Tony nearly clips a car overtaking it and there’s a loud honk. Steve winces, but he just hears Jade laugh. “Are you guys okay there – also, do you have dogs for me to meet?”

“Maybe,” he says.

Tony snickers.

“Is that Mister Stark I hear?”

“Yeah, it is, good morning, kid.” Tony says.

“Good morning, Mister Stark. How’s traffic?”

“Not too awful, but awful enough when you’re in a hurry,” he says, “Really though, just wait for us at the entrance of your building. We’ll pick you up.”

“Do you even know where my building is?”

“Who doesn’t,” he says, “I haven’t visited it yet, but I know where it is and I know this city like the back of my hand.”

“Fair enough,” Jade says, “They better be really good dogs or I’m going to teleport to the Safehouse and leave you two on the porch.”

“Deal,” Tony says.

Steve ends the call, amused, while Tony just grins at him.

“Hey, your fault for coming up with an impromptu surprise,” Tony says, “You guys alright back there?”

“No,” Karkat says, straightening his hoodie indignantly, like he even likes it. “Do you have to drive this fast?”

“We have a friend of yours to pick up,” Tony says, “What better way to make an entrance than to have her open the door and we’re already there?”

“Is it worth getting flattened,” Karkat snipes, but without any real heat in his words. Beside him, the rest of the team is trying to arrange themselves, sending Tony dirty looks for the reckless driving.

“You all don’t seem too excited,” he says, and then lets out a laugh.

“Well, we’re too mad at you to be properly excited,” Eridan says.
“I’m nervous, if it counts,” Roxy says, “I’ve never properly met Jade before.”

“God, this is going to be a mess,” Davesprite says.

Karkat looks like he’s going to say something, and then he just puts his face in his hands and lets out a long, slow breath.

“Very nervous, huh?” Tony asks.

“Yes,” he says. “I think we all are.”

And they are. In the time it takes Tony to drive to the Safehouse, everyone slowly devolves from calm and great at hiding their anxiety to practically vibrating in their seats, with Roxy trying to check the houses they pass by every now and then, Eridan fidgeting with his sleeves, Kanaya crossing and uncrossing her arms, and Karkat chewing on the strings of his hoodie. Davesprite, in the back, keeps rearranging his wings. Steve doesn’t know what’s going on with Hal, though, since all he is right now is a pair of glasses.

“Look at it this way,” Tony says, “When you get there, hide your nervousness by dishing out a one-liner from something you just saw.”

“That doesn’t help, Stark,” Karkat says.

Roxy frowns as she spots the houses in this neighborhood. “This place looks familiar.”

“We might have been here before,” Eridan says.

Up ahead, Steve can see the Safehouse building. He points to it, and even he notices that he feels nervousness and excitement mixing in his gut right now.

“Right here,” he says.

Time seems to slow as Tony pulls up to the curb and parks the car.

Nothing happens, at first. Everyone just stares at the building, and Steve, as if he’s waiting for something and forgetting he has to get out, just does the same thing.

And then it hits him that he has to get out and maybe ring the doorbell, at the same time Eridan and Roxy try to say something, and right at that moment, the Safehouse’s front door opens to reveal Jade carrying several bags that look like she’s shrunk them and their contents down for easier carrying.

Time slows, again, and Steve thinks, waits, watches for someone to do something but none of the kids are talking and Jade has spotted the car and -

Davesprite swings the door of the backseat open.

“Get in, loser, we’re going leech hunting.”

Chapter End Notes

IT'S CHRISTMAS EVE (HERE)
I'm gonna try to do an update bomb, but I have too many parties to attend to, so uh.
moved and under construction:
tumblr writing: inkteacup
Jade stares at them for exactly two seconds before she actually drops her bags. And then it takes her five seconds more to open her mouth, close it, and then frown and tilt her head like she’s not quite sure about what she’s seeing. She takes seven more as she turns back to the closed door behind her, and then at the car, blinking too many times, before she looks down and purses her lips together as she aligns her thoughts.

It’s not like it’s an hour, but it feels like it, and Davesprite hopes his nervousness doesn’t show behind his aviators. The entire car is silent, and no one else has opened a door.

Jade fishes out her phone and dials something. Steve’s phone rings, and Jade’s dog ears appear to pick it up, flicking up, and she glances at the front of the car. She presses the end call button, and turns to Dave, looking him in the eye. She can probably see it from their glow.

“Dave?”

Davesprite tries not to miss a beat. “Sprite, but Roxy does insist on calling me that.”

“Wh – Roxy?” Familiarity seems to register on her face, and he wonders if Rose has told her anything about their ectobiological mother. “What are you – how are you – is that really you?”

“Yes, flesh and feathers, one hundred percent Davesprite,” he says. “I can’t really get out this car, though, because – you know, no one’s really seen me around town, I’m a stranger, and there’s something about mutants going missing lately.”

Jade’s ears flatten back for a second, and then she nods. “Right. Right, of course, I - ” She picks up the bags, and as she does, Davesprite sees that she’s still a little dazed, although then she runs down the steps of the porch and looks like she’s about to vault herself at him, but then she skids to a stop in front of him and frowns.

He tries not to, but it’s hard, when something feels like it’s being tugged in his chest. “Is something wrong?”

Jade holds out her hand, slowly, like she’s testing for something, and then waves it from side to side, and looks satisfied when her hand hits the car door’s frame.

“What is it?” Davesprite asks.

“Checking.”

“For if we’re rigged?”

“For if you’re real,” Jade says, ears flat. “Not that I’d recognize if this was something that wasn’t since I’ve never had to face anything illusionary so far.”

“But it’s a possibility?” Stark asks, turning in his seat. Jade actually sticks her head in the car a little to see everyone else.

Steve sends her a little wave. Stark grins. Everyone else just awkwardly watches as she looks at all
of them, slowly, recognition dawning once she sees Roxy.

“You look just like her,” she says.

“You look like Janey if she grew out her hair, oh my god,” Roxy says.

Jade grins, practically vibrating in excitement as she looks at everyone, and then Davesprite. “How did you guys even get here?”

“We just got dumped here,” Karkat says.

Jade pauses. Her ears flick back, alert to danger. “Do you remember?”

“None of us except Karkat do,” Roxy says, pointing to him. “For some reason whatever memory spell they put on him didn’t work.”

“We’re lucky it didn’t,” Eridan says. “We don’t know how to use this information, of course, since we’re missing all the pieces, but knowing things. That’s useful.”

“You know who brought us here?”

“I might, I don’t know their name,” Karkat says. “But I’d be able to recognize them if I did see them.”

“That’s – that’s great. That’s actually good news, I -” Jade takes time to think as her words are tumbling all over each other in her excitement. “Is everyone else just hiding where you’re staying, or…?”

There’s a small pause. Jade deflates a little, expression falling.

“It’s just us,” Davesprite says.

She nods, determined, already building up her resolve mentally from what she has at hand. Her friends are here. There’s people here. Everyone else is here. Davesprite smiles fondly as he watches her expression lift again from her just picking herself up by the bootstraps and recognizing the situation for what it is – not a complete win, but a win nonetheless.

“If you’re here, that means everyone else can be too,” she says, “It’s possible. We didn’t even know we were – wait, where were you?”

“We were on an island,” Roxy points to herself, Eridan, Hal (still on her nose) and Davesprite. “These two were just here when we found them.”

“In New York?” Jade asks.

“Yeah.”

She turns to Kanaya. “Have you been in New York the whole time?”

“Yes,” Kanaya says.

“Oh my god.” Jade brings a hand up, even as the miniaturized bags swing back and forth, to push up her glasses, realization once again dawning on her. “You were in New York the whole time. How long has it been?”

“A couple of months, definitely,” Karkat says.
“How did you find them if you were on an island?”

“We found a video online,” Eridan says, “Well, Hal did. It was about an attack in New York.”

Jade’s ears flick up for a moment, and then relax down a bit. “Which one?”

Roxy scrunches up her nose and removes Hal from her face. He’s probably blasting text too fast. Jade stares a second too long, Roxy’s resemblance to Rose probably hitting her full force now that she’s not in shades.

“There was one with missing missiles, and another one of Karkat,” Davesprite says.

“Oh.” Jade frowns a bit. “I know about the missiles, but I’m not sure about Karkat – I haven’t found anything about him on the internet.”

“The video on Karkat was from Hal’s friend,” Eridan says, “He managed to ask them not to upload it before the media snatched it up. It was during an attack. During the one Rogers saved him in.”

“Wait, you saved Karkat?” Jade asks.

“I did. I didn’t know you knew each other, though.”

“That’s – that’s fair,” Jade says, “But oh my god, you were in New York for months, and we didn’t know...”

“We didn’t either. We only heard because of the hospital attack,” Karkat says.

“I...yeah, that was a bit of a mess.” Jade reaches up to coil a lock of her hair around a finger, fidgeting. “It wasn’t easy for everyone and Mr. Stark and Steve barely got the press off our backs. We were tired enough as it is.” She looks to Steve as she remembers. “Wait, didn’t you say you were headed to the hospital?”

“Yeah,” Steve says, “Everyone wants to meet the rest of the crew.”

Jade beams, slowly, her smile just spreading on her face like a sun rising until she’s bouncing around in excitement.

“Yes!” She punches a fist up the sky as she jumps. “Yes, yes – I can teleport everyone there if you want, we can get there faster, I - ”

“Hang on, slow down, kid,” Stark says, “We’d love the offer, and honestly, I would love to try teleportation, but we’re kind of also avoiding being seen by traffic cams. You know that missile vid went viral, right, and if you were seen snapping the car out of here - ”

“I’d be called in for questioning,” Jade says, “Even if I wasn’t the one who made the missiles disappear, I’d be a lead.”

“And the kicker is, you are the one who made them disappear.”

Jade laughs into her hand at that, and then shrugs. “I wouldn’t know, Mr. Stark.”

Stark grins.

“Would you be okay if we offered to give you a lift again?” Steve asks.

“Absolutely,” she says, and Davesprite scoots over and winches his wings in so Jade can have room
to climb inside. When it proves to be difficult considering his wingspan, Jade laughs.

“Do you mind if I shrink you?”

“Honestly, not at all, it’s cramped here,” Davesprite says.

Jade climbs into the car and tries to sit on the floor and close the car door behind her, folding in while Davesprite lifts his ghost tail up so there’s more room for her. She sticks out her forefingers and thumbs, positioning them so they form the corners of an imaginary rectangle, and Davesprite sees green light wrap around him at the edges of his vision.

He sees the ceiling of the car start to move away from him, and he looks up, trying not to panic, as it continues to do so in time with Jade bringing her fingers closer together. He feels himself lift from the seat of the car, feels the pressure around his wings cease, and sees Jade slowly grow along with the rest of the car around him – only, he knows, logically, that he’s shrunk.

Davesprite shifts and shakes his wings. At least they’re not bunched up anymore.

“Oh my god,” Tony Stark says.

Jade takes a seat beside where Davesprite is, only since he’s much smaller, she doesn’t have to worry about a tight fit. Davesprite flies over the armrest of the seat in front of him and leans his arms on top of it.

Roxy taps his head. “Cute.”

“I can’t believe I spent months calculating how to shrink things like during the missile incident, and you can just do it like that,” Stark says.

Jade laughs, and then so does Steve, and after a few minutes, the entire car has gone into a laughing fit. Davesprite lets himself smile, because in this moment, for just a while, the urgency of things isn’t felt, and emergency isn’t making their hearts all race.

For just a little while, everything is okay.


Rose turns her phone off and sets it on the desk beside Dave’s bed, sighing.

She wants to answer Steve, she really does, but at the same time – there’s a lot on her mind right now, and right now, she’s not in any mood to answer any calls, not in any mood to be answering anyone save Dave, once he wakes up, because he will, but for now, she just wants quiet, because she feels like if she gets anything less than that, she’s going to start clawing at her own face.

The room, at least, is quiet. Dave is asleep, Loki is concentrating on whatever’s going on in Dave’s head right now, and she – she’s waiting. She’s waiting for something, anything, to happen, although she thinks she’ll take the silence to her brother suddenly screaming and hurting himself again.

Beside Dave, Loki frowns. Rose tenses, expecting him to open his eyes and tell her something, but he doesn’t, instead just continues, silent, moving his head like he’s looking at something.

Rose wants to ask what it is. She doesn’t. She can’t break his concentration when he’s dealing with something as delicate as her brother’s mind.

Instead she quietly hops off her chair and goes to the window to check if there’s anyone outside.
There’s not, there’s just the empty hallway. Everyone else is probably either conked out sleeping in Cecil’s room, exhausted from the frustration of everything that’s happened so far, or doing errands, since they can’t stay in the hospital forever without changing clothes or getting actual decent meals.

It’s just quiet.

Thank Skaia for small blessings, she supposes.

She sighs and turns back to the bed, towards her brother, and then she sees the world tilt, for just a second, her vision spinning, and she staggers, trying to steady herself on the wall and instead hitting her palm on the glass. She hears the muffled noise and thinks her hand print is just stamped there now, like some ugly trope from every B-rated horror movie that’s ever played in every cinema.

When she looks at the glass, there’s no red smear. Of course there’s not. She wasn’t bleeding before that.

She pinches the bridge of her nose and sighs softly. She needs sleep. She’s constantly exhausted these days that the fatigue of her mind if catching up to her body.

Rose leans back on the wall and sits, knees to her chest, as she stares at the floor and listens to her brother’s heartbeat monitor beeps.

She’s so tired.

- “Dave!”

Loki doesn’t like dreamwalking.

For one, it’s a mess going into someone’s mind while they’re in REM, and it’s foolish to expect you’re not going to find anything questionable in there, because it’s a dream. It’s a lot better to sift through someone’s memories, at least the raw ones and not the ones that are recalls of recalls of recalls or false memories, but it takes practice to be able to tell which is which because psychology is complex and fascinating, but he’s had enough practice in the last millenia or so, so he thinks he should at least be decent at this. Reviewing actual present thought is actually just being in someone’s head, and that, well, he’s tended to avoid since childhood, and it’s also quite difficult, even for sorcerers who have had millenia and millenia of experience.

This, whatever this is, isn’t like any of the three.

It’s not a memory, it’s not watching events in real time through someone else’s eyes, and it sure as hell isn’t a dream.

At least, he’s sure it isn’t. He hopes it isn’t.

“Dave!”

He’s in a battlefield – the ground is slick and slippery with so much blood that he’s almost slipped more than a few times, and in the times his feet have scraped and wiped at the smooth floor, he notices that the ground has a pattern. There’s light patches and black patches, a bit like a chessboard, but everything is so coated in blood he can’t be sure until he actually wipes at least a square foot of it.

There’s bodies everywhere, and they look odd. Humanoid, but not any species he’s seen before.
Most of them are in ribbons – intestines hanging out and half-shredded from a torso that looks like it was ripped apart by pulling in two directions; limbs chopped up into pieces; crushed heads and bodies split right in the middle; smeared meat and broken bones on the ground.

The sky above is red and flickering, like a television that can’t quite decide what channel it wants to tune into, and Loki tries to run past the battlefield when it’s light enough, but the flickering is blinding him and he hates it.

“Where are you?” he mumbles to himself, and then has to look up in horror when he hears yells of panic, followed by a caw. This has to be the third time he’s heard this now, and he ducks down as he watches some winged creature swoop down and snatch one of the remaining soldiers still fighting on the field, several feet away from him, take it in its claws and then tear it into two pieces like it was paper before lifting up to the sky.

He watches, squinting as the sky’s flickering is making it a bit harder to, and the creature rises to being a black speck from how high up it is. Then, two shapes fall from where it is, small, turning as the wind pushes against them, and then Loki sees the two shapes get closer and closer to the ground, until they explode upon impact on the field, the two torn parts of the corpse crashing onto the ground so hard bits and pieces fly.

He stares at the remains, as much as he can in this lighting, before feeling a pricking sensation on his hand.

He turns, and tries to make out the thing clearly since the sky flickers to dark and steadies to red lighting for a second, making it hard to see, and then he lifts the hand near his face, feeling things snake around there, clinging onto his palm.

Light flashes. He sees lines of dark red around his hand, and frowns.

Blood?

The dark red lines suddenly pool to the center of his palm, bulging as seems to coalesce, and then it opens – blooms, like a carnivorous flower, peeling from the center and outward, but with way more teeth.

Loki shakes his hand rapidly to get the thing off, even as the creature hisses, and when it refuses to come off, he summons fire into his hand.

The thing bursts off of him with a shriek, and the small pieces of it he sees fall to the ground melt into the blood that’s already there.

He stares at his hand again in horror before wiping it off his shirt, even when there’s nothing there anymore, and turns and starts running again.

He’s got the soldiers to evade, the flying creatures that rip everyone to shreds, and the goddamn blood on the floor.

And he has to find Dave. He’d seen him earlier, running from something, so terrified he didn’t even notice Loki calling for him. He can call again, try to get his attention, but every time he makes a noise, the more he draws attention to himself.

Damn it.

He jumps over a corpse, rolling, before grabbing it and throwing it at someone running at him from the side, sword and shield in hand. There has to be a way of finding Dave here. The battlefield is
vast, though, and he can even see mountains in the distance, so he’s not sure how long it’s going to take for him to go everywhere to find Dave.

He can just end the battle here or at least shift its favor, but he doesn’t know if doing that will damage Dave’s psyche.

This is still his head, after all, even if it’s not a memory, or the present, or a vision of the future. It’s still his mind, but if he damages this place, he doesn’t know how far the damages will spread.

That said, it might be best to stop the battle going on, but he doesn’t have the first idea on how to do that safely.

“Come on, Dave, where are you.”

He glances to the sides, quick and alert, making sure he doesn’t trip. He’s seen Dave head in this direction earlier, so he should catch up. He should be able to, soon. Maybe this is what’s been plaguing Dave, being stuck here with no idea what to do or what to wake up from.

Because this doesn’t look like a dream. This doesn’t even feel like one. This feels like how someone would feel if they were actually just thrust into a sudden war.

He’s heard cases of this before, from practitioners of the craft who were rejected and scorned because they tend to stray from tradition. There’s a way to kill someone from the inside out, from letting their mind think they’re awake but they’re not at all, and let it think it’s dead, that it just shuts down and kills itself by stopping.

The human body is highly dependent on its brain to regulate everything, after all.

If it’s tricked into thinking it’s dead, and it stops, because that’s what dead brains and dead minds do, the body follows. It’s a silent death, and it’s a gruesome one, especially when the pain is enough it carries to physical reactions.

Loki slips, feeling the patch of ground he’s stepping on give out from under him, and as he falls, he holds his arms out on instinct, ready to catch his fall, but instead, his hands hit water.

No, not water. Blood. Red, hot blood, splashing up his face and his clothes as his hands hit it first, and with nothing solid to hold on to, he takes a dive right into the pool of blood in front of him. He clenches his eyes shut, feels himself go down, sinking, and he waits for himself to hit the bottom, but after a few seconds, it’s clear that there’s not one, so he flails and tries to go upwards, kicking his legs, swimming.

Something cold wraps around his ankle. It takes everything not to open his eyes and burn them just to try and see what’s got him. He kicks instead. It pulls down, and Loki feels the rush of the blood around him at the sudden sensation of being dragged down harshly.

- are you doing?

Loki nearly gasps for air as he feels his lungs burn. It only feels like he’s been in the pool – is it even a pool when it’s so deep – for a few seconds, but his lungs protest that it’s been minutes, and he needs to breathe, but the surface is so far up that he doesn’t think he can even make it at this point.

He kicks, again, and the thing on his ankle only drags him down faster, pulling so hard he thinks his ankle has dislocated and he lets out a muffled noise at the pain.

What are you doing?
He starts kicking furiously with his free leg at the other. Whatever has the other is clamped there and if he can just get it off, he can swim up. So he kicks, aiming blindly, his heel scraping into the side of his leg, his foot, digging in so hard he thinks he’s probably peeled off a layer of his own skin, and a few times he hits whatever’s got him, but it’s not letting go.

His chest hurts, and he feels the panic brought on by the body’s natural instinct to survive scream at him. Get away, get away; get up, breathe. But he can’t, because there’s no letting go here, and he’s going to drown.

*Loki, what are you doing?*

He wants to open his eyes. He *needs* to open his eyes. He doesn’t.

The dragging sensation abruptly stops, even when he can still feel the pressure around his ankle. Immediately after, he feels the pool ripple, feels something *screech*, and as it does, he remembers, as he’s forgotten in his relief, that he needs to go up, so he does.

He starts swimming up, frantic, but his arms and legs are tired from the lack of air and the dizziness that he’s now realizing is hitting him, but he needs to go up, if he wants to stay alive. He thrashes, swimming strokes becoming more aimless as his body’s blind panic for survival overtakes his clarity, but he’s so far underwater that no matter how hard he tries, he’s still not reaching the surface.

*Loki.*

There’s hands, on his face. He thinks they are, at least – everything here is warm – and he tries to get away, but he’s too weak to.

They hold him in place, and as he finally decides to open his eyes despite the futility of vision under a pool of blood, he hears:

- "Wake up!"

Loki sits up straight, eyes wide, gasping for air like he’s never breathed before. He snatches his hand from Dave’s forehead so he can grip the edge of the bed, as if to steady himself, and he breathes in deeply, hungrily, like a man who’s just been drowned.

Dave’s heartbeat monitor is going crazy, and Rose has already unlocked the door for the nurses to get in since they’re sure to have heard it, and she’s already pressed the call button anyway since her brother started thrashing in his bed again. Loki is staring straight at nothing, pupils blown wide in terror, chest heaving with every panicked breath he takes.

Rose doesn’t know where to look.

“Loki?” she asks, softly.

He takes a few seconds too many to look up at her, and then a bit more to register she’s actually standing there, and even then, he doesn’t relax.

Rose is about to say something, but behind her, the door opens, and the nurses flood in. They surround Dave’s bed, trying to get the boy lying flat on his back, since in his thrashing, he’s turned on his side. Rose has to step away to let them do their jobs, and even Loki has to be ushered away a bit so they can check his IV, his heartbeat monitor, see if he’s scratched himself again.
Loki stands by the wall, across Rose, and slowly, turns to the bed, like his brain is just rebooting and
taking in his surroundings. It might be the lack of oxygen, Rose thinks. Why wasn’t he breathing
earlier?

Then, she hears it, a soft groan. She turns to her brother’s bed.

She hears a gasp of air, and then Dave speaking, mumbling, and that’s all it takes for her to try to
push past the nurses, finally able to get to his side, just as he croaks out a relieved, “Oh, thank god.
Thank god.”

Dave Strider blinks up the ceiling blearily, eyes squinting at the light, but arms too tired to actually
move. Rose stares, and as she does, her brother turns to her slowly, trying to see past the afterimage
of the light to actually see her.

“Rose?”

Rose lets out a cry of triumph, and throws her arms around her brother’s shoulders as she cries,
nurses around her be damned.

Chapter End Notes

Hopefully, I'll finish cleaning up and renewing everything I need for like, personal legal
stuff and I can finally start updating this steadily...but until then, we'll have this.

moved:

writing: inkteacup
“What happened?” Dave asks, clearly still out of it since he’s letting Rose hold his face and nearly smush his cheeks together so closely that his mouth is pinched and what he’s saying is coming out as a mumble. He looks around, at the walls, at the lights over him – and he screws his eyes shut immediately at that because that’s a bad decision – and at the nurses still rechecking his heart monitor and his IV.

He frowns.

“What are my glasses?”

Rose hesitates. “Your most recent pair broke, and they had to be swept away.”

“Mr. G gave me those glasses.”

“Do you have another pair? I can get them for you if everything is too bright for you right now.”

“Sw’one in my room,” he says, and then nods to himself. “Yeah. They were Ben Stiller’s. I fixed them when the dogs broke them. They were a gift.”

A nurse laughs lightly.

“What?”

“Do you want me to go get them?” Rose asks, calling back Dave’s attention before he gets distracted.

“Please.”

“I’ll be back quick,” she says, finally letting him go, and he realizes then just how much his sister was squishing his face. He touches his cheeks.

“I’m slightly glad the anesthetic didn’t hit Cecil too badly.”

Dave turns, following the voice, and finds Loki standing by the wall, unfolding his arms as Rose goes over to him to be skywalked back to the Safehouse.

“What happened to Cecil?” he asks.

Loki blinks and turns to Rose.

“Oh...something bad then,” Dave says, and then remembers so suddenly he thinks the shock actually sobers him up from the drugs in his system.

Cecil. Right. He’d been brought to the hospital since he was burning himself out and collapsing, and crying blood like a goddamn miraculous statue; and then after a freak blackout, he’d gotten up and he wasn’t himself.

“He got possessed,” he says.
From the corner of his eye, he sees a nurse look at him curiously.

Loki steps forward. Dave notices his hand moving, two fingers pressed close while the others are folded in, and he turns his wrist counterclockwise. “Not exactly,” he says, and approaches the bed. Rose follows after him.

“The staff don’t know,” he says as he sits down, near-whispering. “And it’s imperative that they don’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because we don’t know who this thing targets,” Loki says, “And we don’t need people going into a mass panic. We, in a way, are public figures. We are who they trust to be steady and to be their shield when there are attacks. If we are being destroyed from the inside, they might risk staying out of the Safehouse and thus risk themselves.”

“We also don’t want S.H.I.E.L.D. to find an excuse to bring us in, if it ends up that this...thing – whatever it is, targets only us. That would be an excuse for them to isolate us,” Rose says, “And aside from the loss of freedom, that’ll rob the city of its only bunker.”

Dave lets the news sink in, and damn, he really might be sober, because he actually gets it, and he thinks he shouldn’t be getting it, because he’s got tubes around him and needles under his skin.

“Alright,” he says, “Sorry.” He gestures to the nurses. “What did you do?”

“Sensory glamour,” Loki says, and then reaches up to write several runes in the air, gestures quick and well-practiced before snapping his fingers. The runes burst in green sparks. “And that’s memory modification.”

“Neat,” Dave says.

Loki snorts. “Not so much for them, but for safety’s sake, we’ll have to risk it.”

He stands, and he and Rose return back to where they were earlier. Loki snaps his fingers.

“Don’t get too high on your morphine, Strider,” he says, smiling. It looks forced.

Dave plays along and leans back on his bed. “I don’t know, this feels hella nice.”

Rose laughs. Loki simply shakes his head and puts a hand on her shoulder, and they skywalk out the room in the next step.

Dave stares at the spot where they just were a few seconds ago. The nurses just let him space out, while they continue to check for his equipment for his vitals, and only talk to him for a moment to ask him how he feels, to which he just says he’s tired due to the drugs he’s on but he’s fine aside from that.

When they finally walk out and close the door behind him, he sighs, staring up at the lights for the few seconds he can before his eyes protest, light sensitivity giving him a headache.

He shuts his eyes and brings an arm up over them to block out the light, just listening to the whirring of the machines, trying to somehow focus, because he needs to sort everything out, but he feels like he’s floating and all he can feel is where he is, what’s happening, and everything that is currently around him. He supposes this is what people say about ‘being in the moment’, but of all the times he needs this, it’s not now. He needs to remember, and he needs to know what he and everyone else
might have to do.

He was hurt, and so was Cecil, although thankfully, he hasn’t heard anything alarming about the poor boy so far, but then again, he’s been awake for less than an hour. He can ask later when Rose and Loki have spread the news to everyone else that he’s awake – they’re probably going to stop by with everyone to tell them the news, so he might be able to do that soon unless the hospital suddenly declares visitors aren’t allowed – and from there they can all tackle the problem of what the hell just happened in the past few days.

Come to think of it, how long has he been asleep?

He hasn’t really been paying attention, and even now, his focus wavers.

He clicks his tongue and lowers his arm, trying to reach down and feel his torso to check for injuries as the drugs aren’t making him feel much – broken ribs, maybe an open wound since he does remember being impaled on his katana – but instead, he just stills as he takes in the darkness of the room.

The lights aren’t on. He waits for a moment, as maybe the lamp above him had just finally gone out, or maybe it’s from when he’d stared straight at the light for a bit, but nothing happens.

He feels goosebumps on his skin, and he’s suddenly cold.

Dave sits up, trying to be as alert as he can despite all the painkillers he’s on right now. He wonders if it’s going to be worth it trying to rip out the needles from his arm, and if him being godtier is going to reverse the damage.

Maybe not very worth it, in case it doesn’t and will just further injure himself.

He looks out of the glass window of his room. It’s dark there, and he can’t tell if it’s because it’s also dark outside or if it’s because the blinds are closed, but even then, he can’t see any light from the other side at least illuminating the side of the blinds that’s facing the hallway.

It feels like déjà vu, somehow.

“Shit,” he mutters, and tries to go through his sylladex; he’s dismayed to find his katana isn’t there, but that’s no surprise. He does find a gun he’s stored there all those months ago, and he hesitates.

The light above him flickers, but its light is red, and as it does, Dave sees the space around him in the small span of time that the light shines onto the room. It’s still the same room, nothing is out of place, but there’s also things there that shouldn’t be there. Dark puddles on the floor that Dave has no plan on getting near. Ashes floating around him. Something dark oozing from the corners of the ceiling and slowly running down the walls.

He feels his eyes sting badly and he blinks on reflex, his body immediately trying to get rid of the irritant, but the sensation is still there, followed by something hot on his cheeks, so he reaches up to wipe at whatever’s making its way to his chin, and his fingers come away wet with something dark staining them. In the red light, it looks nearly black.

The smell of iron makes him gag.

He starts to stand, wipes his face with the backs of his hands furiously as soon as he has both feet steady on the floor, and wipes the blood onto his sheets, disgusted. He staggers, for a moment, and as he does, he hears a laugh. He snaps his head to the other end of the room. The light is still flickering, annoying and eye-searing (not that he thinks he’s going to survive crying blood) and he can see
nothing there.

The laugh is closer, and it’s behind him.

Dave turns, arm pulled back in a ready stance for a punch, and just as he swings it, he hears the door to his room open, and then his vision is blinded by the sparks of his heart monitor as his fist crashes into it.

“What the fuck,” John Egbert says. Dave doesn’t look at him, just stares at the heart monitor he’s just smashed his hand through out of pure adrenaline. His knuckles are most likely bleeding.

“Dave, are you – someone call the nurse,” John says. There’s footsteps after, getting close to his bed to press the button there, and a few seconds later, Dave sees Mr. G and John trying to get his hand out of the busted heart monitor. They make him sit. He does.

“What?” he asks, out loud, but to no one in particular.

“We could...ask you the same thing,” Mr. G says, confused. “What happened?”

“Is this real?” Dave asks. He reaches up his cheeks. His hands are clean. “What?”

“Maybe they put him on too much anesthetic,” John says, looking up at Mr. G.

“Dave, what happened?” the man asks.

“I was...I was in my room – this room – but I don’t – I don’t think it was the hospital room.”

“What?”

“It looked different,” Dave says, “Like something out of my nightmares. Like I was still having nightmares.”

“Loki and Rose didn’t say anything about that, but I think that was probably for a more in-depth discussion in the war room,” John says, “But you’ve been having nightmares?”

“I think they were nightmares, yeah,” Dave says.

“Maybe it really is because of the anesthetic. You were having nightmares, and I think that stuff messes with your head.”

“I don’t think they cause hallucinations,” Mr. G says. “We should probably speak to the doctor about this, though.”

“Already called them,” Dave hears the pool master say.

“Thanks,” John says.

Dave just stares at his hand. Clean, bloodless. His eyes aren’t burning and there’s no blood on his face. When he lifts the sheets off his bed, they’re clean as well.

“Dave?”

He thinks he can still hear the laughter, though.

“Are you okay?”
It’s right by his ear.

“I don’t know.”

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Rose feels her phone buzz as her feet land inside the Safehouse’s lobby. She frowns and fishes it out. John is calling.

“Everything alright?” Loki asks.

“It’s John,” she says, and hits the call button. Outside, she hears a car driving down the road, so she puts a bit of distance between herself and the front door, more out of habit than to make sure it’s not too loud.

Loki gives her a small nod. “I’ll get Dave’s glasses,” he says. Rose gives him a go-ahead while he takes the call.

“John?”

“Dave just punched out his heart monitor.”

Rose pauses. “Excuse me?”

“He just punched out his heart monitor, ” John repeats. “We were just about to visit him and the first thing we saw was him punching out his heart monitor. The whole thing’s busted, his fist went right through.”

“What – what happened, why did he punch his heart monitor. Hell, why was he even standing to get to the heart monitor?”

“I don’t know. He just says he was - ” John pauses, like he’s listening to something, but Rose can’t hear it. “He says he was in this hospital room, this current one, but at the same time he wasn’t?”

She waits for him to elaborate. Thankfully, he does.

“Everything looked the same, but it also wasn’t. The lights were flickering and they were red, and he was crying blood. He keeps staring at his hands, actually,” John says, “And he says he heard someone laughing.”

Rose stills. The human brain is unfortunately limited and it’s difficult to describe in words how a voice actually sounds like until one can hear it for themself, and since Rose had been under pressure and hasn’t been sleeping too well, she’s so fatigued that she can’t exactly remember what the person who had spoken during the attack, the one who had held a gun, sounded like. She imagines Dave probably can if he’s not too out of it.

Not that it matters. She’s pretty sure it’s the same person.

“Maybe we should get out of the hospital,” Rose says.

“What?” John asks. “I mean – I can see the merits of it, but we have injured people. And injured people who actually need professional medical help. Cecil still needs therapy. We’re not sure if Dave’s injuries are going to decide to reopen again, we - ”
“I know, John,” she says, “But I don’t think the hospital is safe, considering...”

“What are you thinking?”

“The Safehouse is warded,” she says, “That, at least, we have.”

John pauses.

After a few minutes, “Maybe we should ward the hospital rooms.”

“Maybe we should – I can try to talk to Loki about it, maybe set up stronger individual protection spells,” Rose says. “I know he’s warded us for physical threats and compulsion, but – there has got to be other magic aside from that.”

She goes to find the stairs and races up them, hoping to catch Loki while John’s still on the line.

“That’s a good idea. I can tell everyone to be at the hospital – if, I mean, if you think it’s safe.”

“I’m not sure,” she says. She races down hallways and goes up flights for a few minutes, until she runs to where Dave’s room is. Loki is just closing the door.

“What is it?” he asks.

Rose puts the call on speaker.

“Dave busted out his heart monitor,” John repeats.

Loki blinks. “Excuse me?”

Rose waits while John relays the whole message again – Dave waking up and saying he was in someplace identical to the room he was in, but at the same time wasn’t; about the bleeding from the eyes, similar to Cecil; about how Dave had punched his heart monitor just as everyone got to his room.

“Rose thinks we should get out of the hospital,” John says, “And if we can’t, can we at the very least upgrade what protections we already have?”

“You said you put barriers around us. What are they for and what do they do?” Rose asks, and remembers the sight of her brother being impaled onto his own sword. “And is there anything that can bypass them?”

Loki presses his lips to a thin line as he thinks. “Runes, or, well, spells in general, depending on their origin, have different sources of power. They divert that power and push it onto an intent, and that’s what people commonly call magic,” he says. “The protection I’ve put upon you is rooted in the psyche of sentience. I will admit they might be limited because things can only be adjusted in so far as there is proof of their existence and therefore they will be taken into account in the creation of a spell, but they should work for most things that are present. Unless they are completely removed from reality and thus the magic was not created with them in mind.”

“Like radio station frequencies,” John says, “The radio only tunes in and picks up the signals that it’s configured to pick up.”

“Yes,” he says, “So if it’s not anything the spell has any ground to affect, it won’t affect it at all.”

“When you say take into account the psyche of sentience, you mean it can detect ill will, right?” Rose asks, “Unless – unless it’s a completely new thing that the spell doesn’t know how to detect
and so it just gets past.”

Loki doesn’t answer right away. After a while, he nods.

Rose grits her teeth.

“God damn it,” John hisses, although softly. Rose isn’t sure if he meant for them to hear that. He does immediately follow up with, “How many things can there be that people – what do people who make spells and magic call themselves – how many things can there be that they didn’t know existed that they couldn’t fine-tune their magic to detect and deal with them?”

“Even I know there are a lot of things out there that we do not truly know yet,” Loki says, “And that there are things that can be done to get around seiðr.”

“You didn’t know about horrorterrors,” Rose says. Her palms are damp. “How much do you know about seiðr and its uses?”

“I’d like to think nearly everything given my diligence in studying it.”

“You didn’t know about Skaia,” John says. “Maybe – maybe Skaia wasn’t even a part of this universe at all and we just brought it with us when we came here. Of course there would be no way to prepare for it.”

“The horrorterrors were livid at whatever was possessing Cecil,” Rose says, “Safe to say that whatever it was, it’s tangled with them before.”

“Just what we needed,” John says, “More game related bullshit.”

Rose says nothing. Neither does Loki. John isn’t usually like this, they both know, but – perhaps the stress of everything and finally finding peace only to have it ripped away from you again makes people bare their teeth and finally fight for what they are owed instead of repressing everything. Maybe this has been long overdue.

No, Rose knows this is long overdue.

“Even if it’s not, if all of Loki’s seiðr training can’t deal with it, it’s safe to say we don’t have any form of protection against it unless we can identify the source of this and build up the protection from there,” Rose says.

“Our nearest link to that appears to be your brother,” Loki says.

Rose nearly crushes the phone in her hand.

She takes in a deep breath and lets it out.

“I know,” she says. “And it’s going to be a bitch to deal with, but if it gets whatever is in his head to leave him alone – then fuck it, we’re going to deal with it.”

“You okay?”

“John’s not picking up,” Jade says. She leans back in her seat, ears flat on her head, disappointed.
Maybe he’s busy. She’s been trying to call his line for minutes now, but he’s not answering.

Steve, at the front seat, tries to give her an encouraging smile.

It works, at least, but that’s probably because she’s still riding the high of knowing that there’s more people from the game that are on earth than she initially thought there were.

Davesprite, on her shoulder, floats near her phone screen.

“You know what would be funny,” he says, “is if he’s been trying to call you for hours and it just happened that you were trying to call him too and that’s why the line is dead.”

Jade groans.

“That’s just the universe making everything harder for us,” the troll – Eridan was his name, Jade thinks – says.

“It always does,” Karkat says. “Can you text him?”

“I can try. It’s going to be less exciting, though,” Jade says.

“I think we can skip out on exciting for this one,” Kanaya says. She sounds nervous. Jade glances up at her, but as Kanaya’s back is to her, she doesn’t see her expression. Maybe she’s trying not to hope too much in case she’ll be disappointed.

“Maybe I should just call Rose,” she mumbles.

Kanaya’s ears flick up, though, and she turns to Jade, eyes bright, although still a little wary.

She hopes they all can hope and hope happily and freely soon. She knows what it’s like to constantly think everything’s going to be okay and to be fucked over not even a second later. She knows how exhausting it is. They’re owed small joys, at least.

She starts to hunt for Rose’s number in her contacts when her phone buzzes and she gets a notification on top of the screen.

“Oh, look at that,” Davesprite says.

“What is it?” Karkat asks.

“It’s a text from John,” Jade says. She sees Roxy turning in her seat and trying to lean over to see the text, so she taps the notif to open the message. She reads the whole thing silently, and then nearly screams and drops the phone.

Hope.

Hope without any strings attached. She wants it so badly to be that.

Even Karkat is turning around to try and see what she’s gotten since she’s silent. “Jade?”

The message reads:

“get to the hospital quick.

dave’s awake.”
“Dave’s awake,” Roxy breathes out, and then, louder, “Dave’s awake!”

Karkat quickly snatches the phone out of Jade’s hand and stares at the screen, squinting at it. “I can’t fucking read this very well, and the fonts on this thing are fucking small,” he mutters, and then after several minutes, “Oh, thank fuck.”

“Dave’s awake?” Steve asks.

“Yes!” Roxy says, punching the roof of the car and actually hitting it. She winces as she pulls back her hand and tries to shake the pain away. She sighs, leaning forwards on the top of the backrest of her seat, folding her arms and hiding her face, even with Hal’s glasses digging into her skin. She sounds like she’s about to cry, exhaustion finally catching up with her relief. “Thank god.”

The car is silent for a moment, Jade just letting the news sink into her mind, Roxy trying not to cry, Karkat trying to figure out how to type together coherent English words and everyone else giving them space to feel relief.

Kanaya puts a hand on Roxy’s shoulder and squeezes.

“He’s a strong kid,” she says.

Roxy nods, still not lifting her head. “I know,” she says, “I’m just – fuck.”

“Text back that we’ve got guests coming, maybe,” Tony suggests. “We’re close, and we might as well let the good news train keep rolling.”

“I already did,” Karkat says, a little proudly. He hands the phone back to Jade, who only laughs and switches the screen off and puts it back in her sylladex.

“I hope he’s okay,” Jade says, “What with the morphine and all.”

“I think he’ll be fine,” Davesprite says, “It won’t be his first time.”

Tony mutters something that sounds like, “Damn,” from the driver’s seat.

Jade laughs again. “Yeah,” she says, “He’s a strong kid.”

“Let’s just hope that we can get inside the hospital without any problems,” Steve says, “We’re going to have to sneak in, more or less.”

“Or we can have Roxy and Jade go up to the hospital rooms first and tell everyone we’re coming,” Eridan says.

“We still have to sneak Karkat in if the Cecil kid still hasn’t been released,” Roxy says, “That’s how hospitals work, right?”

Jade frowns. “Wait, why?” she asks, “Why is that important – why does Karkat have to get to Cecil?”

The car is silent.

Jade feels her stomach drop, but tries desperately to quiet her mind as no one says anything. They’re just trying to string their words together. They’re just trying to explain something really difficult. They’re just waiting for someone to talk. It can’t necessarily be a bad thing.

Right?
“Right,” Karkat says, “We – we forgot to tell you in all the excitement, but uh.”

Jade closes her eyes. So much for hope with no strings attached.

“Your friend’s sick,” Karkat says. She looks up and he meets her with a pitying look. “Very, very sick.”

Dave isn’t responding to the doctor. He’s just staring blankly at the floor, not even listening to the doctor as he calls his name.

John sighs and looks down at his phone, which is still trying to call Jade, but with no luck. Of course they would have to deal with this. Of course. There’s never really anything that ends up good without something awful wrapped up with it for them these days. He should have expected this.

It gets old fast though. Very fast. He thinks if he doesn’t get out of this room soon, he’s going to snap but for Dave’s sake, he’s staying.

Mrs. H is holding his hand, sitting beside him, silent. He thinks if it weren’t for her, he probably would have done something he’d regret by now. Bless her kind heart.

He sighs and exits out the dial screen to shoot Jade a text. If she’s busy, she’ll get that, at least.

“Mr. Strider?” the doctor asks again.

Dave takes so long to answer that the man looks like he’s about to give up and get out the room.

“If this was fake and all in my head and a game to get me to think this was real, you would have gotten really annoyed by now, right?” Dave asks.

John looks up, slowly, frowning in confusion. The doctor looks just as bewildered as he is.

“I imagine so, Mr. Strider, but I have a duty to my patients,” the doctor says, “It’s good to see you are responsive and not catatonic, though.”

“What’s your name?”

The doctor pauses.

“Dr. Timothy Mendel,” he says.

“Right,” Dave says. He looks up and pauses, staring at the doctor. John doesn’t know if his squinting is from the light or from concentration. Whatever he was squinting about is over after a few minutes and he nods to himself. “Right, thank you, Dr. Mendel. Do you guys happen to have any protective eyewear – I have photosensitivity.”

“Of course, Mr. Strider,” the doctor says, and gestures to a nurse. He nods and goes out the room.

“Do you want to talk about what happened, Mr. Strider?”

Dave looks like he’s weighing his answers. “The hallucination?”

“Do you think it was a hallucination?”
“I don’t know, and I don’t trust that you aren’t right now, doctor,” he says.

“I see,” Dr. Mendel says, “Could you describe to me what you saw, or heard, or perhaps felt?”

“Why?”

“I want to help you, Mr. Strider,” the doctor says.

John looks at Dave, watches the way his fingers twitch, watches him look at the doctor like he’s making sure he’s going to see it when the man strikes so he can block. John is no combat genius, but he’s been in enough fights to be able to get a good guess if someone is going to swing. Dr. Mendel is relaxed. In fact, if he even tried to hit Dave, John’s sure Dave could easily block and dislocate his arm in less time.

Dave still shakes his head. He brings his feet up to the bed and starts moving away, so he could lie down and try to get some sleep, or at least, shut out whoever is going to try and talk to him while he’s still confused and wary of everything and everyone.

John can understand.

He just wishes this wasn’t happening.

Dave was supposed to wake up, and nothing else. He was supposed to recover. Everyone was supposed to go back to the Safehouse, deal with everything that they have to deal with, and then go back to assisting the city. When they have recovered enough to feel like they can take chances here in this reality, they could go to high school, maybe college, maybe get a degree and a job and just try to pretend to be normal human beings as best as they can with the shitty cards they already have.

Dave wasn’t supposed to be dealing with what was probably hallucinations, and they weren’t supposed to deal with mounting paranoia over everything again.

John blinks, realizing that his vision is blurry due to the tears building up at the edges of his eyes. He shuts his phone screen off so he can pocket his phone and wipe his cheeks with his free hand.

Mrs. H squeezes his other hand. On his other side, he feels the pool master’s best friend put a hand on his shoulder in comfort.

He’s so tired.

Which is saying something, since he usually just tries to forget everything and be happy all the time, because if you fake it enough, you make it until smiling and laughing at every single fucked up thing that’s ever been laid on your path is a kneejerk reaction and a coping mechanism.

But he’s so tired, and just once – just for once, he wants the world to give them what they’re due. If not a childhood, if not a chance to reunite with their dead families, if not a chance to reunite with their friends, then maybe another shot at happiness.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbles, to Mrs. H, to the pool master’s best friend, to everyone he’s ever known in his life. “I think I need some fresh air.”

Mrs. H gives his hand one last comforting squeeze before letting him go as he stands. She says nothing, and John is thankful for it. He doesn’t think he’d be able to keep it together if she does.

He gets out of Dave’s room silently, not even looking back to see if Dave watched him go. He goes to the stairs instead of the elevator and he looks at his feet as he walks step after step, until he reaches
the top floor and disperses into wind, rushing down towards the stairs for the roof.

As soon as he’s at the top, he lets himself solidify and reform. He sits, knees close to his chest, and cries.

He stays like that for a while, the wind around him picking up, and he can feel his hair wildly whipping around him the more upset he gets, but he doesn’t quite care. After he’s cried his eyes out, he knows there will be quite a mess in the streets, there will be weather reports of freak wind storms, but for now he’s angry and upset and he doesn’t know how to fix anything, least of all how he’s feeling, so he just lets it be.

His pocket buzzes. There’s a text. He’s not really in the mood to check that, so he just waits, until he nearly forgets.

He cries until his eyes can’t anymore, and his nose is clogged, and his eyes are hot, and he thinks his cheeks have puffed up from all the sobbing. He feels his phone buzz again, and he ignores it, only for it to buzz four consecutive times three minutes later, so he does take it out.

It’s all texts from Kevin, asking if he wants anything to eat, followed by a few texts of reassurance, and he can’t even find himself to be upset at those, because he knows that Kevin’s had it pretty rough too. He texts back that he’s not really hungry, but – at the very least, he doesn’t feel as awful as he started.

He’s about to pocket his phone when he notices there’s still one notification for a message he hasn’t read. He clicks it.

And frowns, because it’s mostly gibberish, although it’s from Jade’s number.

It reads:

> we4r vp, <, omtto yhe jpsptslll YJODOD lstls5 b Y yhJ WAY

“Did she accidentally butt dial me?” He tries to look at the incoherent message again, to see if it’s a code of some sort, but it doesn’t look like anything he knows. He forwards it to everyone save Jade, with the message: do any of you know if this is a code or something? jade might have just butt dialed me but i’m not sure.

He turns the screen off after he hits send, pockets his phone and looks up at the sky, leaning back on his hands. The wind around him is still raging.

He hopes something good happens soon.

Chapter End Notes

Getting better at returning to the swing of things, finally. Thank you so much to everyone who’s been patiently waiting for updates, and for every single theorist <3

moved, but come and talk:

artblog: almostsweetangel.tumblr.com
writing: inkteacup.tumblr.com
Karkat explains, while the car continues to weave its way through traffic, about what had happened in the past few weeks, at least as quickly as he can since they’re close to the hospital and need a proper plan for how to get everyone to sneak in.

There is something called a bloodleech, and it’s disgusting and he threw one up once. And it also apparently leeches off of people’s very beings, which is why it’s called a bloodleech. Cecil is infected with it, according to one of their sources, who identified as a Seer.

“A Seer?” Jade asks.

“Yeah, and we’re thinking Seer as in the actual class,” Roxy says. “And they mentioned an Heir once too.”

“So - so this is really about the game,” Jade says. Steve glances at Tony, who just tightens his grip on the steering wheel. There it is again, that term, that game. Steve still barely understands it. “It’s just SBURB all over again.”

“All signs point to it so far,” Kanaya says.

“Hal says if it is the game, it’s strange this planet is still around,” Roxy says. “Everything is wiped out once a session starts - or, you know, arguably, it’s going to be anyway unless a session is started to rebuild a universe.”

“That still makes no sense to me,” Tony says.

Jade gives him a sympathetic look in the rearview mirror. “A lot of it doesn’t, Mr. Stark. Even I’m confused by it sometimes.”

“It’s possible it’s not this planet’s session,” Eridan says. “We’re not from this session. We’re not from any of each other’s sessions, our paths just happened to cross.”

“It could be another session, yeah,” Roxy says.

“I remember Rose - at least, I think it was Rose - once said this universe doesn’t even have a game,” Jade says. The tension in Tony’s posture lessens. “So if something related to Skaia is going on, then it’s not native to this universe. It’s something else that got brought here.”

“Or fell here,” Eridan says.

“Brought here,” Karkat says. “I think it was brought.”

Tony slows the car to a halt as the light up ahead goes red. Only a few minutes and they would be at the hospital. “Guys,” he says.

Jade focuses on Karkat, though, confused. “Why do you think they were brought here?”

“Everyone else was,” Karkat says. “As far as I know. I’m not sure, actually, but I remember being brought here. It’s not a huge leap to say everyone else might be too.”
“It makes sense if you think about how we were separated in groups,” Eridan says.

“Guys,” Tony says. The light ahead turns yellow.

“Wait,” Jade says, still focused on Karkat. “What do you mean you remember.”

There’s a moment of silence in the car as no one says anything. Tony opens his mouth to, just as Kanaya says, “Karkat remembers.”

The light ahead turns green.

“Goddamn it,” Tony mutters, and then slaps the dashboard twice, loudly, so as to get everyone’s attention. A few people jump in surprise. Davesprite hovers off of Jade’s shoulder to get closer to the second row seat. “Alright, I would love to hear more about this game and about what happened to all of you, but right now, we are so close to the hospital, and I think this discussion is going to be better when the rest of your friends can hear it and you can all talk about it in one sitting, how’s that?”

“Uh,” Roxy says, “Actually, you do have a point and - fuck, we’re close to the hospital, we need to figure out what to do.”

“Thank you,” Tony says, “We’re incredibly close and unless we go snail-pace, which I refuse to do by the way, we don’t have enough time to think about how we’re going to get inside.”

“Park outside, maybe?” Jade says, “That way we can sit a while in the car.”

“Parking lot ticket booth.”

“Right,” Jade says. Tony is already moving the car forward to catch up with the traffic since he’s being honked at from behind. He goes a bit slower than he was earlier, but not irritatingly slow.

“I have no idea what that is,” Roxy says, “This earth is so interesting.”

“It stops being interesting after a while, especially when you figure out a lot of things are more nuisance than benefit,” Tony says. Roxy snickers.

“If we have Roxy pull the void over us, we’ll risk still revealing ourselves,” Eridan says, “If I understood right, these...hos-pitt-hals - ” he pauses as he realizes he might have pronounced that wrongly “ - of yours are crowded places.”

“Especially around this time,” Jade says.

Davesprite starts waving his arms so as to get her attention. Being a bright orange wisp, most of everyone in the car turns to him, even Steve.

“What is it?” Jade asks. Davesprite says something, and Jade has to lean in a little, but then she says, “Oh!” and laughs. “He’s right, I can just teleport us into the rooms.”

“Do they have cameras in the hospital rooms?” Kanaya asks.

“I...think they do,” Jade says. “Hm.”

“Well, whatever we’re doing, we still have to deal with parking inspection,” Tony says, “We need to hide all of you.”

“I think I’ll be fine,” Jade says, “Nearly everyone in New York knows me. Most of everyone who lives in the Safehouse, really.”
“I forgot you guys were in the Safehouse,” Roxy says, “We spent so long looking for that place too…” She trails off, and then adjusts Hal on her nose and snickers. “Yeah, Hal spent so long mapping routes for it.”

“You were looking for us?” Jade asks, and then backtracks, “Sorry, got distracted. The parking inspection is still a problem.”

“Teleport us to a lesser crowded area?” Kanaya asks.

“In the hospital?” Jade asks. “I don’t know which places have lesser crowded areas, and even if I did, we’d still have the problem of how we’re going to get in the rooms.”

Eridan shifts in his seat so he can get a better look at Davesprite, and then the miniature bags Jade has with her.

“Rogers and Stark are well known in this area, correct?” he asks.

“Obviously,” Tony says.

Steve just laughs and says, “Yeah.”

“So out of all of us, the three who are least to draw suspicion are these two humans.” Eridan motions to Tony and Steve at the front seats, and then to Jade at the very back, “And you. So you’ll be fine getting into the hospital yourselves.”

“But we need Karkat,” Roxy says, “He at least, out of all of us, has to get in.”

“We can just get smuggled in,” Eridan says, and gestures to Davesprite. “If soda pop hides in one of those bags, at least if they’re regular-sized, he can just get in the hospital. Unless those are also inspected.”

“That’s…not a bad idea,” Steve says, “I think they’ll just look it over, and when they see it’s mostly clothes, they’ll probably let it through.”

“Or we can hide in pockets,” Roxy says, and then lifts Hal’s glasses, “Which, I’m going to clarify, was Hal’s suggestion and not mine.”

“That could work,” Jade says, “We’d all be inside the hospital already and we’d just have to deal with the cameras.”

“Since we’ll be seen visiting normally, that should lessen suspicion,” Steve says, “It’ll be better than everyone just appearing inside.”

“I’ve never been teleported,” Tony says. He slows as he pulls up by the hospital, ready to make the turn for its parking lot.

“It’s not fun,” Steve says. “Jade?”

“Oh it,” Jade says, and holds her hands out in that rectangle shape she’d done with Davesprite earlier. She shrinks down Eridan first - who immediately starts climbing up the seat so he can jump over to her row - and then Karkat, and Roxy and Hal, and Kanaya. As soon as she lets the bags she has return to their regular size, Eridan is pulling down one of the zippers and burrowing inside.

“Can’t blame him for not wanting to be hidden in a pocket,” Tony says. He slowly moves the car forwards, while everyone else scrambles for hiding. Roxy and Karkat let Steve hide them in his
jacket. Kanaya and Davesprite let Jade pick them up and hide them in the pockets of hers.

The tollbooth lets them in rather easily, which Steve is glad for, although he’s still thankful for Tony’s paranoia about the situation, considering how precariously balanced everything is. Get found out, and be questioned by S.H.I.E.L.D while the kids are detained. Get found out, and acknowledge that there might be an unconfirmed alien threat. Get found out, and acknowledge that there is a game out there that destroys and restarts universes. Get found out, and acknowledge that there are multiple sessions of this game that are running and whose players have converged on earth.

And that’s not even going into the whole bloodleech and hospital attack situation.

Jade lifts the bags carefully as she steps out of the car. “Cecil’s in room 1025,” Jade says, “Dave’s in 1111. We’re going to see Cecil first, right?”

“That’s the goal. We’re on a limited amount of time and we don’t know how long we can be here without being found out,” Steve says, lowly, “And the longer Cecil goes while infected, the lesser our chances of being able to help him.”

Jade nods. “Alright,” she says. She slings the bag Eridan is in on her shoulder and carries the rest in her other hand. “Room 1025 it is,” she says.

“Where is he?” Loki asks, just as he and Rose stop outside of Dave’s room, having just gone to the roof to fetch John as he’d been crying for about an hour up there.

The pool master looks relieved to see him. “Still in his room, and he’s calmed down a lot, but I think he’s confused,” they say, “Even I am, I have…no idea what’s going on.” They reach a hand up to pinch the bridge of their nose, sighing.

“We’ll get to the bottom of it,” Rose says.

“Please do,” the pool master says, “He’s inside, he’s talking to Graham and Mrs. H, I think he’s asking about what happened to Cecil.”

“Thank you,” Rose says, reaching out to squeeze their shoulder briefly before rushing into the room. John follows her as she does.

Loki pulls them aside and lowers his voice. “I’m going to need you to make sure everything in the Safehouse is in order. I think you know which to prioritize.”

Sapphrel pauses, their lips thinning to a line, but they nod. “I’m not cut out for this,” they say, “But alright.”

“You’re the one with the lowest profile out of all the entire team, you’ll be less of a target,” he says.

“What about James?”

“I’ll send Ruben to look after him. We need people no one will expect to have any part in this,” Loki says, “Unless S.H.I.E.L.D’s turned an eye to you both and you just haven’t told me?”

“God, no, and thank fuck, I’d probably have a panic attack,” they say.
He skywalks them to the Safehouse quickly, and the pool master gives him one last nod before making a run for their room, while he pops back into the hospital to pull Ruben aside this time and send him over to James. Rose gives him an odd look when he finally approaches Dave’s bedside, after Mr. G and Mrs. H excuse themselves to give them all time to talk, but says nothing.

He hands Dave his sunglasses, and the boy immediately slips them on.

“Thanks,” he says.

“How are you feeling?”

“Awful,” he says, “And confused. At least I’m pretty sure this is real.”

“I’d vouch for its realness,” Rose says. Dave snorts, amused.

“John called us about what happened and - what exactly happened?” Loki asks, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

“Exactly what I told John,” he says. “I was in this room, and then I…wasn’t.”

“And the room looked like a hellish version of this one,” Loki says.

“Yeah,” Dave says, “The doc asked if I had any other hallucinations earlier and it was pretty much just that, and I kept hearing someone laughing.”

“Do you still hear them now?” Rose asks.

“No,” Dave says, “Thankfully not.”

“Good,” Rose says, relieved. “Good.”

“Have you gone to the odd room since the first time?” Loki asks. He turns, looking around the room and inspecting it, trying to see if anything’s off with it, but nothing sticks out to him. It’s just an ordinary patient’s room, even if the heart monitor is different from the old one it’s had to replace.

“No,” Dave says, “And honestly I think I’d rather just keep it that way.”

“I don’t blame you,” Loki says, “Your…nightmares, if that is what they even are, have been vivid.”

Dave leans back just a bit, wary. “What do you mean?”

“You weren’t waking up,” Rose says, immediately covering for him. “It’d been days, Dave. You missed your birthday. When you did start to show signs of consciousness, all you did was hurt yourself.”

“I tried to look into your mind in order to see what was possibly wrong,” Loki says, “I believe I ended up not only looking into it but being fully immersed into where it believed it was. It was a battlefield there - ”

“- and everything was trying to kill everything else,” Dave says, “There was so much blood.”

Loki nods. “It was a war zone. I saw you once, but you were terrified and running, and I tried to look for you.”

“I didn’t even know you were there,” Dave says. He looks down at his lap. “How long was I out?”
“A few weeks,” Rose says, “What happened in there?”

“I don’t know,” Dave says, “It was just - I don’t even know what was there, but there was so much blood on the ground, and when you touched it, it would just try to get into your skin. I don’t even think it was blood at all, or if it was, it was fucked up.”

Loki remembers the thing that had snaked up his hand and had bloomed into something monstrous with too many teeth. He frowns.

“There were carapaces fighting,” Dave says. Rose stills. “And then there were other things that weren’t carapaces at all. I don’t know where they came from.”

Rose is silent, thinking. Dave, beside her, is staring at his lap but isn’t seeing it at all.

“I fell into a pool of blood,” Loki says, and she looks at him. “Except it wasn’t a pool, it was way too deep to be one.”

“Fuck,” Dave says, reaching up to pull his glasses off, so he can rub his eyes with the heels of his palms. “God, I don’t know what’s going on.”

“It’s Skaia,” Rose says, voice in a small, disbelieving whisper. “It’s Skaia, isn’t it. That was the Skaian battlefield.”

“Yeah,” Dave says, still rubbing his heels into his eyes slowly. “Yeah, I think it was.”

“No,” Rose says. She stands and puts her face in her hands, drawing in a breath in a hiss. “No, no, no, this isn’t supposed to happen - what even happened to the battlefield that it would manifest like that?”

Strands of her hair are lifting, Loki notices, as if buoyed up by an invisible force, and he can see them start to glow faintly. John, from where he’s sitting by the wall, just watching, shifts nervously.

“I don’t know,” Dave says. “But whatever happened, it turned Skaia into something that’s not even close to what it originally was.”

He’s still not looking up as he says this, instead just digging his heels further into his eyes, kneading into them the more frustrated he gets.

It’s John who stands and rushes to his side later to pulls his hands away from his face, snapping, “Stop that.” Dave’s eyes look bloodshot and reddened. Loki can see dark red at the inner corners of them.

“Dave no,” Rose says, inspecting his hands. There’s a tiny bit of blood on them.

“They itch,” he says.

“It’s getting to his head,” John says, “Whatever this is - if it’s the same thing that got Cecil, it’s just getting worse.”

“There’s nothing in my head.”

Loki stills. So do Rose and John.

Dave’s voice sounds distant, like he’s not really there, and he’s just staring blankly at his hands, unfocused.
“There’s nothing in my head,” he repeats. “I’m fine.”

“Dave,” Rose says, “You nearly crushed your own eyes in.”

“I’m fine.”

John slowly lets Dave’s hands go. “Dave, wake up.”

“But I am awake,” he says, frowning slightly, but still with such unfocus that he looks like he’s half-asleep. “And there’s nothing in my head.”

“Fucking hell, Dave, snap out of it.” Rose grabs her brother’s face in her hands, both of which are glowing slightly. The glow impossibly flickers to black for a moment, before finally steadying on a faint light. Rose’s eyes are fully glowing, and for a second, she looks like she’s radiating with the force of an entire sun.

If the entire sun made Loki feel like he needed to throw up because the air around it felt wrong.

Dave stares at his sister, wide-eyed, and Loki sees the exact moment he’s brought back to the present, because he immediately squeezes his eyes shut and yells, “Shit!” and trying to wipe the blood off his eyes. There’s thankfully not a lot.

The glow around Rose fades, and with it, the feeling that makes Loki’s stomach churn, especially when he’d been sitting so close to it.

“All right, don’t make it worse, you’ll heal,” John says, prying Dave’s hands away from his eyes again, “You’ll be fine. You’re good. You’re alright.”

Dave struggles briefly before sighing, shoulders dropping and expression actually falling to one of defeat. Then he puts on his neutral facade again, ever the paranoid child, and picks his glasses up to slip them on.

“Whatever is going on, we need to get to the bottom of it,” Rose says. Her hair isn’t floating around her anymore, and she’s back to normal. No glowing eyes, no glowing hands, no ill aura about her, just Rose. “It’s already gotten two of you, whatever this is.”

“At least we know it’s tied to the game,” John says.

“Except Cecil isn’t a player,” Rose says. “Skaia is involved, but it might not just be Skaia.”

“I think it just doesn’t care,” Dave says, “Maybe it just doesn’t care as long as it gets what it wants.”

Then he laughs. “Maybe it just wants death.”

Rose says nothing at that. Neither does John.

Loki, for once, doesn’t know what to say, because there’s really nothing he can think of, when what they might be up against is something that just doesn’t discriminate between anything, and wants nothing more than for everything to be destroyed.

There’s only one person inside Cecil’s room aside from the patient himself. Tony thinks it’s probably
good that everyone else is hiding right now and can’t see that Jade is lowering the bags, include the one Eridan is hiding in, to hug Kevin, who is the only one present to receive them all as they visit room 1025.

“What are they, um, doing here?” the boy asks, looking at him and Steve warily, which irks Tony a little if only because his job is to save New York and not burn it to the ground, but the kid’s been through a lot.

“They have a lot of things to explain,” Jade says, lowly. She leans to the side a little to look past Kevin’s shoulder. Tony sees the kid on the bed, a carbon copy of the one standing in front of him, wave. He has a cat on his lap, and a dog sitting in a chair beside him. The whole thing’s pretty Disney-worthy, honestly. “Where’s everyone else?”

“They went to go check on Dave, he just woke up,” Kevin says, “Although I think there was a bit of an emergency. I haven’t heard much about it, I haven’t really been…away from this room.”

Jade tenses a little at the mention of the emergency but nods anyway. “Where’s Luke?”

“I don’t know if he’s at the Safehouse or Dave’s room,” he says, “You just came from the house, right?”

“Yeah, he wasn’t there,” she says, “I’ll check Dave’s room, then. In the meantime, uh.” She steps aside to make more room for Steve and Tony to let themselves inside. “Steve and Mr. Stark want to see how Cecil’s been doing.”

Kevin just looks at them, very slowly, eyeing each of them from head to foot like he’s doing a full scan. With the dark lines under his eyes and the unnerving focus he’s fixing on them, it actually makes Tony smile stiffly in discomfort.

“I think we can wait,” Steve says.

“Yeah, I think we can wait once your other friends are here,” Tony says. He’s not about to throw hands with a rightfully paranoid and protective teenager whose brother nearly died.

Jade nods, and takes a step back, but then stops.

“Right,” she says, whispering, “No teleportation when there’s cameras around.”

Kevin raises an eyebrow, but says nothing else, and only watches Jade wave them a quick goodbye, shooting Tony an amused, “Maybe you’ll get to see it live next time, Mr. Stark,” before running for the stairs.

“Damn.”

Steve laughs. “Teleportation is real,” he says.

“I hate this,” Tony says, under his breath.

From the doorway, Kevin only keeps his eye on them, leaning back on the frame like a watchdog.

“To be fair, I thought you of all people had already started working on teleportation when I met Jade,” Steve says, “Maybe as a work in progress.”

“I’ll figure it out,” Tony says.

“Good luck,” Steve says, grinning. “Oh, I forgot to ask, but I’ve been trying to look things up - ”
“Look at you, learning how to navigate the future and use slang.”

“- and - shut up - I haven’t been able to find much on whether or not alchemize means anything new today. At least with technology. I just remembered I was going to ask you if it did,” he says.

Tony frowns. “Alchemize?”

“Yeah, Jade said something about….” he pauses, then, “If she and her friends had the right equipment, they’d be able to alchemize anything into existence.”

“Huh.” The only thing Tony can think about, in regards to alchemy, was a lot of fictional novels and shows, but then again, he’s pretty much grabbed shawarma with a god and has heard about teleporters that are able to snatch any object in any point in time and space, so really, this shouldn’t be something he thinks is impossible. “That makes no sense.”

Steve laughs again. “I’ll take that as a no.”

“That’s - that’s most likely in the same vein as the appearifier thing,” Tony says, and then crosses his arms as he stares down at the floor, thinking. The ability to alchemize anything with the right equipment.

But what sort of equipment? And for Jade to have mentioned it like that, that meant that equipment already must have existed. But who made it, and how?

“You have no idea how much I hate that I don’t understand this,” he says.

Steve’s still laughing when two people arrive, who Tony first mistakes as just passing through, but Kevin actually relaxes when he sees them and lets them in after greeting them.

The man, who looks like he is in dire need of sleep, only gives Steve a polite nod, before picking up the bags Jade’s left on the floor to carry them inside (and Tony sees the dog hop off its chair to ask for pets from him) while the woman actually stops and gives them both a warm smile.

“Hello there, loves, are you here to visit Cecil?” she asks.

“Yes, ma’am,” Steve says, “We’re still waiting for Jade, she said she was looking for Luke.”

“Oh, of course,” the woman says, “He’s with Dave, the poor boy punched out his heart monitor earlier.”

“He what?” Kevin asks, surprised.

Tony shares a look with Steve.

“He punched out his heart monitor,” the woman says, “The doctor said it was trauma-induced hallucinations. It might be because of - ”

“Oh,” Kevin says. The woman reaches out to give him a gentle pat on the shoulder, and he sighs. “Right,” he says, “That’s entirely fair.”

“He’s a strong boy, and so is your brother. Everything will work out, we’re dealing with it as best as we can.”

“Thanks, Mrs. H,” Kevin says.

“It’s no problem, dear,” she says, and then, to Steve and Tony, “Do you boys not want to come in
and wait for everyone else inside?”

“We’re fine here, ma’am,” Steve says.

“If you’re sure - oh, here they are.”

Down the hallway, Tony sees two people with Jade, one he recognizes and the other he’s only familiar with in passing and has only met once before when he’d visited the hospital after the attack. Rose seems to pause as soon as she sees Steve and Tony waiting by Cecil’s door, although she presses on, strides determined.

“Mr. Stark, you’ve met Rose,” Jade says.

“Pleasure to see you, Mr. Stark,” Rose says.

“Tony’s fine,” he says, “How’s your brother?”

She hesitates, so that probably wasn’t the best thing to ask, but she does answer. “He punched out his heart monitor earlier, but he’s calmed down significantly.”

“What the fuck even happened for him to punch out his heart monitor?” Kevin asks.

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out,” the tall man - Luke, he thinks - he says. He turns to Steve and Tony, and from how his posture changes, Tony thinks one wrong word would probably get him to deck them both, Jade’s friends or not.

God, everyone around here is on a hair trigger, which is fair considering the situation, but holy hell.

“May we help you?” Luke asks.

“We wanted to check up on Cecil,” Steve says. “And we have - things to discuss,” he says the last part quietly, “Ones that may concern you.”


“Do you think we should call for a War Council meeting?” Rose asks.

“You have a War Council?” Tony blurts out, although he still has the awareness to say it quietly despite the shock.

“We take our job seriously,” Rose says.

Jade laughs, nervous. “I don’t think we can call for a full meeting when we have two people injured. At least not within the comfort of the Safehouse.”

“And we need to be around Cecil,” Tony says, “What we - we’re here for him. This, what we’re here for, it concerns him.”

“Yeah?” Kevin asks, frigid. Tony has to think for a few seconds so as not to make everyone’s danger meters spike.

“We know your brother is…sick,” he says, softly, “And we know it’s not just any ordinary sickness. We know what it is, and we might know how to deal with it.”

“How,” Kevin asks, voice flat and unamused, but Tony can see just a small glimmer of hope there. Steve gives him a warning look. Don’t fuck this up.
“What do you mean?” Rose asks, “How do you know - are you even sure?”

Tony pauses. “Well, it’s so far the only thing we have, but it might just work,” he says, “As for how we know, that’s part of what we wanted to talk to you about.”

“Alright, inside,” Luke says, motioning his head towards Cecil’s room. “We’re not talking about this here in the hallway like idiots.”

Kevin thankfully doesn’t protest, in fact retreating inside the room first. Tony and Steve step in, and Tony goes to where the man from earlier has placed the bags to look for the one Eridan is in. He’s aware of a faint bark from the dog in the room, but there’s a gentle shush after.

Behind them all, the door closes and he sees Rose and Luke write on the air, leaving trails of purple and green, respectively, as their fingers glide and form the markings.

“What the fuck,” Tony says.

Steve is squinting at the sigils, even when they disappear so fast since Luke and Rose just quickly snap their fingers after. “Wait, what are those, they look familiar - ”

“Seiðr,” Rose says, “Or, well, runework used to channel seiðr to achieve something.”

“In this case, we’re proofing the room,” Luke says, and then aims his hand towards one of the cameras in the corner and snaps his fingers, “And fooling the cameras.”

“You can do that?” Tony asks, this time unashamedly loud. “How does that - how does that even work, is it magnetic interference - ”

“It’s just magic,” Rose says, grinning cheekily.

“There’s a science to magic, it’s just unexplained physics,” Tony says.

Jade laughs. “One day, Mr. Stark. One day.”

“Done,” Luke says. “Graham, if you would get the blinds.”

The man from earlier, the exhausted one, goes over the window to close all the blinds, leaving the fluorescent lamp above them their only light source.

“Alright,” Luke says, standing up to his full height and crossing his arms. “What did you want to talk to us about?”

Jade makes her way over to where Tony is.

“Fooling the cameras means they’re not going to see anything they don’t have to see, right?” Tony asks.

“Yes.”

He turns to Steve, who nods.

“Okay,” he says.

He sets down the bag he has in hand and opens it, slowly, in case Eridan has moved up near the top and might get snagged by the zipper. He hasn’t, although he does pop his head up from under two folded shirts and starts climbing out of the bag like he’s just swam in a lake somewhere.
“What the hell…” Kevin trails off, watching Eridan slide off the edge of the bag and use the momentum to roll on the floor and land on his feet. Afterwards, he stands and straightens out his jacket, before inspecting the room and all the strangers in it.

“Is - ” Rose steps forwards to get a closer look, and for a moment, Eridan’s fins flatten on the side of his head (absolutely fascinating, thinks Tony), but he seems to recognize her. “Is that a troll?”

“A what?” Tony mutters.

Steve approaches and reaches into his jacket’s pockets, slowly, and crouches down as he lowers Roxy and Karkat onto the floor, next to where Eridan is. Roxy has to make sure Hal doesn’t fall off her face.

Rose draws in a breath and puts a hand over her mouth to muffle a sob.

She kneels, slowly, just as Roxy looks up at her.

“Mom?”

The others are watching, intrigued now. Cecil and Kevin are leaning forwards to get a look, eerily in sync, and Mrs. H looks fascinated by the tiny little mutants on the floor, one of them waving enthusiastically. Graham looks like he doesn’t know whether to be interested or unnerved, while holding back the dog so it doesn’t try and snatch up the tiny humans it’s seeing. The cat is just ignoring everything, which is good, Tony thinks.

Luke is silent, simply observing.

Davesprite, before Jade can even get him out, simply phases through her jacket pocket so he can hover over Rose’s face.

“Davesprite?” Rose laughs, disbelieving. Tony sees the bird mutant give her a thumbs up. “Oh my god, what happened - why are you here, how long have you been here, what happened to all of you?”

“We had to sneak them in since we wanted to make sure there wouldn’t be any footage of them anywhere,” Steve says, “In case S.H.I.E.L.D decides to use it against them.”

“I - okay, that’s fair, but - how long have they been here, all this time, I thought we were the only ones -”

Rose stops, just as she turns to Jade, hoping to have her friend answer all of her questions since her brain is working a mile a minute right now. Instead, though, she just stops and stares at Jade’s palms, where Kanaya is slowly standing and straightening out her skirt.

She looks up, and Rose’s tears start to fall.

“…Kanaya?”

Chapter End Notes

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It’s a little surreal, watching miniature versions of her friends climb out of bags and be taken out from pockets, although she supposes that’s one creative way of working around paranoia and very real threats they could face. Being lax on countermeasures is not a luxury any of them can afford, especially with the situations they’re facing – not that she’s sure those who are outside of the Safehouse crew are aware of exactly what they’re dealing with, aside from the mutant abductions.

And maybe it’s better that way, honestly. There’s no need for more panic. If they’re not involved, it’ll probably keep them out of harm’s way too, although she knows, past all that wishful thinking, that it doesn’t work that way.

Nothing is too sacred or too precious to be left out in a war, especially when the goal is simple: win.

Nevertheless, Rose watches Jade and the others present her friends (and she doesn’t even know how long they’ve been here and how long Jade has known – how did they even get here?) and stares as Kanaya stands from her place in Jade’s palms.

She watches as Kanaya takes a moment to smooth out the wrinkles from her clothes, and then looks up at Rose, the corners of her eyes already tearing up even when she’s clearly trying to keep herself composed.

Slowly, she’s wrapped in green light and lifted off of Jade’s hands, while Jade herself forms her fingers into the outline of a rectangle and moves them apart, until Kanaya’s feet are on the floor as she stands face to face across Rose.

Two feet apart, and Rose feels her stomach flipping; whether out of nervousness or excitement, she doesn’t know. Her hands are cold and shaking, and she doesn’t know if she can even speak.

She wants to reach out, wants to make sure Kanaya is really here, but – Dave had hallucinations earlier.

If she reaches out, what if the mirage disappears and nothing here is really as it seems? What if she just hears laughter, and realizes what’s right in front of her is the barrel of a gun, facing her this time instead of being pressed to the back of her head. What if it, whatever it is, laughs as it watches her fall into her desperation for hope to be there and just shoots it out of her grasp?

It would be a Heroic death.

There wouldn’t be any coming back from that.

Around her, Jade is unshrinking everyone else, and she’s only vaguely aware of a few of them trying to get used to being their regular sizes again. If it is an illusion, or a hallucination, then it’s too detailed since each of them look distinct – Eridan looks like he’s starved and like he’s just starting to remember what self-care is, Karkat looks nervous and jittery, Roxy’s hair is longer than what Rose had expected it to be and she’s got these pointy anime shades on, Davesprite looks nearly timid and awkward, and Kanaya is -

Well, Kanaya seems to notice her just staring, thinking (she’s always noticed), and smiles softly, comforting.
Always comforting.

Kanaya has always been a role model for understanding, the one who took risks to make sure everyone was getting along, the one who took care of people even at the cost of her own comfort and reputation. Pushed to extremes, she’d break herself over and over in order to help others put themselves back together.

And god, Rose loves her. She loves her so much.

“Hello,” she says, and she’s the one who extends a hand to Rose.

Rose breaks and runs to her, so fast she nearly knocks Kanaya off her feet.

“Oh my god.” She feels Kanaya wrap her arms around her, at the same time Rose throws her arms around her neck and bury her face in her girlfriend’s shoulder. She feels the tightness of the hug, she feels the warmth, she feels the relief – she feels that it’s real. “Oh my god, you’re real. You’re real and you’re here. Oh my fucking god.”

“I’m real,” Kanaya says, moving her hand up to Rose’s hair to hold her, gently. “I’m here. I’m real.”

Rose sobs, trying not to make a sound at first, but with Kanaya just holding her, trying to make her feel safe, and her overwhelming relief that this is real, this is happening, she just breaks down and starts crying; she’s hiccuping and trying to stutter something out, but her sobs are making her feel like she can’t breathe.

“It’s okay,” Kanaya says.

“Nearly two years,” she manages, after a long minute of trying to get her voice to work. “I thought I wasn’t going to see you again.”

“I thought the same thing,” Kanaya says, “But as fate would have it, it seems our luck hasn’t run out yet.”

Rose laughs, and maybe it sounds a little hysterical, but it’s justified.

Kanaya holds her the whole time, combing her fingers through her hair in a soothing motion, while Rose cries into her shoulder, fists bunching up the back of Kanaya’s shirt, holding on like her life depends on it.

She doesn’t even let go when she’s sobbed her eyes dry, still keeping Kanaya close, like she’s afraid she could disappear at any moment (and she knows she can, she knows nothing is safe right now, and with that realization, and the fact that Rose’s friends, and Kanaya is here, with the threat they face – it makes her stomach drop, because it’s not just them now, it’s other people they care about that could get involved in this, and the very thought alone makes her cling tighter).

“Hello, then,” Rose says, finally, her nose stuffy and her eyes red. She laughs when Kanaya smiles, amused.

“I missed you,” Kanaya says, moving her hand to cradle Rose’s cheek, and Rose leans into it.

“I missed you too,” she says, leaning forwards to press a kiss to Kanaya’s lips, and then laughing in relief again. “You have no idea.”
She doesn’t let her hand go even after she’s calmed down. Everyone is respectful enough not to talk about her crying her eyes out earlier, and they settle in the room. Rose sits on the edge of Cecil’s bed, close to Kanaya, while Roxy sits on her other side, a hand on her shoulder in quiet support, so Steve and the others can explain what they’re here for, and how they got here.

Eridan’s the one who starts the story, and he gives Rose a nod in acknowledgment as he introduces himself. They’ve never really met each other properly, she realizes, especially not since – well, if memory serves, Kanaya sawed him in half.

He doesn’t look very sawed in half now.

“That’s what Rogers and Stark said the first time,” Karkat mutters.

“Something happened,” Eridan says, “I remember being sawed in half, but I don’t remember what happened after that.”

“Hal says he remembers being merged with a sprite,” Roxy says, pointing to the black, pointy glasses perched on the bridge of her nose. They’re reflecting red lights onto her face.

“And yet, here...we are,” Eridan says, hesitating at the ‘we’. “Alive and very notably individual.”

“We don’t remember what happened before we were dropped here either,” Rose says. She scans the room briefly.

Steve and Tony are standing behind where Eridan and Karkat have chosen their seats; Davesprite is hovering beside them; Mrs. H, Mr. G, and Kevin are sitting on the other side of the bed, listening, with Cecil; and Loki is just leaning by a wall, Jade right by him, patient. Khoshekh is still sitting on Cecil’s lap, and Winston has decided to sleep by Mr. G’s feet, content.

Rose glances at him for a moment, and he shakes his head minutely.

She doesn’t nod, but she does discreetly turn her eyes down for a moment. No introductions for him, then.

“There’s only four of us here,” Rose says, “From the game, I mean. Just...” She hesitates, and Kanaya squeezes her hand gently, “...myself and the ones who were in my session. We don’t remember what happened, but I do remember waking up on Earth not too far from where Dave was,” Rose says, “John and Jade were miles away from us.”

Eridan shares a look with Davesprite.

“Okay, that might poke a hole in our theory,” Eridan says.

Rose frowns. “What theory?”

“That whoever’s dropping us is strategically placing us, and one of those target places was New York,” Davesprite says, “You weren’t in New York, were you?”

“No,” Rose says, “I think John was, though.”

“Where is John?” Karkat asks.

“He’s with Dave,” Rose says, and doesn’t miss how Karkat’s lips thin out in concern at that. “He’s stable. He’s woken up.”
“We heard. Jade got a text,” Davesprite says, “Did you get our text back?”

Rose shakes her head. “No.”

“Karkat texted John earlier,” Jade says, “I didn’t get a text back.”

“Maybe it was around the time of the monitor punching thing,” Davesprite says.

Right, Rose thinks. The threat they’re facing.

“We weren’t here for that, we had to pick his glasses up since he’s photosensitive,” Rose says, “More so than I am. John called us - ” She looks to Loki at that. “ - and told us Dave had punched straight through his heart monitor when he and the others visited his room.”

“Wait, wait – straight through the heart monitor?” Tony asks. That was probably the last straw for him, considering – actually, Rose has no idea how much he knows about the game. If he knows nothing and they’re all talking about it, it’s a wonder he hasn’t asked anything about it yet. He’s probably so lost. “I thought it was like, punching the heart monitor and then getting his fist stuck inside.”

“John said it went right through,” Rose says.

Tony puts a hand to his forehead, trying to smooth it out from the stress. “And – wait, your brother’s a mutant, yes?”

“Yes,” Rose says. He technically is, anyway.

“Right, I forgot. I was thinking he was just a regular kid.”

“Godtiers don’t exactly have incredible strength,” Davesprite says. He shares a look with Eridan, who turns to Roxy, who turns to Kanaya, who turns to Karkat.

“So…that’s bad?” Tony asks.

Ah, so maybe he does know a little about the game.

“It could just be because he was...I don’t know, spooked?” Davesprite says, “I’ve lived through his life, maybe it’s just the lifelong training plus the SBURB experience.”

“It could be something else,” Kevin says.

Everyone turns to him, as he’s been silent this whole time.

Steve frowns. “What do you mean?”

“It’s – I...” He turns to Rose. “Can I tell them?”

“It depends on who they’ll be reporting back to,” Luke says, interrupting. “Due to the fact that they’ve been housing your friends for however long and are concerned about mutants being kidnapped, I imagine it shouldn’t be S.H.I.E.L.D. Unless, of course, it is.”

“We’re not with S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Tony says, and then grimaces and does a little shrug. “Well, technically, we are, we’re both Avengers, but we’re not here on behalf of them.”

“It’s not official business,” Steve says. “And they don’t know we’ve been helping these guys.”
“We were camping out at this guy’s - ” Karkat points to Steve with a thumb. “ - hivestem until we had to move to this other guy’s tower.”

“It was just Karkat and myself at first,” Kanaya says. “Rogers found Karkat first, and then he helped him hide. We found each other later and he told me he had met someone earlier who looked like me, and I thought that if it was another troll, perhaps we could help each other out of here.”

“How long ago was that?” Rose asks.

“A while,” Karkat says, “There were these little fucking furbeasts all over the city and they kept trying to bite my head off.”

“Oh,” Jade says, “Well that...that happens a lot here.”

“We noticed,” Eridan says, “We got here during some sort of festival of yours, and then we had to deal with furbeasts on fire.”

Jade winces.

“Yeah, and Steve found us,” Roxy says, “Except, he says he didn’t.”


“I know I found Karkat and Kanaya,” Steve says, “But I really, really don’t remember finding you guys at all.”

“That’s...certainly strange,” Loki says. “Perhaps our side has only had a corner of the puzzle all along.”

“What do you mean?” Tony asks.

“Strange things have been happening to us too,” Rose says.

“More than playing some fucked up game and getting thrown into another universe?” Tony asks, “Which still makes fuck-all sense to me, by the way.”

Rose snorts, smiling, and beside her, Kanaya snickers.

“Stranger things than that, Stark,” Loki says, “We really do have much to discuss.”

“Yeah,” Davesprite says, “But maybe we should get to helping who we came here for first.”

“Who’s that?” Loki asks.

Davesprite looks to Karkat, who just sighs and pulls on the drawstrings of his hoodie until it bunches up awkwardly against his neck. He walks over to the end of Cecil’s bed, and lifts an arm to point to him.

“You.”

The whole situation is one that requires a meeting with the entirety of the War Council, but sadly a
lot of people aren’t present – Rose had seen Loki talk to the pool master earlier, and then to their best friend, and someone needs to look after Dave, so they haven’t asked John to come over yet, although she did call him to ask about her brother’s situation and told him that Eridan, Roxy, Karkat, Kanaya, Hal, and Davesprite were here, and he sounded like he had to cover his mouth to stop from screaming excitedly – so they’re just trying to get a grasp of the situation they actually have to deal with, because curse of all curses, it’s time-sensitive.

“Around a few days into being on Earth,” Karkat says, and he pronounces Earth weirdly, “I started getting nightmares. And at first, I thought it could have been an awful allergic reaction to your planet, because this place is like a knock-off version of Alternia – and what makes that sadder is that Alternia is the knock-off version of Beforus.”

Rose sees Tony turn to Steve for a moment to mutter, “What the fuck.”

“But it turns out those nightmares weren’t really nightmares at all,” Karkat says, “At least, not anything that’s just cooked up by my thinkpan.”

“Were you on the moons?” Rose asks.

“No,” Karkat says, “But honestly, dear Empress, I wish I was. That and gouging my eyes out would have been more bearable than having to wake up to Skaia looking like someone shat blood all over it nearly every single fucking night.”

Rose stills. Kanaya notices, turning to her in concern.


Karkat turns to him in surprise. “I don’t fucking remember you in any session, do you know about Skaia?”

“We’ve been telling him,” Rose says, “And I think – I think whatever it was that you were visiting every time you fell asleep – I think he’s been there.”

“What?”

“I was trying to help Dave,” Loki says, “We noticed that he was stirring days before he actually woke up, and we expected him to wake up when we did. He was moving, he seemed to be in an REM state. The doctors said he would wake up any time soon.”

“He didn’t,” Rose says. “He just started screaming and scratching himself.”

“Like a nightmare having turned into something much, much worse,” Loki says.

“Nightmare on Elm Street,” Tony says.

Loki just looks confused, while Jade laughs, whispering, “It’s a movie.”

“Eventually, we figured out he wasn’t going to be waking up any time soon,” Rose says, “And Luke thought that perhaps there was something else at work here than just a coma from blood loss.”

“How bad was the attack?” Kanaya asks. “Your brother is a godtier.”

“Whatever it was that attacked us,” Rose says, “The horrorterrorrs said it killed one of them.”

“What the fuck.” Karkat turns around to look at Davesprite. “Can you do that? Can anyone do that? How the fuck do you kill a horrorterror?”
Davesprite doesn’t answer right away, mulling over his words, and Rose feels her skin prickle, like the horrorterrors themselves are tuning in. It’s still such a foreign feeling, the fact that instead of possession, this is symbiosis now, for the sake of getting to a common enemy.

Whatever and whoever that may be.

“You can talk to horrorterrors,” Davesprite says, “I know that much. They’re just sentient beings who live in the furthest rings. Sentient. They’re still just creatures even if they’re...a little fucked up.”

“A lot fucked up,” Eridan corrects.

“Yeah, but, anyway. I know you can negotiate with them, reason with them, appeal to them. I know they possess people sometimes when they sense emotions so strong it’s an easy gap for them to exploit, because some of them have skewered morals, if they even have any,” Davesprite says, “But I don’t know how you’d go about killing a horrorterror. I know it’s possible, considering...well. But I don’t know how. And I don’t even know if you’re supposed to kill them within the game.”

“Otherwise you’d know,” Rose says.

“But with the way SBURB is built, though, there’s so much that can happen,” Roxy says, “We never really hit walls or anything, because there’s unfinished maps or you can’t interact with objects because there’s no set event for it. Supposed to and not supposed to doesn’t equal to shit in SBURB.”

“Yeah, not according to its Help manual,” Davesprite says, “You can ask me nearly anything about the game from grist to aspects, but when it comes to killing horrorterrors, I come up blank.”

“I don’t think it was ever supposed to be a part of the game. It’s not supposed to happen,” Rose says, “But...something still did it anyway.”

“I don’t think we could kill horrorterrors,” Roxy says, “Just us, I mean.”

“Well, someone out there apparently can,” Karkat says, “And if it’s the same jerkwad who’s been giving me nightmares, then we’re fucked.”

“You said you’ve been having the same nightmares as Dave,” Loki says, redirecting the conversation.

“Well, more like he’s been having the same nightmares as me, because those sound recent, and I haven’t had nightmares in a while,” Karkat says, “At least not any with the bloody battlefield.”

“Have you ever hallucinated?” Rose says.

Karkat frowns. “No, it never got that bad.”

“So it’s treatable, then? Whatever this is, the nightmares?” Kevin hops off his place from the bed to take a step towards Karkat. “You said you were here for Cecil and – Cecil had nightmares too.”

“But none that ever made him scratch himself,” Loki says, “Just nightmares.”

“Oh my god, there’s two,” Tony says, “Fuck.”

Steve crosses his arms and turns to Cecil. “Have you had any nightmares, recently?”

Cecil only shakes his head and lifts his hand from where it’s petting Khoshekh on his lap to sign. Not any about the battlefield.
“Maybe it moved to Dave,” Roxy says, “Whatever is causing it.”

“It sounds like my nightmares and See – Seh – Cecil’s nightmares happened at the same time, or at least the same timeframe,” Karkat says, “I don’t think it needs to jump from person to person.”

This time it’s Kanaya who tenses, and Rose puts a hand on her arm in comfort.

“What is it?”

She hesitates, at first, but a few others turn to her.

“The Seer,” she says, “They said that whoever was infected was terminal.”

The Seer.

Curious.

“Infected with what?” Loki asks. Rose sees nearly everyone from her group tense, panic rising. Even Khoshekh turns to her, eyes glinting.

“The bloodleech,” Kanaya says, “It’s what was causing the nightmares for Karkat.”

“And what was causing the nightmares for Cecil, according to The Seer,” Davesprite says, “And what might be causing the nightmares for Dave, although his seems to be far more extreme.”

“Who’s The Seer?” Mr. G asks, speaking for the first time since he’s entered the room with Mrs. H, who just seems to be communicating with him through glances.

Kanaya looks down, as do the others. “We don’t know,” she says, “They’ve been our primary source of information in all this. They contacted Karkat first, and then revealed themself to us later.”

“They told us about the bloodleech after Karkat threw it up,” Roxy says, “They said that the bloodleech was a terminal thing because it seemed to infect a vital part of the person.”

“It was a perversion of a person’s Blood,” Eridan says.

Roxy nods and points to his direction as a gesture of agreement. “Yeah, as in, the aspect.”

“Which is a vital part of a person,” Rose says, “Not only physically, but metaphysically. Blood is - ”

“Connections and bonds,” Davesprite finishes, nodding. “Emotions, empathy, relationships, links. That might influence how people get infected too. It tries to find easy gaps. Easy connections. Like a Blood player who embodies the aspect to be infected itself.”

“Or someone in a tumultuous mental state, which in turn affects emotional state,” Kanaya says, “It’s not a reach to conclude that the easier it is to exploit the link, the worse it can be for a person.”

“And Karkat is a Blood player,” Jade says, realization dawning. “That was the easiest gap it could find.”

“Cecil was already having nightmares from his visions,” Loki says, “Tumultuous mental state. And it was weathered down further by the more nightmares he got.”

“Dave had just been through a near-death experience,” Rose says, leaning back on the wall as she feels the weight of the information settle. “After believing for so long that we were finally going to be able to just live our lives. And we had to fight against Cecil.”
She feels Kanaya let go of her hand to wrap her arm around her shoulders. She leans against her, letting her take her weight, because she’s so fucking tired.

“We’re all in danger,” she says, letting out a small hysterical laugh. “This is not a situation we can avoid stress in, we’re all – fuck.”

“That might actually be why the Heir is playing with you,” Steve says, and Rose snaps her gaze up. A title. They have a title. “If he needs an opening, and he wants to get to all of you rather than just immediately kill you, then he’s going to make it by putting you in stressful situations.”

Tony frowns. “This is fucking up to say but the fact that he’s actually waiting until he has all of you, to strike, instead of just killing you is...well, fucked up.”

“It’s certainly in line with why majority of us haven’t been infected yet,” she says, “Although people have different emotional barriers.”

“John’s is breaking,” Loki says.

Jade turns to him sharply.

Rose closes her eyes. Right. He was crying earlier. John doesn’t exactly cry. He’s always pushed aside his emotions in favor of just floating around them, letting things work themselves out.

But then again, things have changed since they’ve settled here.

“It’s called depression,” Mr. G used to say.

“It could be that it wants to play with us,” Eridan says, “But we got told that it eats through a person’s metaphysical aspects first before eating through the person’s organs, and remember that we also have The Seer and whoever it is they’re working with to help us.”

“We have allies?” Loki asks.

“Apparently,” Karkat says, “I’m still unsure, but.” He nods towards Cecil. “They sent us to help you.”

There’s a drop of silence as everyone considers that. On one hand, it could very well be a trap, and they have every right to be cautious considering what’s happened thus far.

On the other, why would anyone wanting to kill them want Cecil alive and uninfected?

“How can you help?” Jade asks, walking over to Karkat. “You said that you were here to help Cecil. How can you help?”

“Karkat threw the bloodleech up,” Dave says, “Because not only is he an actual Hero of Blood, and the aspect is his domain, he’s...” He trails off and looks to Karkat.

Karkat, who is staring at the floor wide-eyed and fists clenched.

“Oh, Karkat,” Kanaya whispers.

The poor boy’s knuckles look ashen from how hard he’s clenching them, and Rose sees that there are tears pooling at the corners of his eyes.

Red tears.
Rose has known, of course. Karkat had stopped caring halfway through during their time in the meteor, but he’s never once brought the subject up himself. He’s never stopped wearing his symbol grey. He’s never acknowledged it.

And for it to be the foil of some entity’s virus, and the very reason they have a fighting chance, and therefore his only weapon so far – it’s ironic.

“It eats through the metaphysical first?” Rose asks, moving forward.

“We’d need The Seer to explain the process first,” Eridan says, “But we know it enters through the metaphysical – so it makes sense it would find its gaps in an aspect and through emotions – and exits through the physical.”

Roxy laughs. “Hal says you spent a lot of time building theories and told no one, huh?”

Eridan actually looks sheepish, which makes Rose blink, since she hadn’t imagined him to be like this at all. “I didn’t exactly have time to share them,” he says, “Since the time I spent building them wasn’t really all that nice.”

“Are you sure you’re not infected?” Tony asks suddenly. “Considering...”

Eridan runs a hand over his face. “I’m actually considering it, since – I don’t know, I’ve had weird thoughts here and there, although I’ve had time to get myself out the dirt.”

“Lately, though,” Davesprite says.

Eridan clenches his jaw. “Don’t jinx it.”

“What’s your theory?” Jade asks, although she glances at Karkat briefly, who’s only just begun to relax.

“Okay, well, Blood as the aspect covers the whole thing,” Eridan says, motioning his hand in a circle. “So the theory has to do with Karkat also being able to remember what happened before we were dropped here.”

“He can remember?” Rose asks.

Karkat turns to her briefly to nod.

“I...” he starts, hesitates, and tries again. “I think it has something to do with me.”

Rose doesn’t press, and instead waits. So does everyone else.

Still, Karkat closes his eyes, shoulders hunching, like he’s scared, like he’s terrified, before he just lets out a breath, giving up, absolutely exhausted.

“I think it’s because I’m a mutant,” he says, wiping away the red tears from the corner of his eyes. “I can remember because I’m a mutant.”

“In Alternia, blood color is a spectrum,” Kanaya says, at Tony and Steve’s shared, confused looks. “The higher you are on the spectrum, the higher your status in society is. The lower you are, the lower your status in society is. Every group shade is known for certain traits, and every group shade is treated a certain way.”

She motions to Eridan. “Eridan here is a violetblood. He’s the second closest to the shade we consider royalty.”
“Your blood is violet?” Tony asks. “How does that work?”

“I insect biology?” Rose turns to Jade. “Jade?”

“Maybe later when we’re not pressed for time,” she says, ears flicking back apologetically.

“That would be for the best,” Eridan says, curling his fingers around the edge of his chair as a way to fidget. “But yeah, in Alternia, I’m considered near-royalty. Our princess was Fef.”

“Feferi Peixes,” Steve says.

“You know her?” Jade asks.

“S.H.I.E.L.D. has her,” Tony says.

Eridan nearly crushes one edge of his chair at that. Karkat looks concerned.

Jade starts picking at the ends of her sleeves. “How many of us are here…”

“We’re not sure,” Steve says, “But we do know that we’re getting somewhere. After we get the bloodleech out of Cecil and Dave, we’re going to help Feferi.”

“Can you?” Kevin leans over his brother’s bed, hands splayed out on it as support, so he can face Karkat properly. “Can you help them?”

Kevin’s eyes are determined but desperate, and Rose sees Karkat faltering under the pressure.

He’s just a boy, she thinks. He’s just like the rest of them. Young and inexperienced with this, and he just wants to rest.

But he stands, and nods, approaching Cecil’s bed.

“I don’t know what the fuck I have to do since this didn’t come with an instruction manual,” he says, “But I can try.”

“You can find a way,” Eridan says. “Your mutation is the key to getting the leech out, if we’re on the right track.”

“From the metaphysical to the physical,” Rose says, “Since that’s how it goes out.”

Cecil starts clapping.

Rose frowns, turning to attention to him just along with everyone else. The kid has his head bowed, and on his lap, Khoshekh gets to his feet, his hair standing on end. Rose hears Winston growl from the other side of Cecil’s bed.

Mr. G, standing by him the closest, slowly grabs Kevin’s arm in an attempt to make him back away with him and Mrs. H, but the kid is stubbornly staying, even as horror dawns on his face as he watches blood dribble out from his brother’s lips, and drip down his chin.

And then he starts laughing, and Rose can see something dark in his mouth, resting right where his missing tongue should be.

Blood?

“Bravo,” ‘Cecil’ says, actually speaking, even though he’s speaking very slowly, like having semi-
solid blood for a tongue isn’t very easy, and Rose isn’t surprised to see his eyes in pure darkness again. “I have to say, that’s a very good theory, Mr. Ampora. Did you know it applies to your Sufferer too?”

‘Cecil’ suddenly snaps his hands out, and Rose feels herself slam into the wall behind her, even if that’s a close distance to cover. All around the room, everyone else gets pinned – to the wall, to the ceiling – everyone except Khoshekh and Kevin.

Khoshekh just hisses and Kevin stands this time, slowly backing away from his brother’s bed.

“The Sufferer, or as official historical archives used for government study only still call him, The Signless, was a mutant, like his dear descendant Karkat,” ‘Cecil’ says. He slides off his bed and proceeds to violently rip the needles from his arm, leaving wounds as he does. “And because he was a mutant, and not only that, the post-scratch version of himself who was once a player of SBURB, he was able to remember his life in Beforus.”

He smiles. “Because Blood as the aspect – because all aspects – consider everything as a whole, and with him being a mutant, it was just poetic perfection for him to be a Hero of Blood.”

Rose hears the door handle of the room jiggle, and she tries to turn to it, but her neck won’t move. She can’t move any of her limbs, and she closes her eyes, trying to reach down, reach deep, mentally screaming help to any horrorterror out there that is listening.

She feels a pulse. Something angry and hot, even when it’s faint.

They’re listening.

She lets out a shriek as she’s suddenly forced to slide upwards until her head hits the ceiling. She sees Kanaya beside her, grunting at the sudden impact as she too is slammed up.

“Thank you so much for gathering everyone in a place so unwarded, though,” ‘Cecil’ says, “Although I guess you really just panicked when you heard, Oh, please save wittle Cecil.”

Rose can’t even grit her teeth.

Please, she thinks. It’s here. He’s here.

He looks nearly comical as he waltzes over to the door, arm bleeding, shoving Kevin away so his back hits the wall. Khoshekh bounds over to the kid, hissing again towards ‘Cecil’, as he turns the door handle and the lock pops open.

She feels her skin burning.

Dave walks inside, John slung over his shoulder in a fireman carry, unconscious.

The speed of which the heat escapes Rose’s bones makes her shiver, and like he knows, ‘Cecil’ turns to her and smiles.

There’s faint, rapid footsteps outside, like there’s a lot of people running their way, but Rose just stares at her brother in horror, his eyes the same dark spots as Cecil’s, and he doesn’t seem to care that one of his best friends is bleeding from his head.

“Dave!”

That’s Karkat. He’s on the ceiling.
“Try again during work hours.” That’s Dave’s voice, but even the way he talks is nothing like her brother.

“Let him go, you fucking bastard.”

“Oh, Karkat,” ‘Dave’ says, looking up and smiling as he walks further into the room. ‘Cecil’ closes the door behind him gently, locking it. He just leans back on it and smiles, even as the footsteps from outside – help? - get closer, and Rose can hear yelling.

“Didn’t you know?” ‘Dave’ still smiling, and he actually looks serene. “Every universe I touch will always fall to me.”

And he drops, collapsing onto the floor at the same time ‘Cecil’ does, and at the same time that the pressure pinning Rose and everyone else to the walls and the ceiling release, making them all come crashing down -

Just as the door is kicked open for S.H.I.E.L.D. agents to storm in.

Chapter End Notes

imagine me doing some sort of fortnite dance in the corner of your room while wearing like four aviators at once

- 

more stuff here:

artblr: https://almostsweetangel.tumblr.com
writeblr: https://inkteacup.tumblr.com
Don't Stop Me Now

Chapter Summary

guess...who's sick again...
it's ya boi
angel

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

There are only three words for what happens in the next several minutes:

Chaos.

Green.

Screaming.

For Tony Stark, of course, it's what the fuck. He lets the world know this is his choice of three words, as he says them out loud while he tries to pick himself off from the ground, Steve doing the same beside him, while across the room, the door has been kicked open by soldiers armed to the teeth like they're storming a military base instead of a kid's hospital room.

Said kid is unconscious on the floor, along with the other one who looks like Davesprite and the other kid that he was carrying. That one is John, if he remembers what he's read from the Safehouse files and what Pepper had told him correctly. Tony doesn't have enough time to check if the three of them are breathing, because there's too many things to take in all at once.

There's everyone else in the room trying to move, to get up; there's the soldiers yelling at them to stay down and to not move while they file into the already-crowded room as best as they can, reaching for anyone within range; there's the dog barking; there's Phil Coulson by the door - when had he come back from the Caribbean? - and there's -

A cat's hiss, a loud scream, a surprised yell, and then a flash of green light and an empty space where Cecil's brother had been earlier.

Tony blinks. Everyone in the room freezes for the split second it takes them to realize that someone has just disappeared right in front of them.

"Jade!"

There's another flash of green light, not even second later from when Tony hears Luke yell, and then another right by where Cecil is, right by the doorway. There's a gunshot - an agent's reflexes on a hair trigger despite having his gun trained on a teenager - and Tony can only make a strangled sound at the back of his throat, faintly aware of a third flash of green light from the corner of his peripheral (from Luke, he thinks), before Jade suddenly disappears from where she's crouched over Cecil, right as the bullet breaks through the floor tile and stays there.

Jade is gone. So is Cecil.
The crowded room doesn't still, not this time, because there's another flash of green (and this time he definitely sees it's Luke - two people who can teleport, holy fuck) and suddenly the old lady from earlier and the man with the glasses are both gone.

Tony snaps into Avenger mode as everyone else gets moving. People from outside of the room have definitely heard the gunshot, as Tony hears faint screams and a lot of panicked shouting, and he notices Coulson stepping out of the room while motioning for as many agents to get inside, already saying, "Please remain calm, sir."

God, they really brought the cavalry for a teenager's hospital room. What on earth was going on?

In the room, Eridan launches himself at an agent reaching to grab his arm. His hands slam onto the man's shoulders so he can haul his legs up to wrap around them, rip off the agent's helmet and start pummeling him with it. When someone moves to knock him off their colleague's shoulders, Kanaya's a blur of brightness that tackles them out of the way, Rose quickly covering for her, knitting needles in hand.

Karkat drops to the floor, growling, sickle in hand, and dives towards Dave's direction so he can grab him and John to safety. Roxy and her glasses disappear into thin air and reappear right in front of Karkat - not quite teleportation due to the half-minute delay - sword in hand in order to ward off anyone trying to approach. Davesprite bodyslams into the cluster of agents by the doorway, suddenly corporeal, his wings pushing them over and toppling them into the hallway.

Steve grabs the dog from where it's barking while Tony grabs Cecil's I.V. pole. It's not like anyone's using it anyway.

They're both a little cornered, but it's mostly because the agents are just as hesitant to arrest them - they're both Avengers, for crying out loud - as they are about hitting them since they're supposed to be on the same side.

"Sir," one of the agents says.

There's a flash of green light right in front of them, and Tony instinctively raises his arms to cover his eyes, only catching a glimpse of Jade as she reaches for the dog in Steve's arms.

"Get the girl!"

Steve quickly pushes the dog into her arms and pulls her to his side, while stepping forward, effectively switching places with her. The agents manage to grab him, but with the time he's bought, Jade has already teleported away in another flash.

"Sorry, Cap," Tony hears someone say.

"Well, sorry for this too, I guess," he mutters, and swings the I.V. pole at the nearest agent trying to get Steve's arms behind his back.

The I.V. bag bursts on the agent's helmet, and Tony gives them another whack. They stagger, and he kicks them behind the knees, making them buckle down. He sees a swing coming from another agent and immediately ducks, taking the pole with him before swinging it out at his attacker's feet, putting all his strength into it. The agent gets knocked onto the ground, taking a few of the others with them.

"Go, go, go!"

That's Roxy's voice, and Tony, from where he's in the process of getting up, can only see
Davesprite's wings which are now being held and restrained by multiple people. The kid suddenly goes incorporeal, causing the soldiers to lose their balance at the sudden lack of wings to hold onto, and then Davesprite just shoots up and through the ceiling.

"Somebody get air support."

Air support - *fuck.*

Tony gets to his feet and then ducks down again as Luke reappears and kicks someone in the side, sending them flying across the room, barely missing Tony by a few inches. As he rises again, he sees Karkat as he hops over fallen, unconscious bodies, to get to Luke, Dave in his arms; he's trying to keep John upright, leaning the boy on his shoulder.

Luke grabs them all and in another flash, they're gone.

"Thank god we have two people who can teleport," Tony says, vaulting over some of the knocked out agents to whack someone away from him. The ones near the doorway are already being evacuated. In the hallway, someone calls, "Medic!" followed by an ambush of footsteps.

Not all of them are from medics.

There's a loud buzzing sound, and Tony hears Kanaya yell, "*Eridan!*" just as back-up storm into the room, taser guns in hand. One of them shoots Eridan with it, the needles catching him easily, and he convulses as he gets shocked.

Tony throws the I.V. pole like a javelin at the agent, and it hits them - sloppily, it still collides with them and distracts them enough so Rose can fire what looks like a miniature star at them, snapping her wrist out with a murderous look on her face.

There's a bright flash of light, and the agent slams into the wall with enough force that the surface dents, cracks spiderwebbing across it from the impact point. That has dark red staining it. Tony shuts his eyes at the sudden brightness, and when he opens them again, he can see the agent, their outfit scorched and melded, smoke coming off of them. When he breathes in, he thinks he can smell a bit of burnt meat.

Shit.

It's getting more violent than anticipated.

Steve rushes over to Eridan, even as agents from the hallway are quicker to get inside and start grabbing the kid's arms, mission over shock even when one of their colleagues has just been fried right in front of them.

"Sir, stand down."

Tony moves, intent on pushing people off from him, but he sees the spark of the taser gun aimed in his direction for only a split second and then everything *hurts.*

"*Fuck!*"

A flash of green from behind his eyelids. Good, good. That's either Jade or Luke, and they can just get everyone out of here one by one and then they can reconvene. Another flash. Someone's out.

Tony feels hands on his arms, and then he's rolled onto his back (when had he fallen?) and his hands are being cuffed behind him.
"Really?" he slurs out, still disoriented. "They're just going to teleport us out of here."

There's another buzzing sound and a cry of pain from Steve. Damn, they're tasing even him.

The hands cuffing him and holding him down suddenly disappear. He quickly moves so he can use his head to push himself onto his knees, and then someone's grabbing his arms and pulling him up, helping him move. Roxy.

The buzzing sound is there again; he sees someone shoot, but there's a flash of green light behind him. He ducks and tries to move so he doesn't get hit again. The barbs from earlier are still on his arm and he's not keen on getting another set. There's no sound of a body hitting tile. Roxy's out.

He gets to his feet, shaky but alright. If he can just grab the wires of the taser gun that's hooked on him, he can avoid getting shocked again.

By the doorway, Coulson is back. He's talking into his phone.

"Hey, Phil," Tony says, grinning. It's not like any of them have any way to stop teleportation, anyway. Maybe it's a good thing no one has managed to synthesize it yet, because then no one can stop it.

Coulson just nods to him, but keeps talking into the phone.

He pouts, making it as childish as possible on purpose. Unfortunately, one of the people from behind him that Roxy's knocked over has gotten to their feet and grabbed his taser gun. They pull the trigger.

Tony falls to his knees; he thinks he probably looks like a wriggling fish, muscles reacting to the pulse of electricity.

"Fuck," he hisses, trying to look up at Phil without making it obvious that everything really hurts right now. "Long time no see and that's how you greet us?"

Last he'd heard, the man had a lead on something Safehouse-related, and had moved away to the Caribbean to do some research. There hadn't been news from him since, at least, until now.

Granted, Tony hasn't been keeping up with S.H.I.E.L.D. aside from Avenger duties, given the new circumstances.

"I'll admit this wasn't what I expected to see when I came back, Mr. Stark," he says, finally getting away from his phone. He ends the call and pockets the thing, before smiling that calm smile of his.

On the floor, Eridan is starting to thrash. As Rose's shot at the previous agent has melted and snapped the wires of the taser gun that had gotten him earlier, someone else fires and hits Eridan's side, the boy convulsing again upon contact. Steve is being restrained beside him.

An agent steps towards Tony. Tony starts to scoot backwards as much as he can.

Tony hears: "Sir. I don't want to have to tase you again."

"Mr. Stark," Phil says, disapproving.

"S.H.I.E.L.D’s arresting kids now, huh?"

"S.H.I.E.L.D is taking threats to national security into custody," Phil says.
"That's what I said, you just said it wordier."

Coulson sighs. He grins.

"How are they threats?" he asks.

Phil gestures to the room. A few agents step into the room to hold Eridan down before he starts moving again, while others check fallen agents for their vitals.

"Okay, point, but self-defense isn't necessarily a threat to national security," he says.

The man takes a few seconds to step into the room properly this time, making sure to avoid stepping onto any of the unconscious bodies, the ones that still haven't been taken out to be checked by the medics. The one Rose launched into the wall is still. Very still.

"I suppose there's a lot you don't know, then," Phil says.

Tony frowns. "I think I could say the same thing to you."

There's the flash of green Tony's waiting for, finally, and he grins, hope rising, as Jade reaches for where Eridan is trying to wriggle free from everyone holding him down. She'll get him out, and then there's just him and Steve, and even if she doesn't manage to get them out, they'll find a way. They're Avengers, they can take care of themselves.

Except Jade doesn't quite reach Eridan. She freezes, frowns, and then slowly stands up properly, just staring down at the ground but not quite seeing it.

"Jade?" Steve asks. His concern is making it easier for him to be held in place.

Tony sees the green sparks from her fingers and thinks, *okay, alright, it's fine, maybe she's just feeling a little off*, but Jade still does nothing.

And then she does. She disappears, and comes back, holding Cecil like a ragdoll, one hand on the back of the collar of his shirt, so the boy is choking, thrashing around and trying to breathing, mouthing, "Jade. Jade!" but not able to speak.

She drops him onto the floor and he holds out his arms to catch himself, but since his arms are injured, the pain makes his elbows buckle, and he collapses onto the floor with a cry, still bleeding from his injuries.

Tony blanches.

Jade disappears again, and comes back with Rose and Kanaya, throwing them both down. Kanaya growls, crawling over to shield Rose even when she's barely sat up, but thankfully Jade doesn't pay them any mind. She just disappears again.

"What the fuck is going on?" Eridan yells, only to be silenced with the butt of a rifle to his jaw.

Jade's back, this time with her brother. At least she has the decency to put him down gently before rushing off again to wherever.

He's still unconscious, but he's breathing, albeit weakly.

"For fuck's sake, get a medic!" Tony shouts, raising his head. "He needs medical attention!"

Steve has stilled, looking shocked, staring at the body of John, who thankfully is quickly checked
for injuries. Cecil is as well, and so are Rose and Kanaya.

Kanaya strikes.

"Tase her!"

Kanaya's nails gouge past an agent's mask, drawing blood, just as the taser's needles latch onto her. Rose screams, horrified, and she's quickly knocked down and held to be cuffed.

Jade comes back with Dave. He's conscious, but barely, and he's quickly taken from her grasp by someone, to be cuffed and forced to kneel as well.

Tony can only watch as the room empties of unconscious agents and more of Jade's friends; she's bringing back everyone who was teleported out. Agents are quick to apprehend them, and whenever they squirm, they get tased and piled on.

From the doorway, Phil Coulson watches, grimacing slightly. He's clearly uncomfortable with the situation - who wouldn't be, they're kids, after all - but it's work. It's his job. It's S.H.I.E.L.D. and it's for the safety of everyone, or so he believes.

Roxy thrashes the most when she's finally brought in, kicking and screaming until Jade pushes her onto the floor.

She rubs her neck, as she'd also been held by the back of her shirt's collar, croaking out, "Jade -"

But she's restrained, just like everyone else.

Jade blips out. Tony's hefted up and told to move. He doesn't, instead hecatalogues everyone in the room to make sure they're alright. They're not.

Cecil is crying, arms bloody and bound. Eridan is weakly breathing, mouth bleeding violet from when he'd been smacked with the rifle. Kanaya and Rose are pinned down by a good dozen soldiers. John has long been brought outside, hopefully for medical treatment away from a hazard zone. The man from earlier and the old woman are also bound, both looking terrified out of their minds.

Karkat is brought back next, already screaming threats, but then he falters when he sees Dave, barely awake, restrained. When Jade lets him go, he immediately tries to crawl for him, only to be pulled back by an agent who quickly takes her place.

Dave looks up.

"...Karkat?" he manages, "What the fuck..."

Jade's gone again. Rose sobs at the sight of her brother awake, looking like she wants to reach out for him.

"This is a mess," Tony hears Coulson say, turning to the side to massage his forehead for a moment.

Damn right it's a mess. A disturbing one, considering they're all treating children like terrorists.

Luke arrives gasping for air, as Jade has held him by his throat. It's the first time Tony notices that her nails are actually sharp, enough that they're digging into his skin and drawing blood.

Her skin looks strangely grayer.
Rose screams again.

Dave's eyes widen, lucidity forced out from shock. "Jade, no!"

The boy grits his teeth and moves his shoulders back, taking advantage of the fact that there's less people holding him down, but he's quickly kneed in the back and falls to the floor, breath knocked out of him.

His outburst has caused a chain reaction; Rose yells for Jade to drop Luke, and Roxy squirms again, pleading for Dave to be let go because he's clearly still recovering from prior injuries. Kanaya hisses, glowing brightly, when someone tries to tell Rose to quiet, and Eridan starts kicking furiously, hoping to get anyone he can hit. Steve is yelling for everyone to stop.

Even from where they're huddled, the old woman says, "That's enough, they're children - " but she's quickly told to stay down too, and the man from earlier immediately comes to her defense; he's forcefully shoved back to the floor.

And Tony watches.

In fact, Tony can only watch, because when he tries to get free, to reach anyone and try to help, he gets the trigger pulled on him again and his knees hit the floor with an impact that he feels more than the electric shock.

The cacophony rings in his ears, that he suddenly feels like the room is too small, and everything is going so wrong.

Luke is bleeding, now actively trying to pry Jade's hand off his neck, because she's managed to lift him off the floor and hold him up while choking him. Blood stains her nails, while a few droplets run down her hand and onto the floor.

"Jade, let him go!" Rose.

"Jade, that's Loki." (What?) "That's Loki. Let him go!" Dave. His head is turned so he's fully facing the floor. He lets out an enraged, frustrated cry.

"They're kids, just stop hurting them."

"For fuck's sake."

"Jade, you're going to kill him!"

Luke - or...Loki, but Tony's going to think about that later, if there's a later - is flashing green. At first, Tony thinks he might explode, but then he realizes that he's trying to teleport away, but Jade keeps pulling him back and holding him in place.

His eyelids are fluttering, his lungs losing air, and the green flashes are slowing. If she continues to choke him like that, he might actually sustain brain damage.

Tony grits his teeth, presses his forehead to the floor, and tries to get up.

He needs to move.

Another shock. Hands on him. He needs to move, needs to help. Everything is so loud; the noise itself sounds desperate to Tony and it chafes, burns, and makes him want to curl up and cry because helplessness is not a feeling he would ever like to get used to, and has not wanted to get used to since
Afghanistan.

"Mr. Stark, please stay down."

Across the room, he sees Dave manage to lurch forward, but is too slow on getting to his feet.

So he doesn't. Instead he takes in a deep breath, puts all of his strength into his legs, and twists, kicking up and hitting the agent holding him down in the jaw. Not wanting to get tased again before he can do anything, he forces himself to land on his knees, take a step forward, and lunge.

Several things happen at once.

Tony barrels into Jade's side, headbutting her in the ribs, and the impact knocks her onto the ground and loosens her hold on Luke. The man falls to the ground, but is too disoriented to move, instead hungrily taking in air, his body's instinct to survive the only thing at the forefront of his mind. Jade drops like a rock, crashing into the nearby wall.

Dave hits the floor, and tries to get to Luke, but only manages to crawl a few inches forwards before he's pinned down again. He screams in pain as his arm is held down the wrong way. Karkat moves, one shoulder forward in an attempt to get to him, but he's also restrained.

And Karkat breaks.

"Stop it!"

It's not like anything Tony's ever seen before.

There's a lot of blood all over the room - from Cecil before, when he'd collapsed and that blood-tongue from earlier had dissolved; from John as he'd been bleeding from his head; from Eridan whose mouth is swollen and whose blood is still dripping down his chin; from the soldier Rose had knocked into the wall and the one Kanaya had scratched; from Luke's neck, gouged by Jade's nails.

All that suddenly moves, reaching out towards Karkat as a singular point, and then just as all of it meets, it suddenly springs out, aiming for the floor and to the soldiers holding Karkat and Dave down.

The aim hits true. The blood, whatever's happened to it, strikes the agents with enough force to rip through them, branches of long, thin, discolored blood impaling them in the shoulders, in the stomachs, in the arms.

In the distraction, Karkat crawls for Dave, who groans in pain. He tries to move, but Karkat reaches him first, immediately collapsing beside him in relief.

Tony stares at the morbid little tree of blood in the room. It's solid. Completely solid enough to go through people.

"Oh my god," the old woman from earlier breathes, shaky.

Karkat doesn't seem to care, instead trying to sit up, as Dave is moving.

"Dave," he says, weakly at first. Then, "Dave, I swear to god, you better be okay."

"I've had better days," Dave croaks out, and rolls onto his side, letting out a breath. "I'm not complaining, though."

Karkat lets out a tired laugh, hunching in on himself.
Dave raises his head to take in the scene in front of him, the one everyone's still staring at. "...Jegus grist."

Even Coulson is staring. The little blood tree in the room is thin, but it's holding up well. The agents are still impaled on it, although their shock is wearing off now and they're all trying to move away, trying not to cry out as they do.

Tony sits up, slowly. Across him, Jade rises, growling at him. Her head is bleeding a little.

"Shit," he says.

Thankfully, her attention is on Luke, holding a hand out towards him just as he tries to teleport away. Coulson motions to his direction and he's immediately restrained, taking three blows of a gun's butt to the head so he's knocked out. When he motions to Karkat and Dave, the tree suddenly moves again, collapsing in on itself towards its fork, and then rising in a dome over Karkat and Dave, until they're completely hidden from view.

Silence.

Coulson clicks his tongue.

Tony grins, unable to help himself even when people are grabbing him again. "What now, huh?" he says, tongue sluggish. He might have bitten it when he'd hit Jade.

"Cordon this area off," he says, calling down the hallway. "We'll dig them out of there if we have to. Get medic, get back-up, and prepare for transport."

"You can't be serious," Tony says. "They are kids. Several of them are injured!"

"We have medbays at S.H.I.E.L.D.," Coulson says. He motions to the dome where Karkat and Dave are in, and then to Jade, who's walking over to the windows and looking out. "You've seen what these kids can do, and you'll know what they've already done. They're dangerous."

"Because you forced our hand," Rose says. She's pulled up, and she gets to her feet; her eyes are red and puffy but she looks livid. "You can't expect us to just stand down when we're being treated like animals."

Coulson pauses and then turns to the soldier by the wall. Tony's sure their head has been crushed in, from how dented their helmet is.

Rose just spits onto the floor while she's dragged out the room.

"The bird is still outside," Jade suddenly says.

There's hesitation in Coulson's expression. Tony takes note. Interesting.

"Can you take him down?" Coulson says, "Detain him, I mean."

"He's a sprite, he can phase through anything," she says.

"Is there a way to get him to be solid?"

Jade turns, appears to think it over, and shrugs. "Bait."

"Will you need help with that?"
"I got it, don't worry," she says, and reaches a hand out, a rifle suddenly in her hands. "Just make sure you have a cage small enough for him."

She grins, and disappears in a flash of light. Coulson visibly relaxes.

"Phil," Tony tries again. "You know this is wrong."

Coulson's already leaving, letting the soldiers bring everyone out one by one.

Tony can't see his face, but at the very least, he sounds shaken.

"I'm sorry, Tony," he says, "This is work."

She does get Davesprite.

Tony and the others are blindfolded before they're driven off. He's too tired to keep up with the snark while he's being patted down, and when the blindfolds are finally removed, Tony's already inside a five by five cell painted in white with one glass wall leading out to the hallway. There's a few holes near the top of the glass wall, too high for him to reach, and he thinks about animals in shoe boxes, holes poked into the cardboard with a pencil to allow them to breathe.

Fitting. It's what he feels like, at the moment. So much for being an Avenger, when he's getting about the same treatment as every prisoner they've had here.

He sees a few of the kids when they're being led to their own cells. They're all blindfolded too.

He tries to knock on the glass, slamming his palms flat on the surface until he can't feel anything but his skin burning from the impact, but none of the agents would even turn to him. The kids do, heads snapping up at the noise, but they're just pushed forward.

Tony ends up sitting by the glass wall, trying to get anyone to talk to him, at all, because at least if they talk, he has a chance to charm them all out of here

Even Davesprite is blindfolded as he passes by. Jade's with him. She walks down the hallway with an agent but doesn't walk back out.

Hours later, he sees Karkat and Dave being brought to their cells, finally dug out of the dome Karkat had somehow created earlier - and that was an interesting thing to think about, the ability to manipulate blood and change its properties on a whim. Maybe Karkat can break them all out of here if they all bit their pinky fingers or something.

But Karkat looks exhausted. Dave looks like he had a medbay visit, but that might just be this prison's uniform. White laboratory experiment scrubs.

Cecil and John are the last he sees pass by, both conscious and patched up. John has bandages wrapped around his head, and he looks horrified as he glances around the cells, pausing for too long to stare, and Cecil gently puts a hand on his arm to remind him that they can't dally right now.

Tony thinks he's broken the skin of his lower lip from chewing down on it, as he lets everything replay in his mind.
They have to get out. There's too much at stake, and he's not sure S.H.I.E.L.D. even knows this.

There's still the fact that Cecil and Dave need help with the bloodleech, and with both of them being on lockdown, maybe even separated from Karkat, there's a chance they might not make it. There's also the situation with Feferi Peixes, since they still have to get her out, and those other two kids - the ones on the news - who were detained, but they're all here...

Save maybe for the dog, the cat, the fucking glasses, and Kevin - yeah, come to think of it, he hasn't seen Kevin here - they're all useless until they can find a way out.

Hopefully that'll be easy.

Luke can still teleport outside. As soon as he's regained his strength, maybe he can break them all out of here and they can find out what's wrong with Jade, rescue Feferi and bounce.

There's a knock on the glass wall of his cell. He looks up from where he's been sitting by it, staring at the floor deep in thought.

It's Coulson.

"Come to tell me I get parole for being an Avenger?"

He doesn't hear him, clearly, most likely because of the glass, so he raises his voice and says it again.

"No," the man says. He looks weary. Which isn't something he does a lot, so Tony can tell even when he looks like he always does, if just a little subdued. "Although the Director's going to see you and Cap later for explanations. I just came to deliver a message."

"Is it that I'm getting parole for being an Avenger?"

Coulson gives him a flat look.

He shrugs. Might as well still hit him with humor despite the situation.

"I'm here to tell you that all attempts to escape will end in the death of Jade Harley."

Tony freezes.

"...what?"

Coulson sighs and looks away. "She has access to her weaponry in her cell. She's the only one allowed to."

"What the fuck do you mean you're going to kill a teenager if we try to escape?!!"

He's on his feet now, stalking over to where Coulson is. If a glass wall weren't separating them both, he would have decked the man right there.

"I mean that if none of you stay put," he says, "She's going to pay the price more than she already has."

"That's your brilliant idea, huh, Phil." He clenches and unclenches his fists, trying to push down the urge to ram one of them straight through the glass. He's angry. No, he's livid, because this is too far. This is too much, and for S.H.I.E.L.D. to go this far is sickening and disturbing.

"It wasn't my idea," Phil says. He genuinely looks offended.
"Then whose was it," Tony asks flatly.

He hesitates, and then turns away. "I can't tell you that."

"Was it Nick's?"

"Goodbye, Tony," he says, walking off. Tony stares at his retreating form, until he disappears from his line of sight.

Tony stares at the spot where he stood, for about a solid minute.

And then he pulls his arm back and slams his fist into the glass wall, knuckles splitting through his skin at the impact, bone fractures crawling their way under the skin and muscle of his hand. The wall doesn't even crack, because it's bulletproof glass, and that just makes Tony want to punch it again.

The noise seems to startle the occupant of the cell across him. He ignores them - it's probably a random villain they apprehended, and he's not in the mood for mind games right now - and instead goes to where his bed is to kick the frame. Pain bursts in his foot, and he kicks again, and again, his shoe getting battered the more he kicks at the bedframe. He takes the pillow and throws it at the glass wall; the blood from his hand, as he realizes a second later that he's using the broken one to grab it, stains the fabric., His floor is a mess too, red droplets all over the white surface.

The person across the cell stirs again, flinching; Tony just moves to sit on his bed, putting his face in his hands. One of his cheeks feel the warm slather of his blood.

This is wrong.

All of this is wrong. This is not supposed to happen this way. This is not supposed to be the organization he was working for, and yet.

And yet.

He raises his head, after a long, long silence. The pain in his hand is starting to get to him. He needs to get it patched up. Once his anger and the adrenaline die down, this is going to hurt like a bitch.

The person in the cell across him moves, sitting forward in a way that he registers is concern.

The first thing he notices are the horns. Similar to Karkat's and Kanaya's, but they're longer, and they curve outwards. The second thing is the fins, which look like Eridan's.

Feferi Peixes' eyes are fuchsia pink, and they're looking at him in confusion and fear.

Tony blinks.

"Oh my god."

Phil Coulson sighs as he walks out of the Director's office.

When he asked for backup, he hadn't expected the Jade girl to suddenly turn on all of her friends, to the point of nearly killing one of them, and he certainly hadn't expected her to ask for everyone outside of Steve and Tony (and that was a strange request; strange enough to catch his attention) to
be gathered in a room and to be told that if they tried to escape, she would shoot herself.

It was...disturbing, to say the least, and there was definitely a bit of mind control involved there since he can't really think of any reason for the girl to suddenly just act like that.

How did that even work?

Unethical. And uncalled for, but it had been a successful operation, despite the initial chaos, and their backup had delivered everyone to them in one piece.

He wonders how Clint would react if he knew what was going on. He's on a mission right now in Belgium; Phil doesn't know if he's been involved with the Safehouse case, but this was sure to strike him as something too far. Even Phil himself knew it.

Still, what's done is done and no harm has been dealt with yet.

He looks at his watch. It's been a long day. Hell, a long month, all in all, from meeting Dirk Strider by accident, to organizing a capture of him and his friend due to provided intel.

And then he had to organize the capture of everyone involved with the Safehouse after their backup got them evidence that the whole group was responsible for the attack at the hospital - the violence with Cecil and Dave had just been the result of infighting.

He hadn't expected to deal with Tony and Steve's charges in the same day (and that had been a surprise to learn; he hadn't even been sure to believe the report when it came, seeing as it had a little too much glitter, and Tony Stark and Steve Rogers were involved - they were S.H.I.E.L.D's, they had to have their reasons), but maybe it was for a best. At least the whole thing hasn't been dragged out.

Guess there was a waiting game on the next one, then.

He straightens his tie. He needs a drink.

Kevin is screaming when he's suddenly dropped onto the floor of the bunker's living room.

Sapphrel squeaks, Ruben drops his drink and James instinctively moves an arm out in front of them in order to shield them from whatever's arrived, but it's just Kevin.

And his brother's cat.

James relaxes.

"Kevin?" Sapphrel stands, immediately going for their friend. They help him to his feet. He's shaking. "What's going on, are you okay?"

"No," the boy immediately says. The cat saunters away from him and onto the couch, where it proceeds to clean its paws. "I think we nearly got shot at."

"What?"

Sapphrel guides Kevin to the couch to let him sit. Ruben goes to the kitchen, most likely for a drink
"What happened?" James asks, gathering up the chess pieces on the floor from where he and the others were playing on a three-person board.


Oh.

Right, he'd heard about that organization a few times before. They were the ones kidnapping mutants.

He presses his lips to a thin line. Not good.

Ruben comes back with a glass of water for Kevin. The boy downs it in one go and sets it on the coffee table.

"We were - we were talking, because Tony Stark and Steve Rogers were there and they brought these kids with them and I think the others know them?" Kevin is motioning with his hands, the movements frantic. Sapphrel shares a look with Ruben, concerned and confused. "I thought a few of them were familiar too, like I've seen them before, but I can't remember where. The bird, especially, I've definitely seen him. I-I mean he looked like Dave, but I'm sure I've seen him."

His breaths are too short.

"Slow down," James says, slowly approaching him, hoping he's not too strung up to be spooked right now. He thankfully is calm enough for James to kneel in front of him. "Deep breaths, Kevin."

Kevin nods, trying his best. He gets it under control in a few minutes.

"I'm not too sure, about where I've seen them before, I mean," he continues, when he's calmed down. "I'm still...give me a moment to get my thoughts together, but we were talking and suddenly Cecil got possessed again, a-and Dave too -"

"Again," James says, remembering the hospital and being drenched in the darkness, being slammed into a wall, and then ushered out of the hospital by John.

Kevin gives him another nod. "Again," he says, "Dave too."

Beside him, Sapphrel puts their head in their hands.

"What happened after?" James asks.

"S.H.I.E.L.D. arrived," Kevin says. "They knew, somehow. They knew that we were all there, and they were armed."

"Why were - they know half the Safehouse crew are teenagers, right?" Ruben puts a hand on Sapphrel's shoulder and squeezes gently.

"I think they were just prepared for the worst, and then Khoshekh..." He trails off and looks to his brother's cat, still cleaning his paws from the couch. He doesn't look up, even as everyone's attention turns to him. Kevin sounds unsure as he continues. "He just...got me out of there."

"It wasn't Lu - Loki?" James asks. "Or Jade?"

Kevin shakes his head. "It was Khoshekh," he says, "Neither of them were near me."
James looks at Ruben, who looks at Sapphrel.

"Did you know he could do that?" Sapphrel asks.

"No," Kevin says. "I just thought he was some regular cat my brother picked up - I mean, as normal as we can be, but."

As if recognizing that he's the topic of discussion, Khoshekh lifts his head to stare at everyone. With the light reflecting, the cat looks like its eyes are glowing.

That glow suddenly engulfs it, and it's gone in a flash of green. Everyone stares at the spot where it once was, and no one gets a word in before he's back, a dog in tow. James recognizes it from the Safehouse.

Milko, he thinks. The chalk-eater.

He disappears again, and reappears with another dog, a rather excitable Corgi with no tail. And then he's gone again, and then back again, with another dog. He does this, again and again, flashing in and out of the room, coming back each time with another dog, until the area slowly gets crowded.

Fenrir bounds into the room a few minutes into it, no doubt alerted by the new scents of other dogs in the house. The puppy - now a lot bigger than he was before when James first got him - runs over to James, pushing his snout into his hand as a greeting, and James absentmindedly starts patting his head, all while watching Khoshekh zap dogs into the bunker.

Then, when it finally looks like he's stopped, as he climbs onto the arm rest of the couch and looks over the army of four-legged fluffballs he's amassed, he suddenly disappears again.

And comes back with one more dog, this one looking more ragged than the others. James thinks this one is named Winston.

Kevin swallows thickly and turns to the others.

"I definitely didn't know he was like this."

Chapter End Notes

remember when i materialized in your room and danced with four aviators well this time i'm still bopping with four aviators but Don't Stop Me Now is in the background

Also! I have a thing on Betabooks that I would love to hear your thoughts and feedback on, so if you like fairy tales, or princesses, or dragons, or college roommate energy, then please check it out! : https://betabooks.co/signup/book/3e4944

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Hard Cut

Chapter Summary

Hard Cut: In video editing, hard cut is the change from one scene to another without any transition effects in between.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"There's new people here."
A sigh, soft and weary. "I know."
"Are they alright?"
"Some of them are. A few are injured. A few have a...condition."
"Oh." Pause. "What kind?"
"A terrible one."
"How terrible?"
"Very."
No luck with that avenue, then. Maybe another. "Do you know them?"
"The new people?"
"Yeah."
"I know them the way one knows people they read about in newspapers." A laugh. "I would say like one knows people in books but people connect with people in books. They're as tangible as everyone else."
"Do you know them the way you know me?"
A smile. "I think we at least have conversations to look back on, my dear."
"Do you know me the way people know people in books?"
"If you want to see it that way."
"I think I can."

Someone is passing by. Silence. Curl up. Do not alert them that a conversation is going on.
They're gone.
"Why are they here? The new people?"
"Something happened. Something unprecedented."

"You didn't plan it?"

"We planned for it, certainly. But not thoroughly enough."

That happens.

"Can you tell me what happened?"

No answer.

"Can you?"

"Perhaps." A lengthy pause this time. "But you know why we try to be as hands-off as possible. We nudge. We do not make the choices. Less of a mess that way, dear."

"I saw Eridan."

"When he was brought here?"

"I think they thought I was asleep. I just woke up, and I saw he was being taken somewhere down the hall. He looks...different."

"Time does things to people," the woman says, smiling softly. It's kind, welcoming. Hopeful. "So does growing up."

"You said you would never lie to me," Feferi Peixes says, lifting her head up slightly from where she's mumbling into her knees, trying not to seem to obvious that she's talking to someone no one else can see. "I want to know what happened."

The woman turns away for a moment, fidgeting with her bracelet that glints against the harsh light of the fluorescent above them both.

"You'd have to be more specific as to what exactly it is that happened that you want to know."

She thinks for a moment. Then, "Everything."

The woman smiles again. This time it looks sad.

"Once upon a time," she starts, "We made a mistake."

"There must be a mistake," the little human girl says, hands on her hips and a stern look on her face that tells Vriska she's grown up too fast for someone that pint-sized. "It's been days and we haven't heard anything from the Safehouse."

"Maybe they're busy," another human says, taller, voice deeper, and a lot more tired than the tiny human. "I saw the news about them being in a hospital and being attacked."

"All of them?" someone pipes up from the throng of children all sat around the little girl and the other humans. There's a gasp.
"No, not all of them," the taller human says, before the gasping can get out of hand. "I think someone was in the hospital, and they were all just there because they wanted to be there for their friend. Only saw a glimpse of it in the soup kitchen TV."

"Oh," someone else says.

"They still could have seen the message," the little human says. "Maybe Mr. Winters."

"Maybe Mr. Winters was taking care of the sick friend," another tiny voice says from the front.

"There's still a lot of other people in the Safehouse." There's another taller human sitting by the little girl, but it's not the first taller human. This one has similar features to the little girl, although to Vriska, most humans look alike, so she might be wrong. She probably isn't, though. "It's not hard to designate."

"If they haven't gotten the message, then Mai's right, something's wrong," another girl says, her arms crossed and her face set in a frown. She's also tall. Everyone under this bridge is just either the size of a tiny boulder, or tall. It's not like Vriska needs to be able to find the distinction between all of them. "When have we last heard from the radio system?"

"God, it's been a while," the second taller human says. She's going to call him Lookalike.

"Something's definitely off, then," the small girl says, and then turns to where an equally tiny figure with a sash around his chest is stacking cans by one of the dumpster's that's on fire to keep everyone warm. "What do you think, Mr. Mayo Man?"

It's like a hive, the way all the children turn to the 'Mayo Man', heads moving in unison like it's all choreographed. The Mayo Man only looks up, looks at the can in his hand, and stacks it on top of the highest can on the tower he's building.

All the kids turn their attention back to the front, like the Mayo Man's wisdom has been imparted and it's been enough.

_of course_ they'd listen to The Mayor than they would to her.

"You can't go out there!" they'd told her, when she'd tried to get out from under the bridge the day after they'd carried her here, dragging Terezi with her (or trying to, not that she was going to admit it). "They might arrest you."

And she'd raised an eyebrow and tutted, because for one, this wasn't real, this was a dream bubble. _Obviously_, it was a dream bubble. There were too many humans here, and this place didn't look like Alternia. Whatever arrest was going to be made, she might as well have fun, before she and everyone else get spat back out the other side of this thing.

Terezi had pulled her arm away from her grasp, giving her a dry, "Really?", to which she'd asked, "Are you really going to play along with them?"

She hadn't gotten an answer.

Then she went out from under the bridge, or tried, nearly got run over by a loud hunk of metal that had really bright lights slapped on it, and was tackled out of the way by several of the tiny-boulder-sized humans. Like a complete moron.

Everyone's shot down every suggestion she's had about getting the fuck out of dodge since. The worst part is, Terezi's letting them.
Okay, maybe that's not the worst part. Maybe that title should go to the fact that, after she and her arrogance had nearly gotten flattened by the side of what the humans called a highway, she tried to figure out what sort of dreambubble this was, which led to her trying to backtrack on what had happened when they were in the meteor, which only conjured up the memory of her sitting, waiting, by Gamzee's fridge, and not much else.

Nothing to worry about, because there's nothing there.

She'd asked Terezi. She remembers jack shit too.

"Something's wrong," Mai declares. Vriska draws away from simmering at the thought of nearly being crushed and drawing the stupid card. It's been days, but the reminder is there every time she hears another one of those 'cars' roaring overhead, and every time someone has to explain to her how things work here, and when they tell her, "No, you can't go out there, it's dangerous," and every time Terezi is sensible and agrees, saying they should learn more about the situation before they approach it.

"Yeah, well, what can we do about it?" someone asks. "We're just children. What if it's - " He hesitates. Vriska leans forward, curious. "What if it's S.H.I.E.L.D.?"

She can practically hear the capitalization from the conspiratorial, near-terrified whisper.

Mai doesn't answer right away. "Then this is bad."

"If it's S.H.I.E.L.D., then we've lost the only place we can go to, to escape S.H.I.E.L.D."

She files that bit away for future use.

"Maybe there's someone left in the house," Lookalike says. "There has to be someone who wasn't taken by S.H.I.E.L.D. - if it's S.H.I.E.L.D."

"I hope it's not," the other kid says.

"We all do," the tall girl says. "New York's in shit if we just lost the Safehouse."

"We really should have checked on them," Mai says. She crosses her tiny arms. "Someone needs to check on the Safehouse. Maybe one or two of us, we can't go there all at once if something's wrong."

Opportunity. She sits up a little straighter, then feels a tug at the back of her shirt. Terezi doesn't even sit up from where she's lying down, instead just saying, "Don't even think about it, you know nothing about this place."

Vriska bites down a huff.

"I can go," the tall girl says.

Another tiny child stands at that. He ambles over to the tall girl and moves his hands.

"It's okay," the tall girl says, in response to whatever the little boy has expressed. "I'm less a kid and more a teenager, Al."

"What if something is wrong?" Lookalike asks.

"I'll deal with it."
The boy looks like he's sucking on a lemon, displeased. The expression makes Vriska chuckle.

"What are you laughing at?" Terezi asks, still not getting up. She's given up pretending to be asleep half an hour ago. It's difficult enough without sopor slime, but being in a completely foreign environment that stinks like there's things that died in every little corner, that has been raining every other day or so, and has a lot of chattering little humans that tell them not to do this and that just makes you restless.

And the fact that this foreign environment has been around them for more than a day.

Maybe that's the worst part, that this dream bubble is lasting longer than most.

There's a lot about the situation to unpack. They're still struggling with the zipper.

"Haven't you been listening to the meeting?"

"I have," Terezi says. She doesn't say much else.

"I can go with you," Mai says. Vriska tunes back in.

"Absolutely not," Lookalike says. "Like you said, if something did happen - "

"I'll be fine," she says. "At least we'll find out if something is wrong. If there is, we'll report back here, and we'll figure it out."

"We're like, five-year-olds and seventeen-year-olds max, Mai, what the hell are we going to do?" the other taller kid says. "Steal street cones and throw it at them?"

"It could work."

"Mai, look, Shaun's right. We're kids. We have a - we have a fucking two year old." Lookalike motions his hand towards someone in the crowd. Vriska spots a girl, around the same boy's age, but she's got an even tinier human clinging to her, asleep. "What are we going to do?"

Mai's frown deepens.

"Whatever you're planning to do, don't," Terezi says.

"We could get out of here," Vriska offers. "This place reeks."

"It's safe," Terezi says. "Use that brain for a second, will you - "

Someone's snappy.

" - and think. We don't know anything about this place aside from it being Earth. We don't know where we are and when we are. I'll take my chances here until I can get my bearings, thanks."

"That's very defeatist," she says, ignoring the whole 'this is Earth' part. "Where's your sense of spirit, Terezi?"

"Where's the rationality, Vriska?"

She hums, deciding not to answer that. Instead, she tries to listen back on what the kids are talking about. There's bound to be something she can use here. They both can't stay under the bridge forever. Hell, even the kids can't stay under the bridge forever.
Although, yeah, that's not really going to be a good talking point, since they go out a lot, although they seem to leave people behind in shifts, partly to guard the place, or listen to the purple and yellow radios they have hidden in a hole in one of the bridge's support pillars, and partly to...babysit Vriska and Terezi. Sometimes, it's entertaining, when she can get the kids to talk to her, and that's pretty easy. They're just adamant about three things: 1) It's not safe for her and Terezi to go out 'with their mutations', 2) Don't touch the radios, 3) Stay the fuck away from people in suits.

The last part is a bit of a bummer. People in suits look cool. Pity they're apparently antagonists.

Maybe those people are S.H.I.E.L.D. Huh.

"I've been practicing," she catches Mai say, fully turning her attention back to the conversation. "I think I've been doing well."

"We can contact Rei," the tall girl says. "Would be good to have a bit of back-up."

Mai seems to light up at that, and nods. "Yeah."

Lookalike, and the one named Shaun, share a look, both clearly uncomfortable with the situation. Vriska tries to review exactly what the situation is in her head:

There's something called the Safehouse. From how the kids have been talking about it, and from the few snippets she's caught in the past few days, it lives up to its name and is a safehouse. This place's name may be New York. There's something called S.H.I.E.L.D., which is likely what the Safehouse is safehousing people against. These children use the Safehouse, or duck under there. There's people who run the Safehouse, but one of them was sick and the others brought them to something called a hospital.

(Another part of the situation is that she can't remember anything as to how she's gotten here and that this dream bubble seems more different from most. More solid, somehow. More real.

Another is that denial does not suit her, but it seems to be the defense mechanism her brain has chosen right now.)

She gets up. Terezi does too, but only hisses, "What are you doing!"

Vriska throws her a grin, before speeding up so she's right by where the kids' leaders are gathered.

"Hiiiiiii, Mai," she greets, waving a hand. The little girl looks up at her, a little surprised from being jolted out of planning land, but her expression melts into something friendlier, something more open.

Vriska's violently reminded of John. She shakes the thought away.

"So, I couldn't help but overhear what you guys were talking about," she starts. She hears Terezi already moving towards her. "And I thought, hey, if you need an extra hand to help you with eliminating any threats - " The tall girl raises an eyebrow at the wording. " - I can pitch in."

Terezi tugs on her sleeve as soon as she's beside her. "Vriska."

"Look, the Safehouse is obviously important," Vriska says. It's not lying. She knows enough about the Safehouse to know that it is, in fact, important, at least to these kids. Who knows, maybe it'll be important for her too, in terms of better shelter, maybe a way out of here.

That's getting dangerously close to acknowledging the situation. Hm.
"And Mai just wants to check if her friends are okay. Friends do that! It'll be good to check up on your friends," she turns to Mai at the last one, addressing her directly. "You can see what's going on, and if there's anything wrong, we can fix it. I can help."

When Terezi tries to interrupt her, she says. "And, it's a safehouse, right?" Self-preservation is a key to tap into nearly any creature. Not all of them, of course, there's a few that have a botched sense of it, but there are those that would do nearly anything to make sure they stayed alive and kicking.

Vriska'd know. Not that it's the point. The point is, she knows Terezi, and she knows that, Terezi right now is confused and needs things to make sense because being lost and disoriented and being in the dark makes her feel like her center of gravity has been disrupted, and then she just gets weird about it. Vriska needs her to not get weird about it, because, on the off-chance that this is not a dream bubble, on the off-chance that something is wrong, they need to be on top of their game to get around this.

Or at least know the rules enough to find loopholes around it. If this isn't a dream bubble then they need to get the out of here and back into the game, otherwise everything they'd have done to reach the point where they had been would have been all for naught.

Terezi's candy red scleras narrow, although she obviously can't see her. Her glasses had already been broken when she'd been found. The humans didn't care, not that they even understood exactly what had happened to Terezi's eyes.

"Have either of you ever been to the Safehouse?" Shaun asks.

"No," Terezi says, before Vriska can.

The boy nods, thoughtful. "Maybe it would be best if you both stayed here," he says, "I'm sorry, but it's just dangerous out there. If you guys aren't from New York, and you're new here - there's these guys who kidnap mutants off the streets and we've never seen any of the kids who get taken again. We don't know what's happened to them."

Terezi stiffens. So does Vriska. She knows they both have very different reasons.

"They're the guys in suits," Mai says. "We don't know what they're taking kids for, but we know we don't want to deal with that."

"And they're not with the Safehouse?" Vriska asks, fishing for information.

"Oh, god, no," Shaun says. Mai and Lookalike let out nervous laughs. "No. The Safehouse is where we go every time there's attacks in New York, and when we want to hide from the men in suits."

Vriska's eyebrow had risen at the first phrase. "Attacks?"

"It's a long story, but New York gets attacked every now and then," Shaun says. "That's why the Safehouse is important."

Vriska hums. She turns to Terezi, who looks deep in thought.

"Wouldn't it better, and wouldn't it make sense," she tries, "If you brought us to the Safehouse now? I mean, if there's going to be attacks here, in New York - " Her pronunciation is off, but it'll have to do. " - we need to know where to go, don't we?"

Mai and Lookalike share a look, so do Shaun and the tall girl.
Terezi doesn't protest. Score, then.

Besides, it's not like she's wrong. If this place has the danger factor of being attacked every now and then, it would be best to take note of all the safe points.

"We think the Safehouse might be compromised," Mai says, "That's why maybe we should handle it ourselves."

"Oh, don't worry, I can handle myself too," Vriska says, grinning. "I'm great at handling myself. I can fight. Isn't that right?" She turns to Terezi at that.

"'She's got killer luck," Terezi says.

Vriska laughs. "Absolutely. And, well, I can help if the Safehouse is compromised," she says.

The kids give her weird looks.

"She can put hu - people to sleep," Terezi says.

"Oh." Mai turns to the boys, "Oh, that would be useful."

Vriska's grin gets wider. "See? Terezi can fight too, we can help you," she says.

"Mai," Lookalike says.

"Lester," Mai says in return. Lester. His name is Lester. Horrid.

"They're - well, civilians. Come on."

"We need the back-up," Mai says. "Besides, like you said, we're all kids. At least it would be good to have teenagers with us." Then she blinks, and turns back to them both with a look of confusion. "Wait, how old are you guys?"

"Eight," Vriska says, proudly. She's not sure, really. She could be nine, or close to nine, but eight is always a good number to settle on, so eight it is.

The kids don't seem to hear her, though, because Terezi starts snickering to herself.

The gardens are silent.

She's quite a hunter, Thor thinks, with a bit of glee and pride, keeping his footsteps light as he treads the cobblestone, trying to catch a glimpse of his pursuer. He doesn't see anything as he scans the trees, the bushes, even the walls around the shrubbery, for any indication of where she is.

A joke is at the tip of his tongue, something along the lines of, you know, it's quite cowardly to hide from a battle, but he bites it down, bitter and foul in the back of his mind. He doesn't say those things anymore, he reminds himself. It is unfair to say those things.

Besides, because of the fact that she's hidden, he's going to have a few precious seconds lost to being surprised and having to turn to where she's going to spring. This is tactics. And it's brilliant.
Instead, he adjusts his hold on the sword he has in his hands, willing his own breaths to quiet down so he can hear his surroundings better. There is no wind, so there are no leaves rustling. There is no one else training in the gardens, so there are no swords clashing. There are no festivities reaching this part of the kingdom, so there is no chattering.

There's just Thor, and -

He hears it, the sound of metal scraping, very, very faintly, but he's been in enough battles to be able to catch it.

Thor turns on his heel, immediately pulling the foot he has behind him up so he can use that as support once he's pivoted, and brings his sword up in defense. There's a flash of gold that clashes against it, the sound sharp, and then the gold pulls back and dives.

Thor brings the sword down to block his knees from getting skewered. The gold retracts suddenly, gloved hands landing on the concrete instead, not even touching his sword, and then his attacker is flipping up and kicking both feet at the underside of his jaw.

He staggers. She uses the momentum of her flip to land on her feet, and then she's pouncing on him again, coiling and uncoiling like a mountainbeast as she charges. He swings his sword upwards, the motion a little sloppy from disorientation, but the disadvantage of charging upwards at someone in a jumping motion, is that if they swing from the down up, you're going to get caught and are going to have a lovely new pocket between your intestines.

Her attention shifts quickly, and the gold is back with that same scrape of metal earlier, slamming against the blade to push it down. Thor yells and swings the sword like a bat, throwing her off of it.

She hits the ground with a grunt, a tumble, and then digs her golden claws into the dirt as soon as her feet touch soil, slowing her momentum down and keeping her upright.

Thor grins.

"You've gotten even better, little lioness!"

Nepeta grins back at him.

Maybe this is what Fandral had talked to him about, whenever both of them would play-spar with each other.

"Picture this," the man had said, "Someone took the sun and condensed it into a living body. Except it's not you, in this scenario. It's the girl. But the thing is that you're also like if someone took the sun and put armor on it and let it loose onto the battlefield."

"Powerful and exuberant?" he'd joked.

Sif had snorted. "Obnoxious, more like."

Thor sheaths his sword, while Nepeta retracts her gold claws. He offers her a hand to help her up and she takes it. "You've gotten even faster."

"Thanks," Nepeta says, laughing. "You've gotten quieter."

"Ah, well, it's going to be a lot of help when we're stalking prairie beasts," he says, "Poor things spook too easily."
"Are you going to be hunting again?" Nepeta asks, eyes lighting up. Thor's never fancied himself to have paternal wishes, but he thinks he's starting to understand why some fathers look at their children and decide they're going to do their damnedest to give them the world.

"Not tonight, no," he says. "Sif and the others have yet to come back from Vanaheim."

She pouts at that, but the expression smoothens out after a few seconds. "They're supposed to be here in two days, right?"

He nods. "Yes, the kitchens have been busy trying to prepare for the feast," he says, and then, at the look of mischief in her eyes, "And no, young lady, you may not join the revelry."

"Awwwww," she drags out the syllable on purpose, and Thor chuckles. "But it seems so fun."

"It's all just people getting drunk and smashing tanks," he says, and the words feel foreign in his mouth, feel wrong, feel like an apology, but not only to Nepeta. "You'd spend your time better somewhere else, little lioness."

Nepeta pauses for a moment, but then puts a hand to her chin, making an exaggerated show of thinking. "Purrhaps," she lets the 'r' roll as she speaks, and Thor bites down a laugh. "I can be persuaded if we can go to the observatory."

Ah, well, that's not that big a request. He hadn't planned on going to the feast anyway. Sif and the others would understand. They always would. They've understood for two years.

"And you won't sneak into the dining hall to snatch mead?"

"Promise," she says.

"Alright, then, after dinner, we can go to the observatory," he says. "I've books I wanted to show you and Equius, anyway."

"Oh, have you been on Earth again?" She's nearly bouncing on her feet at the news. "Why didn't you tell me!"

He has no good reason for that, aside from, well, he doesn't know much about earth but he knows that there's a lot of trouble in it, and he'd rather they all avoid the mess that would come from all of them bumbling around a planet none of them are experts on.

Besides, Heimdall also told him, the first time he'd talked to him about maybe bringing Nepeta and Equius to visit Earth, that perhaps that would not be the best thing to do. All he had been able to say was that something was wrong. Thor's forgotten what exactly, now that he actually recalls the conversation, but he doesn't think it's too important to remember the specifics. All he knows is that he shouldn't be too lax with taking Nepeta and Equius anywhere.

Wait, that doesn't sound quite right.

Still, if he doesn't remember it, there should be a reason why his brain has chosen to discard it. He'll ask Heimdall about it again later, maybe tonight.

Nepeta is still expecting an answer.

"I thought you and Equius were having too much fun around here," he says.

"Well, we are," Nepeta says, "But I'd love to visit Earth. It's always seemed so interesting to me."
"Have you been to Earth?" he asks. He doesn't know exactly where she's been before she'd landed here, after all.

Ah, maybe the danger Heimdall had seen on Earth is connected to Nepeta arriving here. Maybe it was chasing her and Equius, or something, and they'd tripped into a portal and ended up here.

"No," she says, "I've just seen bits and pieces of it."

"That sounds like a quite a tale," he says, interested. This, he's never heard before.

"Thor?"

Both of them turn. Mother stands by the decorative fencing of the veranda, looking at them. She scans the gardens, and, watching her expression, Thor looks around too. So does Nepeta, who winces.

"Oops."

There's a small mess around them. Nepeta had gouged lines into the grass and earth when she'd dug her claws in earlier, and there are deep dents where her feet had tried to steady herself.

"Sorry, mother," Thor says. He knows she won't be mad. Still, it's rude to destroy her gardens like this.

"Got too rough with your sparring?"

"Unfortunately," he says, and then claps Nepeta's back, beaming. "Our little lionness here is getting better with her new claws."

"I love them," Nepeta says, lifting her gloved hands up. The gloves are made of metal; Nepeta had told him about her old weapons from her home, a planet called Alternia, and Thor had suggested them after he'd remembered the Man of Iron's own light gaunlets, and learned that Equius had a gift for blacksmithing. He'd brought them both to a forge and helped them explain to the smiths what they wanted.

It had been fused with seiðr. She's loved them since she's gotten them seasons ago.

Mother laughs, stepping down the shallow staircase, to make her way towards them.

"I'm glad you do, dear," she says, and inspects Thor's face, reaching up. When her fingers make contact with his jaw, he winces, and realizes there must be a reddened mark there, if not a bruise. She gives Nepeta an impressed look. "You really are getting better."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

"None of that, now," she says. "Frigga will do."

Nepeta nods. She'll forget and call her Your Majesty again, Thor knows. It's adorable.

"Did you need us for anything?" he asks.

"Must I have a reason to see both of you?"

"Well." Thor rubs the back of his neck. "No."

Mother laughs. "I wanted to see the ruckus," she says, "And I wanted to tell you Sif and the Warriors
Three have returned."

"Their journey was a success, then. They're ahead of schedule," Thor says. Mother turns, and he and Nepeta follow as she starts to make her way inside.

Mother purses her lips. Concern flits over Thor's face.

"Mother?"

"Yes, and no," she says. "The unrest in Vanaheim has been taken care of - oh, and I believe Sif wants to have words with you on that."

Nepeta glances at him, and they both grimace. Sif has been...concerned about his behavior lately, the parts where he's been skipping feasts and waving off offers for quests.

"But the four of them have reason to believe there's something odd about Vanaheim."

Thor pauses. "The whole realm? That's a bit of a troubling attitude, isn't it?"

Mother laughs, fond. "Oh, no, my dear, not like that."

Their steps echo more and more as they weave through the palace; mother leads them down hallways until she reaches two, large, wooden double doors. One of them is open, and Thor can hear snippets of the conversation. Something about new things they've never seen before, something that doesn't belong, the air being wrong.

Thor frowns. Nepeta is still with him. This is a royal meeting.

He stops.

"Wait."

Mother stops, so does Nepeta. They turn to him. His voice, unfortunately, has carried to the War Room, and his friends also turn their attention to him.

"Thor!"

He's barely able to crack a smile and raise a hand in a wave when they're already in front of him, clapping his back and pulling him into hugs, one by one.

"Good to see you, man, you've missed out on a lot in Vanaheim," Fandral says, hugging him last.

"Like Fandral nearly getting cleaved in half," Volstagg mutters, to which Sif laughs and Fandral shoots the man a dirty look.

"I'm sure it was a glorious battle, friends," Thor says. "But you've been more than enough in taking care of the situation. Tell me, what's warranted a call for a meeting?"

He glances at Nepeta, and puts a hand on her shoulder, protective. Nepeta seems to sense the situation and steps close.

Sif doesn't miss the gesture.

"Something that might be dangerous," she says, "We're not quite sure yet, but it's never a harm to be prepared."
"So it's nothing definite?"

"It's troubling, that's for sure," Volstagg says. "Some of the Vanir have been talking about - " A pause. "About magic that they've never felt before."

"Which in itself is already alarming, given the Vanir are proficient seiðr wielders," Sif says. Volstagg nods. "Some of the unrest hasn't purely been rebellion. There's been evacuations in small towns out of panic."

Thor frowns. "Vanir are sensitive to seiðr. If they've sensed this to be malicious enough for them to evacuate in a panic, then something is wrong."

Sif looks a little surprised at this, for a reason Thor can't pinpoint, but she nods. "It very well may be," she says.

"We've had oracles spouting prophecies," Fandral says, the playfulness in his expression earlier gone now, replaced with seriousness. "They say that things that do not belong in our realms have started to bleed into them. And I don't think that's a good thing."

"Have they felt it to be malicious? Definitely?" Thor asks, making sure.

Volstagg snorts. "Most definitely," he says. "One of the seers was screaming while in a fugue. Something about - what was it, exactly, about a reckoning?"

"He's here for the reckoning," Sif says. "He's here to cleanse everything."

"Right, that. And about something condescending. They referred to it weirdly, though, as if it was thing."

"That...is troubling," Thor admits.

His mother touches his shoulder, comforting. "Perhaps we should move this to the War Room," she says.

Thor nods. The Queen leads the way inside, the rest of them following. Nepeta pulls on Thor's cloak.

"Thor," she whispers. "If they mean someone called The Condesce, then that's bad news."

He doesn't miss the way Sif glances at her, brows furrowed in concern.

Thor raises his voice a little. "Does she have to sit through the meeting?" he asks. "She's not a part of our troops."

The look in Sif's eyes soften. She sighs. "I'm sorry, Thor, but - " She motions to the table as they step inside. Equius is already at the table. "As far as creatures falling into realms they shouldn't be in, they certainly fit the criteria."

"Oh," Nepeta says.

Thor clenches his jaw.

Chapter End Notes
/kicks down a stack of yogurt milk cans: n o s t o p p i n g n o w

This is...I've forgotten to count which section this is of the story, since this is split into parts but just dumped into one fic. I believe this is the fifth part, since we had the intro, the island section, Karkat and Kanaya, the Get To The Hospital section, and now hard cut to this. Let's go babeys.

-  
artblog: https://almostsweetangel.tumblr.com/
writing blog: https://inkteacup.tumblr.com/
instagram: https://www.instagram.com/teacupchaos/
twitter: https://twitter.com/angelteasugar
The kids unanimously vote for him to be in charge of the situation, which he supposes makes sense given that everyone else is either a teenager, a teleporting eldritch cat or a dog, but James has not done much in the time he's spent out of HYDRA confinement, aside from rebuild his life from scratch, scrub and avoid all memories of HYDRA as much as he can, and raise his little puppy into the large, adorable dog it is now. Fenrir is a force to be reckoned with when he wants belly rubs, and James wouldn't want him to be any other way.

Raising a dog, however, while challenging, is a completely different ballpark from leading the remaining faction of a small organization because the rest have been detained.

Kevin had told them all about the situation; the new people and how they seemed to know the others, Cecil and Dave's infection of the metaphysical kind and how one of the kids could help with it, and the unfortunate circumstance of Cecil's re-possession and S.H.I.E.L.D. storming in.

With that on the table, James asks for a recon. They can't solve this problem with a blindfold on and one arm tied behind the backs after all.

The pool master starts calling every tenant in the Safehouse, and every hospital employee they can (at least the ones they knew worked at the same hospital Dave and Cecil had been admitted to) - having half of New York's phone numbers with them is useful, although since the bills would be killer, James asks the cat (Khoshekh, right?) to bring them back to New York for a moment, just away from the hospital.

They send their best friend a message a few seconds after disappearing in a flash of light with the cat. They're in a cafe. It has the Safehouse's radios on its shelves, so it's safe. It's run by their people.

Said best friend turns on every line of communication to the outside world that's in the bunker: the TV, the wi-fi, the radios. The radios are silent since Cecil is out of commission and Kevin is with them, so James doesn't know why the boy's turned them on but maybe he's comforted by the action. Like he knows his friend is still out there, and maybe, by some miracle, he can scream through the speakers to tell them he's okay.

He flips through the channels and looks up everything he can about any sudden S.H.I.E.L.D. activity at a hospital, takes notes, and tries to piece everything together.

Kevin herds the dogs into the living room and makes sure they behave. James lets him be.

What they get, hours later, is this: according to the news, there were suspected public threats that S.H.I.E.L.D. has identified and has detained. The identities of these threats have not been made public, and reporters are diligently being kept away and not allowed to film anything (although a few persistent ones that had already been live on air the second they climbed out of their news vans obviously managed to get the story out, or at least a part of it - all the reports are likely to be covered...
up soon; maybe some tall tale about a government experiment, weather balloons and all).

A few internet searches by the pool master's best friend yielded blurry videos of green flashes in the sky chasing a bright yellow and orange blur, but there's not a lot of other info on that. None of the public knows what it is, but there's already theories brewing on reddit.

According to the pool master's contacts, everyone who is in charge of the Safehouse is currently not in charge of the Safehouse. They're not home.

Of course, the pool master had worded their questions a little less suspiciously so nobody would panic; *Oh, Mrs. Johnson, I forgot my laptop and I'm running late for a lunch, is there anyone there that could help me? Mr. Winters, maybe? Any of the twins that's not the Palmers? Mr. G? Mrs. H herself? No one? Oh, geez, Mrs. Johnson, it's fine, it's fine, I'll figure it out, I couldn't bother you any more than I already have, thanks for answering* - and most of the staff in the hospital are still confused by the situation of S.H.I.E.L.D. storming in.

There had apparently been a quarantine for a while, around the same time the news aired (they cross-checked), but after the fuss was over, no one was told anything other than there was nothing to panic about.

Which is, of course, every conspiracy theorist's cue that there is everything to panic about, but either S.H.I.E.L.D. doesn't know that, or they just don't care.

Two areas in the hospital are sectioned off. One nurse had been able to tell the pool master the room numbers.

1025. 1111.

So, in conclusion, S.H.I.E.L.D. likely had gotten everyone. According to Kevin, the orange blur in the videos could be one of the new kids, who looks like a dead ringer for Dave Strider, is half bird, and has a sword sticking out of his chest.

James is unpacking that later.

That leaves only the four of them, plus the cat, and the dogs, in charge of the Safehouse and tasked with the dilemma with breaking everyone out.

They all sit in a circle uncomfortably, assessing their roles, which is...sadly a little lackluster. There's a discount oracle, a kid who once got suspended for stealing a squad car, an IT student and an ex-military who can't remember half the shit he's done in the military.

A teleporting cat.

Around thirty-one dogs, Fenrir included.

"Alright, so what exactly does being a discount oracle entail?" James asks.

"I can tell you when Walmart's going to have a sale," Kevin says flatly, running his fingers through Rover's fur. He's Jade's dog, James remembers. "Aside from that, not much else."

"Do you think you can direct it towards somewhere else?"

Kevin shrugs helplessly. "I'm not sure, I don't really - I don't really control it. Sometimes, I notice it kicks in if I'm in danger, but I can chalk that up to me wanting to subconsciously protect myself."
Self-preservation instinct. If it can manifest in the form of that, there might still be hope. He turns to the pool master.

The kid shrugs too. "Look, I know how to stick needles in people, but that's either because I'm taking stuff out or pumping it in."

"Do you have to phrase it like that?" Kevin asks.

"It's just blood or air, Kevin."

"Do you have medical training, then?" James asks, "Even a small amount?"

"No, my parents were just drug dealers."

That - that's not good.

He turns to the pool master's best friend.

"I made a chat client?" the boy says, but it comes out as a question.

"We're all useless," the pool master says.

"We know you can drive," James says. This isn't optimal, but it's something, and he's been in the military, for fuck's sake. In the Howling Commandos. He might not remember exactly what he did, but he knows there had to be a time when all he had was his brain, himself and his survival instinct versus a fuckton of nazis to kill. "We know you can also stab people with needles."

"That's - that's certainly one way to look at it."

"Pumping air through a syringe mimics a heart attack," Kevin mutters.

The pool master blanches. "I'm not going to kill anyone, I was joking!"

"We're not going to." James lifts a hand, about to touch their shoulder like he's going to comfort them, but then decides that's too awkward and puts his hand down. That's a blalant lie, anyway. They might have to, but this is a teenager here. He gestures to Kevin instead. "If your precognition can make itself useful for your benefit, it's not a shot in the dark to say it can be used for something else."

"I don't know how," Kevin says. "I don't know how to control it."

"Do you think it would help if, like, you tried rituals?" the pool master's best friend - Rock or something, offers. "I don't really know what they're called or if calling them that is crass, but plenty of people try divination, right?"

Kevin nods, but it's hesitant. "I know people who try it. I have classmates who are practitioners," he says. "I just never really did it myself, I mean - I thought if all I was going to see was, hey, there's a sale at Macy's, what am I going to do with that? I don't have the money to go to every sale in the city."

"We can work with that," James says. This is going to be a first, but he's living in a world where people teleport and magic radios can reach distances they're not supposed to. "You said you had friends who are, uh."

"Practitioners," Kevin says. He takes out his phone, already typing out messages.
"How good are you with computers?" James turns his attention to the pool master's best friend.

The boy runs a hand through his hair, stressed. "I'm not great at it, that's for sure, but I'm decent," he says, "I can code. I can send a few funny viruses. I definitely can't stand up against S.H.I.E.L.D., though."

"Let's hope you're underselling shit, then," the pool master mutters.

"Unfortunately not. Honestly, I'd deliver better if you were asking for a ditty."

"God, if only we can sing them all to let everyone go," Kevin says.

That sounds like something one of the New York supervillains would do, but that's not an avenue worth going down. That just happens in movies and usually makes James scream at the screen, anyway. It's a pity the trope has carried to the 21st century.

They all sit there and think, all mostly silent since they all know pressuring each other for anything wouldn't get them anywhere other than having a lot of anxiety on their hands and unwanted bad blood. Eventually, Kevin has to excuse himself since one of his friends is starting a voice call. The pool master's phone buzzes and they start tapping away at it, whatever is on the screen making their brow furrow.

He's got a psychic; someone who can drive, and in the worse case scenario, inject someone with heroin out of self-defense; and someone who can trip up S.H.I.E.L.D.'s systems for a little bit. There are multiple people missing. James doesn't know where they are or how to get them.

If Kevin can figure out where they are through divination, though, he can get the pool master's best friend to distract S.H.I.E.L.D. It doesn't have to be anything devastating, it just has to be enough for him to infiltrate the area. The pool master can serve as the getaway car if their options for teleporting are incapacitated.

It's crude and it's shaky, but as long as everyone is out, then they can polish up whatever 'go underground and stay lowkey' scheme they need to make.

"You know," the pool master's best friend says, after a while. "I think there's things at the Safehouse that might help us."

"Yeah?" James leans forward.

"I don't snoop around, but - come on, Mr. Win - Loki's a paranoid guy, right? Do you think he keeps weapons around?" He turns to the pool master. "Wait, what about all the errands he has you run, does anything stick out?"

The pool master has a little frown on their face. "I'm his secretary." They sound distracted as they comb through their thoughts. After a while, they say: "There's an emergency system, but he said it's for when there's people in the house and we need a quick getaway. He said it goes to a hideout."

Hideout, perfect. They'd just need to get to the Safehouse after the breakout, maybe have the cat or Jade teleport them, and then that can be triggered.

"Did he say what was in the hideout?" James asks.

"Food, supplies, a place to stay hidden," they say. "I'm trying to remember other things. It's really hard for me to think when I'm anxious. Um." They pause. "The Safehouse's doorway has runes on them. I remember he says they welcome only people with good intentions towards the Safehouse."
Put 'em up a little while later than most of the other stuff, so I remember that. I was around for it. They sort of detect intent."

Perfect.

"The door itself has runes carved on the part that's inside the house?" they say, motioning with their hand. "It's got - I forgot the terms he used, but basically it kind of tells people to like, think that it's not worth talking about the Safehouse. It makes it background noise in the back of their heads. That's why no one ever really talks about us, unless we're brought up, or no one spills anything, because no one thinks to. I think being aware kind of breaks the compulsion."

James blinks. He...hadn't really thought of that, although he supposes that's the point of what Loki's done. To not think about the Safehouse or go telling others about it. It's a thing he's aware of, but it's not really at the forefront of his mind.

"Huh," the pool master's best friend says. "I didn't know that."

"Did he tell you that?" Kevin asks.

The pool master shrugs. "He said I needed to know how things worked so in case people weren't available." They pause thoughtfully, again. "Hey, do you think we should make some noise?"

"What do you mean?" James asks.

"I mean, like - if people knew - Loki always told me to keep quiet about things and to pretend like I didn't know anything," they say, "Right from the start. I didn't put it together at first, but then he explained to me about the emergency system and how, if everyone else was incapacitated and it needed to be triggered - "

"It would make sense for someone who didn't seem to be involved to be the one to trigger it," James finishes. "Because no one would guess it was them and wouldn't target them."

"Yeah." They hug their arms, conscious. "So like, every time the topic would even start to come up I'd try to redirect. I'd try to lie, too, and I was awful at the beginning. If I ever slipped up, I'd try to make it seem like I was a casual tenant, just a civilian but - but if we made some noise, if we let the public know what happened, and what's happening, maybe we could get them on our side."

That's a point. There's nothing more powerful than the combined ideals of a mass that's willing to protect what they believe deserve to be protected and to burn down what they believe deserve to be destroyed.

"Like," the pool master's best friend starts, stops, then, "Like a witch hunt?"

"No, not a witch hunt." The pool master looks horrified. "Like, we let them know that the Safehouse is down, or something is wrong - I know Rose said that we shouldn't let anyone know the Safehouse is having trouble because there's going to be panic, but we might need that panic to make some waves."

"Have everyone petition for our friends' release?"

"Best case scenario," they say. "It's either they give an explanation or New York loses its bunker."

"It's something worth considering," James says, "But maybe slowly. We have to be careful too."

The kid nods.
Their best friend clicks his tongue. "Didn't you have to take blood from everyone at one point?"

"That was part of the emergency system," they say. "He said it was so we could go through the gate."

They get a shudder in response.

"We can use that system," James says. "If we get everyone out of wherever S.H.I.E.L.D. is holding them, we can get them in the Safehouse, and you can open the emergency system."

"If they don't know about it, they won't know where we're going," Kevin says.

"The doorway and the door keeps intruders out, right?" James asks.

"There's also wards around the house, apparently, although I forgot the full explanation for that," the pool master says. "I remember he said that it does the whole background noise thing, but it welcomes those that belong to it and those who need it. So I guess it's like, invisible to everyone's minds unless they live there or unless there's an attack and they need it."

"Oh, you mean like - " Their best friend points to Kevin. "Like home."

Somehow that makes sense to both of them because the pool master nods. "Pretty much."

"Wait," Kevin says. "That's - I don't know shit about magic, but that's not true. Or, like, that didn't really hold up well."

"What do you mean?"

"Green sparks showed out of nowhere behind Loki," Kevin says. "Cecil got possessed, so did Dave. I don't know how the infection is spread, if the victim has to be touched or if it can be long-distance, but if it's not, then that's something that's bypassing Loki's precautions."

That's a very good point.

"Does S.H.I.E.L.D. use magic?" James asks.

All the kids look at each other, unsure.

"Not that I know of," Kevin says. "But I don't know anything about S.H.I.E.L.D."

"As long as they don't, I think we're fine then," James says, "Anything else?"

The pool master looks down, and they don't talk for a long, long time.

When they finally do, it's with a weary, guilty sigh. "I would like to apologize in advance."

"That does not sound good," Kevin says.

They close their eyes and press the heels of them palms to them.

"Loki brought me to see Cecil's room," they say. "He said he and Cecil had been talking about things. We knew that, he told us that, but just." They lower their hands and turn away, their gaze distant for a second.

"Cecil's room was a mess." They start picking at their nails. "It's just. It's something. Cecil's dreams, whatever they are, something had been deeply wrong when he made his mess, and now that you say
he's infected with something, that makes a lot of sense, but it's disturbing."

James says nothing, only adds the information to what they already have.

Kevin is silent. The pool master waits.

"What did you see in the room?" Kevin asks, voice low.

"You haven't seen Cecil's room?"

"He didn't let me," he says, tightly. "He started getting a lot more private, and I just respected it. He was getting nightmares."

"It looked like a huge conspiracy board," they say. "I don't know if there's anything there outside of whatever game bullshit everyone keeps talking about."

"Oh," Kevin says.

"If we can see the room, we can try to pick it apart," James says. He looks for Khoshekh for a moment, trying to see where he is. He spots him sleeping on the couch. "Can the cat teleport a whole conspiracy board?"

"I'm not sure," Kevin says.

"We can try to ask him," James says, and decides that's the most ridiculous thing he's ever said. "At least we know he understands us."

"After a lot of hand-waving."

He snorts. Then, "Anything else?"

"I have some chalk in a safe, along with some blood samples," the pool master says. "A few notes I made when Wi - Loki first had me started doing errands. That's about it."

James leans back, propping his arms up behind him. That's a lot, actually, and it's useful. The Safehouse is their ticket to getting the fuck out of dodge, which is their first priority right now. Even if they don't reach the Safehouse, as long as they're out, they can come to this bunker.

Everything else can be dealt with later. Biggest problems first.

"We're taking those," he says. "I don't think we need blood samples lying around, who the fuck knows what can be done with those."

Everyone else murmurs their assent, with the pool master's best friend muttering that anyone else getting the blood would be alarming.

"If we can know where to find everyone, we can try to get them out," James says. "It's S.H.I.E.L.D., so we might need something big, but even a small distraction will do as long as we can get everyone out. We have Jade. We have Loki. We have Khoshekh. They can teleport anyone away. If they can't teleport, for whatever reason, we can go to the Safehouse and open the gate."

"And hide," the pool says.

"Recuperate and solve the next part of the problem," James says. He stands.

They have a plan.
"Let's get to the Safehouse," he says. "We need that board and those samples."

The kids get them thick coats and hoodies. Vriska's not complaining, especially not in this drab, cold weather. New York makes the meteor feel like it's paradise. It's freezing here even when it's not raining.

"Snow's just coming in soon," Mai tells her when she mutters something about the cold weather. If that's going to make the temperature even worse, then she doesn't know how humans survive around here.

They wrap scarves around the lower part of their face, covering up their mouths and nose, and pull hoods over their heads - which their horns immediately make awkward. They get a few winces at that, before someone rummages through a little milk crate where the kids apparently keep serviceable clothing in case of emergency, or in case some of them wear through whatever few clothes they have, and they're tossed two, large hats with brims so wide they can probably have a small island's entire history written on them.

Terezi's hat sits alright on her head, hiding her horns underneath perfectly, but Vriska's horns make the hat feel like it's being hung on a rack instead. It still hides the horns, though, so she keeps the hood on, and then puts the hat over it.

It's the most ridiculous-looking disguise, and it makes her want to take it off two seconds into wearing the whole getup, but they have a goal. She needs to see the Safehouse, and going outside with no disguise is a fast way to get a game over. If the human children are mistaking them for mutants even when they're obviously not, there's a possibility that the adult humans might too. It's not a guarantee, but being in a foreign planet - as is increasingly, and unfortunately becoming obvious, which she's tempted to deny simply out of spite and irritation - with dangers around and not taking any precautions for it is just plain stupid.

Vriska does not do plain stupid, no sir, so she's going to don this awful disguise and walk to the Safehouse. It'll be like the old days, she tells herself. Just remember the old days, the awful old days, where FLARPing wasn't on her radar and she had to sit around cold forests pretending to be small and vulnerable until some poor bastard of a wriggler passed by for her to drag off and feed to her lusus.

It's like that.

Honestly, that's a terrible comparison and she shouldn't even have thought of that in the first place, but it's out there. She just has to forget about it.

Mai leaves Lester, who turns out to be her brother (and she faintly remembers being explained the concept by Rose and Dave), to be in charge of everyone who's under the bridge, and she and Kristina, the tall girl, bid The Mayor a respectful "See you later, Mister Mayo Man." to which he gives them an empty soup can with a faded label, which Kristina pockets even if it's bulky in her coat. Afterwards, the two of them, Vriska and Terezi, climb up the hill and out from under the bridge they've been hiding under.

The highway sits empty in front of them. Seconds later, a large car roars past, headlights off since it's daytime out. Vriska frowns under her scarf.
Thankfully, they only have to walk on the sides of the road, and people give them a wide berth. It makes Vriska's skin crawl in disgust and offense, at first, but Terezi puts a hand on her arm and shakes her head minutely. It would do them no good if she tried to pick a fight here right now.

She can't pinpoint it, at first. There's so many people here in New York, and it's really not built like Alternia's system was, with everyone trying to live as far away as possible from everyone else, at least if their blood colors were too far apart. Here, humans cluster, but they don't seem to want to be, what with how they're reacting to each other.

Then she notices, slowly, the difference between them and the passersby. Or rather, the difference between Mai and Kristina, and the other humans.

The other humans don't look ridiculous, and their clothes aren't dirty, thin, and frayed at the edges. Most of them look clean and groomed, but Mai and Kristina look like they haven't had sleep in days. Their clothes look dirty, look messy; they both look like they decided tangles was a good fashion statement for their hair and stuck with it. Kristina looks a little better off, at the very least, but Mai looks thin and gaunt, and her overcoat is more dust grey than black at this point.

It clicks. Humans might not have a bloodcaste system, but apparently, they have another way of implementing ranks. Mai is young and Mai is a child, but she is not on the same rank as the other people they're passing by on the road, and so that doesn't matter.

She really shouldn't have chosen her earlier analogy. Now her mind's just crawling in spaces it hasn't for a sweep.

The walk is long, but silent, which works for her. It makes it easier for her to observe her surroundings, and given how there's so much to look at and to figure out, she's not really in the mood to fill in the silence. Beside her, she knows Terezi feels the same, hand on her head to make sure it doesn't fall, because she has her head tilted slightly upward, her scarf pulled down so she can identify the smells around her.

Vriska wrinkles her nose. She doesn't have as keen a smell as Terezi and she thinks New York smells like shit.

Terezi just looks like she's smiling, wry, under her scarf.

They take turns, cross roads, walk up skywalks, and go under subway tunnels. Mai and Kristina navigate the city with the expertise of people who've lived here their whole lives, and Vriska takes note of signs and buildings as best as she can. New York is full of lights and billboards, and is loud and crowded. It's impressive how the kids even know their way around here.

After a long, long while, when her legs are burning for walking farther than they have in perigees, they stand in front of a large, unassuming building that looks like every other large and unassuming building they've passed before.

There is a plaque beside the front door. It says Harrison Apartments.

"This is the Safehouse?" she asks, her voice muffled under her scarf.

Kristina motions to the plaque. "It's formally known as Harrison Apartments - it's been renovated a bunch of times. The landlady's name is Mrs. Harrison."

"I was thinking it would have The Safehouse posted on it if it was going to have a plaque."

"We just started calling it The Safehouse." Mai laughs lightly before ascending the steps of the
porch. She presses a small button. Vriska hears a small buzz from inside.

"Who did?" Terezi asks.

"The whole city," Kristina says.

Curious, Vriska slides the information along with the rest of what she knows about the situation.

"How many Safehouses are there?" she asks.

"Just this one," Kristina says. "You'd think New York would have a lot of bunkers given how often there are attacks, but no. We just have the Avengers, and a bunch of civilians decided to turn their apartments into a fallout shelter."

"What's the Avengers? Is that, like, a FLARP group?"

Mai frowns, muttering, "What's a FLARP group?"

Kristina just laughs. "No, they're superheroes."

Vriska and Terezi share a look. "Superheroes."

"Yeah, save the city every time there's attacks. Every now and then some genius who's got a few screw loose decides to let whatever abomination they've given birth to in their labs take a walk downtown, and things get destroyed." Kristina waves a hand around to motion to the city. "The Avengers swoop in to take care of it. Sometimes it's small enough of a threat that it's not even them that's dispatched, it's just S.H.I.E.L.D. agents, or a handful of the team."

"I thought S.H.I.E.L.D. was dangerous," Terezi says.

"They are," Mai says. "To us. See, they catch - " She pauses, thinking her words over, obviously not satisfied with what she's conveying with the last wording. "Contain, I think, is the word I'm looking for. They contain threats. Usually, these are whatever that's sent to destroy the city, or people with abilities who decide to use their abilities horribly."

"Mutants," Kristina says.

Mai nods. "Yeah, they call us mutants. 'Cause we're human but not really. Mr. Winters said we were 'ahead on the evolutionary rung'."

"Like a tier above the rest?" Vriska asks.

"Something like that," Mai says. "But I think S.H.I.E.L.D. went from just containing mutants to making sure mutants can't do anything at all."

Ah.

Right. By what Mai has said, Vriska would be a 'mutant', given her psiionics. Terezi, not so much, unless a keen sense of smell counted.

The door has not opened yet. Mai presses the button again.

"What can you do?" Vriska asks. Mai, at first, and then she glances at Kristina.

The girl shrugs. "I'm not a mutant."
"I'm hydro - hydro - " Mai turns to Kristina.

"Hydrokinetic."

"Hydrokinetic," she repeats.

A water psychic?

"Interesting," Vriska says.

"As it is dangerous." Mai presses the button again, harder this time.

After a few minutes, no one still answers. She sighs and turns the door knob. It lets her, and the door swings inward.

"It was open the whole time?" Terezi asks.

"I wanted to be polite and let them know we were here first," the little girl says.

They all file in, the humans first, and then Vriska and Terezi, and at first, the lounge is nothing more than a polished area that doesn't fit its exterior, but nothing really out of place. At least, until Vriska looks to the side, notices the wide, wide space that the carpet reaches, the fancy, but empty, reception desk, and the door beyond it that looks like a small kitchen.

She looks up.

"Well." She whistles lowly. "That's impressive."

There's a chandelier in the center of the high, high ceiling. Much higher than it should be, from what it looks like outside.

Something is up with this building.

"Welcome to the Safehouse," Kristina says, with a bit of pride in her voice.

"It's our very own TARDIS," Mai says.

"What's that?"

Mai laughs. "Old joke. But yeah, this place breaks reality a little."

Terezi pulls down her scarf and sniffs the air. "It really does."

"Is the building just like this on its own?" Vriska asks. "Some well-kept ancestral secret, maybe, that's just been fashioned into something else?"

"What?"

Kristina snorts. "Nah, this was a regular old building that got refashioned into this. Like I said, it's been through several renovations."

"That includes folding so much space in a little pocket."

Something is definitely up with this house, and she's on the right path with investigating this place. She turns to the reception desk.

"So, who's in charge?"
"They should be around here somewhere," Mai says. She tots up to the reception desk, takes off her shoes so she can stand on one of the guest chairs in front of it, and rings the little bell.

The sound echoes around the lounge, making it seem cavernous.

And empty. Something is wrong, too.

"They didn't answer the door," Kristina says, "Are they all at the hospital?"

"They could be," Mai says. "I don't think we'd be allowed in, though."

"Haven't seen Khoshekh and Wilson in a while either, so we don't have anyone who can deliver messages," Kristina says. "Maybe we should wait."

Mai pauses. "We can. I just have a bad feeling."

"You feel it too, huh?"

"Yeah," the girl says. She sits down on the chair, sagging into the seat. She seems so tired.

"Something's wrong with the air. I can't explain why or how it's wrong, but it just feels like it."

"It smells wrong," Terezi says. She's pulled off her hat now. "Smells rotten, but it also smells - it burns the nose. It smells metallic."

"Any other day, I'd say you're just smelling pure old Eau de New York, which smells like shit all the time, but - yeah," Kristina says. "Something definitely feels wrong."

Like them being from a session fully in swing and landing in a universe where the game hasn't been launched at all.

This isn't a dream bubble.

No, no, this is something, far, far worse, and it's not just because the game hasn't launched. This is a universe that had somehow sat in the middle of the way of their session, and now elements from the game have fallen into it, and that's not supposed to happen.

That's not supposed to happen, because SGRUB subsumes entire universes into its framework, erasing all other commands of how it's suppose to run prior, embedding itself even into the lives and the construction and constitution of everything that is inside of it. Every character is an element, every location a block, every action a strip of code that is catalogued and bracketed and remembered to make a functioning system that determines the fate of existence. How else would people be able to die and come back to life if the death was senseless? How would the Just-Heroic system be put into place? How would the Derse and Prospit awakenings work?

This is a universe where the game has not had its script launched into its very bones.

Except.

Except, except, except.

Some part of it has, and SGRUB - SBURB- -ath, whatever name it takes, is a living being in and of itself. This universe hasn't had the beginnings of its script launched, but a huge chunk of the middle, maybe even the end since Vriska and her session have technically ended their game, is already in it.

It's already opening something, and that something is going to take and eat this already-cancerous universe alive.
Vriska grabs Terezi's arm.

"We need to get out of here," she says, lowly.

Terezi frowns. "What is it? I don't smell danger, these are just kids."

"No, not out of the building," she says, "Out of this. This universe. We're not supposed to be here, this universe doesn't have the game running yet."

Mai and Kristina are giving them weird looks, obviously not being able to overhear what she's saying.

Terezi is processing what she's said when she suddenly snaps her head up.

"There's someone new in the house."

"What?" Mai asks.

"I have a keen sense of smell, there's someone new in the house," Terezi says. "They just arrived. And they're close."

Mai looks at Kristina. "First floor has five rooms."

"There's four of us," Kristina says.

"We don't split up, then." Mai turns to Terezi. "Can you tell where they are?"

Terezi sniffs the air again, turning around slowly, following her nose, until finally, she looks towards the stairs. Vriska leans a little to the right. There's a doorway under it.

"There," Terezi says.

"...common room," Kristina says.

Mai hops off the chair, her shoes forgotten, and stalks towards the common room, her steps made silent by her worn socks. Kristina follows her, staying close.

Terezi summons her cane and follows suit. Vriska does so as well.

All four of them stop by the wall where the doorway is, their backs pressed to it. Vriska sees Mai draw in a breath, and then turn to Kristina, who nods. Like it's an afterthought, she glances to Terezi and Vriska with a knowing look.

Then she silently steps under the doorway, hands poised - Vriska wonders for a minute where she plans to manipulate water from before she remembers Earth has plumbing too - and Kristina backs her up, standing behind her, whipping out what looks like a small black box that's been tucked in her belt, hidden under her coat. Following their lead, since they're going to have to see who the intruders are, Vriska and Terezi spring right beside them, Terezi brandishing her cane already.

There's several people in the room. One of them already has his gun drawn at them.

"Holy - Mister James?" Mai's posture immediately drops in relief, and she lowers her hands. Kristina lets out a relieved sigh.

"Friends?" Terezi asks.
"Yeah, definitely friends," Mai says. She runs into the room, and the man, James, lowers his gun and tucks it into its holster, equal relief slackening his muscles.

"What the fuck?" one of the other humans in the room says. This one is short and squirrely and is on two chairs stacked together rummaging through what looks like a safe that had been hidden behind a painting, given there's one on the floor beside the chair stack.

"It's alright," James says, raising a hand "It's just - I'm sorry, I might not have caught your name the first time."

"Mai." The little girl grins up at the man. His hair is long and tied back to keep it from poking his eyes, and he's got a bit of a beard on his face that makes him look kind of cool, like Nick Cage, but of course, not as good as Nick Cage. He has kind eyes, and a kind smile.

Vriska eyes him warily. Beside her, Terezi sets the bottom of her cane to the ground.

"And Kristina." Kristina lifts a hand as she walks into the room as a greeting. "Palmer knows me though."

There's another human, one in a bright yellow sweater, and he turns as soon as she says that. "Kris!"

"Hey, Kev."

Palmer rushes forward, arms open, and Kristina meets him halfway, laughing as they hug. Humans are so open with their affection, it's a wonder how they can tell every sort of it apart.

"It's been so long, how's Alfred?"

"He's doing well, how's Cecil?"

Palmer stiffens.

Vriska steps into the room, intent on getting as much out of the situation as possible. There's only one other human in the room, a tall man - not taller than James, but taller than the others - with an ugly dark blue beanie and boxes of stuff in his arms. The other human, the squirrely one, is taking things from the safe and giving it to him. They both still at the mention of Palmer's brother.

James presses his lips to a thin line.

Mai and Kristina sense the shift in the air immediately, and Kristina pulls away from her friend's hug.

"Kidnapped," Palmer says.

Kristina closes her eyes. "S.H.I.E.L.D?"

"I'm not - I'm not actually sure," Palmer says.

Confusion flits across Kristina's face. "What do you mean?"

"A long story," James says, softly interrupting. "Although I don't think we should discuss this here, given - " He glances at Vriska and Terezi at that. "We have a lot to talk about. It's not the best idea to stay here, at the moment."

Everyone in the room glances the both of them, for a moment. Palmer gives them a small wave.

"Hi," Terezi says.
"Yeah," Mai says, "We definitely have a lot to talk about."

"Well, I'm done here." The squirrely shuts the safe they were emptying. They clamber down from the stack of chairs they're on, push their glasses up when they almost fall, pick up the painting on the floor - it's of a woman with golden-brown hair, and kind, kind eyes - and place it back on the wall.

James nods. "You have everything?"

"That I can remember," they say.

"Good." He turns back to the children, sparing Vriska and Terezi another look, before speaking. "We can talk in the bunker, if you'd like. Just not here."

"The walls have ears," Palmer mutters.

"You have a bunker?" Mai asks.

"Winters does," James says.

"Huh," the little girl blinks. "Neat."

"Is it okay if we, uh." Kristina motions to Vriska and Terezi. "They're friends. Or, well, we kind of found them in the rain days ago and they've been staying with us since. We've been trying to contact the Safehouse about it, but I don't think our messages went through."

Vriska steps closer, smiling in a gesture of being harmless.

"We're not here to cause harm," Terezi says, before she can get a word out. "We want to help."

"Honestly, at this point, what's the worst we could get hit by?" The man with the ugly beanie says. The squirrely one gives him the stinkeye. "Why would you test fate like that?"

"What's the worst, really?"

"We all get sick and die."

He snorts.

"It'll be fine," James says, pulling the conversation back from where it's derailed. The way he says it tells Vriska it's not going to be fine, even if he's smiling at Mai and Kristina in reassurance. It tells her that if she tries anything funny there's going to be a gun in her face.

She doesn't know how she senses it, but maybe it's because she's lived under a force of danger for majority of her whole life. Maybe it's because she's partnered with Eridan, an Orphaner, for so long. Maybe it's because she's not the nicest person herself.

Whatever this man is, he's not as harmless as he looks, even with the layers of clothing that just makes him look like he's cozy for the season.

"How do we get to the bunker?" she asks, plowing through her wariness. Her instincts are flaring but that doesn't mean she's afraid. It just means she's alert, and she knows what to expect.

"Do we need to dress up again?" Terezi asks.

"Oh, no," James says.
The Palmer kid makes a noise with his mouth, a bit of a softer, friendlier-sounding hiss, and from behind a bean bag where it's been sitting, a cat trots, all the way across the room - stretching halfway - and hops into Palmer's arms as he crouches down to pick it up.

Green sparks fly around the cat, static charging up in it fur.

"Not to worry," Palmer says. "We have Khoshekh."

Chapter End Notes

Happy 4.13, here's a chapter out of the regular schedule of uploads! :D

-  
artblog: https://almostsweetangel.tumblr.com/
writing blog: https://inkteacup.tumblr.com/
twitter: https://twitter.com/angelteasugar
instagram: https://www.instagram.com/teacupchaos/
It is undignified to be tossed onto the couch like nothing more than a strip of glass, but Hal supposes he can't really complain considering the circumstances. Roxy is grabbed and teleported away, and he picks up her saying, "No, no, the Tower. Get me to Stark Tower. That's big, that's eye-catching, if anyone goes there, it will be a ruckus. There are automated systems there, there are floors, make this as hard as possible for anyone who'll go after us - " and then they're being teleported again.

She tosses him onto the couch, runs off somewhere, and being shitty anime shades with a tiny camera and mic, but no legs, his view is of the ceiling for the next few hours. There are several flashes of green, which he assumes is everyone else being re-teleported here, a couple of minutes of noise, green again, and then silence.

It stays silent, for a very, very long time. Several hours, in fact.

Eventually, after he gets tired of mucking around YouTube, he snaps back to his surroundings, registering that nothing has changed and everyone is being awfully silent.

He connects to the tower Wi-Fi, gets into his and JARVIS' private server, since AIs needed some privacy around here, after all (also because they had to find some way for him to still be involved with the proceedings while Roxy was tinkering with what she intends to be his body, after all), and asks, Hey, where's everyone?

_I'm afraid a girl I believe to be Jade Harley has taken them out, Master Strider._

He's tempted to ask, _on a date or like a sniper_ on instinct, but refrains from doing so.

Really? When was that?

_Several hours ago, shortly after you arrived._

So they were here, decided this wasn't the best place to party, and bounced but forgot me.

_I wouldn't say that, exactly._

Aw, come on, Jarv, you don't have to be nice to my feelings. We're both artificial intelligence. People would argue we don't have any.

_Miss Harley appeared to be taking everyone away by force._

Oh.

Oh, well, that sort of changes things.
He doesn't know what the fuck to make of that. He doesn't know Jade, granted, but. What.

What?

JARVIS sends him the footage. It does, in fact, appear to be Jade looking weird (maybe it's the camera? But the tower's CCTV system can give professional studio cams a good run for their money) and grabbing everyone before zapping out in a flash of green light.

There's nothing after that?

*The living quarters have been empty since.*

Huh. Okay. That's a problem.

*Have you checked the news, Master Strider?*

He immediately does. Google front page gives him the juicy deets right away.

Well. Now, I have.

He opens up article after article, reading through them quickly with the advantage of being a computer program. He opens up a video that's just been posted and is already picking up popularity.

It's Davesprite. Being hunted down by Jade.

Something is wrong.

That doesn't seem good.

*I haven't heard anything from Master Stark. If there was a situation that necessitated it, he is to contact me to release a suit.*

So either it's not an emergency or he couldn't.

Hal doesn't need to recheck the articles again.

Except it says here 'threats' have been contained. That's an interesting way of wording it.

*Certainly.*

Can you check if Stark's alright or anything?

*Unfortunately, no. I can only monitor his devices, and his state when he is at the house.*

Can you check anything else that might give you info on him?

*I am able to check anything that was created by STARK Industries.*

A…little troubling, that sort of power. He doesn't want to ask if that's ever been used for something else before.

Can you check?

*Already on it, Master Strider.*

Good, good, that's good. If he can find anything on where Tony is, maybe he can find where the other kids are too.
How long will it take?

About an hour, at most. New York has a considerate amount of traffic cameras.

That's fine, and reasonable. In the meantime, there's a lot he can review in his memory - Ping.

[Notification:
Borkinbork (11:11 PM):
Have you guys seen this]

He has a message. He opens it.

Borkinbork (11:11 PM):
Have you guys seen this
Newyork120413.mp4
Hello
New York people

abeille (11:17 PM):
oh my god
what is that

Borkinbork (11:18 PM):
I don't know, it kind of looks like a comet being chased by some green sparks

abeille (11: 18 PM):
i don't know it looks like the orange thing has wings

Borkinbork (11:19 PM):
Maybe Angel saw it or has better videos

Is anyone awake

abeille (11:19 PM):
@everyone

tcrimeeats (11:20 PM):
I'm awake, what is it?

abeille (11:20 PM):
something funky went down in new york again

tcrimeeats (11:20 PM):
Ohoho?

tcrimeeats (11:27 PM):
I just watched the video, and wow, that was something out of a superhero movie.
Is that real or doctored?

abeille (11:27 PM):
real i think, there’s a lot of videos going around youtube right now, i just looked it up there
also it’s new york, come on

Borkinbork (11:27 PM):
Definitely real, look at these
https://www.nytimes.com/section/todayspaper
https://www.odditywatcher.blogspot.com/2013/12/strange-SHIELD-activity-in-hospital
https://www.truecrime.com/2013/02/612413/SHIELD-storms-hospital-room-to-restrain-threats
https://www.truecrime.com/2013/02/10251111/strange-creatures-filmed-near-stormed-hospital
They feature the videos and have witness interviews

abeille (11:27 PM):

oh wow

tcrimeeats (11:28 PM):

Oh, wow, this is really the real thing, huh.

autotestifieus (11:29 PM):

What's up?

tcrimeeats (11:29 PM):

New York's being weird again, man, but this time it's not a big bad or the Avengers.

Borkinbork (11:29 PM):

It's S.H.I.E.L.D

Though, isn't that sort of connected to the Avengers

@777angeles Help us, you're the New Yorker here

autotestifieus (11:29 PM):

Sometimes, right?

tcrimeeats (11:29 PM):

LMAO, yes.

abeille (11:29 PM):

im walkin ere

Borkinbork (11:30 PM):
Let's chant for the tiny tot to get here

abeille (11:30 PM):
skdjfhsdfs tiny tot

Borkinbork (11:30 PM):
They're not here, it's bullying time

autotestifieus (11:30 PM):
Tsk, tsk, cruel.

Borkinbork (11:31 PM):
SAYS MR. TESTIFIEUS

autotestifieus (11:31 PM):
Yes?

tcrimeeats (11:31 PM):
All hours are bullying hours for you and the tiny tot.

autotestifieus (11:31 PM):
In this world, it's shoot, or be shot.

777angeles (11:32 PM):
...

autotestifieus (11:32 PM):
Oh, hello, Angel.
777angeles (11:32 PM):
i was going to unfriend you as a joke, but apparently, i've already unfriended you.

Borkinbork (11:32 PM):
Oh shit

abeille (11:32 PM):
mmm, drama, do tell

tcrimeeats (11:32 PM):
Theory: Angel ditched Auto for Senna.

777angeles (11:32 PM):
trick question i'd sell them both to satan for one corn chip.

autotestifieus (11:32 PM):
And here I thought we all had something special here.

777angeles (11:33 PM):
we do, something specially trying.

tcrimeeats (11:33 PM):
Well, that was terrible.

777angeles (11:33 PM):
forgive me, it's been a long and confusing day. i still don't remember when the fuck i unfriended auto.

autotestifieus (11:34 PM):
Perhaps a bug. Or a hacker that only wanted to unfriend you from people.

777angeles (11:34 PM):
Imao that's a waste of time trying to get into someone's account just to unfriend me from people.

tcrimeeats (11:34 PM):
I mean, were you unfriended from other people?

Borkinbork (11:34 PM):
Maybe it's a bug
This thing's been buggy since the new update

abeille (11:34 PM):
yeah its been annoying actually sometimes my notifs dont even work

Borkinbork (11:34 PM):
I get mine even after I turn them off

tcrimeeats (11:34 PM):
RIP.

777angeles (11:34 PM):
so uh
i've been unfriended from everyone.
my friends list is empty.

autotestifieus (11:35 PM):
Damn.
Thorough.
tcrimeeats (11:35 PM):
Are you sure you didn't just get drunk and then unfriended everyone?

777angeles (11:35 PM):
god, i wish.

tcrimeeats (11:35 PM):
dfksjdfhksjf

abeille (11:35 PM):
go d

Borkinbork (11:35 PM):
Did you get the new update?

777angeles (11:35 PM):
i don't remember if i did, let me check.
nope, google play says i still have yet to update.

autotestifieus (11:36 PM):
Odd.
It seems we have a bit of a conundrum on our hands.

777angeles (11:36 PM):
idk, maybe it's just because i haven't been here in a while.
my phone did die the last time i dmed auto, i think it was a battery issue, and then i got pretty busy right after that it kind of just didn't cross my mind to message.
sorry, dude, it was an honest emergency.

autotestifieus (11:36 PM):
It's fine, no hard feelings.

Borkinbork (11:36 PM):
I can't b e l i e v e you forgot about Auto

777angeles (11:36 PM):
listen

abeille (11:36 PM):
yeah now that you mention it you havent been on a while
howve you been

777angeles (11:36 PM):
busy with life stuff, you know how it is.

it's winter break, but like, there's been a lot of emergencies around the safehouse.

autotestifieus (11:36 PM):
What sort?

777angeles (11:36 PM):
family friend got super sick. he was hospitalized

Borkinbork (11:36 PM):
Oh jeez
tcrimeeats (11:36 PM):
I hope he's okay.

777angeles (11:36 PM):
me too

abeille (11:36 PM):
too much school or

777angeles (11:36 PM):
yeah too much school

Huh. Interesting. Hal keeps the information on the forefront of his processors. If on the off-chance that Angel had witnessed the S.H.I.E.L.D. thing, maybe they can tell him more about what happened.

And about the incident of their account being hijacked, although he’s not sure if bringing that to light would put them in danger.

autotestifieus (11:36 PM):
It's not the same hospital that the S.H.I.E.L.D. people stormed, right?

777angeles (11:36 PM):
wait, what?
Apparently, there were threats at a certain hospital and S.H.I.E.L.D. detained them. It's all over the news, although S.H.I.E.L.D. seems to be doing damage control and trying to get the outlets to retract their information. I'm looking everything up as we speak.

abeille (11:37 PM):

oh thats some juicy juicy news right there

Borkinbork (11:37 PM):

Must be serious if they're trying to do that

Also here:
Newyork120413.mp4

autotestifieus (11:37 PM):

Whatever was in that hospital, they're certainly trying to cover it up.

tcrimeeats (11:37 PM):

I'm tempted to go sleuthing for it, honestly.

abeille (11:37 PM):

you fool SHIELDs going to kick down your door

tcrimeeats (11:37 PM):

At least I can maybe get the Avengers' autographs if I get arrested.

Borkinbork (11:37 PM):

Oh thats true

autotestifieus (11:37 PM):

Priorities, Crime.
tcrimeeats (11:37 PM):

Look me in the eye, Auto, and tell me you wouldn't do that for some quick autographs to sell on Ebay.

A man's gotta live and live resourcefully.

Borkinbork (11:38 PM):

Modern problems require modern solutions

abeille (11:38 PM):

KDJFHSKDJFS

truly a meme ahead of its time

Borkinbork (11:38 PM):

God, it really feels like that though

Borkinbork (11:38 PM):

WHY

abeille (11:38 PM):

w h e e z e

Borkinbork (11:38 PM):

(Through tears) I can't understand what you're saying.

autotestifieus (11:38 PM):
Y'all should've.

Borkinbork (11:38 PM):
STOP

777angeles (11:39 PM):
wtf did i pop back in for again

autotestifieus (11:39 PM):
Canoodling.

777angeles (11:39 PM):
please stop canning the noodles.

abeille (11:39 PM):
i ca nt fukcinfs br eah te

autotestifieus (11:39 PM):
Somebody call 911.

Borkinbork (11:39 PM):
The amount of self restraint it's taking me not to say 'shawty fire burning on the dance floor'

tcrimeeats (11:39 PM):
Shawty's fire burnin' on the dance floor!!!
tcrimeneats (11:39 PM):
...

Borkinbork (11:40 PM):
You absolute fiend

777angeles (11:40 PM):
this server is a mess.

autotestifieus (11:40 PM):
It wouldn't be our server otherwise.

777angeles (11:40 PM):
aww, that's sweet.

abeille (11:40 PM):
awww <3

777angeles (11:40 PM):
also, this new york vid is concerning.

autotestifieus (11:40 PM):
You said you lived in New York sometimes, right?

777angeles (11:40 PM):
yeah, like, for school. getting away from the fam sort of stuff

Borkinbork (11:40 PM):
Ah, I hear
autotestifieus (11:40 PM):
Were you in the area at the time, were you okay?

777angeles (11:40 PM):
oh no, i'm actually just hearing about this. i'm like, oceans away right now.

Pity. That's too bad, but he can find information the hard way. He pings JARVIS.

Can you get into the hospital’s CCTV cameras?

*It depends on the make of them, but if they're from the STARK surveillance line, I can, yes. Would you like me to check the hospital footage if the CCTVs are from the line?*

JARVIS, I love how in sync we are. Send them to me if you can, please.

autotestifieus (11:41 PM):
Good, then. This all seems concerning, especially with the photos and videos I've seen.
That's an awful lot of people in gear and with guns.

abeille (11:41 PM):
yeah what were they detaining...

Borkinbork (11:41 PM):
It's in a hospital too, so like
There's people there and there's some who are probably so sick they can't move or are passed out from drugs
tcrimeeats (11:41 PM):
Oh, god, yeah...

Borkinbork (11:41 PM):
I hope they did get the threat

autotestifieus (11:41 PM):
If we haven't heard news about it, there's a chance that 'threat' wasn't even planning to do anyone there harm.

777angeles (11:41 PM):
yeah it could just be S.H.I.E.L.D. being paranoid bastards
they're like that sometimes.

autotestifieus (11:41 PM):
Yeah?

777angeles (11:41 PM):
yeah
i live in the safehouse sometimes, remember
there's a lot of gossip even when you're just sitting in the sidelines

abeille (11:42 PM):
true true

autotestifieus (11:42 PM):
Any of that gossip particularly juicy?
Borkinbork (11:42 PM):
Doth mine eyes deceive me

tcrimeeats (11:42 PM):
I don't think you're saying that right.

Borkinbork (11:42 PM):
Silence!
Has the Auto testified to saying the abominable word 'juice'

autotestifieus (11:43 PM):
Gimme the juice.

abeille (11:43 PM):
my brain is fucking melting we get together for the first time in months and this is happening

777angeles (11:43 PM):
this is why the gods forbade us to converge
we're too cursed together

Borkinbork (11:43 PM):
Cursed together to be cursed together

tcrimeeats (11:43 PM):
poetry

777angeles (11:44 PM):
for real though, the most juicy news i have was that i think last halloween someone turned all the
ingredients into rubber turkeys

abeille (11:44 PM):
wh
excuse

777angeles (11:44 PM):
it happened, apparently.

abeille (11:44 PM):
wtf

Borkinbork (11:44 PM):
What
Who and h o w

tcrimeeats (11:44 PM):
This is like advanced trolling.

777angeles (11:44 PM):
it was

autotestifieus (11:44 PM):
Did you find out who turned ingredients into rubber turkeys?

777angeles (11:44 PM):
honestly, it was probably mr. winters.
he's a bit of a prankster in the house.
Mr. Winters, Mr. Winters - if he's lucky, that's going to be the name of one of the new people he and
the others had met when they'd gone to the hospital. If he can find records of him, maybe he can get
the name of someone who'd be willing to help because he was missing.

JARVIS, can you look into anyone with the last name Winters, male, involved with the Safehouse? If
the information is obtainable, that is.

There's a beat. Then, JARVIS sends him a file, just one. He opens it.

He's seeing the face of the man that was with Jade and the others a few hours ago. Thin and lanky
like he's starved himself during his early adolescence and never got into the habit of eating more than
what he was used to. High cheekbones. Black hair. Tired, green eyes.

He recalls seeing the man through his cameras. His eyes had been a little less tired. Stress was
obvious in the lines of his face, but he was alert and determined, like in the time between when this
candid photo for the file was taken and when Hal met him, he's gotten better at whatever he's been
dealing with.

The file tells him the man's name is Luke Winters, he's 24 years old, he was born on December 17
1988, and he works at an animal shelter. It's dated 2012.

Late, but still useful, because this man helps run the Safehouse.

And JARVIS had his file.

Do you have files on the Safehouse? he asks. On all of them? You had Winters'.

JARVIS sends him the rest of the Safehouse files. All of the people who are on them had been at the
hospital with them during the S.H.I.E.L.D operation.

Damn it.

If they aren't on the run, then all of them are with S.H.I.E.L.D. now.

"I'm combing through the footage that I can find, and that seems to be the case."

Did you get into the hospital cams?

"Yes."

JARVIS opens a doorway for him, the sudden available connection a beam of metaphorical light in
the landscape of code that he inhabits. He connects to it, and watches as many angles of the footage
as he can at once.

He doesn't have a stomach, but he feels like there's something trying to imitate the turning of one in
him, as he watches the kids be pushed down and tazed, a few hefted up their feet and carried away.
He watches Jade, strangely grey-skinned with nails too sharp, choke Luke Winters and then zap out
of the hospital later after she says she can hunt down Davesprite.

Something is wrong. Something is very, very wrong.

How did S.H.I.E.L.D. know they were coming, anyway? It can't have been anyone on their group -
he knows them well enough by now, and that's not anything any of them would do. The other group hadn't even known they were coming -

Jade texted John, though. John was with Dave. Dave was infected with the bloodleech.

He shoots through old records so fast he can practically here the data whizzing past him, despite the lack of any actual physical whizzing or ears. He overshoots, however, and ends up at the bank for footage hours prior to the time Jade had even texted John, hours before they'd arrived by the Safehouse.

Still, it's possible he's missed an angle. After all, just because there was a coincidence didn't immediately mean these were all connected. For it to have been, the bloodleech would have been involved with S.H.I.E.L.D., and as far as he knows, the bloodleech is from the game, from another player in a completely different session, who seems to be hellbent on fucking things up.

S.H.I.E.L.D. would have to have a direct link to the bloodleech to use it as an espionage device. Which, unless they were the Heir of Blood (may he rot in hell) would be impossible. So it would have to be something else. Looping back is a smart move.

There's plenty of footage that registers in his processors, but he notices one particular piece of it.

It bleeds into another, as Luke Winters steps out of a room and goes into a hallway. He disappears from the sight of the cameras monitoring that room, and Hal shifts his focus onto the ones for the hallway, where a figure is standing.

JARVIS?

Yes, Master Strider?

Can we get the android model synthesis fired up? he asks. And skip the casing, I have somewhere I need to be and fast.

abeille (11:45 PM):

oh a resident prankster

that's always fun tbh

777angeles (11:45 PM):

yeah, it’s fun when mr. winters is around

like, no one wants to be a part of the pranks because they might be on the end of one but everyone wants to prank everyone so it’s just oxymoronic chaos in the house

tcrimeeats (11:45 PM):
I wish my college dorm was like that instead of people microwaving things they shouldn’t microwave in their ovens.

Can we all move to the Safehouse?

autotestifieus (11:46 PM):
I copyrighted that idea.

tcrimeeats (11:46 PM):
Squatters’ rights!

autotestifieus (11:46 PM):
Too late.
But really, that’s not too bad an idea, for us to meet at the Safehouse. The whole place is a bunker, right?

Borkinbork (11:46 PM):
Safest place for a meetup

abeille (11:46 PM):
unless one of us turns out to be a serial killer

Borkinbork (11:47 PM):
True
Vote who’s most likely to be a serial killer

abeille (11:47 PM):
that’s a hard one

tcrimeeats (11:47 PM):
Yeah, on one hand, you have Angel who is so small and close to hell they’re likely to be a serial
killer by default.

777angeles (11:48 PM):
i might just prove that right

autotestifieus (11:48 PM):
That is not helping your case.

tcrimeeats (11:48 PM):
Case in point.

On the other hand, we have Auto who seems like he could pick a knife and decide it’s good weather to be having a jolly good time making pockets out of people.

abeille (11:48 PM):
nah i think he’s likely to flirt with the serial killer in an attempt to survive

Borkinbork (11:48 PM):
think he’d rather – ksadjfhskdjfsf y e s

autotestifieus (11:48 PM):
What on earth gave you that impression?

Borkinbork (11:48 PM):
Your cannibal neighbor

autotestifieus (11:49 PM):
Ah.

One time.
abeille (11:49 PM):

too late

Borkinbork (11:49 PM):

The shame stays with you forever
So unanimous agreement only Angel is likely to kill people

autotestifieus (11:49 PM):

I’ll disagree on that.

777angeles (11:49 PM):

re-friending you for defending my honor.

autotestifieus (11:50 PM):

I think they’re likely to kill people by accident despite being well-meaning.

777angeles (11:50 PM):

unfriended for being a traitor.

abeille (11:50 PM):

rip

tcrimeeats (11:50 PM):

More proof to my theories…
We’re gonna have Angel as a serial killer.
And then, uh, I guess…since we decided Auto is garbage.

777angeles (11:50 PM):

he is
tcrimeeats (11:50 PM):

Senna would be a serial killer if they tried, I think.

It’s in the vibe.

Borkinbork (11:50 PM):

skjdfhsk this chatroom is filled with gossip tonight

777angeles (11:51 PM):

hey

i just noticed

where *is* senna?

Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry this is late. I was at a three day conference while also being sick. Anyway, enjoy the AI madness.

Works inspired by this one:

[we all suffer but we recover just to discover life where we all are](#) by [felinedetached](#)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!