Wires and Stars: Consummation

by tatterdemalionAmberite (amberite), titianArchivist

Summary

==> Present Sollux: **You know what you have to do.**

Notes

As usual, warnings will be added as content is added, and specific chapter warnings will
continue in chapter notes when it seems appropriate. (The M rating starts at chapter 2, and goes to E somewhere within a couple more chapters of this juncture, so we added that early."

*Consummation* is where we start having an entire shipping grid (which Titian and I legit doodled in crayon when we met in person. EXCELLENT LIFE CHOICES I say.) I'm not going to post every single relationship in the tags right now, so as to avoid spamming them, as the focus is still on Sollux and what he sees and feels and goes through, and most of the others are in the periphery. But the open spoiler policy still stands. We will happily not only tell you if our story will punch you in the feels (answer: probably) but also exactly how it will punch you in the feels and what the aftercare will be like, because aftercare is important.

New soundtrack songs for *Consummation* are:
ThouShaltNot - Trial By Fire
Loch Lomond - Wax and Wire

Chapter titles may be lines from these or sometimes from songs used in *Initiation*. 
here and now it doesn't matter the highway you have taken

===> Present Sollux: Awaken.

You're already awake. You're in your recuperacoon, and it's the crack of dusk (odd, being awake right then, not so much earlier or later) and you don't remember sleeping - no, you do, you saw Astris, like always, and -

And it makes you suddenly breathless to feel the ongoing rhythm of starship noise in the back of your mind, not on the frequency bands of the dying, because you remember what was about to begin, and you're tight-chested and glad and sorry - you remember everything.

Your ablutions are cursory and by the time you're done Trollian is already dinging. You take a deep breath and look.

-- apocalypseArisen [AA] began trolling twinArmageddons --

AA: s0llux
AA: what did y0u d0 t0 the timeline
TA: ii don't know, aa, are you 2tiill a collectiion of robot2?
AA: n0
TA: what do you remember?
AA: i remember things that didnt happen
AA: like being a c0llection of r0b0ts
TA: yeah me two.
AA: n0 i think i remember m0re than the rest 0f y0u.
AA: i remember things that didnt happen even when 0ther things that didnt happen happened
TA: what doe2 that even MEAN.
AA: its hard t0 explain
AA: i kn0w i was supp0sed t0 tell y0u i was s0rry
AA: 0nce
AA: but i d0nt kn0w what i meant by that n0w
TA: no, don't even 2tart that 2hiit, ii think we have e2tablili2hed that you are not even allowed two be 2orry for anything untii ii have been apologiizing for longer than eiither of u2 could normally be alive.
AA: that w0rd
TA: what word?
AA: n0rmal. was it supp0sed to be
AA: a funny j0ke
TA: ...no, ii don't thiink 2o.
AA: 0k
AA: i remember that y0u like it when i laugh
AA: s0 i am trying t0 remember t0 d0 that

You sit there for a moment so completely stunned that you can’t think of what to say, frozen in place until a tear falls into the keyboard of your husktop and you jerk back, irritably, swiping at the keys so the sensitive hardware won’t gum up.

TA: aa, you don’t have two do that.

you type, wishing desperately that she’ll respond, react, argue with you, insist - that somewhere in that strange placid collection of impressions and memories and voices you’ll strike a mark, find a
stray ornery feeling, but:

AA: Okay

You're not sure what to say to that, so you just open up another tab.

-- twinArmageddons [TA] began trolling cuttlefishCuller --

TA: hey feferii.
CC: You ardly ever call me by name! 38D
TA: 2o you remember me, then, that'2 good.
TA: what el2e do you remember?
CC: EV--ERYFIN! I t)(ink.
CC: And Eridan remembers me breaking up wit( )im, at any rate. )(e's trying to get me to )(ake )(im back. 38C
CC: Wow, t)(is is reely complicated. Your matesprit... is alive now, again?
TA: ye2.

And the memories you're integrating are all starting to fold in on you, to coalesce at some gravitational center that you didn't know you possessed; that you didn't possess, yestereve, in this timeline. You're going to need to speak up, you're going to need to act; it's taking shape in your mind, outside your mind. Of all the stupid pivot points for the fate of the world, a Trollian chat seems the most ridiculous, but you can feel the probabilities winding about you and Feferi, pulling heavy and tight.

This is going to be the most impossible thing you've asked of anyone, ever. And you still don't feel worthy of demanding the respect it will require to be at the center of this. But at the same time, there's no one else who can start this off and see it through, and you feel more certain of that with each passing moment.

You take a deep breath and type:

TA: feferii, do you tru2t me?
TA: no, wrong que2tiion, what ii need to a2k ii2 how MUCH do you tru2t me?
CC: I said I would bereef you, and I did; does t)(at answer your question?
TA: maybe.
TA: if ii told you we would need two change the world, what would you 2ay?

The chat window is dead for what you know is less than half a minute, but it feels like sweeps pass while you wait for her answer.

CC: I would say I've known t)(at was true for a long time!
CC: But you manta t)(at more t)(an abstractly, didn't you?
TA: ye2.
TA: and thii2 ii2 going two require you front and center, ii think you know why.
CC: I'll follow your lead w)(et)(er or not you still )(ave romantic feelings for me, Sollux.
CC: And gudgeon some sense into you w)(enever you need me to. 38D
TA: ii have a lot of feeling2 about you, ff.
TA: ii don't know how two cla22ify them right now becau2e of everythiing that never happened.
TA: ii mean iin thii2 tiimeline we techniically haven't kii22ed yet, but that doe2n't mean ii don't remember kii22ing you, ii do, and ii want you ii in my life and ii in my quadrant2, and not ii in a caliiigiinou2 quadrant, but out2iiide of that, everythiing ii2 compliicated.
CC: It sure as S)(-ELL is!
CC: But you're s)(important to me and you minnow your s)(it.
CC: Yea, we need to do somethin. The question is when I've got it (aboat) (is before and I don't want to see our friends) urt for nofin. 38C
TA: I was thinking that way two, but now I'm realising they have 2kiin in the game themelves.

You double-check your proxy settings before going on, even though you're not using words that should trip a surveillance bot.

TA: I mean if any individual troll among them could survive a whole... I know two many of their secrets now two think they could all make it. TA: Two many mutation2 and idiocy2ie2. TA: I mean if I didn't call myself fir2t, which we can all agree ii2 ju2t...
TA: I think I have a slightly smaller load of nope for culling myself but we don't need...I'm a whole... I know everyone will survive a whole... I know... I think twenty.
TA: well... I think I have a 2liightly 2maller a22load of nope for culling my2elf but we don't need two 2pliit haiir2, eiither way we are up two our nook2 in metric a22load2 of nope.
CC: You alaways have such lovely mental images, Sollux!
TA: I aim to please.
TA: anywave...
TA: wow, it feel2 weird u2iing your oceanic pun2, liike i've been doiing iit for nearly a periigee, and at the same time i know i've never done it before.
TA: It's like we've...doubled back.
TA: How the fuck should I know, I'm only the software engiineer.

== Sollux: Deal with these trolls later. Get back to FF.

TA: let's meet up a2 soon a2 we can, i2 don't want thii2 two wait.

~~~

== Reader: Wait a minute here. The game isn't going to happen in this timestream, right? So why am I getting these command prompts?
Ah, yes. You have waited so patiently; what am I to do but resume my expository function for you? I was telling you about CANCELLED SESSIONS, and now you have the background knowledge to understand the implications. Very well, then. I shall continue.

A CANCELLED SESSION results when a player makes a decision in the course of play which restores their universe to a pre-Reckoning state and removes gameplay from the timeline.

However, due to TIME SHENANIGANS, events which happen within the game are always necessary antecedents for events which have happened prior to the Reckoning, including but not limited to ectobiological loops and interventions of First Guardians. Like the original White Text Guy, who has now never existed.

===> Then how did all the...

That’s where I come in. Or rather, came in at the beginning of the universe, in this iteration. You may call me Tiresias.

The template that gave rise to Doc Scratch, AKA Mr. Vanilla Milkshake, AKA White Text Guy, in the previous iteration of the universe, birthed me instead in this one. Call it the stray whim of a universe never to be born. The private joke of a fertile imagination so interwoven with the Horroterrors that its tendency toward obscure references has carried through into timelines that preceded it; timelines it would not otherwise ever touch.

But leaving aside the significance of my moniker: in a CANCELLED SESSION, the game elements which are retroactively necessary to the universe remain in place - or more accurately, are substituted with elements of identical function.

Or mostly-identical function. Despite the sterling quality of my sinister machinations and near-omniscience, I am an utterly terrible host. And I am not shepherding the universe toward apocalypse. Rather, I deal in the dangling and resolution of loose ends; I supply alternate beginnings and endings to devices within the framework of the game that would otherwise be at a loss.

===> So do you really have, you know...

The context here is a planet full of hermaphroditic aliens. My gender presentation is the most irrelevant thing we could possibly drag into this meta-narrative sideline.

But I have inherited my predecessor's infinite supply of command prompts. Take as many as you please.

~~~

===> Sollux: await and plan.

Even with all possible security measures, you think it's prudent to wait to meet in a physical location before laying out plans in their entirety. So you've arranged to see Feferi first, have her check whether your nascent ideas seem sound, and then…

Then you're going to involve everyone else. One at a time, mostly. Somewhere where communications aren't recorded, which feels threatening to you even though it's for your own protection.

But right now: right now you're hearing that shift in the back of your mind, the distinct sensation of attention that you feel when a part of his consciousness peels away from the ship, restless, searching, scanning - alert, maybe, to the difference in your own mind - and you switch off the speakers on
your husktop and close your eyes, breathing, bringing into focus - feeling the sudden vertigo of reorienting, in dream you're standing, and he's -

You throw yourself into Astris' arms while the dreamspace is still half-raveled, shaking and clinging even though you're being too abrupt and he is startled, still getting his bearings, phasing in and out of solidity. “I'm sorry, I'm so sorry,” you’re saying, the words coming out your mouth faster than you can actually think them through. “I - I think I chose the wrong way, I didn't know what he was saying, what he was offering me, and I’m too selfish, I’m always too selfish -”

With the final flicker he gathers you in but it’s automatic, it isn’t really comforting, he doesn’t know. “Sollux, d -” He stops, his face half-buried in your hair. You hold your breath - “Your memory” - but he only pulls you in tighter - “What happened to your memory?”

“I haven’t, I haven’t lost anything, I remember too much,” you stammer, “I don’t know if I can explain everything -” and for once you’re the one being judicious, the one holding back floods of information, scared that the wrong thing let slip might devastate.

But what you are not being now is tenuous. Frightened and exhilarated, giddy with relief soured all over with guilt but you know what you know and the only way to go is forward. You don’t know if you can tell him the right things, or if he’ll believe you, but that matters less because there are other secrets now, and other reserves against doubt.

“Too much -” he echoes - “Too much - it’s blurred - planets -” - his hold shifts, measuring - “You’ve changed, your... shoulders are - no -” His hands grapple frantically at the back of your head, rush down your spine, and you have to tell him.

“It’s okay, I - I’m still real,” you blurt out and it’s only when you do that you realize one of the things that’s changed for you: that you’re more sure of him than you ever have been before, you’ve completely discarded the last shreds of doubt that cast him as a projection of your own mind. Both your hands still brace on his ribcage, as you draw back just enough to look him in the eye - “The timeline changed. It - there were things that were going to happen in the next half-sweep, to the - the machinery of the universe. Things that did happen. I lived through it all and I remember - and I’m not the only one who remembers -”

You’re trying every tactic you know to dim or dull the memories he shouldn’t hear, but there’s one that in your rush of apology you couldn’t help but let slip - that crawls bare and readable across your mental screen every time you hear him speak -

“Your voices,” he whispers, and brushes fingertips across your temple as if that would help him draw the memory out, as if just listening to him hadn’t turned your thinkpan into a broken wireless tower broadcasting echoes of old grief. “You never told me.”

And then he pulls you back in and presses his cheek to yours and just listens and you know what he’s listening for but can’t tell what he’s finding until - “But you don’t hear me anymore.”

“I never told you because that never happened. It happened and then it never happened. I would have started hearing you just days from now - but now I won’t, now I -”

It catches in your throat, a swallowed sob, and the words break into pieces on it, this roiling mess of emotions so violently felt and so contradictory that they push and shove at each other and make a hot blur of distress, the selfish grief that gnawed at you and the profound relief of knowing he finally had peace, would never be hurt again, and now both of them are over and all you can say is “I’m sorry,” again, “I’m sorry.”
“Sollux, my own,” quiet and close in to your ear and how can Astris be so calm, reaching up to rub near enough to one of your horns to comfort (but you don’t want to be comforted, don’t even -) but not so close as to stifle - “I... gave up that right for you. Perigees ago.” Until that point you could keep the tears in, but you choke and shut your eyes hard and they still come spilling out and he keeps saying these things while you try to get a breath to speak, to protest - “I still wish for my life to end, but... I have no right to leave you. Or to mourn that I am still here and... yours.” Quiet, even calm - but so close in he can’t hide that his voice goes hoarse, can only keep you from seeing what the dampness on your neck is.

"No!" You're almost shouting, volume too loud for the proximity but if you try to control your voice now you won't be able to speak at all. "No, no, don't, I'm not worth that, not what they do to you, don't tell me I am, I don't think anyone is -"

He has to bend you down a little, now, to press a kiss to the crown of your head, and your mind rebels against the tenderness even as your body leans into it and he murmurs into your hair, “You say that you were offered my life and did not have the strength to refuse it. Sollux, if I were offered death, I would have no right to accept - and yet I have no doubt that I would embrace it. Even though you... are worth so many millennia of pain to me that this ship would grind into dust before I could serve such a sentence.”

You are bristling, still, your arms braced against him even as you cry helplessly into his collarbones. The discord drags a purr out of your throat, involuntary, loud anxious precarious balanced in that space between resisting and seeking comfort - but when he says I would embrace it the tension starts to ebb out of you and you go quiet and still and soft and press into the warmth, breathing out hard. Your mind still blazes with guilt, but only for right now, not for everything that happened before or will happen after this, and your voice is small and hushed. “I didn’t even know what I was choosing, only that we were leaving behind the game,” you confess miserably. “But on some level I think I did. You got to die, before - you got to die and I fucked it up."

And Astris grasps at words, at your back through your shirt, mouths no but doesn't say it as a shiver runs through him, warm breaths into your hair – "So weak for all our power, you and I..." he mumbles half-audibly to himself, and for what seems like a very long time he just looks at you as you drift and let tears fall. When he speaks, you force your watery eyes to focus and his cheeks and chin are just as sheened-over and blotchy as yours are. "I believe you. And I forgive you, always, as many times as I hope you will forgive me, in the end."

"In some ways I have already," you tell him softly, remembering echoes of his voice.

And for a moment he freezes tense against you as if you've shocked him, eyes teary and lowered and watching your mouth as you speak – gaze slipping down to the dingy green carpet, and in a rush, "I pity you so much, I want - to feel everything you lived through, while - " And he gives up and just kisses you, then, slick and urgent and tasting of salt.

You kiss him hungrily, half-disbelieving, still, distressed and comforted, purring and crying at once, guilty even somehow for how hard you’re pulling him to you, as if it wasn’t a manipulation of fate but the sheer force of your wanting that turned the clock back and dragged the wretched world back into being - you ready yourself to open your mind, and then realize -

“I can’t,” you tell him, “I’m sorry, I - some of it, yes. But not all of it. Because it’s connected - it’s connected to something I can’t share.” You breathe in deep and shaky, try to compose yourself, hands tight on his shoulders - “I’m going to make you a promise now and it’s very large and I’m at the very beginning of it. I won’t leave you this way forever, Astris, I swear to you.”

His mind is so close against the edges of yours, stretching for nearly-given snapped-shut memories,
that perception swims with a marbling of his emotions and yours when you make your promise, colors and edges and gratitude and guilt –

- an almost-audible roar of something like angry helplessness, new or old you can't be sure -

And his mind goes dark and detaches and you're separate again, all in less than an eye's blink, and he hasn't stopped crying, didn't even while he kissed you; says, resonant to reverberating in your chest, "Then forgive me now, my love –" He's standing to his full height, for once, not echoing your habitual slouch – hands on your shoulders, slow-blinking searching you – "Because I do not have it in me to unconditionally say no. I believe that you mean this, and this is not the first time I have told you that if anyone could find a way through an impossibility, it would be you; and – oh, I can see how this might be that way too –" It flickers through your mind, the fragile hope of avoiding conscription, at the surface again now that the world is no longer ending - And he stops, eyes luminous, on the edge of things forbidden, where you can only trust him to step back, and he does. "Just know in every moment of this what it would be for me if you sacrificed yourself in it and failed. That is what I ask in return. Don't condemn me to that lightly, please, my light –"

He watches for your answer as much as listens, all pent-in light and shared thirst for knowing and claws digging in where they rest, collarbones and shoulderblades –

“I won’t act rashly, nor lightly,” you say, a bare whisper, “I swear that, I -”

You can’t tell him that you already have the fragile stretching roots of a plan, a plan that if it kills you will kill him first. You’re going to need his help, and he might guess it in time from what you ask of him, but it will be in fragments, so that the pieces can’t be put together easily - and you’ve closed your thoughts and memories to him before but never so completely as this, building a blank wall in your mind where your strategies live, perfectly sealed and textureless, a wall he could break through if he tried, with his superior strength and amplification, but if he knows where it is he won’t trammel over it by accident -

So much has to go behind that wall, Feferi’s identity and her face, and in a way you never felt guilty for your flushed dalliance you already feel guilty for having to hide her away - to pare away parts of the story, to edit it down to what you can safely tell. But then, he’s always needed to keep back certain things, and you’ve never held it against him, even when it’s caused you anguish.

“You wanted to know everything,” you say finally. “I can’t - too much of it is tied in. I’m not alone in this, though, I can tell you that - I have - a highly placed friend, more than a friend, and I know you’ve said I should seek pity in the waking world, but I won’t blame you if you’re jealous -”

"Not jealous," he says, careful, word by word, but his hold on your shoulders stays just this side of too tight – "Concerned. If that’s all you can tell me... that’s a lot to hide. You – you aren’t just with them for your plan. For me. They're good to you."

“I can tell you more than that, I just can’t show you, can’t go that deep into it -” You breathe in and out, trying to discern where to start, where to go with it - “She’s - I wound up with her as much by accident as anything else, but I trust her with my life. She’s made good on that trust more than once. I,” and the words catch in your mouth, this is the difficult part, "I trust her enough that I told her about us.” The fact that you’ve pained Feferi seems small and incidental by comparison.

"You don't know how much I wanted that for you," he says in a lit-up relieved rush, his smile genuine but visibly blinking back tears again; beneath it, you know, is wanted to be that for you, equally true but not dulling the relief, and there's no hesitancy when he slides his palms off your shoulders and clasps both of your hands in his. "But – If you ever look at me and see only the burden of the immense promise you just made, don't hide it from me. Anyone could tell that you've changed,
you've become more than you were, and if that makes you realize how much I'm static and limited – I would be happy just knowing that you have someone out there to rely on –"

“No, oh, Astris, I just -” His hands are your lifeline, and his eyes something you never want to lose again, and you feel peeled open looking into them, but with an effort you don’t drop your gaze -

“We haven’t quite settled out a quadrant yet, exactly, sometimes flushed and sometimes pale, it’s still in that nebulous kind of place, even counting things that haven’t technically happened - though I think it might be more pale, I - but that’s not the point, not what matters; she’ll never replace Aradia either, she’s a different person; and the trust I have with her is founded on - on the fact that I could tell her about you, that she’s willing to understand -” Language caves in on you, then, and a beat passes in silence. “How deep this goes,” you finally say. “Willing to see that and accept it, for some reason I don’t entirely understand.”

He shudders all over at how deep this goes, his hands trembling in yours. But he's crookedly almost-smiling when he says, "Then she's either very kind or very crazy – it took us long enough to accept this, and the unreal is sort of our purview...” And then, squeezing your hands tight, "But I still want you to show me what you can of what happened inside the code you made – unless it's too painful, I – want to feel like I lived it all through you, even if it was difficult and strange. Because it's – something outside of this – but also because it's yours, and I want to understand –" He gets more forceful, more certain as he speaks, but then he breaks off, leans in and softly kisses your forehead – "And after, there's something I've wanted to do for you, and I think now is the time."

And his mind opens to yours, more tentative this time, less insistent, but the hunger for experience is still raw and close to the surface and he lifts his mouth from your forehead slowing into motionless waiting, careful as a held breath.

"Okay," you say, "I'll try," and you begin to sift through the memories, bringing them to the surface one by one -

Aradia’s ghost appearing outside your window - you wake on Prospit, and wander in visions - the moment when his voice joins the dying choir of Alternia, and you struggle to seek the dreamspace but cannot arrive there -

- wake, suddenly, to urgent messages - guide Feferi through her journey, manipulate the strange opulence of her seadweller hive - the back of your mind crying out for your love, that last narrow contact - but you know he wants -

wants you to live, to save the life in front of you -

You know how to work through great pain, it is easy and practiced; was, somewhat, before he ever entered your mind, just from your own difficulties, so when the sound that isn't a sound begins to build in your mind, a resonant frequency gradually shattering you to pieces, you just

keep

going.

Astris takes you into his arms as you relive his death and your own, curls you up against him on the couch, your head under his chin and his whole body unnaturally still - only once failing to suppress a thin, tiny whine that you know is loss for a thing that never happened -

Then waking -
The view of her face carefully excised, leaving only the sound of her voice, the transferred-in structure of your hive, the creatures - the planet - doing battle, back to back - (and Astris relaxes around you, content to settle into your narration) -

- but you haven't been careful enough, something about her silhouette as you follow her up the stairs of your hivestem, her hair, her horns -

“Wait, stop -” His claws hard against your arms - “I'm just going to assume for a minute that you can give me some alternate explanation for what I just saw. Because if that girl is - if you just showed me who I think you did, I think you know exactly what I am going to say. So - tell me I'm wrong.”

"Damn.” You let out your breath softly, rueful, chagrined - as much by your failure to realize where the tight lock should be set as by his outrage. “Audacious plans require audacious allies,” you tell him, by way of explanation. “And apparently better secrecy than I'm accustomed to keeping around you.”

Walls ascending in his mind where before he was drinking in memory thrown-open yearning, and his eyes snap bright controlled from throwing off sparks but barely, lips retracting from his fangs but holding the snarl back from his voice when he speaks, low and almost-level and grasping at reason – “You’ve spent all this time marveling at how much we are alike - you’ve reevaluated everything about yourself again and again in light of me, I haven’t been able to stop that in you - you of all the trolls on Alternia should be most aware of the extent of what is passed down and unchangeable, or have you forgotten what your own moods can do to you? And yet you are about to gamble everything on the prospect of her descendant being somehow different. Laws of nature don’t just stop working because you hope hard enough, or because you find Heiress beautiful, or because she saw fit to have a high-leveled psionic by her side to keep her from danger and was kind to you - we know what she is made of, and that should be enough. Do I even need to mention what else you may have inherited from me: the capacity to fall into the thrall of a young fanatic and follow them to your doom? And this is who you have chosen to ally yourself to? I do not know which of her powers are stolen and which are hers by birth, but if this Heiress has swayed your mind through that means -”

"You spend so much time worrying that you’ll change me. That you have. And it's true." It's true in ways you don't mind him knowing, and other ways you're not so comfortable talking about, but the principle is there. "I'm conceding that because I want to remind you. FF is the same age as me. If I'm malleable, Feferi is, too. I don't know what... she was like at that age. A lot less doomed, I'd guess, and a lot more isolated, but ... I'm analyzing at a great distance. Still, I wonder, did she have any checks on her power? Do you think she grew into it with anyone at her side who was unafraid to challenge her? To tell her when hoofbeastshit was hoofbeastshit? - before she became the kind of troll who’d never be able to hear it?” You’ve seen just enough of the Condesce through his eyes to cast about at these guesses, and you're aware you're treading precarious ground -

"No, I never thought that I would change your basic nature, but that I would bring the worst of it to the forefront. We are malleable... within limitations that we inherit. You and I saw when we dabbled with the polarity in your thinkpan what disaster you can court if you try to alter what is written into your flesh. What you're saying is that you think you can heal the Heiress with your pity and others' friendship. But even then – she faces the boredom and loneliness of an interminable lifespan and the grief of seeing everyone she cares for die, including you. She faces the avarice of having everything she wishes for the taking. Do you not wonder that she went murderously mad with it? Do you not think the worst in your Heiress' nature will reemerge? I just – I thought you had escaped the part of my nature that compelled me to hang my fate on my belief in one troll, and what I thought I could do for him," he says, burned-through bitter, "I'm in no position to hide from you how deeply it pains me that I was wrong."
You're treading in dangerous territory now, you know you'll need him to hide from himself or even overwrite the things you're saying next, but enough of these words are obvious that he could guess them if you didn't speak them aloud - "Don't forget, I will only die before her if we succeed. If we fail - if we fail, Feferi will be dead, I will be conscripted, and the rulership will remain as it has for centuries, as I don't need to remind you - If we don't try - the same. Even if I saved myself - the rest would stay the same. She'd never have the chance to go mad," you point out. "Just as none of the others of her line have had that chance, unless they're in hiding at the bottom of the sea, would you really this rather -"

"I don't have answers," he whispers, "Not anymore. I'm only throwing myself against the bars of this. I don't have enough information to be of that kind of help to you and I can't be, you're right, it isn't safe -" Responding to unsaid things, watching your thoughts – "I just don't want that to be you, any sooner than it has to be. Maybe neither of us can know about the whole of this, but her wrath is also tiny when she wants it to be, it's personal, are you watching for it? If she tried to hurt you –"

You catch at his hand, squeeze it instinctively, your bloodpusher still racing hard with the anger that you don't feel any longer; whisper his name, spread an arm across his shoulders - You can't help but admire him, paradoxically, for managing to be sharp-tongued enough that it knocks you out of remembering how fragile he is, even as your chest fills with a surge of pity and queasy regret - and your tongue sticks to the roof of your mouth, pressing up against things you can't begin to know how to speak aloud.

"She could snap me like a twig," you finally say, tired and honest and close enough to speak very softly. "And I'm drawn to that, and maybe I'm sick for it. And you can keep these words, when you lock the rest of it away - it's only a secret of the heart. With everything that happened in the game, exhausted and communications breaking down and surviving at each other's backs, I told her even that - and she went to remarkable lengths to live up to my trust. Maybe she's a monster, but she's made sure to be the safest possible monster, even when I - handed myself to her on a platter, like I wanted - That's her identity," you say finally. "And it must be why she accepts this, too -"

"That... really isn't making me any less worried, love." Astris rubs at the back of your hand with his thumb, feeling new callouses – "I understand wanting... to let your watch down in pity, there's always an acceptance of danger in it – maybe moreso for us, our stakes are just higher, maybe that's how it has to be – It's just who you – But by comparison to what you're used to, at least you found a monster who for the moment has herself in hand..." He shakes his head, rolls his shoulders under your arm, and you're tightening your grip around him trying for comfort. "I'm sorry, I keep sounding jealous and I'm not, I'm –" His mind says helpless, but his mouth isn't ready to form the word; he speaks around it tight and quiet – "You try not to remind me of the more painful impossibilities, but sometimes I still find myself choosing to feel them."

His words make you want to promise things you can't promise, or ask for - “No, I don’t think you understand, I -” You feed him more images, more memories from the game, knowing he’ll have to censor them away but at least showing him, first, the way he wanted - “Don’t you see, I was being rash at the outset, I flung myself at her because part of me wanted destruction, I - If she’d wanted to break me to her use, it would have been all too easy. I was already -” lost, bleeding inside - “She could have taken me apart and I’d have been grateful for it, but instead she nudged me into caring a little more about whether I lived or died, because I wasn’t doing a great job of it. I was half mad from barely sleeping and from dealing with all the mayhem, and more than that from losing you -” Your voice cracks and you just press your forehead into the crook of his neck, closed-eyed, warmth and darkness.

He makes that little escaped keening noise again and wraps you in gentle weight and warmth like a distant breath, pressing you to him more like a shared blanket than like holding arms. "Oh, I – I'm
here now but I know that doesn't fix what you lost – I wish I could make you unhear the voices, I
wish I could erase it all for you, the way I'm going to forget about your Heiress, I wish –"

“Don’t wish that, I - it’s probably good that I lived through that, for more reasons than one.” There’s
more than one way your promise could go, but - you know you need to be strong, to be prepared for
- to be willing to survive his absence, again in this new timeline, if you must.

And a part of his mind speaks directly to you that doesn't quite settle with the rest of what you know
of him: all illogic and yearnings, and I wish I could promise to stay for you, I do want to, when
you're in my arms I want to, I know exactly what I would say – I want to but I can't – But what he
says, finally, is, "Holding us back from destroying ourselves is a thankless, endless work. I think I
understand now, as much as I ever will."
my mind holds the key

Chapter Summary

You're among the stars in overlay, without leaving here, his hands and voice simultaneously anchoring you to the couch in the familiar, contained space that you created together as he changes to speaking aloud. "We are so much beyond our minds and bodies by nature that they rebel from holding us..."

Chapter Notes

This chapter is technically a smut chapter. But if you are a reader who typically skims or skips the smutty parts (as I know some are, and that's cool; it takes all kinds; no shaming in comments please!) I recommend reading this one more closely than most: it's not very explicit on the physical level, more on the order of deep communication and uncanny starship porn.

“Do you want the rest of it now?” you ask, and Astris nods, eyes locked on yours solemnity and caution, mistrustful of speech, and the narrowed conduit between you expands until the flow of memory can start again.

- and you take him through memories of converging and circuitous timelines, through the unfolding intrigues of Prospit and Derse and the tangled conversation with your Denizen - through bitter feuds with Eridan and friendly ones with Karkat, through your awkwardness with Aradia and her steely distance towards you - skimming lightly over the times you pailed with Feferi because you think there are things he doesn’t want to see, shouldn’t have to expend the effort to hide away; still giving him enough emotional inflection to see the pale-flushed tangle of your alliance, the way she never tried to push you toward or away from fearing her, but kept you safe. Through the animosity and the teamwork, through the final puzzles, until you all stood together, prepared to win.

And the voices of your friends rang out on that hidden frequency in your mind, and something was wrong, very wrong. You remembered the choice afforded you by your Denizen: your doom or the doom of your doom - the hints at terrible prices to pay - and you turned the key in the lock and opened the other door, not knowing what lay behind it, for once, discarded winning, discarded your precognition and its wretched comforts, chose the unknown thing because it couldn’t possibly be worse.

Woke up with two sets of memories and every Trollian window going off at once -

Astris is carding his fingers thoughtfully through your hair when you finish, dragging against your scalp as if trying to soothe a migraine – not like he doesn't believe you, but like he can't quite believe how well you're holding together with two timelines all stitched up in there, and after a while he says so, palming one of your outer horns, "It was a terrible choice either way, and you faced - you do face - awful tasks going forward, and I'm just..." He rubs light and distracted at the base of the horn for a while, the silence of carefully stringing words together – "I'll do what I can to be here for you, but
know that – that there isn't a moment when I don't ache to do more." There's a movement in your mind, something slipping back across the connection where you shared the color and texture of the game. "I want to sustain you as much as you uplift me, I want to –" And he pauses, one hand still on your horn and the other at the neck of your shirt, strangely hesitant, and the awkwardness of it weighs against the boundaries of your thinkpan, his awareness of the differences in time and experiences and the distraught muddle of emotion you were when you materialized here –

"You've given me so much -" For a moment you've reached ahead of where words just stop, somewhere in your mind's attempt to recount to yourself everything he's been for you - "You've saved me from myself, taught me so much - you understand things no one else understands -" and, you think out loud, unvoiced to save him the abashed moment of having to respond, given me yourself, here, impossibly precious - "No matter what words we use, no matter what I do or say outside of this place, no matter who and what else I pity: to me you're my matesprit, have been that in the depths of my soul since before I could even dare to speak the word pity to you for fear you'd mock me or turn away." And you run out of words again, and just lean into his touch, sharing perceptions again, trying to show him this time a flicker of how it feels when he looks at you with such adoration, to be given such an impossible gift, fortunate edging into dizzy disbelief.

You, the centuries and then you – He's responding entirely inside your head, his lips on your temple and his fingers dappling at new muscle in your shoulders, delicate and careful – I cried out to you not knowing that you lived, I craved your pity when I was dim and dwindling and couldn't have thought what pity was to want it – Just – let me lay it here before you, what you are to me, let me show you –

And with no warning that built-up moving thing is overflowing from his mind to yours, wonder like starlight, wonder that is starlight, a hot flood of stars and a cold hiss of void and emotions that he can't untangle from substance and vision that overlay above and within senses that you can't name and know only from these brushings against the parts of his mind where everything merges – But it's nothing like the last time he brought you to this place. You're among the stars in overlay, without leaving here, his hands and voice simultaneously anchoring you to the couch in the familiar, contained space that you created together as he changes to speaking aloud. "We are so much beyond our minds and bodies by nature that they rebel from holding us... This is what I can do for you, lift you out of it all, now when you've been through so much – there's a part of myself that I can only give you here, where your sense of place can bounce off galaxies – can I –" Palms stroking down your arms, down your sides, purring under speech, rumbling at once resonant-emotive through your mind full of vastness and warmly content against your back.

"Yes," softly murmuring into his collarbone, "oh, yes, I -" and you're hanging onto him, both hands clutching at his waist - braced against the dizzying vision, against phantom motion and indescribable wisps of sensation and it's almost too much and you didn't realize how much you needed to - needed this - to be loosed of the cramped whirlwind of your own head - but it's not a mindless thing, either, it's fantastically intricate - light and motion at once perceived as feelings and described in mathematics, no, those aren't separate layers, information is a feeling - and it goes in alongside the feeling of his dream-fingers rubbing against you, the rise and fall of his chest, thinking in words is more and more difficult and you make a small sound against his throat -

The pit of your stomach prickles with weightlessness, not like flying on Alternia but like being cut free of the planet's pull altogether, like falling, and you feel that you are tangling, tumbling with him at a standstill, vertigo without accompanying motion, and your surroundings shimmer – But his hands cradle and pet and slip up your spine under your shirt and down the neckline to reach at your shoulderblades and he's thinking at you There's more than this – Open to it, it's from me, it's all right, I have you –

And there's a shiver all along your bare arms, the back of your neck, the span where your shirt is
rucked up around his wrist – where your skin is bared to the cosmos you start to feel it, and more where his hands have touched, a sense that is a non-sense – Like starlight that has traversed emptiness hundreds of sweeps to you is suddenly embedded into your skin, each speckle of it tiny and distinct and each a hue within white that belongs only to itself. It's a construction from psionic sight, tracing the shape of rooms and bodies, it's like something you’ve done, but this –

It's like it's poured over you as he gently pulls your shirt off altogether, it's so closely knit into your body, so accustomed and yet so expansive that it's like seeing with your skin, and he thinks *It seeps into you, doesn't it, it's so beautiful*, the firmament at once unfolding boundless on all sides and pressing in like a mist condensing into droplets without number, strangely like an infinity of tiny kisses, and his lips on yours one central kiss with all else in its orbit, and you’re aware that there are other sensations from the hull that he isn’t feeding you, curled away behind walls somewhere in his mind; that the pain you usually carry for him is locked somewhere further away than you’ve ever seen; aware of his steadying hands on your waist, but they’re backgrounded, dim by comparison.

Bright prickles along every inch of you, like the way Astris has held you in an embrace of psionic force except that in some other way it’s exactly *nothing* like being held, freefall keeps you exhilarated-breathless and you only remember your hands when you know they’re clung tighter to his hips, digging in - and each pinpoint of light too unique to swirl together or tune out, so much information through your skin, you can feel color and the faint interlacing of rhythms like music - you gasp against his mouth at once very close and very far away -

He keens a little at the clinging press of your hands and the sound comes from behind and around you (and in front of you, there and directed, where part of you is still awake on the couch and solid and warm and ready to retreat to, if you need –) and when you open your eyes you see him twice, there and here, and here strange and amplified – and like you could see through him if you tried, and you can, you can see – how his skin goes dark to drink in the light – you see what he can’t help sharing with you, invisible lines vibrating through dim reaches, dipping into wells in the way the universe curves, all converging into his body here, into his eyes that are more than eyes...

You can see the way his skin lights up with close-gathered points of sensing and attention everywhere it touches yours, measure his pulse to the merest sliver of a second as it speeds, and he knows it, flushes burning against your face, laid open in embarrassment at the sheer detail you’re seeing but not trying to hide it – and his voice inside your head is awed and breathy-vulnerable and almost words without a voice at all and saying *Would you believe that I see this reflected – all of this – every time I look at you –* and your cheeks go hot with self-consciousness, some part of you wants to curl away small and uncertain, but everything is enormous and you’re both larger and smaller than you ever imagined being. And you’re pulled in, fascinated, so rarely does he let you see the way his dream-body coheres, meshes from force to form, and - the sense of engineering and structure and perfection and precision hits you right in the thinkpan, even as the far-off animal part of you moans a confused *oh* and presses to him for warmth, some soothing counterpoint still against the dancing points of radiance and the translucent complexity of him -

And in his thrown-open mind you read that this is just as muddled for him as it is for you, as much as this is more his element, the transcendent and the corporeal and their interweaving – the reacting to your reaching and mewling, wanting to press and rub pleasure into your body as it is now, there in his arms still small and smooth and comprehensible – but wanting even more to transmute and elevate and his hands are smoothing down your sides, fingers brushing and circling around your grubscars and you don’t know when you’ve been fed all this sensitivity, only that his hands have become their own colored maps of temperature and pressure and digits and precision. You know his mouth on your neck in licks and feather-kisses that pass into you blended with the light, so that each touch of lips reads sunburst and gauzy nebula, close-in little touches and vast distant smears of galaxy and glow.
He just keeps peeling away construction and illusion, offering you glimpses and layers and veins inside him that are light, that are psionics and electricity, until you resonate with the rushing away of the great strobing pulses that he throws exploratory off into the dark and still with the sweeps he waits for echoes – And he holds you so close, touching and coaxing and infusing, that you feel the return of ancient light as if it was yours and came back to you –

And you never felt, never knew, never could have imagined that there would be this much, that the universe is so soaked with his sensory power now that you touch the dead cinders of long-dark first stars in the cold distance with one hand and the hot onrushing edge of the expansion of everything with the other – and all between your outstretched fingertips must be you, and you are so vast and spread so thin and wrapped around him so tight, all as you are skin to skin and red light to blue, all as he tangles in, legs and horns and curling brightness, and moans long and catching on itself and washing over you all desire in its strained-down core –

You want him and everything that entails, and you're aware in some distant analytical stratum of yourself that that is what he's giving you, and it's glorious, but somehow more difficult than the worst of his pain because there's nothing to brace against, nowhere to hide and nothing to hide from.

You're blown open and it's engulfing, overwhelming, but you don't ever want it to stop - these sensations aren't, they don't belong to the shape of your body, but they have nowhere else to go - shuddering and crying out and - too much, this is too much - (reality is / you are) a paradox puzzle, inside-out and glowing-enfolding bright and impossible and perfect, even his lips on your neck deconstructed ruthless into light-halo and nerve impulse, and your hands grasp compulsive frightened of losing him but he's never been more here - and he's showing you how he's here, folding serpentine arcs by which he crosses the distance.

Always with you, his mind is whispering to yours, misplaced shards of concepts and thoughts that arc back on themselves like orbits, No matter what happens, always, always yours – all of this – curled up in your every cell – and here where the boundary between intention and possibility crumples to meaningless and the most intricate calculations yield trajectories that curve parabolic-simple - not sexual except that it is. His thoughts are like incantations and his power crashes cascadic over you and through your body, tiny and physical-real and tumbling like a leaf in a river current - the sounds you're making in your own throat are like radio transmissions from somewhere further away still, little Sollux self sweat-moist and keening pressed up against Astris, warm skin and blinding abstractions looped through you looped through space-time through the base of your spine and even with your eyes pressed tight you see everything and it's maddening and perfect and floods over you, grounds back into you and you howl - shudder and shake and rock and you don't even know what your body is doing any more only that you're feeling so much that you're simultaneously dwindled to a point and expanded beyond belief.

The space where you are caught up alters, hisses like a drawing-in of breath – and all through you and far away and against your skin this whole place – or his sense of it – everything, stars and psionic waymarks and bluing dark all ripple and flicker and shudder around you and your mind swirls with mangled diffuse chords and torn-apart words in languages you don't understand, aren't sure exist, but all so soaked with adoration that their meaning is unambiguous and heavy-laden into them, gasped and stammered and seeping in. Pleasure pushes hard and turbulent through every vertebra and crashes through every nerve-ending in your nook, crashes you back to here where you're making loud gasping inarticulate noises into his shoulder and he's sobbing out the end of a moan that sounds like heartbreak and your name, brings you back even though you've never left - back and down to ringing silence, the light of galaxies blurring to spots behind your eyelids.

His clinging has gone to stroking before your eyes can open, hands shaky-gentle in your hair and down your back, and when you look he's all soft-painted still-flushed moonstruck smiling, mouth open and breath unsteady and eyes all blown wide and taking you in (you feel a strange certainty that
if you looked too deeply into them you might see starfields, or gridlines — Power sparks from their corners and from his horns, careful to avoid scorching you but still imperfectly held into containment here, and he blinks and works his tongue over his lips and finally gives up and asks you without speaking, Hey – hey, love, are you OK – do you need —

For a moment you don't want to break from this endlessness, not yet, so you just let him in, into amazement and sated contentment and drifting, and the glimmers of confusion that are going to be questions when you let them out, when the clamor of your own mind returns, but right now for just a little while it's good to let go of language and just focus on breathing and the feel of his hands. And he sighs into a reassured purr, goes all unfolded-relaxed and drifts with you, his fingers tracing slow arcs and whorls like maps onto your skin.

But when you resurface it's into questions and uncertainties, your mind stirring into a host of restless thoughts, about logistics and your own longings that are too complex to articulate and the uncomfortable sense of yourself as tiny against vastness, a cramped enclosure for mental noise, an awkward ill-fitting speck against the backdrop of everything he shared with you - "So much," you breathe. "Thank you -" and you're aware that your voice falters, abashed, the same wrigglerish shyness you used to exhibit when the terrible parts of his existence slipped through, only this was wonderful, and you don't know why you feel like you're going to cry.

"Whenever you need it," his voice just as swallowed-up small and thready-tired as you feel, now that he is speaking with it. You can't help drifting through parts of his mind that rebel even against vastness and glory as poisoned by his imprisonment; that the euphoric outstretching of it is still shot through with shame for him and that opening it to you was a work of will and pain as much as love. Somehow seeing that distress mirrored in him soothes you, answers the part of you that feels guilty and terrified for how much you want - how much you don't understand wanting -

Still, he's tracing your shared sign across your shoulderblades, breath held and hitching in even further when he senses the edge of tears in you, and he whispers, "Oh – oh, my light, it's –" (A wash from his mind of old, old overwhelmed tears, of opening eyes and breathless incomprehension and loneliness like stillness after wind –) "I know, I know – but you'll be all right, you will, some just – vanish into it, forget everything, but not us, we dive under it all, to what –" (Calculations and equations, elegant laws and inscrutable constants; you saw it all and yet you saw just the start –) "- To what gives it form, that's our hatchright, you've said so yourself, we just keep reaching and wanting and trying to understand –" We know the worth and rarity of anything that remains undiminished in beauty and mystery for the knowing, the thought dropped whole-cloth into your mind as he flushes and glows and his fingers dig into your back and he has to stop and look away from you, eyes faraway-unfocused –

- and from the babble and din of half-formed thoughts you manage, “Everything I have to share with you is so - tiny and biological, I - I know you want that but -” but it seems insignificant by comparison right now, a crude and wrigglerish gift to lay in front of everything he is, and you’re uncomfortably aware you’ve soaked your jeans, that here and now in physical overlay there’s a difference in kind, that the release you felt blazing through him barely touched the outlines of his dream body at all while you sit here at the doorstep of his presence wet and chafed and awkward, and being so animal in this feels like an intrusion, to him or maybe to yourself.

That snaps him out of his moment of abashed distance, his gaze returning to you as if you’d been too bright to look at for a moment, and he grins small and reassuringly smug, "Well, yeah, I want that, have you been too busy conspiring since you came back to look in a mirror?" Astris pinches at your shoulder and laughs at your surprised shiver, but then quiets, suddenly indecisive, even as you start chuckling giddy-nervous. "As much as it doesn't make any damn sense for you to write yourself off as merely physical – you made this space with your mind, you're continually making it – Don't think
I'll ever let you forget for a moment that these –" He makes a show of bringing a hand to your face and stroking down your nose with four fingers, swiping a thumb over your mouth, while the other hand shifts and rubs circles into your back – "Are yours, and how immense that gift is to me and... I didn't tell you the first time because I wasn't sure, but it happened again just now, just before I took you up – I felt something there. As if a muscle twitched – it felt like the inside of my wrist somewhere – I'll have to stop it from happening again, they can't know, but – oh, Sollux –" His hand wraps around your chin and stills there and he just stares at your face and his own fingertips like he's on the verge of being pulled apart, distraught and overjoyed.

Openmouthed and silent and staring, you reach up and stroke his fingers - "Wow," you say, a barely-voiced breath, "I -" You swallow then, close your hand over his, uselessly protective - "You're so beautiful and so remarkable and I'm afraid for you -"

He flinches a little at your praise and more at your fear, that too-common look like he wants to argue with your view of him but can't stand to spend what time you have together retreading that ground – "I'll be all right, I've been hiding something so much more important for a sweep now–" He threads his fingers through yours and clings with them, his other hand going to push your hair back from your forehead, slow, comforting strokes – but still he's staring, hesitant and conflicted – "You would tell me if you thought I was imagining it? If you think I'm – losing touch with things – I want you to tell me."

You breathe out softly, leaning into his hands. "I - I know mostly what we do here doesn't reach you physically, but I also know I can reach out and find you, that there's a power ratio and some of it's mine. So I'd be more surprised honestly if there were no effect - I mean, god knows you do enough to me," and you laugh helplessly and gesture toward your lap, "and a lot of it comes through into my waking life, I just - oh, Astris, be careful, I -" Trying to name your fears has no place in this moment, you don't want to break the stillness and wonder to cast about in the horrors he's lived, still lives, when he's not here with you, or in the part of him that's not ever here -

"After all the hurt you've taken for me, I can do this, I can learn some measure of healing -" and Astris is still shakily smiling and the smile is ruddy-warm in his voice, upturned, he folds you in reaching with a surrounding fuzz of power, holding you to him so tightly your ribs ache, you breathe light this close to him, breathe enthralled pity – but this close you also see his throat move with tense swallowing, hear his breath slowing as he dims his light until the lines of his face come clear, and he answers your unspoken fear in a scraping-low whisper, "I'll endure, I have endured." And if that claim is shame and bitterness for him, an opening into chasms and dark in your connection to him, a tear in the tapestry of stars in their millions that still wheel before your eyes if you let yourself pull that link close – then beneath the dark is still the warmth of his trust and the way he could begin to form to your promise as to your hands, the way he already has. *I'll wait for you*, his mind speaks to you in layers beneath his voice – *I've waited for you, I'll wait.*
I'm setting you in motion and opening your eyes

Chapter Summary

The first thing you do when you meet Feferi (for the first time, again) is kiss her.

"You're a lot less dead this time," she says, grinning.

==>Sollux: Plan.

The landscape of futures stretches out before you, and in some of them you live for a very long time. You feel so many different things about that, you can't hold them all in your head at once. It makes you dizzy and you give up trying, and turn your attention to easier thoughts, like engineering governmental overthrow.

You're not cocky or foolhardy enough to think you can do this by yourself. And yet there are certain parts of it that only you can do; others that need to be delegated - you need to hold the strings, you need to mastermind it, you're frightened that they'll believe you to a point and then stop, pull the floor-covering out from under you, and that's a possibility too - you feel it in the fate-lines and it scares you.

You are divided, as usual, one half a piece being moved upon the chessboard and the other the chess player, watching from outside.

Small things first: you hack into KK's machine and delete the viruses you've sent him; delete your own copies, too, even though you suspect the Mobius Double Reacharound Virus would no longer actually work the same way. Still, the fresh chance given you by the cancelled session is not something you're going to risk wasting.

Then you contact NP.

AC: :33 < im sorry i missed your message sollux, i was asl33p!
AC: :33 < that final battle was expawsting!
AC: :33 < what do you n33d?
TA: 2orry np.
TA: ii'm ju2t lookiing for 2omewhere two meet up wiith ff, preferably not iin plaiin viiew of all altermiia.
TA: and ii thought you might have 2ome iidea.
AC: :33 < ooooh
AC: :33 < *ac scampurrs off to update her shipping wall, which has b33n pawfully neglected!* 
TA: np.
TA: np wait.
AC: :33 < *ac swishes her tail impatiently!* 
TA: 2orry, we don't have a ton of tiime.
TA: iit ha2 two do wiith kk.
The first thing you do when you meet Feferi (for the first time, again) is kiss her.

"You're a lot less dead this time," she says, grinning.

"Ehehe, thanks, I guess."

"You don't lisp any less, though."

The clearing near Nepeta's hive is a place where Feferi has never been before, and neither have you; there may be a lot of holes in Imperial surveillance, but there's no such thing as being too careful. "And what were you expecting?"

"You," she says simply, and throws her arms around your neck. You're suddenly conscious of the breadth of her frame, the way her fingers spread on the back of your neck, cool and strong and foretelling potential; you haven't much taller to grow - even if you didn't know from the shape and size of Astris' dream-projection what your final height would be, you know the average growth statistics of your hemotype, know you're likely to go into season for the first time within a sweep from now and reach final bone length within a sweep after that. There are no public statistics about Tyrian growth patterns, just ED's hemotype on down, but you know from vids of the Condesce that Feferi will grow into a very large troll indeed, eventually, slowly.

Right now her head fits below your chin when she bends it forward to press her face to your chest, hair still damp from the swim upriver, and your frantic thoughts fade out into cool stillness, and you find that despite yourself you're smiling, gently, vaguely, closing your eyes and breathing into a near-silent purr.

But even in your relaxation, you take care not to lose the lock on the back of your head - so used to letting Astris ride along when he can that closing that door to him seems a cruelty. And yet it's absolutely necessary. Something under the surface of your consciousness is telling you that this is only one of many small things you will have to be callous about before this is over. You're not certain whether it's your prophetic sense or just plain common sense.

Feferi pulls away and look you in the eye. "Whale?" she says; and you take a deep breath and trip forward into a stream of ideas for how to bring down the Empress.

You've actually been thinking about the practicalities for quite some time, compartmentalizing, dividing it off into a carefully abstracted section of your thinkpan. It's evidence of how well-matched you are with FF that she can keep up with you while you blurt out your conclusions in the absence of buried context - or maybe she just catches the context without your saying it outright. But she agrees with you on most things. That you'll need support from offplanet; that you'll need to have infrastructure laid out; that you're uniquely positioned to try, between her bloodline and your connection to Astris and your knack for accessing and manipulating information; that this is going to take a while but you need to start right away -
There's a rustle in the underbrush, and before you know it NP's appeared with cups of tea in both her
gloved hands, and you thank her quietly but do a double-take. How long has she been listening? But
you do trust her, for some reason that's hard to describe: maybe her lack of involvement with the
FLARP meltdown - maybe her inherent resistance to social conventions. It's why you let her offer up
her hive as a meeting place, without knowing the full story.

And yet something breaks down here, and you lose your train of thought and stammer irritably for a
minute at FF until a loud hissing and the crunch of some woodland creature's snapping neck in the
distance tells you NP is otherwise occupied. Then -

"It's - Feferi, we have nothing to lose," you say suddenly. "You and me and KK - we're walking
dead either way. But people like her - a tail isn't a cullable mutation, it isn't even considered a defect
unless she wanted an acting career, she could reach Ascension age and make it through pailing year
without a missed beat and do anything she wanted and what are we -"

"Shooooosh," she's saying and her claws draw down the back of your scalp careful-tingly and your
bloodpusher runs a little less hammery -

"- with the lives of our friends," you finish, slow and plaintive.

"We're setting fins right," she says, quietly, and her eyes glimmer in the moonlight. "We're - whale,
I'm at least - learning to rule. You," she says, and presses the pad of one finger to the center of your
forehead, "are using that clever thinkpan of yours to figure out all the complications and help me get
through them. And you're helping your ancestor."

And it's true, but it's also - "I can't add it up in my head," you say miserably, "not all of the
contingencies, or rather I can, but it adds up too many different ways - FF, what if we're wrong, are
we leading everyone to a traitor's death?"

"Terezi tells me the law is clear on this point," Feferi says, and you wonder how long she's been
making these connections - "Kelping me ascend to the throne my hatchright is not treasonous.
Everyfin we do to reach that goal is legal after the fact, so long as I win." Her voice is emphatic, and
somehow the certainty doesn't sound unrealistic, coming from her.

"But if we don't -"

"Then we're fucked," she says cheerfully, "but what else is new? And Nepeta, do you think I cod
stop her from following if I tried? Cod I stop any one of our friends?"

"You could do anything," you answer immediately, and then you realize you're making her point for
her. Half-defeated, you continue, "Sure, I can point to individuals this would help, but I also feel like
I'm being incredibly shellfish." After all, one of those individuals is you.

And then your palmtop buzzes, suddenly, multiple times in a row. There should be no service out
here, and you'd shut off its connection, and for a paranoid heart-pounding moment you think they've
found you - until -

AA: you are not the selfish one soilux
AA: everyone who tried this before lost for selfish reasons
AA: they put self-preservations in front of the longer view
AA: some of them did
AA: their comrades died because of their abandonment
Instead of saying anything out loud you just show Feferi the screen, your 'pusher hammering now for different reasons. She nods, silently giving you permission to pay attention to the device, and you set down the empty teacup on the ground and tap a message back.

TA: aa are you here riiight now?

AA: yes in a manner 0f speaking but that is n0t relevant
AA: there are imp0rtant things i need t0 tell y0u
AA: t0night and 0ther times

TA: tell me.
TA: about the one2 who lo2t.

AA: i can 0nly speak t0 the 0nes wh0 died
AA: s0me 0f them gave up and lived 0n
AA: they were c0wards

A pause, and you start typing, inquiring further, before the palmtop buzzes again.

AA: they say
AA: i mean the 0nes wh0 died 0f c0urse
AA: they say y0u can always save y0ur 0wn hide
AA: that the dr0nes c0me t0 make it s0 y0u have t0 ch00se

You're showing Feferi silently - as if speaking out loud would disrupt the torrent of messages, shoulder to shoulder with the flickering screen in hand.

AA: als0 that is why the imperial bureaucracy makes y0u fill 0ut f0rms all sweep
AA: it is a diversi0n t0 0ccupy y0ur time

You'd always wondered why they stuck juveniles with massive piles of tricky useless data entry to qualify for basic training, if the need for military personnel was so great. It hadn't seemed logical.

TA: aa, who ii2 telling you all thii2?
TA: ii mean, ii know ii'2 gho2t2.
TA: but ii2 ii it any rebelliion ii've heard of, or what?

As soon as you send the message you realize you haven't heard of that many rebellions. Even with your information access being several layers deeper than it technically should be, you've only managed to dig up a few relatively famous ones from rumors: the existence of the Signless and what he did has been swept as far under the table as it's possible to push something that large, and between then and now there was only the incident with the Summoner - which you also suspect must have been larger than it looks from anything you can find out.

AA: they never hear their names sp0ken any m0re
AA: and they kn0w 0f 0lder generati0ns wh0 they can hear and i cann0t

TA: how many troll2 ii2 thii2, are we talkiing liike two group2, ten, twenty?

AA: there is always a new attempt as s00n as the last has been f0rg0tten
AA: 0r whenever an heiress emerges and attempts the thr0ne
AA: m0st 0f them have fallen quickly and quietly
AA: but the dead remember

Though you're accustomed to Aradia being spooky, though you were already used to it even before
she died, that still gives you shivers down your spine.

TA: ...keep talking.

Feferi puts her arm around you and watches as lines of text appear on the screen. There's no reason to keep silent that you know of; but nonetheless she mouths *tell her thank you*, and you do. Aradia doesn't react, just keeps flooding you with messages. So many stories - and you have the feeling this is just the tip of the iceberg, with uncountable dead revolutionaries frozen underneath the surface.

Neither of you hears NP circling back toward the clearing, but by that time the messages from AA have faded from a flow of story-scrapes to *yes* and *no* responses to questions, and you and FF have broken the silence to whisper guesses and interpretations and, maybe, the beginnings of a plan.

NP has more tea but also the news that it might be "purrspicacious" (FF smiles, you wince) of you to retreat to her hive, since she's picked up the tracks of hill-dwelling roarbeasts nearby and you might have eye lasers but they hunt in packs. She leads the way as silently as she arrived, the path to her hive winding through undergrowth and twisting around fallen trees, more of an antlerbeast-track than a trail. The hive itself is half-cave and completely impossible to spot from the air – circling this place in flight when you were first looking for the meeting point was like finding the proverbial sewing-stick in the haystack – and judging by the size of NP's lusus greeting you outside the hiveportal you won't have a problem with marauding roarbeasts here.

She greets Pounce with a whole-body flinging motion that ends up being a hug, and leads you through the portal, and then you freak the fuck out.

There's somebody here waiting. *There's somebody here*. Your defensive instincts kick in and you're crackling with a shield of sparks before you recognize Equius Zahhak. Now you have to look nonchalant while bristling with psionic defenses. Real smooth, Sollux. Real smooth.

"Equius!" Feferi says and smiles warmly, not managing to conceal her surprise but turning it into cheerful excitement. "It's an unexpected pleasure." She saves you the trouble of more than a muttered *hello*, and you squeeze at her hand gratefully, because if words were going to come out of your mouth right now they would not be calm ones.

Nepeta... doesn't look surprised. Nepeta is crossing the room over to her moirail with a downright triumphant look on her face, and your stomach drops. You're not sure what she has in mind and you were going to fully fill her in on the plan next but now you're unsure of the territory - and Equius seems pretty unsure, too. His expressions, transparent as always, go from friendly recognition toward Feferi to a struck-frozen discomfort, and you remember it's also his first time seeing her outside the game, and he's a loyalist to Empire dogmatism more than anyone you know, even more than Karkat.

EQ stands up so suddenly and sharply that the pile of furs and hides he was sitting on slides apart, even as Nepeta says, "You know our furrends!" cheerfully, as if nothing is happening -

He is not done growing, and already quite tall, and his muscles quiver tense and alert and perspiration beads on his forehead, his face looking like he's going to either bare his teeth and growl or flee the cave. But instead he bows stiffly. "Heiress," he says.

Nepeta approaches with what you can only describe as a kind of subdued leap and stretches up on her toes to tap her moirail's shoulder with her claws, starting to hiss, "Be nice," but -

Feferi squeezes your fingers back, then lets go and steps closer. "You know what that means," she says, looking Equius in the eye.
"Yes, I do," Equius says, tight like a strung wire. And you realize that if you ever for a moment thought he wouldn't reach a rapid and obvious conclusion, whether or not Nepeta passed your hints along to him, you were being naive; Equius is no fool. A sweaty arrogant jerk, and overly attached to his notions of aristocracy, but not inobservant. You scowl across the room at Nepeta, not so sure of her own common sense. Pale feelings aren't supposed to muddle up your thinkpan, but romance is complicated and you're pretty sure it doesn't always go the way it's taught in schoolfeeds, to put it mildly. He could turn you all in - well, he could try. You realize you're clenching a fist at your side when you realize you've stopped; Feferi's reaching behind herself surreptitiously, brushing her fingers against your arm, soothing and warning at once.

"Will you stand with me?" Feferi asks him, deceptively light and whimsical, like she's asking for a dance at some gala in the movies.

"I stand with Alternia," he says. "Your challenge will tell, when it comes to that." He's doing his best to sound diffident, but it comes off oddly guilty.

"You're smart," she says. "You're a smart troll and you know your fishtory. Now, please, if you can, look me in the eye and tell me that by any reach of the imagination, by any stretch of probability, the Condesce doesn't glubbing cheat every single time."

" Tradition says the fight should be fair, but the Empurress has the whole Empire fighting for her!" Nepeta interjects, latched onto Equius' side like a tree-climbing squeakbeast. "Fefurry is just one troll with a fork by herself -" She's eyeing Feferi brazenly, none of Equius' diffidence, sizing her up as if for a fight - "Who will stand with her if not her furrends?"

But Equius is staring at Feferi silently, mouth slanted sideways as if to say that's not the point. You get the sense that it is, and it isn't; there's some context here standing in the air between the neurotic thinkpan in that oversized cranial casing and FF's uncannily advanced social skills, and you're not sure you care what it is, so much as you'd really like to know how it's going to impact your long-term survival.

"What do you bereef?" she asks him.

"What are you fighting for, Heiress?" Equius asks, and you know there are a thousand answers she could give and speak truly, and most of them would not satisfy him.

"For the right to do this by the book," FF says at once. "Schools of other reasons too, but that's as true as any. I might meet my end, but I won't go to it on less than honorable terms! I am the one troll who can possibly challenge Her Condescension on still waters. No matter who holds the throne, no matter who wins in the end, it is my right." Damn she's good. "And I will hake that right by force, if I must," she continues, and her voice goes quieter. "Because it is also my duty. To my friends and to my people and to Alternia. To you, here and now, efin if you swim against this current." She doesn't say although then I'd have to kill you; just lets it stand in the air, obvious, unspoken for the sake of dignity, the readied stillness of her trident hand bearing the culling fork speaking for her – sometimes the weapon seems almost comically larger than she is, but right now Feferi herself fills the room and she holds the double trident as if its symbolism weighed more than its metal.

He takes a step closer, looming like he's going to question her or worse, and you brace automatically, this time managing to keep your shielding near-invisible – Nepeta drops from his side to watch the proceedings, one hand in her coat pocket that you're sure is on the specibus key of her sylladex but you've fought by her side in the game and she looks more like she's ready to intervene but doesn't think she'll need to, huge eyes and a thin focused smile – and then he drops his head. One more step forward, and very slowly then he goes to one knee. "Then you stand above me," he says, an oddly literal figurative sentence.
"Yes, and so does the Condesce," Feferi points out, sharply, testing.

"No further above," Equius admits, word by word deliberate like bracing himself to shoulder a weight. "You do not wear the crown yet, but you are my Empress. By hatchright at the very least, until you succeed or fail. It's a decision. And you're none too impressed with the hierarchy and order that governs his life, but you're also realizing gradually that the way Feferi made him justify it is going to keep him more solidly on her side than if she'd wheedled and cajoled. And at least although he's kneeling he doesn't cringe; even in the game Equius never stopped acting like he labored under some immense and mostly made up burden of class dignity, but the act admittedly became marginally less of a cringefest whenever he actually did have an important and dangerous job to do.

"We already did the impawssible together," Nepeta chimes in, ducking her head in a quick half-bow that doesn't conceal her fanged grin of excitement – "I'm not letting my meowrail do it again without me!" Equius eyes her sidelong, affects a look of chagrin, and pushes at the back of her knee with his large hand until she goes into a kneeling position alongside him.

"I will do my best to justify your loyalty." Feferi smiles at Nepeta, then reaches out her hand and touches the tip of Equius' unbroken horn, and there's something weirdly ceremonious about it; you're never sure you understand this kind of thing, a communication highblood to highblood that's not quite ritual and not quite not.

"Justified or not," he says, voice rough, "you are right. I cannot support the Empire as I believe in it without supporting your bid."

"And if that means hiding in the shadows? If it means conch-eeling our ends? If it means breaking away from our roles in the hemospectrum?"

"Then I will accept that as the cost of loyalty and loyally serve you for the rest of my life." It seems an extreme statement, but you realize it's not emotional hyperbole; he's just baldly stating the possible outcomes. Either Feferi will be Empress, or he will be culled in the attempt along with the rest of you.

"No pressure," you mutter under your breath. Feferi ignores you. She starts to say something and you can't quite make it out - no, you can't and you can, it's like a whisper that turns melodious at the edges and there are pieces of Old Alternian that you recognize, just out of reach, like and unlike. This is something like the voice she uses with Gl'bogolyb, you know this without asking, but it's also an actual sentence and Equius seems to be understanding it and you don't think you're understanding it but you know what the words feel like they mean and the paradox makes your head hurt.

I accept your oath, she's saying. You don't understand what's going on. No, that's not true; you do, and you want to pretend you don't, at least for a moment, because the sudden determination and devotion Feferi has catalyzed is something you can't hide from - and it won't be the last time. The last part of you that believed you were preparing for Ascension like a regular schmo is dissolving away. This is your life from here on out.

~~~

After that business with Nepeta and Equius, you're inclined to code up some Trollian updates for everyone - both to add an extra layer of security and to serve as an early warning system for you. You don't want to be caught unawares like that again.

The hacks are mostly what you use yourself, security-wise, tightened up and tweaked a little: and with the addition of a logging function that reports directly to your mainframe in an encryption
scheme that requires the epigenetic signature of a particular strain of bees (which is to say, yours) to unlock. That should keep Imperial snoops from getting in through your back door; it should also mean that if any one of your friends ever gets good enough at computer fuckery to notice the Trollian tap (you have a good laugh to yourself over that one) they'll know to place blame squarely on you, and not think the operation compromised.

KK says straight up I BET THIS IS SO YOU CAN FEAST YOUR LOOKSTUBS ON MY JUNK THROUGH MY WEBCAM, RIGHT? and you answer there’re a secret way two find out the an2wer two that que2tion, it’2 called… learning two code! 2o ii gue22 we can 2ay it'll alway2 be a my2tery.

You wouldn't mind if he did find out. The thought of the heated look on his face…

(He really does leave his webcam wide open, but you've just locked that down for him rather than ogle through it. You have the sneaking suspicion you'd stumble into a quadrant-filling endeavor you really didn't want to see, given you're not sure exactly what irons he has in the fire right now.)

In any case, you roll out the updates to everyone, even the people you're specifically avoiding bringing in on the plan. It's not the first time you've sent everyone you knew a software upgrade; and you've also made it so that old versions will experience a little bit of artificially generated lag when communicating with your version, just so that if anyone holds out, they'll end up complaining about it and the others will harangue them to install your patch.

Sometimes, you really do think of everything.

~~~

Feferi brings Kanaya in. Nepeta slyly lets Tavros know something's up, as you'd thought she might. You get the story both directly via Trollian and thirdhand through Feferi, but even if you hadn't, you have no reason to doubt it. Tavros has as much to lose as any of you and nothing appreciable to gain by playing the squeakbeast, and by now Aradia has gleaned enough information about his Ancestor that you suspect he's going to prove usefull on more levels than you'd originally thought.

It doesn't take long for TZ to troll you. You were going to contact her; you were just biding your time, but she gets there first; and when you're in the middle of double-checking the anonymity of your latest information requests, too.

GC: 4PPL3B3RRY
GC: H3Y 4PPL3B3RRY
GC: SOLLUX 1 KNOW YOUR3 TH3R3 YOU 4R3NT 3V3N S3T TO W4T3RY GR33N1SH
TA: 2et two what now?
GC: 4H4H4 1 KN3W 1T
GC: ONL1N3 TROLL14N 1CONS T4ST3 L1K3 4PPL3 JOLLY R4NCHOK3RS!
GC: 1NV1S1BL3 TROLLS 4R3 MOR3 L1KE W4T3RY DOWN L1M34D3
TA: tz.
GC: OFF1N3 T4ST3S L1K3 NOTH1NG OBV1OUSLY
TA: 2orry tz, ii've been kind of up two my horn2 in bu2y.
TA: can you maybe troll me again when iit'2 not a22 o'clock iiin the evening or 2omethiing, ii don't know.
GC: >:P
TA: tz what are you doing.
GC: >:P >:P >:P
TA: ii really wi2h ii had time two 2hoot the 2hiit, ii would 2hoot that 2hiit 2o hard iit would fly through a wiindow and cull random pa22er2-by.
And you remember FF has been obliquely asking her legal questions, and the idle concerns that were making you wait melt away. You give her the Cliff's Notes version and she fills in the rest, about as astutely as you'd expect. The next few nights aren't so bad. It's hard to find ways to speak freely, but in between the lines it's clear that your loose-knit cadre of allies mostly aren't pulling in radically different directions.

Then something happens that you wish you could call surprising. You weren't expecting it, but not because it wasn't obvious; just because you didn't want to think about it.

grimAuxiliatrix [GA] began trolling twinArmageddons [TA]

GA: Sollux Would You Look At This Hoofbeastshit


TA: kn why are you a2kiing ME?

You've been giving VK's chatlogs a wide berth, knowing that you'd have to get to them sooner or later but dreading it, so you're entirely uncertain what to expect.

AG: Everyone is 8eing all hush-hush and weird a8out the game 8ut I know it's a crock. Either they're all going to play in secr8 or there was no game to 8egin with. I know how these things work. I'm pretty savvy like that. ::::)

AG: 8ut I know I can always trust YOU to level with me!

GA: Vriska I Do Not Know What To Tell You

GA: I Am Not Sure Who Else You Are Talking To But I Have Told You The Truth

GA: We Played The Game Then Time Itself Was Reset

AG: Why is everyone in on the joke 8ut me????????

AG: I thought I could trust you 8etter than that.

GA: What Are You Doing

GA: Stop It

GA: Sollux Foretold Doom During The Final Battle And Created An Exit Portal That Led To Our Own Universe In A Reset Continuity

GA: We All Argued But Everyone Went Through Except For You

GA: You Said You Would Have The New Universe To Yourself And We Were All A Bunch Of Suckers

GA: Apparently Not Going Through The Portal Meant That Your Reset Self Did Not Retain Memory Of The Game
GA: ... 
GA: Are You Happy Now
GA: Having Shoved Me Around With Your Mind To Say What I Already Had Said
GA: If Somewhat Less Brusquely The First Time
AG: UUUUUUUUGH! You're useless!
AG: I am going to g8 to the 8ottom of this if I have to 8reak every one of my f8lse fri8nds to do it!
GA: ... Is That A Threat
AG: T8ke it however you please! It's not like you're listening to me anyw8y.
AG: I'm tired of 8eing a8andoned 8y you jerks.
GA: That Is The Opposite Of How I Remember It
AG: Wha8ver. Th8re's more than one w8y to get h8lp feeding Spidermom.
GA: If You Really Mean What You Seem To Be Saying
GA: I D8nt Expect It Will Be Taken Lightly

This is so not your purview. In fact Vriska Management is pretty much the exact opposite of your specialty, but on a scale from one to what she's capable of, this is like a 0.2. You mostly keep poking at the windows where you're monitoring a bug-riddled alpha of some malware that's failing in various informative but exasperating ways to make headway through an abandoned corner of the Imperial Network and obsessively rereading every relevant text you've received from AA for the two hundredth time, but you still troll KN back, stomping down the queasy irrational anger that you've been skirting around this subject trying to avoid. This is wriggler stuff if anything, nothing really new.

TA: 2o vk ii2 pu2hiing you around, did you expect anything different.
GA: I Am Not Sure It Is That Simple
GA: We Shall See Whether She Follows Through But I For One Believe We Need To Keep A Close Watch On Her
TA: you alway2 u2ed two want two keep a clo2e watch on her rumble 2phere2.
GA: Although I Admit They Are Very Handsome Rumble Spheres
GA: They Do Not Pose A Danger To Our Current Audacious Plans
GA: Or Perhaps I Should Say Our Future Audacious Plans And Our Current Planning Disarray
GA: But I Am Entirely Convinced You Take My Meaning And Are Just Attempting To Get My Miniature Hornbeast
TA: who even thought of that idi1om, ii2 what ii want two know.
TA: li1ike what would ii do withi a miiniiature hornbea2t, and why would ii acquire iit by tea2iing you anyway.
GA: Sollux You Are Changing The Subject
GA: We Cannot Just Assume Vriska Serket Will Behave Herself And Stay Out Of Our Shit
TA: and you're telling me thii2 why, becau2e ii have 2uch a good track record of keepiing vk iiin check?
GA: I Am Telling You Because You Always Get Into Information Sooner Or Later Regardless
GA: And Because By Nudging Everyone Into Action You Have Impiled That You Would Like A Background Administrative Role In Our 'Shenanigans'
GA: Which Requires Having Information
GA: Also Self Pity Is Obnoxious And Masturbatory
TA: thank2 kn, ii can alway2 rely on you two blow 2moke up my wa2te chute when ii need a piick-me-up.
GA: Youre Welcome
GA: So How Are We Going To Deal With Vriska

You unclench your jaw, pry your fingers from the keyboard and stretch. Fuck all mind readers with a rusty culling fork; you would be 200% done with this but you haven't even started this yet. You set a
time and date at Kanaya's hive, because if you bothered to set up a chatroom and ask everyone about a meeting you would probably wind up with a date sometime after the end of your projected lifespan, and start spreading the news. Vriska could end everything with a snap of her fingers and a well placed text message – or get bored, wander off and leave you all to your audacious planning disarray, but so much of this business inherently involves taking too many chances that the part of you that manages risks and probabilities isn't going to let this one lie.

twinArmageddons [TA] began trolling cuttlefishCuller [CC]

TA: ff
TA: after a concerted effort by kn two diig my head out of the 2and, i think we have two actually deal wiith thii2 vk thiiing
TA: meeting the day after tomorrow?
TA: al2o everythiing about thii2 2uck2

twinArmageddons [TA] began trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

TA: hey jerkface do you have anything iimportant happeniing thur2day
TA: iif 2o then two bad, cancel it
TA: and tell the other u2ual 2u2pect2 the 2ame, ii don't have tiime two lii2ten two hii2triioniic2 and excu2e2 right now.

And you keep going down your contact list, your hands forming words but your thinkpan a blur of hastily constructed walls and static and possibilities.
so many things can look like blood

Chapter Summary

TA: 2o you wouldn't by any chance be planniing two bring along a gue2t ii'm not expectiing, riight?
TA: liike a certain noxiou2 viiolet bulgebiiter, for example.
CG: I KNEW IT.
CG: I KNEW YOU WERE SNIFFING MY PANTIES THROUGH YOUR VIRTUAL AIR SHAFT. I CALLED IT RIGHT THE FIRST TIME.
CG: YOU ARE SO PREDICTABLE, CLOCKS SET THEMSELVES BY YOUR MOOD SWINGS.

Well, at any rate, the game was great meowbeast-herding practice.

Chapter Notes

Note: this is where the shipping grid starts to get complicated, so if you like that sort of thing then this is the thing for you. Big thanks to Aewin for beta and to trickshire for being our Eridan wrangler! Auspisticism in Wires and Stars basically follows these headcanons.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

twinArmageddons [TA] began trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

TA: 2o you wouldn't by any chance be planniing two bring along a gue2t ii'm not expectiing, riight?
TA: liike a certain noxiou2 viiolet bulgebiiter, for example.
CG: I KNEW IT.
CG: I KNEW YOU WERE SNIFFING MY PANTIES THROUGH YOUR VIRTUAL AIR SHAFT. I CALLED IT RIGHT THE FIRST TIME.
CG: YOU ARE SO PREDICTABLE, CLOCKS SET THEMSELVES BY YOUR MOOD SWINGS.
TA: 2eriio2ly though, WHY.
TA: ii'2 not liike our liittle 2hiindiig ha2 anythingo two offer mi2ter neck-giill2-deep-iin-the-2tatu2-quo'2-nook.
CG: CALM THE FUCK DOWN, SHORT CIRCUIT ON LEGS.
CG: I SWEAR HE'S NOT GOING TO DO ANY DAMAGE. I TAKE PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY.
TA: why would you even do that, you don't have friiendleader dutiie2 anymore or anythiing.
TA: ii2 thii2 out of 2ome mi2guiided 2en2e of...
TA: oh.
TA: plea2e tell me you're not buyiing hii2 nobody love2 me nobody hate2 me gue22 ii'll go eat 2oft 2egmented invertebrate2 quadrant failure pity ploy.
CG:...IT'S NOT REMOTELY LIKE THAT.
TA: gl'bgolyb'2 tiittiie2, kk, what the fuck are you thiinkiing.
CG: CEASE PSYCHICALLY PERTURBING YOUR SOUPED-UP COMPUTER KEYBOARD FOR A MINUTE THERE AND LISTEN.
CG: I DID NOT LET ERIDAN AMPORA SEDUCE ME. I AM NOT PLANNING ON LETTING ERIDAN AMPORA SEDUCE ME. HE COULDN’T SEDUCE A MACKEREL WITH ITS CENTRAL NERVOUS SYSTEM SCOOPED OUT.
CG: AND YES, THAT’S ONE OF SEVERAL THINGS ABOUT HIM WHICH ARE MIND-BREAKINGLY PATHETIC.
TA: ugh, gag me with a rounded servering utensil.
TA: you did just say that.
CG: WHATEVER. FOR THE LOVE OF ALL YOU HOLD SACRED, WHICH IN YOUR CASE LARGELY CONSISTS OF INSTANT GRUNOODLES, CODE AND BEE GENETICS AS FAR AS I CAN TELL, DO NOT UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCE TELL HIM. I WILL CUT YOU IF YOU DO. I WILL CUT YOUR *BEES*.
TA: ii believe you kk, at the very least because no one would tell me such a humiliating excuse if it was a lie.
TA: are you sure you don’t want me to tell him for you, i‘m not entirely...
TA: no, i can’t say that with a straight face, dammit.
TA: your head of team ii thoroughly convincing, ii have no doubt you would come over here in a lather and try two cut my bee2.
CG: THE BEE-GUILLOTINE IS BEING PREPARED AT THIS VERY MOMENT, YOU DISBELIEVING DOUCH.
TA: diid you ju2t not get the memo, ii 2aid ii believe you.
TA: ii won’t go blabbing, your nau2eatingly moronic feeling2 are hereby added two the extremely long document in my head titled 2ollux2 endle22 li2t of thing2 two not blab.
TA: but why ii2 iit 2uch a 2tate 2ecret, ii2 not liike he’2 going two turn you down.
CG: IT’S COMPLICATED. JUST. WOULD YOU TELL ERIDAN AMPORA IF YOU WERE FLUSHED FOR HIM?
TA: for 2tarter2, ii wouldn’t be flu2hed for him.
TA: we’ll talk about thii2 later.

The meeting rolls around, and you take the four-wheeled transit vehicle to its last terminus, then fly through a few miles of uninhabited (well, mostly uninhabited) desert. It's late enough at night that the undead are in whatever odd lull passes for sleep. Kanaya, herself, has dark smudges of emerald under her eyes when she greets you; you've pulled her off the diurnal schedule she keeps, though she's otherwise immaculate besides a bit of grumbling.

You, on the other hand, are decidedly jumpy. Your original expectations for what a first group meeting would be like: quiet, determined, lacking in highbloods other than Feferi. The actual: spurred on by a state of emergency and every highblood invited except VK and GZ.

You expected FF to arrive with you or nearly with you, but she's late; says there was a slight delay in feeding her lusus, and that's not something you remotely want to mess with. You hope it doesn't have anything to do with ED. Speaking of whom: in struts sir twerpface, awkwardly clinging to KK. Okay, he's several feet behind KK and trying to look slouchy and disinterested, but you know a cling from across the room when you see one. And you're not going to hide your suspicion, no matter how glad you are that your early warning system told you something was up. Admittedly, he's only a liability where Vriska is actively dangerous. Or rather: he might choose to be dangerous, but if that was his game, being a spy in your midst is probably not the way he'd go about it.

Nope. Not trusting that guy.

You get the chance to act on your misgivings pretty much the minute they walk in the door. Kanaya and Karkat get into the kind of overlapping, hand-fluttering conversation that you would normally
only expect to see on *Gossip Pupas*, and you're able to cut Eridan off from his awkward hovering like a lone herdbeast. Not literally, of course. You tap at your phone in your pocket with faint light.

**TA**: thii2 ii2 a very iimportant text that you have two an2wer iin the hallway iiimmediiately.  
**CA**: wwhat  
**TA**: ii know you can read, miight po22iibly be the only thiing you have goiing for you at thii2 poiint.  
**TA**: NOW, ed.

It's not like that's much bait to take, but it's mere minutes of slouching against the wall in what passes for dim light here before he takes it; stalks around the corner rolling his eyes and opening his mouth to start whining.

"What I want to know," you hiss, lifting him up by the collar with invisible hands so his feet still touch the ground but only barely, "is where do you get off."

"The fuck do you even mean, Sol," he says. He tries to punch your shielding but his arm doesn't actually go anywhere; then you think he tries to knee you in the bulge but all that happens is ridiculous squirming. You wonder how he ever survived all that FLARP. Oh, right, Vriska.

"Some of us literally can't live with the status quo, but you have that luxury. You're not going to be culled for - if that's even a mutation and not hair dye -" You gesture at his purple streak, hands totally free, grimacing disdainfully; some of you have *real* mutations - and okay maybe you're also showing off that you can totally manhandle him with your mind while talking with your hands: if he's going to betray you, how much he knows about your off-scale power rating is the least of your problems. "And FF dumped your ass, like, your ass is the most verifiably dumped ass on Alternia, even if you didn't remember the things that never happened which I'm pretty sure you do, you made her have to dump you again. And last I checked you wanted to *kill* us on principle."

"So I'm not in the good graces of some a you weirdos, fine." Eridan kicks out halfheartedly at your shin, aware by now that the gesture is for show at best, before giving you his best seriously offended glower. "But if you think I'm gonna let Fef get culled you better think about that again real quick. Just 'cause I'm *rightfully upset* over her tossin’ me overboard don’t mean I want her dead. I've done nothin to Vris, have I, and Vris was never half as – fuck, I don't have to tell such as you any a this, lemme go." He headbutts thin air furiously, this time as if he means it, and you're reminded with muted amusement of something you read about the memory span of goldfish.

"Last I recall, your relationship with VK was a case of *special circumstances*, am I wrong? No, don't answer that, I'm usually right. And I don't think it exactly helps your case either." You mimic his voice - ugh, god he's whiny. "Hi, I'm Eridan Ampora and I go slummin around with bluebloods sometimes, see, you common folks can trust me!"

"Oh look, I'm Thollux Captwor and I mithplathed my aural shells becauthe they're not ethential computing equipment," ED spits back at you. He's even worse at mimicking your lisp than KK; in fact, he sounds exactly like a shitty imitation of KK mimicking your lisp, while also being on the verge of panicking or crying or something equally embarrassing. Ugh. "I said *I'm not gonna let Fef get culled*.

And it ain’t as if she’s the only one I give a squids’s shit about in this mess either! I'm not gonna turn my back on Kan. Or Kar." He turns a stupid shade of violet just saying his dumb nickname for KK. Double ugh. "They're my friends, not that you would have the first idea about that, and if you must know the only ones I've got anymore are in this creepy daywalker infested hive, ya meddlin sulfur-for-vasculars – ugh, forget I fuckin said anythin."

And there are hornets' nests you're not going to poke, but - "Oho! So VK *did* de-hatefriend you on Trollbook, then," you say, trying to make it come off as a casual smug assertion, feeling like your dig for intel is way too transparent. Then again, ED never was great at noticing the obvious.
"What's it to you? I bet she defriended the rest a you losers too," he snips, pulling a sneer to cover a muddled hurt-relieved grimace. "...and blocked you on Trollian, an' stopped answerin text messages," he adds despondently.

You don't suppose that cracking up is helping you intimidate this walking mistake of a seadweller, but you can't help yourself. Reluctantly, you let him down from the wall; you're giggling hard enough that you don't want to bother having to pay attention to your powers, and frankly, you were sold on his loyalties at about the point where he started blushing stupidly. You're keeping up enough of a force field not to let him take a swing at you, though. "...All right, I guess you can stay. Just -" you force your voice serious again - "- if you got it into your head to snitch, something happened and you got frustrated with the lot of us, whatever, just remember it's not like the Threshecutioners are gonna look at you and say ohh well he's got well-formed earfins, we can't cull HIM! - You're in or you're out, is what I'm saying."

ED rubs dramatically at his shoulder even though seadwellers are resilient and there's no way he actually injured himself with the feeble fight he just put up. "...and I'm not already bein' treated as a traitor how?" he whines, then takes a look at your shimmering shielding, grits his teeth and changes tack. "I'm aware a the penalty for double crossin, unlike some a you uncultured bilgebloods that used your Imperial History schoolfeed books as husktop stands or huntin ammunition, and... I've done my own share a cullin, all right. I know what I’m in for, an’ I probably know it better’n the rest of you do." And he turns his back on you and starts down the hallway, still holding ostentatiously onto his shoulder.

~~~

In the petty chaos that is Kanaya being aggressively conciliatory at everyone present – Eridan drinks in her annoyed tisking and offers of tea alike as if no one has spoken to him in nights; KK alternates between blaring-loud and sullenly silent hunched over his tea like some kind of quillbeast or armored beetle trying to shelter curled up under its own back; FF has somehow managed to graciously and enthusiastically make herself useful with the snacks and tea before anyone notices she's arrived – the additional ruckus of Terezi prying her sandy shoes off with her cane in the entryway and yelling "What's the news, Appleberry?" before she even gets into the same block with you is almost a relief.

"Someone we both know and dislike might be up to some shit. Or not," you wait to tell her until she's actually within normal speaking range. She nods like she's known all along and wanders off, leaving you to your husktop. By the time Tavros arrives Terezi is bickering with Karkat like you've all been stuck in this block for more like fifteen perigees than fifteen minutes, and then Nepeta shows up with no idea where Equius is. You type what the glub into your phone; Feferi shrugs at you from across the room. You give up on trying to start the meeting and keep yourself busy by sweeping the hive for bugs again; the first two checks came up clean, but a third certainly won't hurt.

Eridan is starting to complained that it's near enough sunrise he won't be able to get back to his hive. You're about to go off about how dumb it is to live in a shipwreck when the wayward blueblood slips in and shuts Kanaya's hiveportal behind him.

"Finally," Karkat says. "I was starting to think you'd been clawed to pieces by the undead hordes." He somehow manages to sound both alarmed by the prospect and like he wouldn't be annoyed if it happened. EQ looks intact, but his composure is ruffled and his forehead soaked with sweat; still, for him that could just be weather.

"No," Equius says quietly, "I've been saddled with a different set of inconveniences," and something sharp in his tone makes you look up.
Everyone's quiet for a moment, until you dispense with waiting for a cue.

"Okay, so, you're late. You've been detained by some circumstance. Shit, EQ, what happened? Please tell me it doesn't involve, say, anti-insurgency drones about to descend on us right this minute."

KK quietly mimicks the way you say 'insurgency'; you pretend not to hear him.

"Rein in your paranoia," EQ says. He sounds tired. "Vriska Serket cornered me for maintenance on her arm. Which I supplied, despite the inappropriately demanding tone she used to ask." You start to wince. His preoccupation with hemocaste isn't going to make this easier; he and Eridan are the two who outrank her in that department, and historically they've... well, you're not even sure what to call ED's failed attempt at kismesisvitute with VK, but you're starting to worry that some of your friends might be too attached. Hell, you feel sick thinking about going after her. Not that you don't want Vriska gone. Just that the idea of doing the dirty work yourself puts a knot in your stomach, half from worry about what could go wrong and half because the idea of killing has always been rather less comfortable to you than the idea of dying.

You and KK both were so explicitly and repetitively clear about the absolute secrecy of this meeting that you were pleasantly surprised that no one told you to knock it off with the reminders - not that that prevented KK from having told ED before the meeting was even scheduled. In any case, you aren't going to have time to put up with the kind of confused, circular flow of orders, misunderstandings, and snark that characterized the game, though you're certain you'll eventually find yourself dealing with a communication clusterfuck sooner or later. But it's not like Equius to just open his trap for no good reason, so he can't have told her; can he?

"She seems to know something is ahoof," he continues. "She pressed me on the subject a bit, while trying to seem as if she wasn't doing so. That part made it easier to avoid her inquiries. Then she turned to making a fuss of how tough she was and how she needed to be prepared to fight anyone. Did we intend...?" He leaves it dangling, and you're unsure whether he's asking if the plan was to bring her in or fight her.

Kanaya saves you from having to explain. "She threatened me baldly the other morning," she says, blunt and to the point. "I doubt if she has any idea what we intend, but her meddling could nonetheless ruin our chances. I say we cull her." She winces a little saying it, but is no less firm for that.

A murmur runs through the block, but it doesn't sound anything like dissent. Karkat mutters something like "Here goes;" Feferi glances at you, just a quick look to make sure you're all right.

"Isn't there anyone else in here who thinks this might not be entirely fuckin necessary?" Eridan pipes in, fins nearly flat back against his head and looking distinctly like he expects to be slapped, possibly by you. "Vris is just blusterin because she thinks we're messin with her. She's bein irrational about the game an won't listen to logic, but why not just leave well enough alone and ignorooooooore her until she gets boooooooored," he imitates the completely insufferable droning yowl of Vriska when she gets agitated, then glances around grinning sheepishly as if he expects to score mocking Vriska in-crowd bonus points.

It's Kanaya who answers him, and for all it's a brisk smackdown, she sounds more sympathetic than the words let on. "Do you believe she'd have any qualms about throwing you under the four-wheeled transit conveyance if the situation were reversed? And, more to the point, has she ever responded less than catastrophically to being ignored?"

"Her energy needs to be harnessed, at the very least," Equius begins, but Karkat is already
trammelling over him.

"I don't like this either!" he's saying. "But Kanaya's right. 'Just leave her alone' is not an answer; it's letting a cholerbear loose in a brooding cavern."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Eridan mutters, his chin drooping until half his face is hidden in the collar of his cape.

"There are lots of pawsible ways to deal with the situation," Nepeta says, loudly and not looking at anyone in particular. It's weird for her to be hedging like that; Karkat doesn't notice, just interjects brusquely.

"There sure are, now can we hear some of them before we all pass away tragically from terminal indecision?"

Kanaya picks at a cookie, nervously crumbling pieces between her claws, but her face stays smoothly resolute. "Vriska's hive is still in rather perilous proximity to a cliff's edge," she offers, "Most of the paw – possibilities I've thought of run that way. But I'm not a strategist, I'm afraid."

Awkward silence descends again.

Eridan, of all people, speaks up: reluctantly, quietly, his mouth quirked sideways with dissatisfaction. "Vris is still playin' FLARP," he offers. "I've seen her listed in ranked matches. It's the best pretext we could ask for." You're surprised that he manages we without stumbling; he's still holding himself with his shoulders almost drawn up to his ears, a bit like you all could somehow pollute his blood by proximity. Equius solemnly nods agreement.

"I would pike to get unanimity on this," Feferi says softly, continuing to look from troll to troll, but for a moment no one seems inclined to answer.

"I have a consideration." The voice is sharp, carefully enunciated, and Terezi rises leaning dramatically on her cane in what you've all come to recognize as one of her courtroom addresses. "I'm not advocating restraint or hesitation! Our true adversary is vast, and we are... well." She scans the room in a sightless approximation of a significant glance, one eyebrow raised almost to her hairline. "But this treachery suspect is a single troll without the weight of the Empire behind her, and this should be settled accuser to accused, not by mob culling. Otherwise we aren't just proving our movement unjust, but too cowardly to stand up to a single mindreader throwing a tantrum." She's taut and shaky with anger, but not at anyone in the room. You don't like anything about where this is going.

"She doesn't just read minds," you point out, sounding rather more bitter than you meant to.

"I can hold my own against that," Terezi snaps, although the corners of her mouth quickly tug down apologetically.

"Well, isn't that nice for you," you fire back without thinking.

"I, uh." Everyone turns around to look at Tavros. His voice only wavers a little. "Give me a chance to deal with her."

Terezi and Feferi look thoughtful, but Equius stifles what you're pretty sure was going to be a snort. "Uh, Tavros?" Karkat blurts out. "Do you have a fever? Are you sure you didn't get gnawed on by a zombie on the way here? Even a little bit? Then what the blistering fuck –" You elbow him in the ribs across the room with psionics to shut him up. Nepeta does something with her hand that catches your eye. You wouldn't honestly notice except she's wearing her claw extensions and they flash in
the light; she's giving Tavros a thumbs-up sign, and you think there must be context here that you're missing.

"Three nights," he says. "Three nights, and if it doesn't, uh, work out, you can go after her. But. I've got this. Don't believe me, that's fine, you can go after her when I fail, right?"

Terezi turns to face him, wearing a concerned frown. "Dude, you haven't exactly come away from your dealings with Serket before looking much better than any of the rest of us who've been shortsighted enough to try." Terezi actually waggles her eyebrows a bit at her own joke, though the usual expressive acrobatics of her face are subdued with worry.

"If I," Tavros says, "told all of you what I had in mind, I think it would be a security flaw in what is, otherwise, a completely badass plan, which if it succeeds will make Vriska totally aware of my intentions towards her, and give her some motivation to support us rather than hinder us." Nepeta is doing the thumbs-up thing again and both of Terezi's brows are at full mast. My intentions towards her, eh?

"What about if it fails?" Kanaya asks. "Have you given a thought to that?"

"If it fails, we'll probably have to kill her, but, back to square one, right?" His voice barely wavers.

"Then you'd better have let someone in on your plan so we're not all stuck here scratching our horns like chumps if you don't get back in good enough shape to tell us what you did and what we're dealing with!" Terezi either forgets about her dramatic cane leaning or changes tactics and winds up waving the dragon-shaped handle at Tavros as she interjects, the other end swinging and barely missing Nepeta. "So I'm volunteering for spider backup duty – if this assembly approves."

"I'm certainly not arguing," you tell TZ, drowning out Karkat's stammered but. "Redundancy is good."

"Nepeta has, uh, already volunteered to be my second," Tavros finally hedges, looking awkward. Suspicions confirmed.

"We'll tail you what you need to know," Nepeta says briskly to Terezi.

"Consider it a bargain." Terezi nods to each of them in turn and drops back into her chair looking pleased with herself, which – Terezi being pleased with herself makes you kind of reflexively worried, but this is still on the better end of the scale of outcomes you envisioned for this meeting (zero being "everyone dies.")

"We're all going to die," Karkat mutters, hands clapped to his eyes.

"Hey! That's my line, assface." But is it? Is doom still your purview, now that everything has changed? That's too confusing a line of thought, and you shelve it for now.

"And you bunch always say I come over all inappropriately romantic," Eridan mutters, accusatory. You ignore him.

"In the event that we don't go up in a cloud of post-larval hormones and ambition fumes," Karkat says, "- Why am I even hedging. We all know why we're here, which is because we want to do something grander than staying out of the way of drone sweeps and avoiding the business ends of culling forks. Grander even than eliminating our enemies in faux FLARP style. Yes?"

"Yes," Feferi says, and draws herself up.
"That is why we're deciding it's worth going after Vriska, instead of correctly concluding that we'd have to be complete morons to want to poke that with a stick to see what happens, yes?" Karkat continues.

"Yes," Kanaya answers. You can hear the glare in her voice, and you guess she's none too pleased with being left out of the loop, though Tavros is right that it's better if fewer people are in on his plan.

"Then maybe we'd better figure out what the hell we're doing next, to avoid the inevitable conference in which everyone stares at me with their jaw hanging open, being all help us Karkat what do."

You don't seem to remember the game actually going that way, but you hold your tongue; he's got a point. "Nothing too specific yet," you amend. The less stray information capable of getting out of control, the better.

"Very whale then," Feferi says. "Generalities."

You're not sure if everyone turns to look at her just then or whether you've all been watching her already. The way she commands attention, the shift in focus is so sudden and subtle that it reminds you of the time you were at NP's place and there was suddenly a meowbeast in your lap, with no sign of how it had arrived there.

She turns to Equius. "We may sometimes forget ourselves, in opposing the old order. That isn't always a bad fin, but we need to be able to make peace that lasts. Rein in our worse impulses."

"Is she actually making horse puns," Karkat says. "Cull me now." The idea of Equius as the voice of moderation is still somewhat jarring to you too, so this time it's Eridan who nudges Karkat (more gently) to shut him up.

"I accept the task at hoof," Equius agrees, ignoring the outburst, although he does shift awkwardly, his chair creaking like it's supporting twelve trolls instead of just one, and scrub at his forehead with the back of his fist after getting an order from the Heiress. "And will do my best to keep the troops in line."

She plants herself inches before Terezi, so close you're sure the tealblood can feel her breathe. "Pikewise, with you - we've spoken about this, it's no news to you. But make sure everything we do holds up to scrutiny."

"Remember who our enemy is!" Terezi responds, voice ringing with deliberate projection, clearly addressing the entire assembly rather than just Feferi. "And don't take your sniffnodes off the mark! Then our skulking and dastardly deeds will be only the most justified."

Gesturing with her hand to include Nepeta, Tavros and Kanaya, Feferi says, "Aside from current affairs, the three of you are mostly going to come in handy later on - tactics, fighting, ground-forces stuff. Which we're hopefully going to do as little of as possible, because if it came down to numbers we'd almost certainly lose." Tavros nods fervently. "Except -"

She turns to you. "You understand systems, the spread of information - you get to work out logistical details, large and small. How to feed my lusus more sustainably. How to sway the public. Work with Terezi and with Aradia." You think you hear the sound of a few pairs of eyebrows hitting the ceiling. Terezi just shark-grins at you like she's actually looking forward to keeping her tongue stuck to your husktop screen for the next however many perigees. You're not even sure how Eridan manages to be so obtrusive about standing next to the wall shifting from foot to foot, but it's getting on your nerves. FF must notice, because she looks to him next. "You're a decent strategist. We're
going to need that; we're also going to need to communicate with other seadwellers unobtrusively, and I'm a little too obvious."

By the way she's laying everything out, it almost sounds like she's planning a FLARP campaign. But of course this is something even more serious than that. Eridan nods to her and grumbles, "Whatever you say, Fet," and you're not sure whether he's trying to conceal uncertainty under indignation or vice versa, but you're not sure you care.

She looks at Karkat then, just looks at him, and says firmly, "I'll need a Discordictator."

He chokes on his own spit. Then, "That's nice," he says deliberately.

"Let's try this again. I need you to be my Discordictator."

"There hasn't been a proper one of those in fuckin centuries," Eridan rambles cheerfully, "not since Her Imperious Condescension disliked the advice a' hers and made the position sorta ceremonial, after a few heads got knocked off, anyway -"

"Ugh, and that sure makes me feel confident about what was already a dubious clusterfuck of a suggestion," KK grumbles -

"It wasn't a suggestion," Feferi says, "And removing formal fishidence is exactly where she went wrong!" She has this way of dragging everyone back to the topic that reminds you of Nepeta pulling a kill behind her, and she's pink-cheeked with vehemence as she goes on. "I have every intention of being betta than that. But intentions are things they write in your epitaph, and if I survive as long as I hope I will, I'll need more than intention, on every side. And you, Karkat: you're not easily intimidated. Shore, if we need a symbol that I'm not like the last Empress - you can be that symbol, it's true. But so could Sole-lux! You, on the other fin, you know how to shout at people. You know how to be a friendleader. And we need someglubby to be that. I'm too intimidating, whether or not I want to be."

KK casts a darting sidelong glare around the room, the kind of 'anyone who notices me freaking out is getting their ass handed to them on a silver sickle' fierce-scared look that makes your stomach do an inconvenient little flip. "Thanks, I guess," he growls, and leaves it at that.

Chapter End Notes

Trickshire is our co-author on an upcoming parallel series which focuses on vignettes of some of the non-Sollux-centric relationships in the story; the first piece will be going up soon. Feel free to subscribe to any one of us to get an announcement when it starts being posted!

And yes, Sollux did just mentally insult Eridan's nickname convention while using his own. It's like he's got a ... double standard. 🌃
the sound of hornets swarming

Chapter Summary

AT: IT TURNS OUT, THAT I AM NOT PARTICULARLY, PERSONALLY ATTACHED TO YOUR LUSUS.
AT: AND MY AUSPISTICE, REMINDED ME THAT AS LONG AS SPIDERMOM, WAS WEAVING THESE SHITTY WEBS, AROUND YOU,
AT: I MIGHT AS WELL BE ATTEMPTING, TO GET DOWN WITH AN IMPERIAL DRONE, WHICH IS TO SAY, YOU SIMPLY WEREN'T CAPABLE OF THE RIGHT KIND OF HOSTILITY, :) /

Chapter Notes

Reminder to readers that Wires and Stars ashen romance is slightly different, and more expansive, than in canon: an auspistice serves as a sort of blackrom coach to their auspisticee(s), not only steering them away from ill-fated pitch flings but also matchmaking and helping the auspisticee fine-tune their advances.

(This chapter, if you haven't guessed, contains Tavros <3< Vriska and a heavily implied ashen ship in the background. Putting it here rather than in tags because it's not a central focus of the whole story and we don't want to mislead readers.)

arsenicCatnip [AC] began trolling twinArmageddons [TA]
AC: :33 < *ac leaps off the top of your gaming tower and into your path, b33ing careful not to get mind honey on her paws*
TA: don't think ii don't 2ee your terrible, awful pun.
TA: ii know where itt liive2, ii know where itt 2eep2.
AC: :33 < puns don't sl33p! they are ever vigilant.
AC: :33 *ac sidles up to pawllux to ask an impurrtant fafur*
TA: ii'm kiind of bu2y, but then ii don't 2ee that changiing any tiime thii2 century 2o go ahead.
AC: :33 < we n33d a memo!
AC: :33 < and since you are the code maintainer on the purrent fursion of trollian that we are all using, that means you n33d to reactivate the memo feature!
TA: hell no, itt'2 the lea2t 2ecure of any of the experiimental feature2.
TA: and a2 far a2 ii can tell there ii2 no way two make itt 2ecure, ii'd have two rewriite itt from 2cratch.
AC: :33 < *ac gives a stubborn furown* it's absolutely necessary!
AC: :33 < what if i promii2e no one will say anything sensitive in it?
TA: how can you even promii2e that?
AC: :33 < you can tail them so yourself! and shut down the memo if anyone breaks secrecy.
TA: but people are 2tupiid, itt'2 a con2tant of the uniiver2e.
AC: :33 < then they'll find some other way to be stupid even if you don't start a memeow! at least this way, you'll be able to overs33 the stupidity, and pounce on it as soon as you catch it. :33
TA: you've got a point.
You grudgingly set up the memo. To be honest, you're not sure her logic quite works for something that exists simultaneously at all time points, but you'd also rather find out sooner than later if anyone's going to flame out via failure to follow directions.

You don't find out the rest of the plan until the night everyone else does – the details are actually safer on a hard drive than in your head, for once, which is an incredibly uncomfortable thought during the rare times you stop working long enough to think about it – but you scrape the latest chatlogs from the phones and husktops of everyone involved as soon as you can afterward.

arachnidsGrip [AG] began trolling gallowsCalibrator [GC]

AG: We're still fr8nds, r8????????
GC: 1T D3P3NDS WH4T YOU M34N BY 'FR13NDS' >:P
AG: People who help each other out when the other one's in troubLe????????
GC: BUT TH3 GR34T VR13N 4SK SOLLUX N33D H3LP FROM 4NYON3!
AG: I'm not joking!!!!!!!!!
GC: N31TH3R 4M 1 >:
AG: Seriously Pyrope, you gotta h8lp me, I'm stuck up a fucking TREE!!!!!!!!!
AG: What is this even a8out? What did I even do to anyone? D::::
GC: 1F YOU N33D H3LP F1G1R1NG OUT TH3 LOGG1NG FUNCT1ON ON TROLL14N 4SK SOLLUX
GC: OH W41T
GC: S33
GC: TH4T W41T S33
GC: TH3 K1ND YOU W3R3 H4T3CH3D FOR BY V1RTU3 OF YOUR 1LLUSTR1OUS 4NC3STRY M4YB3!
AG: That implies you DO know something a8out this.
AG: ……..
AG: You sent her, d8dn't you?
AG: Couldn't do your own dirty work, Pyrope? I’m disappointed in you. :::(:
AG: 8t least she's not hard to overpower!
GC: 1 C4N N31TH3R CONF1RM NOR D3NY TH3 4CCUS4T1ON!
GC: BUT 1F YOU B3L13V3 TH4T YOUR TH1NKP4N SH3N4N1G4NS C4N STOP R04RB34STS FROM B31NG HUNGRY TH3N 1 4M NOT SUR3 WH4T TO T3LL YOU >:/
AG: If you wanted me to say it, you're finally going to get what you were w8ing for, ok8y! I'm sc8red.
GC: W3LCOM3 TO TH3 FL1P S1D3 OF YOUR SH3N4N1G4NS
GC: WH4T YOU S4Y
GC: 1 COUNT3D 4ND 3V3RYTH1NG >:]/
AG: You can tell me what your game is any night now!
AG: I can still get my n8gh8or to m8ke new eyes for you, especially since I've got hold of his moir8i8l :)
AG: But I won't 8e any use if I'm stuck here at day8r8k!!!!!!!!
GC: ITS 4LL RIGHT M1SS BLU3B3RRY B4CKST4B P13
GC: 1T W1LL 4LL B3 OV3R SOON
AG: So is th8 8 then? Did you get me up here to k8ll me?
AG: Ev8n 8t your worst I n8ver thought you wouldn't d8re to f8ce me!!!!!!!!!
GC: YOUR3 R1GHT 4BOUT ON3 TH1NG
GC: IF 1 W4S PL4NN1NG TO K1LL YOU 1D PROS3CUT3 YOU MYS3LF!
GC: 4ND 1 WOULDN'T BOT8H3 R1GH7 4LL TH1S D1ST4ST3FUL D3C31T
GC: 1D ST1LL S3TTL3 FOR US1NG YOUR OLD TR1CKS ON YOU 1F 1 H4D TO
GC: BUT 1T WOULDN'T F33L R1GH7 TO S1NK TO TH4T L3V3L
GC: 4ND 4NYW4Y 1 WOULDN'T H4D TO
GC: AY: Your riddles ar8n't 8ny h8lp!!!!!!!
AG: 8ut fine, there are other trolls that c8re a8out me and appreci8 my a8ilities!
GC: N4M3 JUST ON3
AG: It's not my fault my high8lood friends are 8usy! It's the peril of hanging out with v8ry import8nt people.
AG: 8ut th8 8r8 Tavros cares a8out me!!!!!!! He c8n't tear himself aw8y.
GC: Wow 1 th1nk you w1ll com3 to appr3c14t3 how r1ght you 4r3 v3ry
SOON
AG: Of course I'm r8! W8, the superior Terezi Pyrope is finally coming to see reason????????
AG: So does that mean you'll h8lp?
GC: NO
GC: WHY H3LP WH3N 1 C4N S1NK TO TH3 B3ST >:
AG: Ughhhhhhhhh! R8st 8ssured, I'll find out all a8out your o8tuse motiv8ions l8er!

gallowsCalibrator [GC] began trolling adiosToreador [AT]
GC: H3Y T4VROS
GC: TH3 W3B 1S 3MP3TY 4ND TH3 TR33 1S 1N BLOOM!
GC: NO, TH4T SOUNDS STUP1D, 1 MUST H4V3 TH3 COD3 WRONG >:
GC: ...WH4T3V3R, COD3 1S UNN3C3SS4RY
GC: VR1SK4 1S COMPL3T3LY CLU3L3SS, 4LL PL4NS 4R3 GO!
AG: W8w! Talk a8out coincidences!!!!!!!!
AG: I was just a8out to troll you. 8oy, do I have a story to tell. You even have a ch8nce to 8e part of
the excitement.
AG: W8. Condolences? Wh8?
AT: tHE OTHERS AGREED, tHAT i COULD GIVE YOU ONE MORE CHANCE, tO GET
YOUR ACT TOGETHER,
AT: tHAT IS ONE, n0T EIGHT, oR ANY OTHER NUMBER THAT ANYONE HAS
DECIDED, iS SUITABLE TO THEIR PERSONAL SENSE OF SYMMETRY,
AT: bUT i DECIDED i HAD TO K1LL YOUR LUSUS, f1RST, bEFORE i COULD
APPROACH YOU WITH THIS OFFER OF PROBATION, oR AS YOU WOULD SAY, iN
YOUR STUPID QUIRK, pRO88ION,
AT: sinCE YOU’VE TOLD ME, mANY TIMES, tHAT i SHOULD FOCUS ON THE
BOTTOM LINE,
AG: YOU DID WH8???????? I can’t 8elieve this!
AG: If rumors are to 8e 8elieved, you were too w8k to k8ll ME when I 8SKED you to!
AT: iT TURNS OUT, tHAT i AM NOT PARTICULARLY, pERSONALLY ATTACHED TO
YOUR LUSUS,
AT: aND MY AUSPISTICE, rEMINDED ME THAT AS LONG AS SPIDERMOM, wAS
WEAVING THESE SHITTY WEBS, aROUND YOU,
AT: i MIGHT AS WELL BE ATTEMPTING, tO GET DOWN WITH AN IMPERIAL DRONE,
wHICH IS TO SAY, yOU SIMPLY WEREN’T CAPABLE OF THE RIGHT KIND OF
HOSTILITY, }:
AG: Wh8 the fuck are you t8lking a8out?
AG: Your auspistice? 8re you trying to impress me with your ashen score? Could you even g8 more
full of shit th8n this!!!!!!!!!
AT: yOUR ESTIMATION, oF MY TENDENCY TO MAKE THINGS UP, hAS ALWAYS
BEEN SOMEWHAT EXAGGERATED,
AT: eVEN WHEN IT’S IN YOUR BEST INTEREST, I O BELIEVE THAT I’M TELLING THE
TRUTH, wITHOUT RESORTING TO SENDING PHOTOS OF YOUR TRULY DEAD
LUSUS TO YOUR SLAPCHAT,
AG: Ugh, I’m so 8ored of wrigglers with Orphaner delusions it’s nause8ing. What m8kes you think
you can get aw8 with this????????
AT: iT CONVENIENTLY HAPPENS, tHAT BY FLARP BY-LAW 807.1B, a PLAYER WHO
HAS CHEATED, bY ACTING OUTSIDE OF GAME CONSTRAINTS, tO GET AHEAD,
AT: oWES A FORFEIT, wHICH MAY BE PAID, bY THE LIFE OF HER LUSUS,
AG: So Terezi D8D put you up to this. Is SHE........
AT: nO, wE’RE NOT ASHEN, sHE JUST HELPED FIGURE OUT LEGAL DETAILS,
AT: tHE FUNDAMENTALS OF THE PLAN, wERE OF MY OWN CONSTRUCTION,
AT: bUT YES, i HAD SUPPORT, wHICH IS NOT WRONG, oR EMBARRASSING,
AT: iT TURNS OUT, fRIENDS CAN BE HELPFUL, oF THEIR OWN FREE WILL, aND
ALSO THEY ARE EASIER TO KEEP, wHEN NO ONE IS TRYING, tO MAKE THEM INTO
LUNCH,
AT: aND, iT’S HARD TO TELL, bUT i THINK SPIDERMOM AGREED THAT IT WAS
BEST FOR YOU, iN THE END,
AG: Oh my g8d, you are soooooooo em8arrassing. Shitty low8lood pl8titudes? Is th8 wh8 you have
to say for yourself?
AG: Tavros, you could have 8enefited so much from just 8eing my ally and su8ordinate! Why
would you 8etr8y me? D::::
AT: i WOULD THINK, tHAT IT WAS OBVIOUS BY NOW, bUT YOU DO NOT ALWAYS
SEEM TO PICK UP, oN THE OBVIOUS,
AT: a TEDIOUS TENDENCY, wHICH i AM GOING TO HERETOFORE ENCOURAGE
YOU TO CHANGE, pSSIBLY VIA, wHAT SOLLUX CALLS PERCUSSIVE
MAINTENANCE,
AT: aLONG WITH YOUR UNWILLINGNESS, tO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY, fOR YOUR
OWN SHIT, sUCH AS YOUR LUSUS PROBLEM,
AG: Now you’re just being a hypocr8! YOU’RE letting others do the work for you!
AT: iN ALL CASES, tHEY OFFERED OR, i ASKED,
AT: tHAT TURNS OUT TO BE, aN ESSENTIAL ASPECT OF THE POWER OF
FRIENDSHIP, :) )
AT: aND ANY NUMBER OF US, wOULD HAVE DONE IT GLADLY, iF YOU HADN’T
BEEN TOO CLUCKBEAST TO INQUIRE,
AT: rATHER THAN ME, bEING IRONICALLY, tHE ONLY ONE WILLING TO STEP UP,
BECAUSE I HAVE ENOUGH ANTI-PATHY TOWARD YOU, TO CARE, <3<
AG: 8hi8hi8hi! Look at you!!!!!!!!
AG: Waving your little spades around at me like you even know what that means! Playing along with a bunch of losers and their made-up game because you think it will make them like you ::::)
AG: Can't you hear them laughing behind your back? I taught you better than this!
AG: Since you've taken care of my responsibilities, I have ALLLLLLLLL the time in the world to get at you and your ridiculous band of "friends!" ALL of them!
AG: Now excuse me, I have important business to finish!
AT: WHICH WOULD BE, WHAT EXACTLY, ?
AG: Making sure you start never pull this stunt again, to begin with!
AT: WHICH WOULD BE, WHAT EXACTLY, ?
AG: Except, that unlike most of yours, I think it's a pretty smart bet,
AT: THAT YOU AREN'T ACTUALLY WILLING TO TAKE ON TEN TROLLS, WITH MORE BATTLE EXPERIENCE BETWEEN US THAN YOU COULD DREAM OF,
AT: WHO WOULD ALL CULL YOU AS SOON AS LOOK AT YOU, EXCEPT ME,
AT: YOU'RE PRETTY FUCKED UP, EVEN I ACKNOWLEDGE THAT, BUT I DON'T THINK YOU'RE SUICIDAL,
AT: AND WHY WASTE YOUR NEW FREEDOM, ON SUCH A TINY AMBITION, WHEN YOU CAN DO, JUST ABOUT ANYTHING,
AT: I BELIEVE, THE VRISKA I'M DOING THIS FOR, WOULD CALL THAT, "8oooooooring",
AG: ...May8e you've got a point. Maaaaaaaay8e.
AG: But on the other h8nd I also don't h8ve to listen to your hoof8eastshit to get out of this. You know that, r8?
AG: Now th8 we have a ch8 open........
AT: WELL, YOU SEE, I ACTUALLY PAY ATTENTION, TO THE DETAILS OF MY PLANS,
AT: SO YES, YOU COULD CONTROL ME LONG ENOUGH, TO MAKE THE ROARBEASTS, LOSE INTEREST, BUT I HAPPEN TO KNOW, THAT YOU CAN'T CONTROL ME AND NEPETA, AT THE SAME TIME,
AT: AND SHE WOULD NOTICE, AND WOULD MOVE TO CONTAIN YOU,
AT: AND IF YOU CHOSE TO CONTROL HER INSTEAD, I WOULD STILL HAVE THE ROARBEASTS,
AT: NEED I GO ON?, I'M PRETTY GOOD AT, STRATEGY GAMES, AS IT TURNS OUT,
AG: Oh, just shut the fuck up!!!!!!!!
AT: OKAY,
AG: ........
AG: Uuuuuuuugh, it's o8vious I meant th8 rh8orically.
AG: Tavros N8ram, you are H8RR8LE. D:::
AT: THANK YOU, IT'S GOOD TO SEE YOU ACKNOWLEDGE THE OBVIOUS, FOR ONCE,
AT: THIS NEEDS, TO ACTUALLY END,
AT: WE CAN'T GET ANYTHING SERIOUS DONE, WHILE WORRYING ABOUT SUPPOSED ALLIES, STABBING US IN THE BACK,
AT: SO ARE YOU READY, FOR THE BIG TIME,
AT: BECAUSE IF YOU ARE, ALL YOU HAVE TO DO, IS NOT KILL US OR RODENT US OUT, WHICH SEEMS LIKE IT SHOULD BE RELATIVELY SIMPLE,
AT: BUT THIS IS YOU WE'RE TALKING ABOUT, SO I HAVE PREPARED, YOUR REMEDIAL LESSONS,
AG: I 8et you want me to cave in and apologize for wh8 I did, or something.
AG: I was just trying to improve you. You know th8.
AT: yES, i KNOW EVERY VERSION OF YOUR FAVORITE, fALSE APOLOGY,
AG: pROBABLY BETTER, tHAN YOU DO, sINCE i REMEMBER THE GAME, aND
AT: ACTUALLY WE HUNG OUT QUITE A LOT, dURING IT,
AG: aND i HAD EVERY OPPORTUNITY, tO CONSIDER YOUR EXCUSES, aND DECIDE
AT: THAT ACTUALLY i STILL PREFERRED HAVING, lEGS THAT WORKED, }:
AG: 8esides, Sp8dermom would have 8een just as happy to have 8 you.
AG: To 8e honest, 8's kind of a relief.
AG: 8ut I don't know wh8 I'm going to do without all th8 hanging over my head all the time.
AT: wELL, aVOIDING GETTING KILLED SEEMS LIKE, iT MIGHT KEEP YOU 8USY,
AT: cONSIDERING, iT WILL BE DIFFICULT TO CONVINCE THE OTHERS, tHAT YOU
CAN BE TRUSTWORTHY,
AT: bUT, i bELIEVE IN YOU, vRISKA, i AM WILLING TO IMPROVE YOU,
AT: aND MY TECHNIQUE, iS SUPERIOR, IN THAT YOU CAN EVEN, kEEP YOUR LEGS,
AT: aT LEAST IF YOU QUIT WITH THE, ~dESPER8 MANIPUL8TION SCHEMES~, lONG
ENOUGH TO FOLLOW DIRECTIONS,
AT: wHICH IS A NEW SKILL FOR YOU, bUT, yOU'RE SUCH AN ADVOCATE FOR
LEARNING UNDER PRESSURE,
AT: tHAT I TRUST YOU'LL FIND THE ABILITY, }:
AG: You 8re one stone-cold fucking jerk!!!!!!!!!
AT: rEALLY?, tHANKS, i HATE YOU TOO,
AT: tHE OTHERS, tELL ME I AM BEING, oVERLY SENTIMENTAL,
AT: bUT I JUST FELT, iT WAS FAIR TO GIVE YOU A CHANCE, bEFORE WRITING YOU
OFF AS A TOTAL LOSS,
AT: tHOUGH I AM PREPARED, tO DO SO, iF I HAVE TO, bECAUSE I DON'T LIKE,
mAKING THE SAME MISTAKES I'VE ALREADY MADE, aND I REMEMBER THEM,
eVEN IF YOU DON'T, }:

From where you sit, reading the logs after the fact, you kind of agree with Vriska for once. This is
pretty damn stone-cold for Tavros. And as much as you have no stomach for it, you kind of wish
VK was out of the picture - but you also feel an odd chill when you read those words, like the
direction of the wind changing, like a magnetic field inverting. That. That change in him, it's like it
hits a resonance frequency with the vision that's still hovering there too enormous to see; like your
attention has been called to a sign tacked over the world, scrawled History In Progress, and you
wonder if Aradia is watching, was watching this as it happened.

AG: Ok8y, you high 8nd m8ghty dirt-c8ste 8shole. I get the point! You know things I don't, you're
going to w8ve them over my horns like a p8ir of Fidusp8wn pr8nt undershorts, 8lah, 8lah, just tell
me wh8t I have to DO to g8 OUT of this!!!!!!!!
AT: yES, cERTAINLY,
AT: jUST OPEN THE CURRENT MEMO, iN tROLLIAN, aND TYPE, "i'VE BEEN
SCHOOLFED",
AT: mAYBE THAT, wILL BE A GOOD START, fOR GETTING EVERYONE TO TAKE
YOU BACK, iNTO THEIR CONFIDENCES,
AG: Stooooooolooop!
AT: sTOP WHAT,
AG: Stop m8king them growl! I get the point alre8dy!!!!!!!!
AG: Gahhhhhhhh you cr8zy cre8ture g8t your claws out of my tree!
AG: Tell them to knock it off!!!!!!!!!
AT: wHO ME,
AG: Ok8y, ok8yyyyyyyy! F8ne!!!!!!!!
AG: But we're going to discuss this. At length.
AT: That was, the general idea, yes.

~

PAST twinArmageddons [PTA] 16 HOURS AGO opened memo on board this memo ii not genuinely secure you nookfart2, watch your 2hit.

PTA: ok guy2, it's a memo.
PTA: i'm doing this on request2, as you can tell from the subject line i'm not very happy about it.
PTA: trollian' time-related function2 have a backdoor built ii in, so far ii can tell, do not say anything here that you wouldn't be happy two keywrite across the moon2.

FUTURE terminallyCapricious [FTC] 6120 HOURS FROM NOW responded to memo.
FTC: so this wicked business goes back a good long while.
FTC: AND ALL THIS TIME I WAS BEING A WASTED-ASS MOTHERFUCKER STARING INTO A SOPOR PIE.
FTC: ain't no time like the present except maybe the past or the future. funny how it works like that.

FUTURE carcinoGeneticist [FCG] 4130 HOURS FROM NOW responded to memo.
FCG: AS MUCH AS IT KILLS ME TO SAY SO, SOLLUX IS CORRECT ABOUT THE SECURITY LEVEL OF THE MEMO.
FCG: ...WAIT, I'M GONNA NEED TO ASK YOU SOME QUESTIONS. IN PERSON, BECAUSE I DON'T THINK WE'VE TALKED ABOUT THIS YET.
FCG: I'M NOT SURE I'M CAPABLE OF BEING MORE VAGUE THAN THAT. YOU PROBABLY THINK I'M GOING TO TELL YOU SOME JUICY RELATIONSHIP GOSSIP. HOW ABOUT YOU GO ON THINKING THAT FOR NOW?
FTC: NO, MAN, I GET YOUR DRIFT.
FTC: did you think i was gonna spill the beans?
FTC: AIN'T NO FUCKING WAY I WOULD NARC ON MY PALEBRO. :o)
FCG: THAT WAS EITHER ASTOUNDINGLY PRESUMPTUOUS OR A HUGE FUCKING SPOILER.
FCG: ...I'M COMING OVER THERE NOW. BUT THEN YOU KNEW THAT, BECAUSE YOU'RE A COUPLE PERIGEES AHEAD OF ME.
FCG: THIS SHIT MAKES MY HEAD HURT.
FCG banned FTC from responding to memo.
FCG banned himself from responding to memo.

CURRENT arachnidsGrip [CAG] RIGHT NOW responded to memo.
CAG: I've seen school8d.
CAG: 8t8 you h8ppy now?
CAG banned herself from responding to memo.

CURRENT caligulasAquarium [CCA] RIGHT NOW responded to memo.
CCA: kan you owwe me five boonbucks
CURRENT grimAuxiliatrix [CGA] RIGHT NOW responded to memo.
CGA: I Never Said I Was Taking The Bet
Chapter Summary

CA: i cant get in touch w with kar
CA: im serious though kan hasnt heard from him since four nights ago an if you check timestamps on your paranoid fuckin cereal box spy goggles i bet he hasnt said anythin to anyone else neither

Karkat gets cold feet. Sollux warms them up for him.

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains: Karkat-typical language, caliginous sex with non-zero amounts of blood and tears, just a lot of mess in general, and hella awkward quadrant interactions.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You set the memo to ping you if anyone as much as coughs the wrong way, then dive gratefully back into your coding. The Imperial cybersecurity infrastructure is a tweetbeast's nest of redundancy, often with notes in dialects that no one has spoken for centuries, and you're probably going to die of an apoplectic reaction to shitty code and distracting side projects but at least it's not... whatever the hell just happened with VK. Your surveillance program alerts you to a few false alarms, mostly your friends' comings and goings, but not a word from KK since the memo. You try not to worry about it; he's sulking and you have work to do.

It took Eridan Ampora trolling you to get you to pay attention:

CA: sol
CA: hey sol you lemony lout wwhy arent you answwerin me
CA: sol you gotta do somethin
TA: why ye2, ii gotta do a lot of thiing2 and am iin fact doiing them right now.
TA: ii had two temporariily 2u2pend my ab2olutely bada22 lot2 of thiing2 operatiion2 two an2wer your 2tupiid trolliian me22age a2 a matter of fact, 2o what the fuck ii2 2o iimportant?
CA: its serious man i cant get in touch w with kar
TA: have you giiven con2iideratiion two the po22iibiilliity that kk miight have a liife beyond the circumference of your 2hiitty cape2?
TA: maybe he ju2t doe2n't liike you enough two bother, who know2.
CA: you dont or youd be rubbin it in a lot wworse than that
CA: i wwasnt hatched last night sol
CA: im serious though kan hasnt heard from him since four nights ago an if you check timestamps on your paranoid fuckin cereal box spy goggles i bet he hasnt said anythin to anyone else neither
TA: thank you for the iiinfo, creepy mccreepertroll, ii'll look iintwo iit.
twinArmageddons [TA] ceased trolling caligulasAquarium [CA]
Shit. What if they got him.

twinArmageddons [TA] began trolling caligulasAquarium [CA]
TA: 2eriou2ly, i'll look iintwo iit.
twinArmageddons [TA] ceased trolling caligulasAquarium [CA]

You barricade yourself in a virtual fortress of encryption before daring to actually think about what's scaring you. You've been working on cracking sat-cam feeds, and this gives you an excuse to learn their language more thoroughly; the way you cover your tracks, if it doesn't hold up to scrutiny, will get a sad-sack troll across the continent culled before they come for you. (Anyone who brags online about entrapping their lowblood friend into servitude… well, let's just say you have a group of unwilling and unwitting beta testers for the rootkits you write in your, haha, spare time.)

KK's webcam is taped over – like you told him to, fuck, you're an idiot – or this tracking operation would have been over practically before it started. But nothing you can turn up points to disaster either. The most recent pass of the sat-cams over KK's hive shows an undisturbed lawnring and drawn shades, and your tracking bug in his husktop pulls up the usual history of news feeds and casual games. It's almost too normal, you're going to have to go over there – or send someone, but everyone else who could do the job is either far away or about as stealthy as a trunkbeast in a living block – and you're about to when a loud clatter blares through your speakers, followed by STEAMING RANCID SHIT ON A NUTRITION PLATEAU, I GIVE THE FUCK UP ON SICKLEKIND, IS THERE A FUCKING-MICROSCOPIC-BLUNT-SHITTY-HORNKIND SPECIBUS OR WOULD MY STRIFE PORTFOLIO JUST LAUGH AT ME AND SPIT IT OUT, TIME TO FIND OUT –

Relief just barely wins out over chagrin.

And you are going over there, but at least you know what to expect.

~~~

It takes him too-long moments to answer the hiveportal bell, moments in which you consider if you could have been wrong: maybe someone recorded him - no, that's -

Familiar aggressive footfalls sound from the other side of the hiveportal, but it doesn't open. "GO AWAY!" Karkat's voice shouts from the other side: distinctively not a recording, and loud enough to actually shake the door.

"Hell no," you growl. "You got me out of my fucking computer chair, I want confetti, ok."

KK's door doesn't budge; his voice is hoarse like he's been shouting even more than usual, or crying, or not talking at all. "Well, you'll have to settle for a parade back to your dumb coding throne accompanied by a sweet serenade of 'go fuck yourself's for the blissfully short time you'll be in earshot of my lawnring. Go away."

"You'll have to yell louder, I can't hear you with your head shoved so far up your waste chute. I promise I won't make you cram a party hat down over the misplaced grubscars you call horns if you open the fucking hiveportal before I start every digital device in there playing Troll Rick Astley in unison."

The hiveportal swings open a crack. Between a couple of sturdy chains holding the door mostly closed you catch a glimpse of KK's living block, dim but not much messier than always, before the view is blocked by KK glowering out at you, hair in sweaty disarray, the usual dark smudges under his eyes deepened into purplish half-moons. "Go away before I – you know what, no, I'm not in the
mood for another exploding husktop competition right now. Come back tomorrow night or something. Fuck."

"...and I thought I was the moody one. Are you actually going to be here and willing to talk if I come back tomorrow night? Why not explain yourself and get it over with? You scared the living shit out of us, KK. If you'd really rather I take the time to come up with a proper revenge for that, I will, but…"

"No, you've got important shit to do. You might as well yell at me now and save yourself some time." No matter how many times it happens it's still a punch in the gut seeing KK go from hackles-raised pissed off to totally deflated so quickly. He fumbles with the latches and the chains on the door swing aside. "And I'm not being moody. Maybe I'm actually being reasonable for once in my heinous waste of a life."

"Oh god." You know a bad sign when you hear it. You slip in and click the door shut behind you, re-bolting it automatically. "Do you even need me to remind you what you'd say if I started sounding like that?"

Karkat steps back out of your space, actually winces when the bolt clicks. "No, when you sound like – whatever the fuck it is you think I sound like – it's because you've just had the exact same epiphany about how much you suck for the millionth time. My awareness of my virtually limitless shortcomings doesn't fluctuate with the weather or what I had for breakfast. I meant –" He hesitates, arms crossed tightly over his chest – "I meant about this thing we're starting."

"What about it," you say, dubious.

"I'm not sure about this. As embarrassing as this is to say, I'm - it's -" He stammers for a moment. "This is too big. It's so goddamn audacious I feel like my head's going to explode, if someone else doesn't explode it for me first."

"That didn't stop you from playing a game tied to the end of the universe." You're still too near to the hiveportal to be having this conversation, even though you locked both of his deadbolts with your mind and now have psionics deployed searching across his lawnring in pulses, listening, and you take the excuse to step closer into Karkat's space, hiss-whispering, inches from his eyes with the beginnings of forbidden color seeping into them until he has to cross them to look at you.

"Maybe that's where I learned what biting off more than I can chew looks like," he spits almost talking over you, and he's defensive but not backing away, shoulders hunched and rigid. "The shit going down with Vriska - my ten foot pole doesn't want to touch it with its ten foot pole. And it got me started thinking, and -"

"Always a bad idea." Despite yourself, you snicker a little at your own cheap shot.

"Shut up. It got me started thinking and I'm not sure I know how to handle this at all, this is not just games for girls this is games for half-ton seadwellers on stimulant binges, aka not us. We are nowhere near equipped -"

"We're better equipped than anyone has been before. It's us or no one." Maybe you sound desperate but you're also right.

But Karkat is jumping on that strained note in your voice, sneering, "And you won't tell me why you think so. That's really reassuring -"

A crisis of faith is not the right time to tell KK about Astris, but you start ticking off other reasons on
your fingers. "For starters, we do have seadwellers - and lowbloods, we're all over the hemospectrum, none of the famous failures were. More people have reason to believe in our legitimacy and lend their support."

"Assuming we even get that far."

"Are you going to betray us?" You flare your eyes and crackle around your horns, not that cheap special effects help your case but that you're fed up and don't care if he knows it and this time when you step forward, half-floating, he does stumble a short step back into his living block –

"No, but -" He's off-balance, voice wavering like someone winded from a blow, anger a delayed reaction but beginning –

"Wishy-washy is not an option here, KK," you cut him off, "Passive is not an option."

And Karkat is growling, "Oh, that's rich coming from you."

"But you have to lead us. And the tiniest slip could fuck us all over permanently."

"Is that your creepy prophetic voices talking?" he scoffs, and fuck if you're going to let him keep standing there and pretending not to take this seriously when he damn well knows, and your fingers are curving rigid with seething frustration, claws outstretched.

"No, it's the voice of common fucking sense. Like you said, this is not a FLARP game, it's something bigger - and you can be scared all you like in private but you cannot get lazy, you cannot be halfway committed -" You're uncomfortably aware that your voice is cracking a little, and okay, maybe these are things you sometimes don't want to look at yourself, you're tired of constant vigilance and it's only going to get worse.

Karkat sees, he catches the slip, and he takes the opportunity to jeer, "I guess it's double or nothing?"

You have him by the collar before you can think about it, and you're growling low in your throat, filled with rage and suddenly lightheaded; if this isn't a classic leading-with-your-bulge moment nothing is, it's twitching and trying to unsheathe in your pants and your hands are crackling with a faint buzz of psionics and the air feels thicker around you - "Fuck, KK, really, do you really have to go there -"

"You tell me," he hisses out, "it's not like I'm the one who's been flaky as a bowl of grain-based breakfast product until now."

"Like hell you haven't, you're a clusterfuck of hot and cold running sexual hangups and oh-Sollux-put-your-bulge-in-me-but-don't-look -"

He shoves you back, for that one, not just shoves but presses his thumbs to your collarbones in a way that reminds you of what an excellent fighter he actually is; you can feel the leverage in his grip, feel how if he shifted and pressed harder he'd break a bone and you could stop him with your powers but you know he won't, and it turns you on so much you stop breathing for a moment. And then he laughs. "Look at you going all floppy and docile, you're so easy, you just want me to do all the work."

Quite a lot of the time that's true; more than you'd care to admit, but not this time, and it can't keep being that way, and you need something else now, and when you speak your voice comes out quiet but not docile, a whispered growl - "You're taunting me because you don't want to admit how much it gets to you," you say with dead certainty, and the way his cheeks flush in answer is what you were looking for. You let a pulse of power crackle out from your hand clenched in his shirt collar, warning
and goading, and now he's the one going still and pliant in your grasp.

"Ablution trap," he gasps out, and it's not like his ablation block lacks for positive associations but it still makes you suddenly furious, you just called him on his hangups and here he is giving you the same old hoofbeastshit and you're not going to back out and you're definitely not going to throw a shit-fit about where you have to fuck. And you know what you're going to do to him now, and it makes you nervous-dizzy, anticipating the vicious satisfaction - he hasn't been ready and maybe you haven't been ready, but now you are - and you're scrambling for the ablation block shucking off clothing like the pair of horny adolescents you are, nearly tripping over discarded sweaters and videohusks. You grab at his hips and shoulders with psionics, to catch you both from careening into the floor and just because you can, as KK snarls and shoves back and knocks your horns together crackling-painful and ringing straight down your spine.

He won't take off his boxers until he's in the trap with the light off, but you manage to cop a feel on the way there and he actually squeaks when you grip his bulge between two fingers through his shorts - fully unsheathed and slippery and squirming under your hand and you're growling continuously, nearly throwing both of you into the ablation block and slamming the door with a burst of excess force that cascades sparks down to the floor. No matter what he thinks he's hiding you can see the red smears across the front of his boxers where your fingers pressed in, and you mouth at his jaw fangy and sloppy and rumbling in a heap of limbs against the wall.

Karkat reaches, snaps the light off and you let him. Watching, waiting, deliberate, pressing a shell of soundproof stillness up against the walls and the blockportal, and if he sees the flare of power he'll take it for excitement - he strips down fast and sloppy in the dark and he knows you're aware of his blood color, damn it, he hasn't been hiding anything for a long time except from himself, and you're not going to keep doing this. Well. You're going to keep doing some of this, but not the letting Karkat hide from himself part. Your hands chase over his body and find his bulge again, uncovered this time, and he moans into your mouth and you reach out with a tiny careful flicker of telekinesis and the light goes on.

Karkat bites your tongue, hard, fast enough that you know it's a reflex, stumbles back a step and snarls at you, wordless at first then "I know what you're doing, asshole, where do you get off –"

"I will stop if you tell me to, I will turn around and snap the damn light off and leave you standing here frustrated in the dark, and never tell anyone, and we'll still be friends," and you say it like it's a threat, so he knows you mean it - "just say the word, KK, does this go further or does it stop here -"

He's standing in the ablation trap eyes wide and bloodpusher pounding so hard you can feel it in his bright red bulge when it coils and clutches around your fingers, and in between little grunting dazed moans manages, "Do your worst, you fucking bulgetease, or are you losing your nerve?"

And you reach out your other hand and sink your clawtips into his thigh and he makes this tiny noise of shock, but his bulge squirms harder.

You just want to memorize the look on his face, carve it into some cheerfully victorious part of your brain and keep it there to set you on fire on a night when you're feeling dead inside. So scared at the sight of his own blood on your claws and blown-open and panting and - "You're frightened," you say, and he stills, like not moving is going to remove the threat - "You're not scared of me, though. No. You're scared shitless of yourself.”

And you dig your claws in, scrape a line down his thigh that wells with bright-red blood, while he squirms and moans, arcing his back up and snarling in frustration like he's trying to lose himself when you want him here and he just doesn't get it yet. "Karkat fucking Vantas," you say, "you're scary as hell or I wouldn't be here pailing you. You stupid little shit. You're afraid of yourself
because your very existence is frightening.”

He sputters at you, mouthing the word *existence* like he’s going to mock your speech impediment again and you are *so done* and you shove your hand into his mouth, dripping with his genetic fluid, and he mmmphs around it and bites you hard enough that it’s gonna leave a mark. “But you’re even scarier when you *actually bring your force to bear on something*. Shit falls *down*. Hives and enemies and empires.”

And the sound he makes trying to yell back at you around your hand afraid, afraid and *angry* and confused, growl-whining until the bones of your fingers vibrate in his mouth –

“Yes, I said it. Gonna cull me? I’m committing treason right now,” you say, and you push two knuckles into his nook and he just *wails* around your other hand. “I’m committing treason by enabling you to exist.”

You take your hand out of his mouth to shift position, briefly, and he manages to choke out, “Dispensations -”

“Are part of the fucking smokescreen. Even if you did get to live. What about me, Karkat? What about *me*? And I have to fucking *see* all this garbage and know that you’re going to need to be an active part of this or we won’t make it and you, just haven’™t. been. listening. Look at yourself.” He’s crying now too - you’re a mess of your own blood and his and his genetic fluid and his bulge is twitching and curling so hard you think he’s going to come as soon as you’re in him, and you reach up and paint him all over his chest with the fluids he’s been so carefully, ridiculously trying to prevent you from seeing. “Look at you,” you pant at him, “So pathetic I’d flip flushed for you if I didn’t already have a flushed quadrant.”

He goes silent suddenly, stammers out - “When did you - who -”

“Wouldn’t you just like to know. I *hate* you, god, you little *shit*, why do you think we haven’t been in a quadrant before this, it’s because you’ve been too cluckbeast to *deal* with yourself.”

Karkat's entire face is flushed ruddy-garish with pailing and crying, the thread of a tear-inflamed capillary in his eye running mutant red that even contacts wouldn’t cover, and he's hissing and scrubbling at your wrist with his claws and you're angry and triumphant, but not cold with it, warm to white-hot in your core. He's glorious like this, and he's giving way to you but not easily and you want to be stained all over with his brilliant color, you hate him in all his self-disgust and his cowardice and want to ignite him inside until he burns away everything in him that flinches. "I'm going to make you splatter that fucking color over me until you can't *remember* that you can't stand it," you grate out in his ear, and he's just moaning low and desperate and nodding his head - you're nicking his lips with your fangs, licking tears off his face with your tongue. You pull him to you, roughly, rutting up against his thighs, and he mutters something half-intelligible and it's almost impossible to stop moving but you do, just barely, your bulge still trembling and flicking and questing toward him. "What was that? You're gonna have to repeat it, I didn't hear you -"

And Karkat lets out this beautiful multisyllabic *pleeeeaase* that wavers in the middle with sobbing, and you curl your hand around his bulge and stop restraining your own, let one tip nestle in - you can manage both, though it's a tight squeeze, but he's already so incredibly slick and as soon as you're halfway in he's going rigid all over and clinging to you like he's afraid of falling over, his bulge spurting and dribbling bright red all over your hand and you make him look at it, lift your hand and lick it off your fingers, salty and slippery and he cries out like he can't bear it but just holds you tighter and oh *god* the way his nook contracts around you, you shudder hard and almost lose it right there - but you're not *done*. You just want to take him apart and not think about it but there was a
"Best possible treason," you whisper in his ear, "hottest fucking treason -" and he yelps and his eyes roll back in his head as another pulse of bright red wrings out of him all over your stomach and you guide your other tendril in, shove deep, press and coil and brace heavy leaning forward against the walls of the ablation trap with his legs clenched around you still shaking. You're holding him up with psionics now, your own muscles on the verge of giving out and you lean forward, dig lines into the skin of his shoulder with your fangs, something he's never let you do even after he must have known that you knew about his uncanny blood, and you thought he was done coming but he's not, he's writhing and twisting in your grip and sobbing near-silent breathless and clamping down on your bulge flooded-wet and so viselike you see prickles of light that don't come from your psionics - and that, oh, you're going to replay that forever in your head, it does you in, exquisite tremors all through your bulge that you feel all the way to your nook without so much as a finger touching you there, and you gasp and pant until you're lightheaded and tingling, sinking to your knees with him still wrapped around you, slumping against the wall of the trap.

~~~

Later, in the recuperacoon, you fade into dream still woozy and thick-tongued with sleep – you really need to get KK to change his sopor when you wake; the evening will be a mess of hassling KK into mending bridges with everyone while catching up with nearly a night's worth of your own missed work – until a bruise on your neck throbs, not under the sopor but on your dream-body, in the dreamt-together version of your hive, and your eyes jolt open and you're there. Astris is still materializing too, standing in front of you, steadying himself by the hand on your shoulder, and you go still again. "Hey," he says softly, eyes crystallizing into brightness, shadows settling around the folds of his clothing. "You're here – wait. What happened?"

"I - nothing bad," you tell him first, reassuring, and then you try to formulate a better answer in your mind, which leads to blushing hot as a miniature sun. "Caliginous things," no, that sounds dumb but it sure as hell just came out your mouth and now your face must look like an ochre paintpot. Fragments of the caliginous things that just happened are spilling through your mind, sopor-groggy and disoriented.

Astris clasps a hand over his mouth with a pfff of air, his eyes pulsing brighter and crinkled up at the corners, before a chuckle manages to escape and he flops back on the couch. "Him? Really? I mean, that's great, but also – eheheh –"

That raises your hackles a bit. You're already answering, off-guard, "Hey, I may have epically bad judgment in some respects, but my romantic tastes are unimpeachable," by the time it occurs to you that's not what he meant. Well, the stealth compliment isn't a bad thing, anyway.

"I appreciate the sentiment – heh – sorry." He wipes at his eye with the back of his hand. "Are... things going to be OK between you? You aren't – you know – ?" Astris pulls the frustrated face that you've come to associate with him forgetting a word and makes a dramatic gesture over his head, opening his hands and pulling them apart like he's miming something exploding.

"...naw, I'm sleeping in his recuperacoon right now, he's been my best hatefriend for ages, it's just... more official." You're still blushing, damn it. "I'm probably gonna wake up with a bulge drawn on my forehead but... we got here because we trust each other to call bullshit when there's a lot at stake."

Astris' face is nearly as yellow as yours from laughter, but he's calmed down enough to tug at you with psionics, pulling you down toward him on the couch. "And I'm... only freaking out a little. I
think if it was anyone else I might be – well, freaking out a lot. You look like a woofbeast's chew toy." It's odd to be having this conversation without actually mentioning Karkat's name or his ancestor's, and that thought must have been Astris' as well as yours because he blurts out, "This is so strange."

"I'd ask which part you meant, but... I'm not sure that's a useful question." You're getting your equilibrium back, starting to laugh a little too. "I uh. Definitely enjoyed getting like this. Sorry if that's too much information."

"Uhhh." Astris starts out like he's going to try to answer your question anyway, then – no, he isn't laughing anymore but he's still getting yellower, definitely blushing. "Not really, I think I misplaced my threshold for 'too much information' somewhere, just... be careful." He wraps a hand around one of your larger horns and tilts your head to the side, baring the bruises along your neck to warm precise kisses that trail up gradually until he's purring right into your ear. "Still mine," he rumbles, his face so close to your skin that you can feel him flushing hotter.

Twice in one night is a lot, but being with Astris is everything that being with Karkat is not, too, a counterweight, balancing you, reaffirming your bond, softness and light and completion - you need this, and you don't quite forget where you are, but you don't bother to quite remember it, either, until Astris fades from view once more, and -

"What the fuck." A splatter of something slimy hits your cheek: Karkat's too-thin sopor, by the way it drips down your face in gross sticky rivulets. "Sollux, what the fuck, ewww, get out –" More splashing and then a bigger slosh and by the time you open your eyes it's pretty clear that Karkat has gotten out instead, standing next to the recuperacoon naked except for globs of sopor and glowering at you like he's never seen genetic material before.

Your actual voice is a little bit sleep-rusty, which is good because it means you haven't been vocalizing everything. Small mercies. "...You didn't seem to mind my geneslurry last night." And you're awake enough to backtalk. Not that you need to be all that awake to backtalk.

"You weren't getting it in my sopor last night, smartass! Between that and the miniature Troll Tesla coil act, yeah, I kind of mind. The absolute last thing I need is you reenacting the experiment in In Which An Eccentric Scienterrorist Creates An Eponymous Monster, Etc, on my recuperacoon in the middle of the day. 'It's alive!'" He forms his hand into a claw and shakes it around in an attempt to illustrate the film reference that mostly just winds up getting more sopor all over the place. "At least this was better than waking up to you screaming your cranial shell off again, my ear didn't work right for a week. Congratulations, your daymares have an upside, now you get to clean it up – wait a minute." He squints at you, one hand going to his hip where his sickles currently aren't. "There's – things that cause vivid dreams. I swear on whatever the fuck we're supposed to be swearing on now that it isn't the Empire, if you're getting attacked by some asshole with chucklevoodos or something and not asking the rest of us for help I'm going to cull you first before going after the fucker –"

You're awake enough to backtalk, but not to go a mile a minute like that. Being treated to one of his breathtaking surfactant-box rants first thing is surreal and leaves you feeling like you're unpicking thickly knit language to get the meanings out, and so you're silent for a moment, then burst out laughing.

Karkat turns bright red and growls at you. "...oh, fuck you. Yeah, this is so serious, one slip up and we're all gonna die, but the minute I call you on shoring up your shit it's fucking funny –"

"...nah, man. I just know exactly what happened just now, and you don't, that's all -" You're still not completely coherent. "Remember last night when I mentioned my flushed quadrant and you pulled this face?" You do an exaggerated impression of what he looked like.
He pulls a much less pronounced version of the same face. "Possibly unlike your mystery matesprit – who, *remember*, I didn't push you about last night because I'm not an incorrigible meddler like you, even though I'm in your quads and the info is probably my business – I'm not a fucking psychic. So at the risk of repeating myself, *what the fuck?*

"It is your business," you say, at the risk of sounding like a busted air blower. "You're just not going to *believe* me - I'd have put it out there before now if I thought - but then again what with you going all science fiction double feature on me, maybe you *will* -" 

"Look, I'm choosing to believe that you're not having some kind of sick pitch prank at my expense right now, because the Sollux I know may have his horns firmly lodged in his wastechute but hasn't quite contorted to *that* level of pointless bullshit yet." Karkat takes a wary step forward, rests his hand on the edge of the recuperacoon like he halfway expects it to bite him. "The decision to stick around in Captor Bizarro World may have been truly bone-panned but here I am, I decided, and I'm not going to fuck off into the sunrise because you're unbelievably weird, so you might as well spit it out."

"Okay." You lever yourself out of the recuperacoon, because you're going to need to avail yourself of some grandiosity, and pacing helps. The fact that you're leaving wet sopor footprints behind you probably doesn't, but you can ignore that. You take a deep breath and look Karkat in the eyes. "First I'm going to ask how much you know about the Condesce's flagship," you say, "rumors included."

Karkat mumbles something to the effect that it's highly improper for a schoolfeeding examiner to drip sopor all over his sleeping block, squints at you for a moment like he still expects you to start laughing at him, then shrugs and replies. He sounds like a mash-up of his usual self and the obnoxious, simpering voice that narrates history schoolfeeds that would be hilarious pretty much anytime else. "The *Battleship Condescension* is the vanguard for the expansion of the Empire, obviously. It's the fastest, most powerful, and most technologically advanced thing ever created by any species, so pretty much all Her Imperious Condescension has to do is cruise the flagship through a star system and most of the time the inhabitants accept the Empire in a big fucking hurry. The Subjugglators come afterward, but their ships are slower... fanatics on the thesrechecutioner-wannabe forums like to go on about how the terrifying grandeur of the Condescence's presence or whatever allows trolls around her to fight at twice their strength and even that She can bring back the dead to keep her ship running like that, but that's not even a listed ability, and some other hemoanonymous troll posted a theory that it was thirty powerful telekinetics in a chain array; I don't know much about this stuff but she seemed to know her math."

You give a weird strangled laugh that sounds a little too much like a sob, and try to cover it up by clearing your throat. Of course he doesn't know that particular almost-open secret, he's been reading the wrong rumors on the wrong forums because until just this last perigee he was on the wrong side. 

"...I can see why you think that, KK," you say, and you're grinning darkly and nearly whispering, smugly dismissing him just enough to make him lean closer and listen. "It's probably safer than the 'pan-busting reality. But I'm going to tell you about that reality anyway, because I hate your schoolfeed-regurgitating squawk blister so much you deserve to know." And maybe it's a little safer for you to talk about all this in your smug mastermind voice, because you're pretty sure you're going to cry in front of your kismesis eventually but not *tonight*, damn it. "...So. When I told you to look into where helmsmen came from, how deep *did* you dig?"

"None of the shit on the dark net made sense. It was all either calculators that were supposed to show what kind of ship you'd be assigned to or threads that started off with 'Ascension is shit for psionics,' 'no, Ascension is shit for everybody,' and wound up full of thousands of deleted posts and 'what happened?'s, but then there was some asshole trolling wrigglers who posted in yellow or under with
a shitty manip of what looked like a bunch of dangling intestines and I uh... may have uninstalled Troll Onion Router for a few perigees after that. And then the game happened and I thought..." He makes a vague gesture toward the outside, everything that the meteors destroyed.

You're silent for a long moment, pacing and slopping sopor on the floor, trying to figure out where to begin. "...It's hard to get the story straight," you say finally. "But two things really helped me figure it out: the patent record and the history of the colonies. You know how the central expansion radius of the Empire suddenly got - more specifically, the rate of expansion went up by a factor of ten, about a thousand sweeps ago?"

"Well, something else happened right around then - this one you have to be able to crack private files for, but the technology started changing. All of a sudden no one was building crude mechanical helm interfaces anymore; instead they were building support machinery for fully interfaced helmsmen. When I say fully interfaced just... picture something along the lines of that 'shitty manip', okay, or imagine a horrorterror angling to get into a quadrant with your nervous system; biowire is some fucking serious business."

Karkat has gone very still, his face paling to sickly angel-white. "I think I put it together, that it was something like that," he says, suddenly hoarse, "And then, you know... didn't. Because there was you, and Aradia~"

"I know, KK," you say, your voice a cold burn, "oh, I know, as much as it chafes I can't even blame you because I spent over a sweep deliberately avoiding obvious conclusions as much as possible. Until the daymares. And even after they started, for a while."

"...OK," KK wipes cold sweat and flaky sopor off his forehead, leaning heavily on the recuperacoon. "...Fuck, OK. You're being a cryptic fuck again about all this, you know that right, the daymares and the phantom matesprit and the starship stuff – wait, fuck." He stares at you like you've just told him there are four moons, then shakes his head. "...no, that doesn't make any goddamn sense. Tell me what the daymares have to do with this before I catch any more of your crazy."

You can't stay sardonic, talking about this; you're staring at your feet, your fingers fidgeting at your sides. "There were helmsmen, before, but not - not Helmsmen. That started when she enslaved him. He was the first, still the strongest - He has my sign, KK, my same mutations. He'd been crying out into nothingness for so long with no one hearing him that when I heard he didn't even recognize it at first~"

"How long could...?" KK objects, automatically, and you want to laugh because you know how that feels, grasping for some quibbling thing to dispute because it couldn't be real – "...the Empress' powers. It's true, about extending life. Fuuuck." He groans out his most drawn-out expletive of the night, stumbles over and paps you groggily on the shoulder, hard enough that it's almost a slap except that it definitely isn't. "Of all the rumors I could've picked to not give a shit about, Ancestors~" Now he's the one laughing hollowly.

And you want to start talking about his Ancestor, about the connections reaching through the past, but he could get more of that story almost anywhere, if he looked, despite the censors, and this one, only you can tell. The door in the back of your head is blocked tight when you say, almost whisper-quiet as if that could help against overhearing, "So that's the other answer to why us. Not just because of you. Because of him - and because of me. Because I have a backdoor exploit on the Battleship fucking Condescension that no one else has ever had, or ever will." You feel horribly callous talking about your matesprit that way, but you need to get used to this, to what you're going to have to do, even if you don't think you'll ever be comfortable with the prospect.

"...And you were pailing him in my recuperacoon." Karkat grimaces at you and shakes his head.
You're pretty sure you'll be waking up to frantic Trollian messages from him when this actually sinks in. "I believe you. You're smart as fuck, but you aren't even close to creative enough to come up with shit this weird just to mess with me. But if you pull that stunt in my hive again then so help me –" He cuts himself off and bops at your shoulder again. "Are you OK? I mean, obviously not, but... Who else knows?"

"FF does," you tell him, "I... I'm not ever sure what AA knows, anymore. And so long as we stick together and keep to procedure, I'm exactly as OK as I have to be. Security: it's not just for lusus plushies."

"That isn't an answer," Karkat grumbles, but doesn't push you on it. "If I'm going to do this – and I am – then I'll need to know more about your plan than 'so, we have the Helmsman, that's a thing.' No, that doesn't sound right. Does the myth in my quadrant corners have a name? How the hell is he in any shape to be anyone's matesprit? How many others are out there that – you know what, no, it's the middle of the day. If you tell me anything more now then it's going to leak out of my hearducts along with the rest of my shoddy excuse for a thinkpan."

"...as long as it doesn't leak out your squawk blister, and - KK, the things I've seen, anyone would fall in pity, and it wasn't easy, and it isn't - and I'm babbling, but you knew you needed to flush your fucking recuperacoon before I got genetic material all over it, so that part serves you right." You feel like you're in the setup for a scandalous pitch papping porno right now, all it needs is some shitty elevator music, and your quadrants are already complicated enough without going there, thank you very much. "Is the mechanism broken, do I need to tech support this?"

"Fuck tech support, I need a full day's sleep and for none of this to be happening, but those are off the list of options, probably forever, so. I'll start the recuperacoon draining, you stop standing around looking stupidly pity-struck and do the gross part." And your kismesis stomps off in the direction of the supply closet, flinging half-dried sopor all over his floor.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, the Captorcest porn part of this sequence of events exists, and will be posted in a separate file - it wasn't plot-relevant, just fun to write.
you lie helplessly still as your face falls apart

Chapter Summary

Astris looks at you aghast, like he's hit you, like he expects to see a bruise, and he starts up and steps back and wraps his arms around himself, his hands still resolving into creases and clawbeds and the precise delineation of joints. He flicks his eyes to the the floor and says, trancelike, "I couldn't – make a place for you to turn away in time, you had to see me –" He drags his claws against his arms through the jumpsuit, and you see it all unspooling in his head, what he saw and felt, knowing that you also saw. "I couldn't, I – I'm sorry –"

It's a phantom ache in your breastbone, the lightless weighty knot of exhaustion and centuries and self-disgust, and you don't even know how to begin to unpick it, or whether it's even possible. And you know, too, that he needs to hold onto that right now. You can't bear it, your matesprit's desperate urge to dig himself out of reality like a splinter out of skin, and it hurts, and you're shedding silent tears into his shoulder, letting the emotions loose but not the full reason why, the sudden fragility of your hope, the fragility of everything.

Chapter Notes

Content notes for this chapter: body horror, identity blurring, starship headspace, quadrant blurring, abuse, sensory deprivation, suicidality, copious tangled flowery angst.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#).

It isn't the first time. It isn't even the first time you've done this on purpose. Right now, today, you're gathering data, careful, observant; sweeps ago now you first started receiving transmissions he didn't know he was sending - but maybe his reluctance, the way he hesitates before letting you listen in, has to do with that, too; that guilt like he's afraid what you see will break you any more than you're already broken.

"You don't need me to tell you to be careful." Astris' fangs poke at his lip in a wry, fond smile, his hands rest heavy on your shoulders but the light around his eyes has already gone unfocused with peering into elsewhere, and your mind catches the distant and thunderous edges of it, a looming awareness of the place beyond the barriers that he has thinned but not yet drawn back.

(It sometimes feels not quite real to know that he is the Battleship Condescension. Other times, charged with mania and fire and the knowledge of your own competence and the doom that clings to it like dark threads in the periphery of your vision, you think about what they would make you if you did not stop them, and you sure as fuck wouldn't be a livestock transport.)

You're moved, suddenly, to reach out a hand and stroke his hair, a wordless reminder that for all you've asked over and over for the chance to ride along in his head and see what he sees in the other side of himself, you still value beyond measure the part that's here.
And there's a soft sigh, like your touch eases the work of shifting those barriers, and then -

You carry a city, a world within yourself, and you have been so focused, in glimpses before, on flight, on immense bellowing machines and calculations and vast stretching anemone-fingered hands of light, that you hardly knew –

You reunite spreading, filling the center of yourself, with edges and carved-out pieces of you that have remained waking here. Over the inescapable bass note of linear climbing percentages that mean being pulled out and worn thin, the harvest of light from the body, power coiling in synthetic nodes around the engine core, pumped and purified and stored – lesser numbers swarm in: clusters of infinitesimal fluctuations, microns and nanoseconds, needling alerts and tiny flinching adjustments, climate and life and comfort, the work of enclosing creatures through the void.

You are all of this; you are, also, the part of you that is separate, small, that knows it is something else, and from that part you contain yourself carefully. You listen...

You listen.

All the voices, every word spoken in every chamber and corridor, digitize and parse into fractal sets of information - they're part of your work. They're also strangely welcome. You simply accept this, now, because you are curled into the center of all this and spun down to a careful passive thread, but something in you reaches toward language like dry roots seeking water: the functional, the banal, the secretive all rolled into something you savor as it goes in, savor and replay and analyze and wring for data. For evidence of treason, or evidence that the strife practice room needs a climate control change. It's all the same; you think you might have agonized over it once but can't afford that, because it fills a need in you vital as oxygen.

Lights wax. You check the atomic clock against the stars, cast off signals careening into the dark that will synchronize others' time with yours through the cosmos, flick moments of attention at the subroutines that wash out the filtered dual-moon simulacrum of night with the first ruddy glare of day. You are also aware, tiny and muted and without contradiction, that it was day some hours ago; that a miniscule, almost particulate biorhythm closer in to yourself than the sprawling circuitry of lights and warming air registers the even-rolling wavelengths of midmorning sleep. Like a fragmented piece of you dreaming, from the outside, nothing out of bounds; a dormant cell cluster resting for the jump.

You drop a fraction of mind into matching trance, just for a moment; send an inquiring ping to that place that is almost-but-not self, and it answers back, call and response, steady and patient and curious, listening. Safe. A consuming sense of relief spreads into you from parts of your mind that you can't see from here; you could, you're aware, lift those veils right now, if you turned toward that self and began to decrypt...

And you won't. You've left a warning whisper of trust there for yourself, hardly legible in the dregs of some old memory but utterly to be obeyed. You've put up safeguards, and redundant safeguards; you are an expert in your own neural circuitry and you have programmed yourself well. So the deflection is gentle but inexorable: the refueling process tugs at your attention, there are nodes in need of optimizing, an output point near the base of the spine transmitting power below peak efficiency, and you call up schematics and maintenance schedules and redirect and tune –

- and sensors wink out.

A section you were barely monitoring goes dark all at once: the digital feeds from the helmsblock.

You cannot ignore a possible malfunction, even though you know it is not a malfunction but a
gambit. Your directives still hold, automatic as breath: you have to restore, have to direct your
attention, have to open senses there, to see and feel beyond the narrow bandwidth of status indicators
and warning lights -

There are two options, zero and one, to follow strict protocol or to cut straight to the point; but you
feel – you feel heavy with unreasoning, unnameable caution, like engines spinning slowly in reverse
– that even if this is beyond your ability to mitigate –

You check code; find, as expected, gibberish where the name of the terminal that sent the shutoff
order should have been; order a trace anyway, run commands, cycle power. Cameras and
microphones flick on in dully satisfying &\text{status=restored} messages. You run the manual checks,
inspect each image, and the movements of the concave chest under yellow match your awareness of
your breathing; the feeds are live. You focus on that breath, layered over the ticking of percentages;
on absolute refusal to let the inhales creep even incrementally faster. You wait.

And as you automatically formulate the command to withdraw your focus from that terrible
claustrophobic place, but hold it back knowing - she's drawing near.

The thread of consciousness that does not belong here - to break from it you would have to expand it, would have to wake into - she would see - no.

No, and she walks closer - unmistakably tall to all your multifold eyes, bootless, these are her
sleeping hours, schedules unfolding in your databanks, but she is awake anyway and the last time
she did this she just stared at your body silently, baleful and approving, and then walked away
without a word passed between -

This time she wanders over to the console bank, barely looking at all. She's humming in perfect
pitch, and when the tune goes to words, the language goes in, through the microphones, into storage
and analysis - singing, softly, a song you recognize, dimly, though you haven't heard it in sweeps -"How lovely the rain, how lovely the night, 'ay-di-ai, di-ai-di-oh - how lovely the gleam of blood in moonlight -" and the chorus of nonsense syllables again, the vocabulary database turns up blanks and pulls you into reaching for something in your thinkpan, analog, faded. She reclines against the wall, on the edge of where it goes to squishy organic biotech, and wriggles her toes in the edge of the saltwater pool, twirls a coil of prodigious hair around a finger - "How lovely the song and the power of speech -" and slides a finger along a touchscreen, such a quick flick back and forth that it could be an accident -

And thousands of voices go deafeningly mute, wink out simple as an indicator light. It's the
entertainment block, and for a nonsense moment it reads like that other way you know multitudes
descending into sudden silence – but the voices and their absence both flowed in mundane pulses of
voltage through wires, not the eerie current of Doom's whispers; and the absence is not an attack, or
even a malfunction, but a shutoff. You perform the procedures in their sequence anyway. You aren't
interested in courting feedback, and more than that, you have no choice. The source of the order
verifies to her passwords and biometrics, pings to the helmsblock, originates at a level of command
that renders your recovery measures laughable. Just a clean bitten-out gap in perception where
moments ago you drank in the din of language, like the fuzzy-vacant spots in vision before a
migraine, before your head used to – long ago – (\textit{how do you remember, wait –})

"How lovely the stars further out than we reach," she sings, and slides another control; you're
attending to her movements unwillingly close-focused now, anticipatory.

And the taking before was only a fragment of vision but now you – you dull, you collapse, your
senses wither around the edges and snap off, brittle – the cosmos closes to you, stars flare and distort
and snuff out – and you are what you would be in a crisis of survival, you are the hull and the close
bubble of direct sense around it, the fuzz of shielding psionics enclosing a lump of barren space, gazing in all directions into the oily-kaleidoscopic dark of blindness. Jarred out of space, and when you reach for galaxies, for knowing place by light and aching distance, then – your receptor arrays are still intact on hull integrity scans, still orienting themselves mutely to the constellations; scaffolding and instrumentation still gyroscopic-swinging, centered in lenticular shallow focusing discs as immense as moons, clinging to their beacons in the distant deep as the ship coasts and curves. But they are numb unseeing pockmarks on your surface only now, and you shrink inward from the nauseating blank because there is no other way –

And you know only vaguely, because the awareness is neither prudent nor comfortable, that dumping masses of data feeds from remote and unimportant parts of the ship to stuff your sensory processing space, queueing up millions of parallel tasks and staggering your awareness through in waves, is the equivalent of a cut-winged featherbeast hopping circles in a too-small cage. (But you should fill your consciousness, keep your thinkpan moving, a buried thread that draws toward caution –) You will not be in the helmsblock any more than you are compelled to be, but still you see, circling around to the cameras that cluster thick in the place, the squelch and drip of fluid from the wires, the frigid saltwater cycling unrippled through their gnarled-together old roots, the motionless body, goggles dark over closed eyes.

She sings the nonsense chorus again, then laughs, more sound that you have to process tediously consciously instead of shunting it away into the database, because everything she says is priority - sings, on into the next verse: did she skip one? You aren't sure; don't remember; it doesn't matter now; no one in the galaxy has sung this song in hundreds of sweeps. "Ours is the sea, and ours is the sky -" That sharp-clawed hand reaches for another control, inputs a complicated sequence this time, and you recognize it through your cameras moments before -

**WARNING: CATASTROPHIC SENSOR FAILURE –**

Every stream of code, every line of sight, every voice all ripped away, every direction you could stretch not just walled off but impossible to reach in, gone.

Your cameras are off. You can no longer see the body dangling in limp sunken passivity from its squirming riot of chains, hollow-cheeked and sparkling weakly with feeble shudders as it gives up light; the dribbles of ochre where a twitch broke the seal with a wire along the side, the flight suit grimy-stiff with salt fumes and old sweat. But you can feel it. You feel every aching second of prying your eyes open; the stinging of coronas as they struggle into seeing, ionized air in the goggles sandpaper-harsh after long darkness.

Spiked through with agony you barely recognize the next verse, shrill and harsh and echoing in your ears, with the audio intakes gone and you must still be recording data but you can't perceive it going in. "And mine are the stars, and none to defy..."

Pain doesn't – can't behave the same without the endless pathways of your network to extend yourself through – doesn't ball up and push aside, when you are the wrecked shoulders twisted up and back and disintegrating into formless balls of cartilage – when you are the skin gaping around pumping, sucking purple coils where they merge into you – when you are this body, when you are a hundred million infinitesimal splices into axons, each a microscopic soldering brand – and you hang unmoving, an arc of interrupted spine and bent neck, staring down into the pool that drowns reflected flickering in purple, calculating how far your heartbeat has deviated from the line on the reference charts marked yellowblooded average, the limping whoosh and thump, the shredded rasp of breathing.

And something unaccustomed wakes in you: a riot of emotions, pity and anger like an inferno and
the desire to cry. Wakes, and curls itself small and silent, leaving only the spike in your heart rate and the knowledge of a door that must stay closed. The knowledge of a door, comforting and upsetting at once. That and only that, so long as -

- You can’t, can’t think like this, your thinkpan is a solar core pulsing and melting and fusing, a nucleus of pain – bounded in, engulfed in the infinite scrutiny of your own attention cataloging every aging, aching, brittle cell, every thread of slick cold foreign life coiled up a raw icy clawing in marrow – you can’t think, trapped in this wretched skin-wrapped sac of ripped out and replaced parts, gnawed and worried in the jaws of the millennia – Here where time weighs physical as pain, pulls like a swallowed fragment of the void of space, a blackness in the pit of your shriveled stomach, a dark pooled in the cup of your skull – here where time sucks at you like being absorbed from within –

And though you fight for every thousandth of a percent your cognitives are dropping, processing speed ticking down in plateaus and nauseating jumps –

"Ay di ai, di ai di oh," she sings again, idle, melodic, and then the same notes in a close-lipped hum, her eyes barely even shifting from the screen as she inputs commands one after another and sensors flicker back online under her touch - internals first, then externals, the blessed return of light and orientation and sound. Performance numbers fluctuate wildly, rise and drop with your bloodpusher trying to equilibrate, and you see her for a moment through cameras and quivering eyes at once as she straightens, plashes out of the water and toward the portal.

You expect that she’ll turn around at any moment, retrace her steps, but she does not; she leaves and you follow her life signs down the corridor until they reach parts of the ship that are hers and away from here.

And you – you flow out, awareness moving as light at its speed, as current, a reservoir through open levees; you inhabit every instrument, millions of reboot procedures in parallel, checks and re-checks and nothing has changed. The dryware backups kept you precisely on course; no reprogramming, no sensor upgrades, all as it was.

And you would never think to be relieved; she works in loops and deflections, and all is pain in time, but for now you task the remaining checks to an isolated corner of your thinkpan, to monitor in their sequence and keep watch; and you follow the deep call down into dream. You flicker with changing shape, uncurling memory, you stretch out hands to be pulled in –

And then breaking apart.

Reforming, redoubling from composite consciousness. The sudden return to the dreamspace is like falling, even if there is no physical distance to fall.

You land sprawled legs-out disoriented and it takes you a moment to realize which one of you is you, that you're Sollux Captor and your damped-down stifled thoughts are uncrumpling to fill the oddly empty blankness where knowledge had streamed in profligate, bandwidth-dense, until -

You had meant to wake and start typing, start parsing out stray information as quickly as possible before the details fade, but you can't leave him alone with this.

In the moment when you look at him, when he is still flickering in kneeling over you, you see the disorientation of reopening into memory, dizzy and taxing and horrified and relieved. Astris looks at you aghast, like he's hit you, like he expects to see a bruise, and he starts up and steps back and wraps his arms around himself, his hands still resolving into creases and clawbeds and the precise delineation of joints. He flicks his eyes to the the floor and says, trancelike, "I couldn't – make a
place for you to turn away in time, you had to see me –" He drags his claws against his arms through the jumpsuit, and you see it all unspooling in his head, what he saw and felt, knowing that you also saw. "I couldn't, I – I'm sorry –"

You get to your feet stumbling and reach for him, throw arms around him as tightly as he'll let you as soon as you're standing. You know he saw your face, shaken and wide-eyed, and you can't tell him it's all right. It's not all right, but not for the reasons he thinks. You felt his revulsion as if it was your own and you're still trying to untangle your own emotions from a turmoil of rage and pity and protective instinct into something comprehensible. "Don't - I already know, I already saw, long before now. Oh, Astris, I'm sorry, please don't -" The sentence breaks off with too many possible endings: Don't leave. Don't forget I know you're so much more than that. Don't think that I'll turn away from you.

But he isn't trying to go; his mind stays tangled with yours, and he's bracing against your firestorm of emotion and leaning into it at the same time, carefully cupping hands around your shoulder and the back of your neck.

"Not like that," he says hoarsely, "not since – not for a long time, except in glimpses. I know you knew, you've seen every shame and danger and I – I trust you to stay, but she rubbed your face in that, you had to feel it, and I let it happen to you, just don't –" He shakes in your hold, fingers clutching at your shirt and hair, his mind a beam of concern turned on you, shame and anger a smoky-obscured old glow by comparison, filtered dull through immensities of distance and time – "Don't hide it from me if it affected you."

You're so angry, and you know perfectly well there's no balm for it between here and the end of all this, wherever the end is, and you know you're deliberately misunderstanding him but you can't not - "Of course it affected me - she has no right," you say out loud, "no right, to do that to you, to hurt you, to take away what you have - and I would rend and burn and destroy, I would pulverize her and whoever else got in the blast radius, for making you feel like that - whether or not I'm watching -"

You're vibrating with rage so incandescent it scares you, and you let him see the impotent fury and the fear, because it's a clean burn, but then there's a sick and awful dread that's harder to face, and when you look at it you realize, and you bury it under everything else as soon as you realize, because he can't see what you intend, can't deal with thinking the thought, and you know that now more than ever.

It's a phantom ache in your breastbone, the lightless weighty knot of exhaustion and centuries and self-disgust, and you don't even know how to begin to unpick it, or whether it's even possible. And you know, too, that he needs to hold onto that right now. You can't bear it, your magesprit's desperate urge to dig himself out of reality like a splinter out of skin, and it hurts, and you're shedding silent tears into his shoulder, letting the emotions loose but not the full reason why, the sudden fragility of your hope, the fragility of everything.

"I know," he's whispering, "I know, I do, shhh, I know –" But he clings to you quivering harder as he says it, his hand on your shoulder goes crushing-tight and a high reedy whining purr threads under his words, raw and distressed – that swath of torn-away mind where he should know what it means to be protected, and when you look into that place where you join then all you see is confused bleeding ache and the reciprocal urge to comfort. "It wasn't – what she did, it wasn't nothing, but it was close, I didn't –" He cuts off, bites his lip, and you can imagine ways that could have ended, lose anything, have to hurt anyone – trying to soothe something in you that he can't fully see, until finally he just murmurs, soft, a little defeated, pressing close shoulders to shins – "I just – I love you, my secret light, my – my eyes and hands, my own, you don't know –"
"I love you," you say back, and it comes out more desperate and pleading than you meant it to, your voice faltering on the words, you need to show him and you can't and he's trying to say something, grasping for words, and you look up; pull back just barely enough to meet his eyes blurry and bright and counterpoint to yours.

And at first he just stares at you, the sheen over his eyes thick and beading but too blanched-desolate to even let tears fall, but he lets out the sound of your name, mangled more than ever by the shared thickening of your speech, impenetrable with meaning, then – "You – you know the legend of two trolls who--" He has a certain tone of voice for the deep past, a certain coloration of the mind, warm but clouded over – "Who lived in the shadow of death consumed by a purpose that was fated to fail. They were matesprits at the beginning, but – you've seen for yourself how the weight of Doom can twist and fault and hollow us out, and all was always so lost for them, and – by the time I met them there was no word in Alternian to describe what they were to each other.

"I... didn't want to understand when I knew them, and they always respected that, never tried to explain, but now I know – I know the love at the end of all things. That I have only you, my only good, that there will never be anyone else – it should crush me to think of, there's so much that I can't even let myself see and stay sane, but I can't hide this one thing, from myself, from you, not anymore." And finally the tears break, and he touches your face like he can't help it, traces fingers wondering around the corner of your eye and under, trembling with pity, with –

"Only you, beloved, I want only you in pity and hate and ways the quadrants can't imagine, I think it might be worse for me than it was for them, it's – base and selfish and monstrous and too much to ever ask of anyone, and I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I couldn't – you're too much, fire and pull and light and creation, I think I saw it in prophecy when you – when you gave me my spine – but even if I hadn't doubted I still wouldn't have understood what this would come to be – that I would take every cell you could rebuild in me, that I would claw for every scrap of mind, I would immerse myself in agony and dive for every fragment of personhood, I have, I will, to meet the challenge your existence is to me – You, beautiful to me in ways pity only begins to explain, everything layered over pity, what you are, what you have, and I covet and – and hate –" The muddle of association in his mind comes clear only because moments ago you felt it from trapped inside – his wrists, the eerie twinging of regrowing nerves, and the flickering of concepts, useless and dangerous and cherished – and realization that grew in the heat of insensate anger, and Astris is panting now, claws and gleaming fangs and lines of light streaming out to either side of him webwork from his eyes, shifting forking crackling display, and he's gone too far, flayed himself open to you in the places where your joined ordeal in his body wounded him – shuddering, his whole body, repeating I'm sorry, I love you, I'm sorry, hollow and desperate, he despairs of it being enough but needs it to be, speaking over rumbling like a barely damned in snarl –

And you're caught in the whirlwind, hanging onto the shape of yourself by the tips of your horns - his emotions are so roiling and so large you can't see the edges of them, can't attempt to measure the difference, but where moments ago you thought all was lost - there's a tiny, mad hope that maybe, just maybe, this immensity could contend with the blackened depths of that self-destructive urge.

"I don't know how to be that for you but I'll try, don't tell me not to, you're right that it's too much but - it's not disproportionate when everything's too much," your voice is trembling and you're holding him like he or you might fall, and you mean his life as a starship, you mean your overstrung brain and the game and the insane plan you're masterminding now - "I don't know how, I don't know if I can, but you deserve - you deserve everything wonderful that's been barred to you for so long, and you only have me, and I'll try to be -"

He reaches up with both hands and touches your horn-tips, careful and deliberate and strange, the front then the back, not a touch to give sensation but as if to anchor himself in the mutation, in who
and what you are, and rolls each between two fingerpads, taking up sips of energy from you, as he
cages his shivering in.

And you know perfectly well you would throw yourself over for him but you have to keep your
head, your life isn't only your own and the work of keeping yourself from crashing and burning is
suddenly obligation to him and to your friends and to the future of the world, and like a looming
cliffside off the edge of a too-tight turn, you recognize some small voice of prophecy or despairing
last scrap of common sense, and manage to stammer out, "But I - my other quadrants -"

Astris sees you wrestling with your own mind, close and hyperfocused on you as he is, and the light
from his eyes steadies and braids and unifies and wraps a circle around the both of you. "I don't
know," he says roughly, "I - I'm as lost, it's going to be - two blind trolls leading each other, we'll
fall together, we'll lift each other – But for this: if you give up your quadrants for me, who can't even
be a true matesprit for you, who will never fill your pail or protect you, who can only teach you to
guard yourself and look on and hope – I swear to you again that I will still leave you, with your
clawmarks in my thinkpan if I have to." And you sag with relief. You thought he would tell you
again not to forsake the others for him, but if he hadn't, you're not sure what you would have done.
"Keep your quadrants," he says, "have what you can, please, I still want, more than anything, at the
core of this, I still want desperately for you to be free and happy, and now that might be possible – I
want to wrap up galaxies and press them into your hands, I want to give you – what it is to me now,
to have you in my arms – to be here and reach out for you and pull the universe to myself, in all its
immensity and structures, dear one, in all its ferocity and generation, everything I see in you – that
you are infinitely valuable – and what matters is not that you shoosh me or strife me but that you
are, and I adore you and strive toward you and need you and am here for you only, anything, always,
until my last moment, anything –" His hands are sliding down and skittering over your back, sparks
swirling around and through both of you, wavelengths shifting, specks of febrile energy that wobble
between red and blue.

Your mind is racing through convolutions and possibilities and what the hell you're going to explain
of something you don't even understand and can't even imagine deserving. It helps that you can see it
in his mind, the rush of feelings and thoughts too enormous to describe, beyond anything rational or
the common kind of quadrant-flipping; that it's simply there in plain view. FF will accept it, you
know that solidly; does already, there's a hint of flushed in your diamond and the other way around
won't bother her, sometimes it's close enough already to being like that - KK will probably flip the
fuck out but that's all right, what else is new - but you, you - you're crying so suddenly you don't
know when it happened, burying your face in his neck, fingers bunched in his shirt half-limply,
overwhelmed by what you've seen and felt, the whiplash between his awful claustrophobic self-
disgust in the helmsblock and the intensity of his quadrant-blurring devotion, and - "I'm frightened,
you blurt out, "I need - I need you to be my matesprit - I don't want to lose that -"

Before you finish speaking the light around you is intensifying, coming together, and he lifts both of
you up, curls you in his arms up against his side and settles you on the couch huddled together;
kisses your hair and murmurs, again, "I'm sorry," speaking into your horns, your forehead, stroking
your arms and hands – "I'm sorry, I – I know it's a betrayal, I know I'm betraying you now when you
have never been anything but so steadfast for me, so caring, everything my heart needed unknowing
-" A more familiar self-loathing; but still he never curls away, just uncatches your damp enervated
hand from his shirt and rubs it in his own, plays your fingers between his, rubs your palm. "But – if
you still want my – my damaged desire, my overgrown pity, then – still so flushed for you
underneath it all, I promise, my pity for you is still the same awful flame that I followed
unquestioning into terrible pain and retribution when you first came to me – yours by right, yours
because being your matesprit makes me so happy, because I love hearing you say it, because your
body is such a small, soft, lovely locus of power beyond imagining – because – because you asked
me."
His touch soothes you into purring, even though you're still crying silently, scorched through with too much emotion, still needing to comfort him in return - you curl your fingers into his, one and the same, at nine-tenths scale, and kiss him softly on the mouth. He half-startles under your lips as if he hadn't expected, purring in sped-up amplified counterpoint to you, had thought you might be too wound-up distressed by the revelation to even reach for him.

"Don't berate yourself," you say, "you told me. Everything we can tell each other we need, right now. There's too much that we can't - and I can't imagine I would ever - even when you were gone and the world had ended, I moved forward, I lived, but I didn't let go of what you are to me; in my heart, in my head."

And he speckles small kisses around and under your eyes until his mouth shines with tears; his power still shifts and pulses around the both of you like a third living thing, and he might remember, for just a strange light-saturated moment, more than he meant; you think you see pieces in his mind kept so carefully apart sliding across each other, a moment of remembering why you had to go up with him and see - "If you succeed, then even when you - when you give me what you promised, when this is over -" He tries to hold back the surge of gratitude at the thought, though you have been inside his mind, you've seen his desperate yearning, and his voice is low, emotion-fractured. "Then our names will be joined always in history, the Gemini, the Two; then our lives will be told always in one breath together – as the story of my friends who loved each other beyond the quadrants is whispered, never forgotten how I love you, never lost –" and whisper-quiet, a suffusion into breath, as though in near-silence he could more deeply hide speech from listeners excluded from this place: *my love, my legacy, my salvation*, and he pulls you so close, hot breath on skin and clutching hands and tight as if you could merge; dissolve in crying, yours and his, or melt together into the sea of light around you –

When this is over.

You'll stand or fall together with him, however it ends, and you don't care how history remembers you, don't even know how to tell your own story any longer. It doesn't even matter what story is told. They could idolize or vilify you, so long as you do what you must. And even as you hold tight to him, skin to skin, bathed together in warmth and light, a part of your mind is walling off, beginning to piece out what you saw and heard, cycling through data and hiding its significance. Because you know, somewhere in the recesses of your thinkpan, the shape of your design - and even the closest in your confidence can't assemble the missing pieces together: only you.

Chapter End Notes

We'd like to offer all our readers a hug right about now.
old red rose petals or tracks of mud

Chapter Summary

And while you're in the business of dealing with the things you've been trying to avoid: it's as good a time as any to prepare yourself, track down a certain cerulean-blooded asshole and provoke her.

This is not going to be pleasant. This is not going to be pleasant at all.

(Happy belated 4/13!)

Chapter Notes

We intend to update on a faster schedule again from here on out, seeing as we have about 3/4 of our future chapters written and we're mainly in the process of editing. (We're saying it here expressly to invite you to nag us about it! Don't nag fic writers who don't like to be nagged, but we like to be nagged. Really. Badger us for more at your earliest convenience.)

Content notes for this chapter: Vriska, squabbling, calculated risks, mind shenanigans, mania, politics.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

You've been telling yourself Bicyclopsdad just has a volatile temperament, but more and more, this sweep, you know he's getting restless.

"It's part of their life cycles," Tavros says, wistfully, when you're over at his hive doing the usual countersurveillance measures. "They know when you're, about to reach final maturity, I guess. I'm lucky to have the powers I do, because I got to ask Tinkerbull if I could fool him about my scent, and he seemed to think it would be okay, so I did that... otherwise he'd have gone away in the last sweep..."

By the way he says it, you're pretty sure this grace period cannot be extended to, say, the lusii of his friends.

The roof is no place for a creature like your animal guardian to live for the long run, and the less time you have available to go up there and feed him and strife with him, the more it weighs on your mind.

Finally, early one evening between one momentous coding bender and the next, you bring up his breakfast and a jar of mind honey, stick around as he finishes it off, and then unlock the anklet that keeps him grounded; but the damn fool doesn't fly away.

"Go on," you say, but Bicyclopsdad just looks at you with both heads and blinks expectantly, not even trying to strife.
"Okay, okay, fine. Let's go," and you take off into the air. This, he understands, and goes after you, scorching the brick with his push-off and paddling through the air like an ungainly bumblebee.

You know where some of the entrances to the brooding caverns are, including the one you've always thought you came out of. It's a surprisingly long distance, in practice (even as a wriggler, you guess, you did things because you were too determined to know better) and there's a wooded area near your destination, a place you'd seen before while traveling from one troll's hive to another's, just far enough out of the way for a lot of wildlife to reside there.

That's where you set down, coming in through a canopy of trees that dim the light of the moons. There's a sound in the distance that you think might be antlerbeasts, and another sound that's probably a creek - you're an urban dweller, you're never totally certain about these things.

Your lusus, on the other hand, looks more alert than you've seen him in ages, eyes swiveling in opposite directions to take in the panoramic view.

(They can locate the brooding caverns at a distance of several miles, the Trollpedia article had said. You looked up what you could find about survival odds, because you're a big softie, and didn't find much, because most science on lusii begins and ends with how they raise trolls, but what you did find told you he'd at least have a chance out here.

And even if you weren't in a developmental stage outside his comfort zone - Bicyclopsdad is innocent of your crimes, and you don't want him caught in the backlash.)

A plump white flutterbeast starts up a raucous song on a branch high above your head, and you have to pull Bicyclopsdad down by one big clumsy hand from floating off to investigate so that you can hug him goodbye. "Thanks for everything," you tell him. "Here's hoping the next wriggler is less of a clusterfuck than me, okay?"

He pats your back, peers at you with a slow satisfied-looking blink like one of NP's meowbeasts, hovers again when you let go of his hand – and drifts off, following the flutterbeast from tree to tree and humming a tuneless electrical sound to himself until he's out of sight. At least he seems to think he did a good job.

~

And while you're in the business of dealing with the things you've been trying to avoid: it's as good a time as any to prepare yourself, track down a certain cerulean-blooded asshole and provoke her.

This is not going to be pleasant. This is not going to be pleasant at all. You've gone long enough without an actual hard test of this principle that it's honestly becoming an embarrassment to you as a hacker, for something that's going to be crucial to the final success of this project.

That's how you think of it, most times, the project, superstitiously, as if grander words might tilt the planet off its axis, generate a failure condition - or never mind the planet, they'll tilt your head and that's bad enough.

Intellectually you know this is the safest possible controlled condition for running up against highblood mind control powers. VK has grudgingly been proving herself a reliable ally for most of a sweep now (while insisting at the top of her lungs that she's doing nothing of the sort, of course, but that's what you'd expect from her, if she seemed more contrite on the surface you wouldn't believe it
for an instant - and it galls you how well you can predict someone you would be happier never to see again -)

But in your gut you've been dreading this moment for as long as you've been putting it off, maybe longer. It doesn't help that the comedown from a manic jag is not particularly more pleasant when you've initiated it yourself than it is when it happens naturally - although being able to make this happen on purpose has maybe done something for your ability to tell when a mood shift is happening. You hate the lot of it, and you hate Vriska Serket, and you're walking into Kanaya's hive (blessedly still un-surveiled, you check every time) like you're walking a plank.

Other than Karkat, who looks up and makes his best help-I'm-trapped-in-a-meeting face at you, the small group huddled together around Eridan's tablet at the center of Kanaya's living block makes a production of not noticing you're there. You shrug and head for the back of the room. You're ostensibly around to add another layer of encryption to the network here, and you really are doing that; you keep expecting Kanaya's hive to outlive its usefulness as a hub for the project's inner circle but as long as you're still using this place it's your first priority for security upgrades. It's also yet another soft test: if Vriska reads your plan off the top of your thinkpan before the meeting ends then you've failed before even starting and should probably get the hell out.

You plug your husktop into Kanaya's router, start typing – and come up with half a dozen new elaborations on your security scheme in the first ten minutes, on top of everything you thought of on the way over here. Forcing yourself to type your ideas into a separate document instead of incorporating experimental code into a critical network device on the fly like a complete foolhardy moron takes an absurd level of willpower.

Worse, they're talking loud enough that it's hard to stay disengaged from the conversation. You're starting to think that sharing AA's notes on past failed uprisings might have been a mistake. Everyone agrees that pailing season is a foolproof diversion to any attempted regime change; most everyone agrees on spreading rumors that the drones are culling indiscriminately, and creating some kind of evidence. But then they put VK in charge of figuring out the details. Even Feferi, who's out raising build grist, thinks Vriska needs something to do and that it might as well involve a complicated deception. You're extremely dubious, but you're only allowed to straight-up veto things when your doom sense is tingling.

"Wait, somebody remind me, how many hours have we been at this, again?" Karkat says, interrupting Vriska's monologuing. "And how much closer are we to a plan for Operation Fuck Off and Die that makes any sense at all with our limited resources? I still say we cull a few bastards and get done with it – at least then they're casualties of conquest and not walking liabilities. And I would be out of this meeting – I can't believe I'm saying this, but I have a regiment I'd rather be training."

You've seen the trolls KK is working with and 'regiment' is kind of optimistic, but he's managed to get a surprising number to train with him, in any case.

"He has a point," Eridan pipes up, "If the idea is to seed rumors that some trolls who filled both pails are gettin culled anyway on Ascension, then the simplest plan is to go ahead an cull em. But Fef said...

"Feferi made herself perfectly clear that we are to refrain from wanton and indiscriminate culling."

Kanaya pauses while crossing the room to adjust the armful of toxic-colored, bristly plant that appears to be trying to squirm out of her grasp. "I registered my trepidation regarding the extent of application of this principle at the time, but is it not your role to bring these things up directly with the Heiress?" She gives the plant a stern look and steps over mess of cable you've made around her router on her way out to the perimeter of defensive vegetation around her hive.
KK scowls. "She's been up to her hearfronds with recruiting the newly pupated for their build credits, neither of us has exactly had time for a traditional Imperial dialectic – fuck, before the Discordictator's office was abolished those arguments used to take perigees, who can even talk that much –"

"I can't imagine," KN says dryly, so you don't have to.

"I still don't like this," you call out from the corner. "You're talking about enlisting a couple dozen of the biggest dripping bulgewads on Alternia to completely screw over their quads, not to mention that once they're up there they'll be security liabilities the size of the Pink Moon. There's still a line between breaking shit because it's necessary and doing it just because we can."

"You've already defanged my plan enough!"

"Yeah, since sending our enemies off to marinate in their own acrimony was so obviously something that wouldn't come back to -"

Vriska snaps back, sharp, "Besides, it wasn't my idea, not really. It was Megido's, and you told us. She's still on board with it. Or doesn't she still talk to you, too? - I'm sorry," fake sorry, "did I go too far?" Her tone is all syrup and snark and everything is wrong and you're literally seeing red, but you push on, because this is what you need to do even if you choke on bile thinking about it.

KK has both hands over his face, and ED mutters, "I can't even conceive a being that fuckin insensitive, Vris, could you can it," but she's already mad and keenly pointed at you, and that's what you wanted.

"Wow, VK," you talk over Eridan because who the fuck cares, "Congratulations, your implementation of AA's ideas is so poorly thought out and likely to backfire spectacularly that you've resorted to the classic defense of dead moirail jokes. I'm so impressed I might puke."

"As if I need to impress you, nerd king," she huffs. "You've already made it clear that your sniffnodes are buried deep in my business and if I fuck up for real, I wake up dead. Which means either I'm not fucking up, or you're not as competent as you think you are." It burns that she's actually telling the truth; you can't stand working with her but she also hasn't slipped up in any of the ways that would justify refusing to tolerate her any further.

It's also not what you want her thinking about right now. "Face it, VK, you're just not skilled enough to come after me anymore," you say, almost growling. You're dimly aware of the others in the block looking at you as if you've grown a second head, but what do you care?

Terezi keeps turning her head with unseeing accuracy between you and Vriska, her expression drawing up into a sharp scowl. "You smell like belligerence," she says over your growling, "And a whole lake of Five Night Energy, and... burnt grubloaf. What -"

Vriska trammels over her, sneering, laughing an ugly mocking laugh. "Oh my god, Sollux, leave the manipul-eight-tion to trolls who know what they're doing," she says. "You couldn't be more transparent if you were a ghost! I am a lot of things, but I am not so clueless that I'm going to step out of line just because of your whiny goading."

"Not going to – oh, that's funny." If there's one thing Vriska Serket hates it's being laughed at, but you're too shaky-taut with snarling anger to bring yourself to spit out more than a single sneering hah. "Still more squeamish about saving face than ruining lives and endangering the mission – anything else before I make absolutely sure your dumbfuck plan dies the quiet death it deserves and everyone sees that your fangs have lost their edge?"
"What the hell is that even supposed to mean," she says - "Oh, that's right! You're so completely convinced that I'm going to lose control of my temper and push you that you're not even noticing what's in front of you! Which is me, not rising to the bait. It's not like I haven't been staying in practice," she says, and her one natural eye glimmers, and with a chill you believe her. "Small stuff. Subtle stuff. It's this whole new world! You know, making sure strange trolls don't stumble across our working locations... if I keep it simple, turns out I can handle more than one at a time, isn't that grand? And targets over my hemocaste, too. Funny thing, power. Turns out it's easier to get better at it when you're not constantly flaunting it all the time! Not that you'd know anything about that. Turns out I have exactly negative eight fucks to give about proving myself to you when I have bigger and better things to do. Threaten me all you like," and she says it so it comes out sort of rhyming with eight, and part of the back of your mind finds it ridiculously ironic how much her goddamn number quirk grates on you of all people. "Your friends have just seen you try to set me up and faaaaaaaaail."

"...OK, yeah, that idea was shit." You put your husktop down and rest your chin in your hands. You're still so pissed off that not punching a neat smoking hole through the floor with a bolt of psionics or your fist or both is an effort, but at least you have enough pride left to rein it in until you're somewhere without a whole meeting's worth of eyes on you. "If you're looking to watch me mope around about why it was shit then you're out of luck for the night, but it was definitely shit. I was trying to – well, I was trying to be a vindictive asshole and that part worked out great, but –"

Vriska gives a brief snort of a laugh. "If you're using 'worked out great' to mean 'pointed out your badly crafted trap to me from miles away', sure. So are we done here or did you have some other brilliant wrigglerish scheme to try and pull me into?" She yawns theatrically, covering her mouth with her robot hand.

"Yeah, about that." You roll your tense, aching shoulders and keep focusing on not breaking things. "Setting you up was secondary. No, is – you're still getting owned, but there's no science without testing." Aware of your hands fidgeting, you tug off your glasses and tuck them away, stifling nervous hysterics. Fuck the comedown, you're already a mess. You turn back to Vriska, try to stare down her good eye. "Try to make me do something. Make me do a stupid dance for all I care, just get it over with."

"Fuck no!" she says, in that way she has which sounds like shouting even when it's not. "You've basically said I'm gonna be dead if I do that. Let me guess, you're in one of those moods where you believe everyone else is stupid." And you want to laugh, because she is being stupid; she could put the pieces together from what she has. She knows she can only control you some of the time, and it's not like the phases of the moons factor into it.

"If I meant to kill you, you would know," you snap, beyond caring that it comes off as blustering confirmation of VK's scoffing. "There's no such thing as a fair fight between us, and if I've done this right then there never will be, so the least I could do is give fair warning. Look, if I raise a hand against you right now then these assholes lying around gaping at us can cull me where I sit. Now can you fucking get on with the 'why are you hitting yourself' routine already?"

"That's some nice blustering you have there, but not very much information. Why should I?"

"Because I'm asking you to test a mission-critical piece of equipment, which just happens to be my thinkpan, and I can tell you for free that if you do the job and don't try to pull any 'clever' stunts then it won't hurt your chances of getting the rest of us to lay off watching your every move. More than we already watch each other and everyone else, I mean." You grit your fangs into an obnoxious grin and click your claws against the closed lid of your husktop, deliberately grating. You're negotiating now but it still feels like provocation, sneering lingering anger. "Not all of us have the luxury of test subjects who aren't ourselves, you know."
"You all heard that, right?" She turns around and looks from Terezi to Kanaya to Eridan to Karkat, preening for attention - Eridan grumbles, "Naww, Vris, you could yell louder, course we heard that - " then back to you. "You promise you won't come after me for this," she says. "Promise." It's phrased confidently, but it's a question.

"Shit, VK, as amused as I am that you think I'm so vicious and bloodthirsty, I am not in fact going to cull you for doing what I just asked you to do. It's not like I'm you or something." You roll your eyes.

"I never said you were like me," Vriska crows, vaguely singsong. "But fiiiiiiiiine. If you're so sure about your creepy brain diffusion waves or whatever, I'll have fun proving you wrong! It isn't like this ever took much effort."

She - no, you're not focused on her, you're focused on you, you're large, you contain multitudes - you're moving under a weight, like flickers of a starship moving through atmosphere like there's another troll dangling over your shoulders, but you're moving, you're tapping the fingers of your left hand on your right palm like you're impatiently waiting for her to start and twitching your mouth and staring off into the distance, your vision clouds and darkens a little but you're not losing any ground. You tune the connection in your head, crank the output up a little, and then you're gaining ground, and your vision clears, and the weight comes off, and you're staring at Vriska just laughing and laughing and laughing -

"Bahhhhhhhhh!" Vriska swats at you, or maybe at the hazy bluish glow clearing from around her head. "Cheap conversing-block tricks. I expected better of you. Again!" She spits out the lowblood word for "parlor" like it has a foul taste and somehow manages to rhyme the middle part of "again" with "eight," which only makes you laugh harder. She clutches both hands to her temples like the stereotypical telepath in every shitty movie KK has ever made you watch, grits her teeth into an ugly sneering grin and blue flares up from her forehead again, sharper and brighter.

At first you think it's not affecting you at all but then your hand doesn't respond as quickly as it's supposed to, just a tiny slowdown, a murky haze seeping into your nerves even though your thoughts are untouched. You hiss, an animal noise, and rearrange power flows in your brain. Everything is incandescent. The edges of your eyeballs hurt.

You hold the line.

Not only that but you do it easily. You don't need to be working this hard. You don't have anything to be afraid of. She is a gnat, she is nothing, she can't hurt you or hurt others through you again, and your vision is so full of her scowling, put-out, unrealistically bored face that if your optic nerves breathed they would be choking on it. You're laughing again, softly, advancing toward her a step, only half aware that the others have gone silent: it doesn't seem important.

"What the fuck are you laughing at?" she hisses back, then turns halfway to the group when you don't respond, keeping her good eye pointedly fixed on you. "Do you all see this? He's snapped again, the gr-eight genius Sollux Captor has lost his mind, I can't control what isn't there! But I have other ways of defending myself, if that's really what you're after -" Vriska huffs out a put-upon sigh and reaches into her jacket pocket with a rattle of dice.

"So that is all you've got," you say quietly, sounding smug even to yourself. "And I just said I wasn't going to cull your ass - if you stayed in parameters - so how about staying in fucking parameters?" You're up in her business, close enough that you spray spittle on her face when you talk, and you aren't remotely sorry. "Are you that desperate for a reminder that we need you and can't just throw your lifeless body to the Mother Grub without some backup plans? Because I lose nothing by saying that, you know, it's not a game of face for me. You're a goddamn asset, you're quadranted to
someone I give a shit about, but I can't stand you and I'm not going to make nice about it, you loathsome third-rate cheater -"

"I'm the best cheat your paltry half-baked plotting could get, and I despise repeating myself almost as much as I despise your freakish face so last chance, do you want to make something of it –"

Something red and very fast whirs in front of your face and smacks several times at the floor, leaving gashes in the garish carpet that are guaranteed to be a huge headache to explain to Kanaya later. "You are both despicable, self-obsessed wastes of time to this most dastardly and dishonorable assembly, and also out of order!" Terezi raises the point of her cane to about shin level and glares at each of you in turn with blind, menacing accuracy.

You're mid-yell when the cane flies down, and end up standing there with your mouth hanging open like an idiot; you've been known to be romantically oblivious at times, but you know an ashen scowl when you see one. "Shit, I didn't mean it like that," you blurt out, and you're about to insult her for thinking you did but it's Terezi and you don't want to stoop to that - and the realization is dawning on you that you kind of did mean it like that, although why would you even - oh, right. Juiced-up thinkpan. Wellp.

Well, those vine-borne fruiting berries are definitely sour.

"Ugh, Pyrope, don't look at meeeeeeee! I think a little sparring between allies makes us all more aware of our abilities. In fact, I'm sure Sollux agrees that we could have averted some unpleasantness if he'd thought to have this chat with me sooner." Vriska grins nastily at you but modulates her voice into a fake-sweet singsong that makes your head pound harder. "And even if in his fragile mental state he had less noble reasons for making unprovoked threats when I was doing my best to help, I can hardly see how it's your business."

So much for trying to keep your mouth shut. "Fragile is what you call a thinkpan you can't get into? Yeah, that's rich -"

One quick wrist-flick and two thwacking sounds later, you're both clutching at the shins that you failed to move out of cane range. "This council has examined the hoofbeast excrement offered in evidence by both parties and determined it to be putridly inappropriate for a crucial strategic conference. The complainants are sentenced to stop blathering pointlessly until the meeting is over and also to back off. Three paces. Now."

Vriska glares daggers with her good eye, then rolls it at the ceiling and complies.

You are going to remember to be grateful later. At the moment you're too busy working your jaw like an idiot. You still feel like you need to explain yourself. "TZ, I - did something, that was why all this, it worked -"

"Unless your breakthrough hinges on the volume of your shouting match with Marquise Sulky Notmyfault over here, I suggest that you save it for the information security working group." You know Terezi well enough to be certain that she'll do whatever it takes to be at that meeting; whatever this is, it can't be mistaken for Terezi being uninterested.

"Hey -" Vriska breaks in, but you're faster. It occurs to you that being able to out-talk Vriska isn't necessarily a good thing, but you forge on.

"No, I - I had to tell you, I need to -" These words coming out of your mouth, they are not doing much for the picture of your competence. "Ok, just - keep track of her for a while, please -" What you need to do is uncross the crossed wires in your head, and that'll leave you vulnerable, and if
Vriska is going to try anything boneheaded this would be a really awful time for it. What you said earlier was true, too; you don't relish the thought of having to find a replacement any more than you want VK pissing around in your head ever again.

"I'll keep track of her, the moons will keep being sour apple green and plant fiber candy pink, and you will keep being a huge nerd." Terezi nods at you, abruptly turns around, her cane does another athletic figure around its handle and Karkat lets out an extremely undignified yelp. "Now less gawking, more outrageous scheming! I have not been sufficiently scandalized by you miscreants yet tonight."

You're not sure if that's sarcasm. TZ always did take a certain delight in being scandalized.

You don't want to switch it off; why would you - but you have to, this isn't good for you, you're going to need some functionality left later as opposed to all of it for just the next twenty-four hours. So you steal off into the ablation block (filled with cheery flowers, ornate molding and a very elaborate trap, which you suppose is as good a use of wriggler build grist as any) where the door locks and no one will interrupt you, for as long as it takes to reach your awareness into the physical space of your thinkpan, thin the flow of energy artificially connecting areas that weren't meant to be so directly aligned, and finally shut it down.

You nearly fall out of the sky at least twice on the the way back to your hive, collapse into sopor fully clothed, record your observations with your phone perched perilously on the edge of the recuperacoon – and wake up what seems like only minutes later, both tired enough to sleep for another week and still so jittery that you juggle your phone above the sopor for a minute before you can get it to stop buzzing at you.

-- gallowsCalibrator [GC] began trolling twinArmageddons --

GC: H3Y YOU

-- twinArmageddons is an idle troll! [reason: idle] --

GC: M1ST3R 4PPL3B3RRY W1TH TH3 3XTR3M3LY UN1NFORM4T1V3 D3F4ULT M3SS4G3
GC: N3V3R M1ND, YOUR TROLLT4G T4ST3S L1K3 SOPOR1F1CS. BL3H >:
GC: WH3N YOU W4K3 UP 1 W1LL B3 W41T1NG W1TH GR34T 1NT3R3ST FOR YOUR SURV1V4L SK1LLS
GC: BUT YOU WOULD JUST T4K3 T4T 4SSUM1NG TH4T YOU H4V3 COMPL3T3D WH4T3V3R R3P41RS W3R3 N3C3SS4R YOu D3C1D3D TO SET 4 WORLD FOOLH4RD1N3SS R3C0RD 1N TH3 M1DDL3 OF MY M33T1NG 4ND 4LSO WHY YOUR T3XT SM3LLS L1K3 TH3 WORST H4NGOV3R IN 4LL OF P4R4DOX SP4C3
-- twinArmageddons has set encryption layer 2.2! configuring... --
-- encryption set! automated message: [encryption ii2 till not an excu2e two 2ay 2tupi2d 2hiit. 2eriou2ly.] --

TA: did you think vk wa2 ju2t haviing an off niight or lo2iing her touch, iif 2o ii will gladly inform you that 2he ii2 till in fully dy2fiunctional condiitiion.
TA: a2 near a2 ii can tell, anyway.
TA: ii figurred out a patch for an exploit on my thinkpan, two be fairi it required 2ome help.
TA: and ii had rea2on two believe it would work, but no proof untiil now.
GC: 1 D1DN'T TH1NK 4NYTH1NG
GC: S1NC3 4LL TH1S ST4RT3D 1 H4V3 3M4NG TO D3V3LOP 4 R3V1S3D JUD1C14L 4PPRO4CH
GC: BUT TH4T 1S S1GN1F1C4NTLY OFF TOP1C
GC: SO YOUR F1X TO VR1SK4S BR41N TH1NG 1S DO1NG TH3 TH1NG WH3R3 YOU COD3 FOR 4 W33K W1THOUT SL33P1NG 4ND 4NT4G13N1Z3 YOUR 3NT1R3 CHUMPROLL?
TA: when you put it that way, it 2ound2 2o iidiiotiic.
TA: but ye2 iin fact, certain 2tate2 of con2ciou2ne22 can temporariily make my braiin le22 vulnerable two brute-force intru2iion2.
TA: and ii wouldn't even be talking about it iin an encrypted trolliian chat, except ii'm pretty 2ure iit only work2 wiith my peculiiar braiin 2tructure.
GC: OK UH
GC: B3L13V3 M3 1 UND3RST4ND 4NT13M3NT OUT OF SOM3 S3R1C13D 1F YOU'RE NOT C4R3FUL
TA: ii'm 2orry.
TA: iin fact, certain 2tate2 of con2ciou2ne22 can temporariily make my braiin le22 vulnerable two brute-force intru2iion2.
TA: iin fact, certain 2tate2 of con2ciou2ne22 can temporariily make my braiin le22 vulnerable two brute-force intru2iion2.
TA: and ii wouldn't even be talking about it iin an encrypted trolliian chat, except ii'm pretty 2ure iit only work2 wiith my peculiiar braiin 2tructure.
GC: OK UH
GC: B3L13V3 M3 1 UND3RST4ND 4NT13M3NT OUT OF SOM3 S3R1C13D 1F YOU'RE NOT C4R3FUL
TA: ii'm 2orry.
TA: iin fact, certain 2tate2 of con2ciou2ne22 can temporariily make my braiin le22 vulnerable two brute-force intru2iion2.
TA: and ii wouldn't even be talking about it iin an encrypted trolliian chat, except ii'm pretty 2ure iit only work2 wiith my peculiiar braiin 2tructure.
GC: OK UH
GC: B3L13V3 M3 1 UND3RST4ND 4NT13M3NT OUT OF SOM3 S3R1C13D 1F YOU'RE NOT C4R3FUL
TA: ii'm 2orry.
TA: iin fact, certain 2tate2 of con2ciou2ne22 can temporariily make my braiin le22 vulnerable two brute-force intru2iion2.
TA: and ii wouldn't even be talking about it iin an encrypted trolliian chat, except ii'm pretty 2ure iit only work2 wiith my peculiiar braiin 2tructure.
GC: OK UH
GC: B3L13V3 M3 1 UND3RST4ND 4NT13M3NT OUT OF SOM3 S3R1C13D 1F YOU'RE NOT C4R3FUL
TA: ii'm 2orry.
TA: iin fact, certain 2tate2 of con2ciou2ne22 can temporariily make my braiin le22 vulnerable two brute-force intru2iion2.
TA: and ii wouldn't even be talking about it iin an encrypted trolliian chat, except ii'm pretty 2ure iit only work2 wiith my peculiiar braiin 2tructure.
TA: iit'2 a deal, ii wiill gladly encourage you not two talk liike kk iif you keep me from tangliing wiith vk.
TA: or really anyone el2e that'2 iinadvi2able for me two tangle wiith.
TA: and you can remind future me ii 2aiid 2o, two.
GC: 1 W1LL CR4CK DOWN ON TH1S OBNOX1OUS B3LL1G3R3NC3 TO TH3 FULL 3XT3NT OF TH3 L4W
GC: NO STUP1D1TY 1N TH3 V1C1N1TY OF 4 C3RT41N T3RR1BL3 SP1D3RY 1ND1V1DU4L W1LL 3SC4P3 MY SN1FFNOD3S
GC: c3
TA: c3

Chapter End Notes

A while back we sorted out the definition of auspisticism in Wires and Stars, which diverges from canon: it includes the canonical "keeping two people away from each other who aren't good for each other" role, but an auspistice is specifically quadranted to one auspisticee, rather than two, and helps them make good choices with regards to blackrom, whether that's eschewing a bad romance or pursuing a good one. This continues to be the definition we're using.
and fingers grab at nothing

Chapter Summary

Sollux experiments with bathtub biohacking, Karkat has a falling-out with the handle, Feferi wins hearts and minds, Aradia is knowledgeable, Eridan is not, everyone is at least a little devious, the Condesce is terrible, and the Helmsman is... malfunctioning.

*You knew, you have always known: that seizing back what they have taken from you is its own punishment.*

Chapter Notes

Note: in case the summary and title didn't herald it well enough, there is some pretty serious body horror this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

==> Sollux: Be prepared.

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

CG: aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa.
CG: AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA.
He never forgets his quirk unless he's pretty shaken up. You're instantly on alert, bloodpusher pounding.

TA: the fuck ii2 happeniing, kk?

CG: AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA.
CG: YOU TELL ME WHAT THE FUCK IS HAPPENING.
CG: WHY IS THERE A SHEET OF TROLL SKIN IN A GLASS INCUBATOR HERE WITH YOUR SIGN ON IT.

Oh. That. KN said she had a good place for it, but you guess she never said she'd keep it hidden. Plus now that you know, it's kind of fun watching KK freak out -

TA: iif you were half the hacker you keep 2ayiing you want two be, you would have 2een the an2wer2 you 2eek iin my internet hii2tory already.
CG: AIEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE.
CG: DID IT MOVE? I THINK IT MOVED.
CG: I'M GOING TO BE DEVORED BY SOME POOR SOD'S DISEMBODIED HIDE AND IT'S ALL YOUR FAULT.
TA: calm your exce22iively overwrought rumble 2phere2.
TA: if my cloned 2kiin ha2 learned two ambulate i'll eat my mainframe, bee2 and all.
TA: becau2e that2 litteraly impo22iible, ii mean not even ed could fuck up ablution trap biohacking that badly.
CG: CAN YOU TRY CLONING YOURSELF SOMETHING USEFUL LIKE A CONNECTION WITH REALITY NEXT TIME?
CG: AS MUCH AS I LOATHE TO ADMIT IT, WE ACTUALLY NEED YOU INTACT FOR THE NEXT STAGE OF THE PLAN, NOT MISSING BIG PATCHES OF SOLLUX THAT ARE HANGING OUT IN KANAYA'S HIVE AND TERRIFYING INNOCENT PASSERSBY.
CG: ...ARE YOU ABSOLUTELY FUCKING SURE YOUR FREAKY PET CANNED BODY PARTS DON'T MOVE?
TA: ii would have thought you'd be thrilli2ed, there'2 more of me two hate.
TA: 2eriio2ly though, you may replace your lo2t 2hiit at your neare2t convenience, thii2 ii2 ju2t a head 2tart on a 2ciience project that will theoretiically become nece22ary later.
TA: even ii'm going two get con2ultant2 on board before growiing anything complicated.
CG: I WOULD SAY I DON'T WANT TO KNOW WHAT THE FUCK YOU'RE UP TO THAT'S "THEORETICALLY" GOING TO GET EVEN WEIRDER THAN THIS SHIT BUT I THINK I'VE ALREADY GUESSED.
CG: REALITY ISN'T IN THE HABIT OF JUST ROLLING OVER AND GIVING UP BECAUSE YOU WANT IT TO HARD ENOUGH AND ARE REALLY, REALLY PREPARED.
CG: NONE OF US ARE GOING TO HAVE TIME TO PICK UP THE PIECES FOR YOU WHEN THIS IS ALL OVER.
CG: LET ALONE PICK UP THE PIECES OF YOU, HAHAUUUUUUUUUUUGH TELL YOUR BIZARRE ABERRATIONS OF SCIENCE TO STOP DRIFTING AT ME LIKE THAT.
TA: that2 all riight, feel free to enjoy the brilliiiant frui2t of my obviiou2 ii2aniity while ii ineiviitably 2elf-de2truct.
TA: ii can hate my2elf enough for both of u2, very low mainitenance.

You bang out the words in a sudden vicious temper, use the macro that queues a "congratulatiion2, a22hole, you are 2tiill my kii2me2ii2" message to send automatically with the next Trollian sync - you're still mad and not in a sexy way, but you're not up for dealing with Karkat freaking out just now, either - and slam your husktop shut hard enough that it's fortunate you just reinforced the case.

~~~

Trolls weren't meant to hear the sounds FF's lusus makes, even at her quietest – you remember, from the time that didn't happen, something of the crushing unbearable roar of that voice, though the jagged unreal shapes of its waveforms slide from your memory like your mind can't contain the shape of it, leaving only echoes of pain and the taste of blood.

Fortunately, heavy machinery isn't trolls, and can be remotely operated.

It takes some doing – and making a few acquaintances – but ultimately it's not too hard to route a steakbeast supply train to a port on the remote sea coast near Gamzee's hive, where an ascending and descending construction apparatus scoops up the meandering herbivores and dumps them into the water.

It's a sight to behold.

GI'b seems content with her new food source - at least, Feferi says so, and she's the expert. No one else can really get close enough to know.

~~~
VK's plan makes you feel dirty just thinking about it, but you still have to implement it and ultimately you do. You've lost count of how many abandoned accounts you've owned, jacking their histories to create semi-credible sources to seed the rumors. (Rumors that even a troll with their quadrants and pails and testing papers in order might not survive, that some of the transport berths from academies to remote colonies were going to be gassed instead of opened into the light of an alien sun, that it could happen to a blueblood, to a seadweller, that you wouldn't know until they just disappeared completely - and the thing is, it's not untrue, exactly, you're just making it seem to happen more frequently than it already does, and to people more popular than your ilk -)

And every offplanet shithead you're disappearing into an informational void did an actual thing to get on your shit list - or was trying to escape from someone who did, and for the most part they're still alive (you can't keep adult trolls from getting themselves culled by normal means) but it's a headache to track them all and keep it plausibly deniable. You wind up setting a lot of bots running.

Her Imperious Condescension would fight dirtier than this, if she knew what she was fighting. Already does, without knowing. You can't afford to be squeamish about propaganda.

It's not hard to seed the information where it needs to be, then, because once they're beginning to doubt the system, once they're frantic and scared for their future, the way you were, the way you are, they start looking for it. It's not hard to help them find out that at least one Heiress presently exists. That she's going to actually seek out the challenge instead of evading it. That making sure she wins will change the world.

They come in ones and twos, delegates from FLARP sanctioning bodies and Future Threshecutioners of Alternia and particularly large and influential clades, and from seemingly every weird cult that's ever poked its sun-addled head out from under a rock. Nepeta arranges an array of remote, defensible, and suitably grand-looking wilderness meeting places that you draw from at random, and you background check each applicant more exactly than the last. A liaison from a shadowy youth militia rumored to be among the most fanatically insistent on its members' strict adherence to Imperial doctrine comes forward, and you arrange a meeting that is designed to be more of an ambush than a reception – until she silently drops a necklace bearing Karkat's sign into Feferi's hand. The cult of the Signless is small and fractured from centuries of hiding in plain sight, but still you shiver thinking of shared fragments of memory of the distant past.

And still they keep coming, swearing oaths, hushed and awed or loudly, profanely amazed before Feferi.

You make sure they know two things before they go on to join a project (and it was AA who told you, in the bored and dreamlike words of the departed, how to manage loyalty) -

One, now that they've sworn, their voices will be heard; they can talk back, make suggestions, without fear of punishment, as long as they're not just being total assholes for the hell of it. They are, and will be treated, as a part of this now, adults and adolescents alike, even three-sweep juveniles merrily signing on to share their build credits.

Two, they're part of this now, and you see all (and someone you trust does when you don't) and if they try to sell you out their treachery will become obvious and be dealt with mercilessly. So if they came here and swore for bad reasons, fessing up is their last chance to survive. Offplanet assignment, secure, informational quarantine. They don't even have to tell you why they're unsure they can remain loyal. You just want them where they can't fuck shit up.

Of course, in order to set that up as a possibility, you've had to make a bunch of offplanet contacts. Or at least background-check a bunch of offplanet contacts and make someone else talk to them.
You built bots to scrape the seedy corners of the net for adults potentially sympathetic to your cause, guiltily basing their architecture on Astris' censorship program, and the hits started pouring in immediately – almost all of them complete junk. Of course, the counterrevolutionary measures on the Battleship Condescension are designed specifically to generate false positives to make examples of. You kept refining your algorithms, but at first any records that seemed to point to an adult with the training and competence to actually do anything about their revolutionary sensibilities just led you to trolls already culled – sometimes you knew without even having to pore through old Legislacersors' files because the trollhandle was familiar from Aradia's forwarded messages from the rebellious dead; in at least one case it was recent enough that you recognized the name from your own doomed voices.

But once you found one real hit, then your bots had something to go on, and since then the leads have steadily trickled in. VK even lays out some breadcrumbs in the arcane mess of social networks and microblogging sites that highbloods and FLARP enthusiasts seem to frequent more than forums – you try not to read what she's actually saying any more than is necessary for security, but she brings in some promising adults that your searches missed. You scrutinize their histories until you're seeing Trollian conversations scroll by when you close your eyes, then manufacture reassignment documents for a select number of them, some to Alternia and some elsewhere. The Signless cultists function as eyes and ears anywhere in this process that your bots can't reach.

The spaceport you've chosen has been, for a long time, a secondary point of access for the province, located between Aradia's hive and the ocean. Long ago she tipped you off to the ruins of what was the old capital city there, before that was moved by a few kilometers in the process of eradicating a rebellion, then deprecated in relevance by adult activities shifting offplanet. It's on enough important routes that it never really became uninhabited, but for a long time it hasn't really been a place, just a transit hub, surrounded by suburban hivestems; the spaceport is operated by a skeleton crew, so you can promote officers out of it and others into it at a slow trickle and still have the whole place silently owned by sympathizers in a sweep and a half, although you won't have time to meet them all face to face until the final night.

Meanwhile, with all the grist the young recruits are bringing in, you have some building to do – well, for once you don't, personally; you just scrape the dark web for archived snippets of ancient texts about the Heiress' challenge and hand off a cache of fragmentary and mostly corrupted data to Terezi for legal vetting. The standards for constructing the arena are exacting and very old and require a monumental amount of build grist, and you stay out of the bickering about millennia-old Imperial tradition in a futile effort to preserve the remnants of your sanity, but somewhere near the spaceport the venue for the final battle takes shape.

CURRENT gallowsCalibrator [CGC] RIGHT NOW responded to memo ii wiill go back and ban every 2iingle one of you at every poiint iin your re2pectiive faiil2auce tiimeliine2 2o help me.

GC: QU3ST1ON FOR TH3 DOUBL3 LOB3D L3G3M3 G4LL3Ry
GC: WH4T ON 4LT3RN14 1S 4 CUB1T? >:/
CA: howw many times do i havve to tell you
GC: 4NYON3 1N TH3 DOUBL3 LOB3D L3G3M3 G4LL3Ry 3XC3PT MY 3ST33M3D COMP4TR1OT ON TH3 CONSTRUCT1ON COMMITT33 PL34S3
CA: excuse you im the expert on delicate matters a long standin protocol for a reason
CA: seadwwellers have long memories you knoww
GC: OK BUT YOUR3 7 SW33PS OLD
CA: if you sniffed a calendar or somethin evvery once in a wwhile then you mighta remembered my wwrigglin day last perigee
CA: and i knoww wwhat a cubit is you meddlin stickler now can wwe get to allocatin the build grist already
AA: they say its the distance between a trolls elbow and forfinger
AA: and that it was customary in the old days to use their enemies actual appendages for the measurement
AA: but im sure you can find another soluti0n
CG: I NEVER THOUGHT I WOULD SAY THIS BUT WHERE THE FUCK IS SOLLUX WHEN YOU NEED HIM?
CG: NO BUILD DETAILS IN THE MEMO, YOU BUNCH OF OVERSIZED BLATHERING SQUAWKBLISTERS.
CA: sorry kar
GC: 1 TOLD YOU IT W4SNT H4LF 4 F4THOM

==> Helmsman: the body remembers.

Sometimes respite is flight, precision and derivations and the shape of the universe bending around you. Other times it is eavesdropping, rummaging through your databanks for scraps of language and narrative to hang onto, following highbloods following their soap operas.

Other times - and this is new, this is the change in the rhythm of your unchangeable nights and days - it exists only in the distance, in the form of a name you cannot, must not think, and it's enough that you know that much, enough that you know your consciousness is divided. Which it always has been.

You sleep in halves, but you do sleep; a mandatory cycle initiated by ship systems when you aren't running at maximum - and sometimes you have the consciousness and spare resources to reach out into true-dream, and other times only wane into the dreams you know to recognize as falsehoods -

But you don't fail to sleep. That's not an option. You barely even remember insomnia, except in the sense of remembering that it is a thing which used to happen to you, decades of experience worn to a thin scrap of fact.

It's - when did that happen? Nerves that belong to your hand keep trying to clench it, over and over again, a reflex path reconstructed where there was nothing for so long, and of course the command to move does not, will not succeed, but you can feel - it's like the muscle stimulation routine is being applied to the ruin of your hand, for some reason utterly beyond you, and every time it twitches that sets off a wave of signals, pain at every junction point where the wires enter, normally blunted by stillness, and that makes the cycle repeat. It's also enough to surpass the central blocking and wake you -

Your wakefulness triggers a status query and a stream of low-level error codes, but at least neither the pain itself nor the inexplicable stimulus at the root of it maps exactly to any of the status conditions that would set off a larger alarm. But you can't just stuff this sharp pulling pain into a dim corner of unused long-term memory either, not rooted as close to critical navigation outputs as it is, and you're streaming hundreds of possible hotfixes through crosscheck long before you're fully awake. For now, patching yourself before this gets out of hand (ehehe) is your best chance of
avoiding technicians or worse.

Outside, your hull is solid, course steady, nothing near in the dark but diffuse hydrogen wisps and clouds of interstellar dust. No effect on sensors or communications – something changes, and your focus crews back in, concentration centered on that scrap of atrophied, malfunctioning gray flesh. Ten seconds since the last twinge, eleven, twelve.

The malfunction has stopped on its own. You don't quite recognize the momentary icy clench in the pit of your stomach as loss.

~~~

But it returns. (You knew it would, by some wisp of precognition or by thought processes racing ahead of your conscious awareness.) It does not seem to follow a recognizable pattern or cycle, only wakes you from half-dozing chemical sleep or blazes sudden and unanticipated down your ulnar nerve in phantoms of sensor feedback like a weapons backfire. It happens in either hand, and that seems at random as well. The percentage of your cognitive resources consumed in stopping the tremor is variable but small. If it were only that -

If it were only that. One night you get a jolt from the muscle that runs from hip to knee - that one is a major enough muscle group that at first you think it is the electrical stimulation routine, but it doesn't continue on, only the one insistent clenching, and this time you can locate the source - one of the places where a wire bores in, like the nerves in whatever is left of skin and fascia have taken notice of the intrusion they've been inured to for uncountable sweeps.

You knew, you have always known: that seizing back what they have taken from you is its own punishment.

There was never a reason to endure that. No reason except for the lie of hope, one more claw-hold for her that you viciously reject. Now, there is, and the awareness of what it is remains just out of your grasp, and you are familiar enough with the shape and contour of barricades you set to conceal something from yourself, to take it on faith that you have.

The spread would be slow except that it only takes perigees, a sweep at most, and you have whole centuries of immaculately stored memory that you haven't had occasion to call upon for centuries more. So it is fast, like the whole ship catching ablaze and burning to molten collapse might be, and painful. You awaken to embers under your skin, clots of buried pain at wire-bores that neither cauterize nor heal, once searing into your hipbone, once in the sole of your foot, and you have to record temperature readings and open the eyes of the cameras and look vainly for swelling, for signs of infection that you know you won't find, though you still don't know why.

You wake to rings of sharp taunting flame-tongues encircling your eyes that go from spearing to rasping to bone-deep determined itching that makes you want to claw the damn goggles off first before dying. You almost miss a jump timing that night when half your face seizes, one corner of your mouth drawing back into a rictus in mid-leap, and in a red blur of pain you input nonsense for a minor valve adjustment that you have to correct manually, pulling back on power. No matter how much information you move and process and subdivide your thinkpan feels heavy, like there's always a backlog of calculations waiting to push in; you're running milliseconds slow and the delay drags at you like a countercurrent of radiation on your prow, like claws holding you back.

That the techs would notice, that she would notice, is a conclusion already drawn. It doesn't take the voice of prophecy to tell. It is a known quantity.

Yet you are afraid. You cannot say of what; only that you know how to remove yourself impassively
from fear that only lives in the flesh (surge of stress hormones, bloodpusher drumming hard behind the sternal casing, all of this only reactive -) and this is not that; you are afraid. Afraid of losing - losing something connected to this -

But why -

She knows, too, she must, that when the task item performance conherence comes up it will fill you with a building dread; if she did not, you would not receive warning.

...And you are glitching, worse than you sometimes think you are; the system tells you Her Condescension didn't deactivate the camera feed on her approach the way she sometimes does, but whole seconds are dropped out from your memory of it as she steps into the helmsblock, barefoot and with her hair tumbling down around her ankles, strangely abhorrently radiant as she draws nearer.

Her lips purse, a mockery of pale affection. "You poor wasted fin, you're floundering," she says. She reaches out and cups your face in her hand, and you could almost take her for apologetic except that when you flinch at the sting of her saltwater touch against old wounds that feel new, it only stretches the eerie hollow smile across her face. "... So sensitive, tonight," she murmurs, and she must have already known it, and something about the way she appreciates it - "I wonder why."

That is not usually your purview, you output to the wires, leaving the gaunt body in the helmsblock unmoving except for the reflexive flinching that you no longer have reason to will down.

You are still running your hourly full-system life support check, still keeping a steady heading toward a dim blue-star waypoint, still taking in asterronomical data on a brightening nebula thousands of light-sweeps to port and to nadir, wading past the clamor of muscle and nerve to do those things because you must and because those parts of you are as far from the Empress' black-lipped smirk as you ever get (at least within the memory that you can see) – and you'll need that detachment to steel yourself for the next part, to make it tolerable and to make the bait attractive, both: you must go right up to the line, she must think she has seen everything there is to see, in order to be convinced that the part she needs to ignore is the part you must be trying to throw up as a distraction to protect yourself -

And she pounces, as always, at any suggestion that you might reject her authority. Not angry, not on the surface; nearly purring, enthralled by the game. "But it is my bassness," she says. "You are, and must remain, the best ship in the fleet." And you can already see the direction she's turning, just a little nudge needed to trigger the game where she becomes invested in your failure by pretending to become invested in your success, wallows in disappointment while setting you unpredictable barriers (and, some part of you hopes, forgets that it wasn't her idea to begin with -)

Am I, still? There is no inflection in speaking this way; no way beyond short defeated-flat phrases to bluff run-dry exhaustion and creeping weakness and sickening slips of control if those things did not already show through in sallow skin and broken readouts. But she has spent lifetimes stalking your vulnerabilities, she is looking for pain always, and she will see what she seeks as in a mirror. Your gamma telescopes track too slowly, lose the light of their target nebula, refocus. A muscle in your shoulder that was detached from its insertion point when the wires first went in throbs and pulls at nothing. I continue to function at the highest performance level available to me within the parameters of my operating environment, which is true but only because you're forced, and the words sound in your head like a muddle of cringing-meek and mocking that you flinch from internally before speaking.

"Whale," the Empress says, in a low murmur, looming too close, always too close. "We'll just have to change those parameters, then," and her voice is all hidden sharpnesses, cheerful tones thinly
concealing the zeal you know too well - that her viciousness locks on like a targeting system and once it's set, it holds its course.

She confers with techs as though you aren’t capable of listening. (The ones who are uncomfortable with this - you’ve inferred from their behavior that even where most helmsmen are treated as things and not trolls, discussing maintenance in front of them is at least considered *indelicate* - tend to get reassigned, sometimes out an airlock; by now it is long habit to remain utterly impassive during these affairs, so as not to give the Empress or her top subjugglators an excuse to punish a perceived moment of empathy.)

"Your Condescension," the lead tech says rather more loudly than needed in the confines of the helmsblock, addressing his report decisively in the direction of the Empress' knees with the forced cadence of a memorized speech. Your programming automatically calls up his record: cerulean and boring, no subversive interests, not many interests at all really outside of obscure starship components. You dismiss the information; you hardly have the input capacity any longer to be listening both in this conversation and everywhere else your presence is required. "My team has reached the conclusion that the probable consequences of increasing our current operation-disruptive stimuli mitigation measures outweigh any possible performance benefits. The substances in use carry a near certainty of cognitive impairment and a not insignificant likelihood of fatality to the pilot at dosages above the current level." You think the tech managed that all in one breath; his face is white as a blank readout screen. "As such, I – uh, the team recommends against Your Highness' recommended course of action. However, it is possible that experimental palliatives may emerge in coming sweeps –"

A nerve in your neck takes the opportunity to notice it exists and prickle phantoms of scalding heat up through your skull. You remember, blurrily and very long ago, working through migraines as though nothing was happening, like what you're doing now on such a miniscule scale that your systems would hardly register those symptoms now if they appeared. You prohibit the muscles of your face from moving like holding a broken aileron steady.

The Condesce ignores the rest of the tech's sentence. "I don't care about that," she says pointedly. "Tell me what we can do now;," and her voice is whining and petulant but careful, you're just cognizant enough to recognize that she isn't anywhere near an actual tantrum, only looking for a particular response and putting on a show to get it.

"If we postpone arrival at the next target by a perigee," the tech addresses the Condesce's ankles, adding hurriedly, "Possibly less if the adjustment can be precisely calculated – it would be possible to draw down the current treatments until the pilot's dependence on them is somewhat reduced, without posing a safety risk to the flagship. Administration of analgesics at present levels could then be resumed to greater effect when needed. Some medics believe that this course of action has been overdue for sweeps, but the delay to the glorious mission of the Battleship Condescension did not seem feasible, or –"

"Yes, yes, I get the idea," the Condesce says, and her lips press to a bored line. "No postponement. We'll go faster for a whale, then all have a little *vacraytion*," and you know just from tone and context that she means cutting your painkiller drips down to the very minimum, and you can't bring yourself to be afraid of that, preoccupied only with now, with the unsuspicious tech despairing of your ill keeping.

Because you are in no condition to jump the journey is a sprint skirting the lower boundary of light speed, power wrenched from you as soon as you can form it, thrown into velocity as sensors blink nonsense readings interrupted by screaming bursts of input from your body twisting in the helmsblock. You keep almost expecting to be *forced* to slow, that your psionic production will
malfunction like the rest of you. But this agony is not a *weakening* of your body, just the opposite, and you keep making enough, more than enough light, as your own fruitlessly healing fingers gnaw at you and your consciousness flinches away into acceleration and direction.

Even when she is not in the helmsblock, she keeps a viewport open. You feel her watching through the wires, shark-toothed delight, a scavenger's curiosity hovering around a foundered animal. Centuries ago this was your every night without ceasing, but the waiting and being watched never became more bearable with time, and there was never anything to learn about stopping her, no matter how you sifted through behaviors like astronomical data, seeking a pattern.

Jolts of off-course feedback jab at you as you slow, wobbling into the light and tidal gravity of your destination star system. You settle into an orbit that would drift out of the ecliptic if you stayed here for more than a sweep or two but still barely satisfies the parameters you've been given, turn your focus in and begin the slow process of rebooting one by one the systems that your neural interference has crashed or glitched… when a thought comes to you, slipped in between subroutines, unbidden, *this is the beginning of the end*.

You expect to find relief in that, but fear surfaces instead, sharp and fleeting and entirely different from the ancient dread you know so well, and there is nothing there to tell you why.

Chapter End Notes

This seems an appropriate time and place to thank all of our betas, past, present and future! Let's see, so far that's... solluxisms, chlorinetrifluoride, YesVirginia, manyblinkinglights, trickshire, madamformicidae - hopefully I haven't forgotten any names here (and let us know if you would prefer to be credited by different names or handles as various of you have changed them from time to time.) Your watchful eyes have kept us from making a good few bloopers and your assistance is much appreciated!
just because you've forgotten, doesn't mean you're forgiven

Chapter Summary

"What do your voices say, when you give yourself in pity to her blood and bone? Those doomed by her caprice, do they even stoop to speak to you in that pile of sea-wrack? Or can the Heiress' touch silence even those not yet dead?" *Does my shade claw at your conscience yet, Sollux? Or am I still silent – silent again, since you –*

Your mind is still tangled up in his, not knowing if you even tried to hold that back, your thinkpan throwing words out barely hearing them itself – there are lines that you do not cross out loud and lines that you do not cross at all and *that –*

And then there are lines that you don't see before you cross them.

Chapter Notes

Chapter warnings: relationship arguments, jealousy, dissociation, brain problems, suicidality, people being badly triggered and taking it out on each other, body horror, neuroplasticity horror, that thing where the Condesce is her own warning tag.

We wrote this and cried and then we edited it and cried and refused to post it until it felt resolved properly and edited it again and cried moar and crying is cool and having a dry shirt is overrated.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sollux is

(– feigned solicitous-unyielding interest, mad eyes, sharp-tined fins and hair that drags flowing-sopping over wires – "You can't hide your waveforms from me. Teel me what's wrong so I can kelp, shelly stubborn thing – On the other fin, we cod always run some tests instead, hold seal –")

 tinkering with the inputs and outputs of a graph, presented as bees entering and leaving a hive, it is obviously something else that you don't and can't know – there are

( hands and arms bejeweled-dripping, proffering tortuous care, razor-grin that tilts into wrigglerish glee – )

complicated rules for how many bees can enter and leave in successive iterations, algorithms that start with the initial "day" and evolve from there, and he's chattering as he sets it up, talking about his moirail –

You should be better at this now, you *have* been better at this, ship and body narrowed to a point and nearly out of view, but even sitting cross-legged with Sollux in the replica of his hive, listening to his nightly life, you can't rid yourself of the feeling of her fingers, like they'll hunt and find you even here – and your memory is functioning like a vastly more simple system, one of those ancient
recording devices bearing one track that plays beginning to end, film progressing in its spin no matter how you try to tug and nudge your thinkpan parallel, to play anything else –

He leans back on his hands and yawns. "I always forget she actually needs me," he says, "I don't think I've ever seen her scared like that, she's just… not the stereotype, you know? She's the highblood but I'm the one who's shithive maggots –"

There's a sense of hidden alarm when he talks about the seadweller girl; something you hid away from yourself because it would be too dangerous to recall.

"— and, I mean, she's not Aradia. No one else is ever Aradia — but we take care of each other, even if she's more aggressive about feelings jams than I'd be, it's still… it's what I need, too —"

Usually when you're here you feel almost free of her icy splinters in you, those parts of you carefully shoved back behind locked gates, but his speech these days feels sprinkled with crumbs of truth you're forbidden from following, granular knowledge-fragments that catch in the folds of your thinkpan and itch, and you're deadpan-neutral to steady both of you, keeping to open questions, generalities, letting him fill your head with the numbing buzz of the quotidian –

"You're still so overstrung lately, it's hard to believe you've spent a minute on a pile in the last sweep — but then, when is one of us not stretched a little thin —" You elbow his ribs, halfhearted, distracted — memory short-circuited, eyes of your mind averted from the wire-cross but sliding –

Maybe Sollux doesn't see how thinly you're stretched. But by now it's more likely by far that he does see, and knows it's easier for you when he just keeps talking – feeds you morsels of outside experience that you can lose yourself in like moonlight.

Usually it's easier. Right now it doesn't make you feel any less like screaming when he goes on, chuckling – "Well, it was a seaweed-pile, but – compromises, right?" Then he goes quiet, head-tilted, pensive. "We're making progress," he says, referring to objectives he can only hint at. "But there's a lot to be scared of. And so much timing to micromanage. Her own plate is so full – we barely have time together that isn't working, not unless one of us needs it desperately."

A sick swoop of shame inside, like fingers squirming in your stomach – you've learned a coexistence with the unfathomable weapon's guilt, but these petty self-hatreds angle against your soft spots – you're angry, frightened, pale-needy, not looking at his hands as if that will help you keep from imagining them dappling at your face, he knows your feelings break through quadrants but you shouldn't –

— you can't help, haven't contributed anything substantive to his calculations since he arrived, but still he comes to you when he has – when he has –

— the seaweed-pile, seadwellers content with shallows and the ones who of necessity seek out the deep, seek to drag it up with them, even up into the dark, past the moons – the lapping and the stinging around your ankles, more and more often you half-feel, twinges and traces – and the lock on the part of your mind where his deepest and most dangerous secret lives just rusts away, as if the salt-water has invaded even your thinkpan now; and in borrowed memory you see a face.

And you know. And all the reasons that justified your capitulation before tear clean through, a flimsy pity-spun film over fanged visceral horror.

"…because your moirail is hers. No – don't ask me to apologize for remembering. Don't –" You wanted his hand on your cheek, that you see in your mind's eye, see hallucinatory here in dream dripping seawater, you can't turn to him without the stench of salt – knowing who – and you wanted
him to *touch* you – "Don't *dare* –"

You close your eyes and for a moment you need every cell in your thinkpan for reining yourself in, power that wants to snatch up and *push* – you made a promise about leaving, weak dwarfed words under the seethe of light that slams in and boils beneath your skin, have to get out now, release this into the ship or leave him broken in your wake –

"Astris – *no* –" And the look on his face will stay with you, shocked and lost and *furious* and protective, and the part of you that will make sense of this later, now submerged under seawater and anguish, will marvel over his instinct to protect his friends, will be quietly glad that he's defending his life outside of you –

Sollux catches at your wrist, incandescent with his own shielding out to the tips of his fingers, touch that sears and shocks and focuses you so hard here that the pinprick awareness of your distant body that you haven't been able to shake fades into the black of space and you sheer off a thunderclap of power in warning, light but also motion, shaking the dream-air around you, growling into and through it "*Do not* touch me –"

His hand hovers there, still in contact even if not with your skin, light crackling and snapping back and forth between his fingers and your wrist, to the point where the buzz of it hurts – "If you're remembering, you *must* remember why you locked it away – *I am in danger*, Astris. You're not thinking clearly. If you let it slip, the consequences for all of us – Would you see me go to a traitor's death – if I'm *lucky* –" You're numbly aware that he's reaching for the buttons he can find to try to contain this, but right now it's only waving daymares in your face –

Your knees go weak and tendon-loose as his power washes up into you, threatening to fold, your eyelids droop, you've taught yourself through both habit and intention to lean into the signature of his power, acknowledge its touch as proof of a claim, give him time to get through to you – and he's *had* time, oh, he's gotten through, you claw his hand away with a swipe of light and stagger straight again, pain forgotten, and spit – "What do your voices say, when you give yourself in pity to *her* blood and bone? Those doomed by *her* caprice, do they even stoop to speak to you in that pile of sea-wrack? Or can the Heiress' touch silence even those not yet dead?" *Does my shade claw at your conscience yet, Sollux? Or am I still silent – silent again, since you –*

Your mind is still tangled up in his, not knowing if you even tried to hold that back, your thinkpan throwing words out barely hearing them itself – there are lines that you do not cross out loud and lines that you do not cross at all and *that* –

And then there are lines that you don't see before you cross them.

His mouth works for a moment and he stammers out, "I'm not doing this for your goddamned gratitude and I'm not doing it for my moirail – I'm doing this because I'd hate myself too much to live if I didn't *try* –" And the *this* in his sentence is a looming blank and Sollux has blocked himself into a corner and the plaintive frustrated note in his voice almost makes you want to crumble, to reach out with empathy, if you were only a little more here – but he's still talking, and there's a tangle of fear and anger like a wall in him, shutting you out, defensive, bitter, *stung* – "But I should have known, I should have expected you'd – She's had you for a thousand sweeps, you know she's gotten into your head, how can I possibly expect to compete, nothing *we* share is ever going to make a difference to it, so go on, put your misery ahead of our opsec, she'll be there when I'm gone –"

"If I could stand to touch you right now, I would claw you to *atoms* –" You aren't screaming, you're speaking one syllable at a time, forcing your jaw through it, there's so much layered onto your voice that you're grimly surprised to hear it coming out words at all, focused on him, a lensed beam. He's bared his throat to you; well, *fuck* him, you won't bite.
His (exquisitely ordinary – common as a beating heart, common as an unfurling leaf, so perfectly pitiful –) his terror that in the end, he means nothing to you – no. He doesn't get to wallow, what you can't force into your voice of rage that sounds like raveled devotion like necessity like longings of the body like sundering-enfolding light you will push out through your mind. You flash a glimpse of her time-mad laughing despicable eyes at him just enough to leave an afterimage before you snarl, fangs-bared glaring measuring slow-raking stare – "Nothing she can do can ever surprise or disappoint me, Sollux. But you, stooping to –" To the deepest, the only insult that can be offered to a slave – "I am immeasurably disappointed."

You know it hits him like a blow, even before his face changes; you hear it in his breath, the way it clicks almost imperceptibly on the inhale before he speaks, his fists tighten at his sides and finally his near-blank expression settles out into actual rage. "And you're making my point again," he says. "You would conflate my moirail with her – bad enough, but I can at least understand – but now you're looking for her in me."

Not her – but the one I see in you is hardly any better, you sneer at him in your mind, so clotted up with bile and loathing that even amped-up pain and fuchsia-and-black gleaming-fanged terror are dissolving in its acid drip, and now your thinkpan knows just where to sink claws in his to open up old blister-skinned soft places, it doesn't want to stop –

"No matter how deep you rip into me," he says, and his voice is ragged, tired, "you won't find that. If you reach through me to my friends and quadrants and open them to the worst – all you'll find is a bunch of young trolls who were trying to help. Until you gave her the tools to destroy another descendant and secure her rule for another century. Is that what you want?" His voice cracks, shrill, unhinged. "Is that what you're going to do? – All because you can tell me over and over again that I shouldn't deny myself quadrants for whatever length of time I even have, but you can't respect my fucking judgment –"

You're both past the point where anger has its own inertia, where it barrels forward like an asteroid, no engines, no stabilizers, just going until it runs into something sufficient to stop it, and you hurt, and the ugliness of things you've thought in your worst moments is still pouring out of your mouth – "Do you want me silent and sealed off here? Is that what you want from me? Because if respecting your judgment means you hide your betrayals behind my limitations and then expect some meek complicit affirmation of your debasement from me then you think even less of me than I think of myself. Tell me, have you ever really seen me as a troll separate from your own mind or am I just another problem to play at solving –" Something warm drips down your fingers, blood from your claws biting into your palms, illusory, doesn't matter – power stings the welts like a salt-rub, holds you crackling above the floor and glaring down at him.

Sollux can't be anything but icily hostile in response, you know it from the inside, the way white-hot brittle rage hides itself under layers of dignity, and it still doesn't make it any better to see him closing you out like this, his posture drawn up stiffly and his power a tight shell around his skin. "I am signed on for your fucked-up 'pan and everything that entails, you know that just as you know I'm willing to debase myself before you, tear myself to shreds for you, even when I shouldn't be," and for a moment you're sure he's twisting your words on purpose; then you're not sure, but too angry-numb for it to matter – "– but I won't break the trust of my friends – not for you, not for any one of them, not for my moirail either, that is not a thing that is ever fucking happening on my watch and if I have to tear myself in half I'll do it gladly first. Remember my betrayal, if you want to call it that, if you want to hurt yourself for no reason; remember what a contemptible jerk I am, that I'm an all-around shithole who takes advantage of you –" And for a moment it reaches you that this isn't performative, watching him dig into himself with one half of his thinkpan and into you with the other, and you suddenly disjointedly want to shout at him about bad tactics, but he's still going – "Betray me, if you must, tell them my face and my name and what and where I am, I'd like to see
them try—" And then he breaks off. "No. Don't. If there were anyone else who could do my job — but there isn't, and I'm stuck, and this goes beyond your life and mine —"

"I wouldn't. I won't. I never will. They could hold up the one thing I want in front of me and ask only for you in return and I would spit in their eyes — and how you used to wince when I said that — now here you are asking me to say it, well. I could be called back into my prison now and in the nanosecond it would take me to laugh in your face and disappear I would go right back to living without half my thinkpan in order to guard your image. And you think you've reduced yourself for me — heh — no matter how you've protested, you still say it as if it was such a point of pride for you —" And yes, somewhere beneath this is the pitch desire to knock him low before anyone else gets the chance, but this is more than that, this is — you would reach through space and cull that giggling miniature of her yourself, horribly misplaced vessel of your secret — of all the trolls on Alternia he could have chosen — and he leaves and you have no one —

"And your band of hopeless causes —" Your words come out slow, heavy with exhaustion. "If you really think I would lay waste to my one chance at an end to my torment out of simple anger at you, then you overestimate the extent of your significance to me. I would betray your friends without a thought, every one of them, I would watch all Alternia go dark, I have done worse, just to abate my pain for a while — but as long as they are the instrument of your promise — or. Or. Are you tempted to go back on your pledge, then? Not quite crazy enough to cull your matesprit and take the whole world down with him after all? So easy, a slip of the tongue or of the mind, and suddenly I know — a vicious, unpredictable, half-crazed tool of Empire, savage enough to reveal everything, and it's all over — try to tell me you haven't thought about it —"

"What you're telling me is that you've thought of it yourself," Sollux says, low and rough, no longer shouting. "I know what it's like to be obsessed with failure to the point where you start to steer towards it — and you sound like me when I'm like that, and it scares the crap out of me." He doesn't really answer your question, and his eyes are downcast and maddeningly unreadable. "If you think I don't still have petty self-destructive fantasies, you haven't been paying any goddamn attention, even to what I can say — which I guess shows who's turning away from -" You draw yourself up to speak, but abruptly, somewhere where you cannot see the workings of it, he meets whatever force is strong enough to stop the movement of his asteroid, and shakes his head. "No. I'm not going to keep standing here and — no. I'm not going to keep standing here. I'm just going to hurt you more if I do."

And there have been times when the contact breaks in waking, times when he's interrupted, and this is not like any of those; this is — you feel the deliberation of his focus as Sollux closes it down, narrows the connection to a point, as the dreamspace shrinks to become a distant apparition.

~~~

===>Sollux: try to pick up the pieces.

It always feels like a shock, but you've learned it so many times before — that the world doesn't stop, just because everything is horribly wrong.

You're still training hackers to manage untraceable build grist transfers, still moderating memos and running Trollian security updates, assigning bots to follow troop movements and message them to your compatriots, keeping moving because you have to. TZ hovers over you when she comes by the hive to pick up a secure signal relay and complains that you smell of spite and dead things, then when you answer just "Yeah," insists on making you eat something, no matter how scandalously quadrant-crossing that might seem.

You don't want to eat something and you're not even sure what was in that nutrition basin, except that it tasted like sawdust and you put it down your throat so Feferi wouldn't have to waste her time
chasing after you too. You don't want to anything. You don't know if you can make this better, you
don't know if there is a better when you can't just give up your stubbornness, when there's someone
to protect on either side of you, and you wonder if you have the strength to carry this, without –

You would, though, you would still, even if he hated you to the end or worse disdained you, if you
still had the slightest access, even if he sabotaged you at every turn. In between being a complete
fucking asshole, you were right: there's too much riding on this now. And even if there weren't – you
could burn yourself to cinders ending his torment and be a meritorious footnote to history, an
instrument of this thing that's always been larger than you, and it would be worth it, even if he never
–

And you're making yourself the hero in your head here when you were just a total asshole, and
you're going to fry your keyboard if you keep getting tears in it, and you have a stack of shit to get
through before you can see FF.

~~~

You stop recording time in nights and days sometimes. This, theoretically, should defend you from
queries about how many nights you've been up; but Feferi manages to get you to string together a
loose-tongued account of sixty-two hours, and why; and accepts it, somehow – the senseless muddle
of anger, the knowledge of how Astris thinks of her – nonchalant as the ocean swallowing a flaming
wreck. How do you not take things personally, you want to ask her, but you don't think you could
understand her answer right now, even if you could get the question out.

Even the chatter of voices seems to come through a thick wall of mist, and your thinkpan is blessedly
disconnected from the concept of tomorrow.

"Trolls do need sleep," she murmurs to you. "Efin I have to sleep."

"But you can keep swimming while you sleep." You're not sure if you're trying to say you're jealous
or trying to say it doesn't count. The point seemed important when you opened your mouth, then got
lost by the end of the sentence.

"You do that too, Sole-lux," she says, a gentle whisper. "But you don't have to, if you don't want
to."

Even that reminder hurts a little less, with her here. "Mmh," you say, and curl deeper into the pile of
data solids. You were going to try to read their labels –

Someone thinking more clearly than you might take that for a sign you aren't thinking clearly.

Feferi is singing some quiet, strange, slow song, each note of it a long drawn-out breath, and the
sick-scared frustration of not knowing if you will dream or not dream, if you will emerge into anger
or emptiness, fades into a distant trepidation; and you hear, in your head, a conversation with Aradia
from long ago: But you must think I'm so stupid, , you'd said, after she talked you out of some manic
bullshit, and layered through Feferi's singing, you hear Aradia's voice, like they're both here with you
at once; saying, Everyone is stupid – Part of being smart is surrounding yourself with people who
are going to stop you when you're being stupid –

~~~

You drift for a while before lucidity arises –

You know what the possibility of the dreamspace feels like, in sleep and waking, the way it feels
when Astris has enough mind free and isn't blocking you out, when you can hook into his power and
pull the place together – but not for over a sweep, since the very beginning, has he resorted to constructing the space himself, cavernous-dark and featureless without your shaping influence – it pushes at the back of your mind like water behind a levy, blackness and the half-heard sympathetic sound of footfalls, drifting bits of consciousness as the space pulls close – you could fall into it like falling asleep, but if he has felt you orbiting its edges then here in the void between dreams there is no sign –

- and you let yourself be drawn in, quiet, furtive, hovering at the edges. Its solidity changes in response to you, but not fully, objects shaping themselves in outline, in silhouette; like your hive, but a darkened colorless replica, the space you stumble through with the shades drawn and the lights off, the same block but at once unfamiliar. You're there and not there, which resolves to being in a doorway in the dark, not quite sure you belong inside –

Astris paces past you once, eyes turned to the floor but too dim to really illuminate it, before he notices that anything has changed, turning underwater-slow to look at you on the threshold of your own hive, just look, eyes shadowed even in their glow and mouth pressed into a fanged weary line, mind closed. Age doesn't usually spill into his dream-presence like this, and you can't be sure even now if the wavering creases around the corners of his face are projected or imagined, a pinprick leak of his sealed-away consciousness or a trick of poor light – but when he speaks he sounds old, rasp-weakened, not a change that just anyone would notice, but you know him. "So you're here." Flat to almost uninflected, but then he steps back as if to make room for you to come in without getting too close. "You questioned my allegiance in ways that would have gotten anyone else culled before they could finish a sentence, and I seem to have forbidden myself from remembering why. I don't know what I need that you can give me."

And you do inch forward, just a little, casting details out around you as you step in, your memory bringing fuzziness into form "Go ahead and remember, while you're here. If you're quite sure you won't be called away." You clasp your hands together to force them not to shake, raise them up to your face and rub your forehead, eyes downcast, avoiding his. Even conciliated and sung-to you're enervated; making yourself stand upright isn't supposed to be this difficult, but you hardly deserve to relax; your mind is already trying to muster a snide answer, something dismissive that will make you feel a little less shitty about yourself for a while and more so later, and you won't let it. "So long as you remember the whole thing. Feel free to tell me what a colossal walking waste chute I am. I'll live. I can't promise I won't get angry if you insult my moirail again. I don't think I've ever met a troll who wouldn't get angry about that." – And you realize you're justifying, and shut yourself down. "I was completely fucking horrible to you, though. I'm not going to try to pretend that didn't happen."

You don't apologize, not quite yet; you have the feeling he wouldn't hear you and it wouldn't mean what it needed to. Better to save your breath.

In your periphery you watch his face twist as it all comes into focus – he steps back again, his eyes clouding so dark the colors go almost indistinguishable – not shocked anymore, just drained, low and flattened still, "Oh, I – what are you doing to yourself –" he shakes his head again, you know his movements even not looking at him, almost feel him trembling with nights' stopped-up confusion of feeling and exhaustion and – something more, some other distress, his voice ragged – "This is useless, isn't it? Nothing I could say or do – or be for you or give you – would stop your thinkpan turning against you, or you going to her for it. I could threaten to leave, but we both know about how far that flies. Please just – tell me honestly if there's anything I can do to stop you. Anything at all."

It isn't what you were expecting – and you want to break down, to reach for him and close your eyes and tell him to forget all this – you wish you could, yourself; wish that you could erase the way you ripped into him and the things he said and shove it all somewhere it would never come back. That you could make yourself simple as a wriggler, for a while, stop having to think and to care so
goddamn much it pulls you in a thousand directions, though it's true what you said before, that you'd tear yourself in half for him if you thought it would help.

But it wouldn't.

You look at your feet, focus on breathing. "Ask yourself," you say finally. "Ask yourself what I am doing, really. Because there was a time when I was interested in her for being dangerous. But I get my fill of that now. I'm over that thing. This isn't about acting out. This isn't about playing games. I'm more intelligent than you're giving me credit for, Astris, please -" and you make a tiny miserable noise and catch yourself and let out a cautious breath and look up at him, at last, guarded and tear-blurred and tense. "Please see that – I said it in the worst way possible before, but there's a veil over your eyes – and I know you can't see my moirail beyond that, but try to see me -"

"It has never been your intelligence that has worried me," and he is chewing on his lip and raising his eyes to stare straight at you, taking your demand at face value – blinks and digs in with his fangs and there's a catch to his voice that is not just worry – "But I – at the core of it, there may be nothing intelligent in finding betrayal here, but it still gnaws at me when I let myself remember and needles at me when I can't – and even then I see, I do, I see that something from outside is buoying you up, holding you back from raising a hand against yourself – and I'm grateful, even while my skin is crawling, and I can't –" Guilty and bitter and building up a cloud of sparks around himself again, darting and stopping chaotic up against his skin, frozen and tonguetied –

You say the thing you held back when you were angry, now that you're not, it comes out differently – "I have that and you don't – and I have no right to rip into you, no matter how egregiously you flip your shit, I was frightened, yes, but that doesn't mean I hurt you any less, and I'm sorry, god, I'm so sorry -" and you find yourself inching closer, leaning toward him dizzily until your hand rests on his arm, you're not sure if to comfort him or to catch yourself or verify that he's there and not shutting you out again.

Astris flinches a little but doesn't move away again, just stays rooted and staring at your fingertips where they dimple into the flickery film around his skin and working his jaw until you think he might slice his lip clean through. "Please don't, I – I gave you the right to rip into me, and to whatever you find, even if that turns out to be a rabid howlbeast more times than not –" and he winces against the bubbling up of nervous laughter – "I promised to give you everything I could, and instead – you accused me of turning away from what little we have when I was really trying too hard to cling to it. My –"

He takes a shaky-audible panicky breath and now he steps back, clutching his arms over his chest, in slow teetering retreat as he speaks, rapidly, now, the things held back and rehearsed in his head – "My greater awareness of my body, there, spilling over from what we do here – you were right to be afraid. I could hide more sensation but when it started to extend to more pain – and in places that had been hardened to pain for centuries – she watches that, she... takes an interest." He stops moving at the same time he stops talking, like he's hit an invisible wall in his mind, cloaked horrors and grayed-over details, you're still sealed out from his thinkpan but you read it in his eyes, sickeningly familiar – "I don't fear her. She has no way of tracing you this way, is too arrogant to guess, too caught up in – but I was afraid that you – I've been fearful and petty and –" And he gasps and bows his head and tears are running yellow streaks down his cheeks, locked tense like he wants to cover his face and doesn't want to stop digging his claws into his arms, run out of coherence in a jumble of half-finished thoughts –

You can't hide the horror in your face that Astris didn't want to see, hope desperately his eyes are too downcast to catch it, know in a moment of breaking clarity that you're going to open your mouth and upset him even if he doesn't see, but you can't just pretend – can't back away, either, can't not move
to comfort, even knowing that every time you touch him it's – and so you throw your arms around his shoulders and hold him, squeezing so tightly that you won't shake with anger or terror or the relief of touching him again – "I'm sorry," you blurt out again, but you can't be sorry enough, and at the same time something in the very back of your mind lights up with selfish hope and you keep it as carefully boxed-up out of reach as you've ever held his pain – "I've done this to you, I wanted to give you something beautiful and all I've done is – make you vulnerable." Your voice cracks and you can't go on.

He draws inward within your embrace, not quite a flinch but still an all-over tightening, caught between curling in and breaking away, "I knew, I knew you would –" And then – like a spring released, power lapping then flooding over your skin – his head is on your shoulder, your neck is warm and wet and breath-fogged and he's choking down sobs up close to your ear between strange high strangled-relieved whining, "I would give over the rest of the time I have left to the worst, 'pan-crushing pain they could invent for me, just for your hands on the spine you built for me here, just once – my refuge – don't dare try to spare me, I'll have you in every treasured detail you can give me or I won't have you at all, don't make me –"

"I know," you murmur, "I know," because you do, and you won't say it's okay because it's not, won't tell him right now how much you want him, though you'll say it again later in every word you've found to describe the way pity stirs in you from the press of skin, how the light in his eyes and the thing you've built together are magnificent and devastating and more of home than you ever expected to have – won't say it right now because too much of him is caged and if he ever needed to remake that one free choice and held back in guilt and obligation it would gut you.

Astris frees his arms from between your chests and wraps them around you, cautious-light and hesitant, and you're catching bits of his mind now, finally, intent listening, leaning into warmth and pity, slurring, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, you've proved you're strong enough to handle the worst of my truths but – I keep – I'm so –" And he stops and catches his breath and you hear the moment of cobbled-together clarity, still muffled into your shoulder, still stiff, but just unclouded enough – "This is just going to get worse. What you've seen – you've seen her bored of me, and that's over. I'm going to get worse, it's all going to get into my head and I'm going to take it out on you just when you need – and I won't be able to stop it and I'm so sorry –"

Your plans are in motion, there's just so much waiting, so many tiny details to line up and he needs you to accept this and you can, for him, automatically you do, but it feels like prying your bloodpusher out of your chest. You're now searingly conscious of the price paid, and every day that you have him now is the worst of your craven selfishness and the depth at which you hide that is worse still and you – you will make up for it one way or another, and once you thought knowing that was hardest, but now the waiting is worse, and if you fail you'll go madder than you've ever been.

What you manage to stammer is, "I'm a jerk," and you know as soon as you say it that he's going to object and you say, "Wait – Don't tell me I'm not. I have something to say, I -" and you reach out to his mind and open your side of the conduit to take the edge off his pain for a while, to carry this for him, it's the least you can do, and he shudders and growls, frustrated teary fighting with himself, claws prickling through your shirt into the skin between your shoulderblades.

And Astris opens his mind in cracks and increments, so that you catch the edges of pooled tears and bitten-back words of gratitude even though all he says is a lisp-thick muttered "Yes, all right –" And you siphon off and lock away what you can, horribly conscious of how much worse it's gotten, of how it's happened so slowly you've been able to let yourself ignore – you concentrate, and keep talking.

"I'm an asshole sometimes, it's just the way I am, I'm going to fuck up and tear into you for stupid
reasons and be sorry for it later every time but that's not enough and it doesn't make it better – and still, you're allowed to trust me, just please recognize that, that I'm going to try to be better for you and sometimes fail – but I – I will see this through to the end, I swear I won't let you always be -" like this., but your voice breaks – "and you're allowed to choose, but I can't see how I'm ever, ever worth what you're going through -" But you are, you think, as your voice gives out again, and you don't hide the thought; knowing he'll hear it as pity and love and your very real respect and mistake it for nothing more.

"I'm not willing to go – however long I have left – without you, even if it's a night, even if it's an hour. Even if this –" And he shrugs his shoulders in your hold, meaning the pain, the fight, everything – "Is how it's always going to be. Even... if that means a tyrian keeping you alive." And he pulls back enough to look into your eyes, teary but deliberate – "I want you to have – any measure of pity or comfort you can find in me – I'm going to fight to the last moment to hold myself together for you, even if – but just – remember how selfish I am, if that helps you, you've called me worse but that's the root of it, that my love for you is a needy selfish powerless thing underneath it all, remember what I would be without you and stay with me –"

And without breaking his gaze he opens up just the fleeting outlines of an image, diagrams and calculations and the rush of energy he casts into the cosmos, the ship's echo-mapping pulses and the power he lets off into nothingness when the fuel cells are full and still there is too much – and encoded into it all, wavelengths and frequencies altered and modulated from his familiar psionic signature, the known buzz against your skin. Just barely shifted, invisible to anyone just looking at the light – he's reproduced the tone of your power and twined it in with his, and the combined waveform hurtles out in omnidirectional shells, has been for a sweep or more, spreads reaching toward the edges of the universe, like a message, like the image of your held hands – and in your sight he's crying, and in your mind he's saying my love for you is selfish but it isn't small, and – and not everything is finite, not everything is limited, not everything has to end –

And for a moment you see, vivid in your mind's eye – not second sight, not prophecy, just imagination and projection – learning to read these signals and their echoes, bouncing back and forth gradually fading, even if – even after – you still can't name his death; still call it probable outcome in your head firmly and clearly and no matter what you call it you never try to think of yourself continuing afterward, never try to acknowledge the possibility –

Freeing him is worth destroying yourself; that part is easy certainty – and you know intellectually and accept as fact that your friends and quadrantmates will try to pull together what's left of you, if they can, because they need you, and you know you'll let them. You see that projected future impassively, from the outside, you see them in it but you've never – never read yourself into it before, not your will and your personality somehow, even though you outlived him and your whole world once in the timeline that never happened, it's different now, you're tangled up in this so deeply you've overdrawn the account of your own will to go on, and resigned yourself to numbly facing the collection of that debt. Or had.

And now you're thinking of yourself learning to listen to the fading echoes of the story of the two of you together, seeded throughout space, like files fragmented across servers, abandoned – of going on because no one else could ever hear or recognize that – and you break down, you can't help it, your eyes blur over and you sag against his shoulder, tears streaming down your cheeks, because you can see it, it's not prophecy but it's – realism, it's something you could be or do, and it was so much simpler when you could just refuse to look further down that track, and you know it's a gift he's giving you but the spectre of feeling in the place of numbness hits you so hard you're gasping between silent sobs and can't speak -

You know Astris watches as your mind builds that possibility; his anguish curls in and around and
tugs at your grieving imagined shadow-self and his voice goes membrane-thin, my light, dear one, trying to bear you up but reeling, floating-dragging you both to collapse onto the couch. Lifts your head and kisses tears from your cheeks and chin and lips soft-frantic as he paints them with his own, and his mind tells you that he can't apologize for this, that this is too immense for apology, the measure of the gift, even if –

And he's crying in pity, he's crying for you, but also – you've waded through the miasma of his continual terror, and in his clinging, in his endearments degenerating into weak animal calling-out – you peer into the gnarled center of his opposing daymare, the lump of swallowed ice, of you conscripted fast-withering in wires and him left, silent bereaved needle-drip encaged eternity – what used to be near-certainty for him, before – and his hand drags wet and salt and mucus through your hair when he tries shakily to stroke and commingled tears blotch a stain down the front of your shirt –

It's easier when there's something outside of yourself, when you're moved to comfort, easier to be silent inside yourself for long enough to ease the hiccups out of your breathing and get your voice back when Astris needs you to speak, and you do, quiet thin measured words, as you reach up and stroke his horns with firm thumbs – "Never, I'll never let them, even if everything else goes to shit, even in the worst, most unpredictable failure – I have killswitches, you know. More than one. I was careful. I'm sure of my work. If you have to know I'll explain, but I don't want to load you down with more things you'll need to forget –"

Astris shakes his head and inhales long and damp, still clutching at you like you'll dissolve. "No, I – I think I've proved how I handle knowledge I can't keep." Puffy-eyed blinking, his face mask-swollen and mottled yellow-gray – "I can't even – I just want to be able to forget about... her. Your moirail." He forms the word like a mouthful of thorns, but deliberately chosen, perhaps not understanding but recognition at least. "I'll still – remember that I resolved to trust even if you provoke – but you didn't, I was out of my mind, I am out of my mind, I'm sorry –" Every movement he makes to comfort still goes to clinging, his hands getting stuck clutching fistfuls of shirt and hair; enervated quivering at the touches to his horns.

"It doesn't matter who made the hole, I dug it deeper, – we don't need to sit here self-recriminating," you tell him quietly, leaning against each other; you're almost calm, no, not calm but a simulacrum of it, your emotions wrung and rolled out flat. "But – I don't want a free pass. Forget about her, yes. Remember – remember that you criticized me when you should have trusted, but also that I reacted badly out of proportion, that I said cruel things, we do when we're afraid but that doesn't make it all right – remember that I'm sorry, but remember that I'm sorry for something, please -" You're not even sure what you're asking him for, or why, only that you need to be imperfect in his eyes: enough, at least, that you won't devastate him by stumbling.

He wrestles enough control into his limbs to swipe his thumb under your eyes, one then the other, brushing tears – claws angled back but still trembling tapered-dangerous close to the surface – lets the gesture speak for itself for a while, wobbly-smiling, risk and trust, psionics skating, sensing over your skin as if he could encode what you need him to know of you from curve and angle, or fears losing some essential of your image in locking away your secrets.

Finally he says the words he's been holding behind his tongue – "If you think I would ever forget anything about you, unless my knowing would destroy you –" And responding to the unspoken, "...but I don't think you're perfect. I love selfishly, not blindly."
Right, so, this chapter gave us trouble, and we spent a long time trying to iron it out, and not lose hold of our readers' belaying line, but still keep the immediate awfulness of what relationship arguments can feel like, especially when one or more people in them are having problems with thought distortions. We hope that we've succeeded in this.

The Captors are in a very bad place here. Astris is dealing with being horribly isolated, abused, and in pain; Sollux is strained past the limits of his pretty amazing capacity for responsibility, on several fronts; and Alternia, planet of unfair, doesn't have anything resembling mental health care, beyond the existence of pale quadrants. They are both messed-up brilliant babies who care for each other a lot, toughing things out that people shouldn't have to tough out; and it shows.

Earth does have mental health care and therapy, even though it's inconsistently available, and if things ever feel remotely this desperate to you in any relationship in your real life, for any reason inside or outside the relationship, we highly recommend seeking counseling, with or without your partner. (Amberite says: it saved my marriage! Twice!)

Non-relationship situations, likewise. Relationships, brains and lives can all have dysfunctions. Having someone to talk to, to help you build a toolkit to overcome these dysfunctions, is invaluable; and many areas have low-cost services available.

These poor alien assholes are just going to have to muddle through.
quivering wings beneath my breastbone

Chapter Summary

twinArmageddons [TA] opened memo on board thii2 one'2 a2 fuckiing 2ecure a2 ii't2 going two get or ii'll eat my 2hort2 with urgency level EXTREME and title "new plan: we're doing thii2 now."

carcinoGeneticist [CG] responded to memo.

Chapter Notes

It wouldn't be Homestuck without abrupt weird timeskips, would it?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

==> Things: Never stop from keep happening constantly.

Everything happens so much. Perigees pass and it just keeps happening.

Consider: twelve trolls finally working in concert, squabbling and quadranting each other and doing it right this time. Preparations on Alternia, changes made slowly and carefully, not a single one suspicious in and of itself. Trolls changing residences, one by one. A city built into a new capital, one block at a time, as wrigglers bring their build grist to join the effort.

Consider the Heiress, readying herself to fight and win. Oh, she will cheat - but her opponent has been cheating for millenia. It is only fair, all things considered.

("I hope it won't fuck up the feeling of triumph any."

"If I find I'm eeling deflated from watching my friends kelp defeat Her Condescension - which I can't imagfin I would unless you get yourselves krilled - I'll just have to make it up sometime in the next few hundred sweeps, won't I? If I lose, I lose more than my ego. And if I win, I win much more than a moment on a podium - for all of us. For Karkat's line, for my own, for every troll like you or Aradia, for every world getting mined for resources and half abandoned.")

Consider: a brilliant boy with a mutant thinkpan, at his full height now, counting down to a startlingly ambitious moment.

Consider star charts written on his wall, diagrams sketched, calculations rehearsed feverishly.

He barely sleeps anymore.

~~~
Consider: the Helmsman, and what could break.

Understand now that something has broken, although you have not seen how it happened, yet.

~~~

Datta: what have we given?
My friend, blood shaking my heart
The awful daring of a moment’s surrender
Which an age of prudence can never retract
By this, and this only, we have existed

--T.S. Eliot

~~~

==> Future Sollux: assemble your forces.

---

twinArmageddons [TA] opened memo on board thii2 one’2 a2 fuckiing 2ecure a2 iit’2 going two
get or i’ll eat my 2hort2 with urgency level EXTREME and title "new plan: we're doing thii2 now."

grimAuxiliatrix [GA] responded to memo.
GA: What Like Right Now In The Middle Of The Afternoon
GA: Who Is Even Awake Other Than Me And Trolls Who Drink Too Many Energy Drinks

arsenicCatnip [AC] responded to memo.
AC: :33 < *pounces entire memo* I am!
GA: Im Pretty Sure Your Favorite Leaf Water Counts As An Energy Drink
TA: ii’ve al2o 2et 2ome alarm2 on everyone’2 per2onal electroniic deviice2.
TA: iit wa2n’t the way it planned either, but ciircum2tance2 have forced my hand.

carcinoGeneticist [CG] responded to memo.
CG: IN THE MIDDLE OF THE DAY? WHAT IS THIS, DID SOMETHING HAPPEN WITH YOUR SPOOKY UNDEAD HELMSMAN MATESPRIT?
TA: ye2.
TA: but al2o you knew we diidn’t have that much more tiime before eiither one of our dii2appeared
loo2e end2 re2urfaced, or 2omeone noticed the new palace 2priingiing up around a previiou2ly
minor 2paceport.
TA: whiich ii2 why we had already moved two fiinal alert pha2e a couple of periigee2 ago, even
though we were expecting two be able two u2e a better galactiic alignmnet.
TA: 2o get wiith the program, 2lacker2.
CG: YOU KNOW I HAVE SOPOR DRIPPING DOWN THE CREVASSE BETWEEN MY ASS CHEEKS, RIGHT?

adiosToreador [AT] responded to memo.
AT: wELL, nOW WE ALL kNOW THAT, }:/
GA: It Did Not Sound Like There Was Time To Waste On Public Displays Of Kismesic Affection

caligulasAquarium [CA] responded to memo.
CA: hey at least someone in this memo is sharin some knowlledge
CA: since ivve been tasked wwith makin sure our flarp teams get in line id like a head count
CA: of course im constrained by the format and ill havve to say eevverything in stupid secret agent
talk right
TA: actually, you won't.
TA: ii 2et up the memo without time2stream 2ynchroniizatiion for a rea2on.

arachnidsGrip [AG] responded to memo.
AG: What, so our future selves won't show up and 8e smug at us?????????

gallowsCalibrator [GC] responded to memo.
GC: NO, DUMB4SS, B3C4US3 TH3 TI1M3 S3CUR3! F34TUR3 1SN'T S3CUR3!
AC: :33 < *ac is purrplexed* pawlux, didn't mew say that mew would have to rewrite the entire feature to make it secure?
TA: ii kiinda diid, we ju2t had two 2acriifiice the temporal 2hiit.
AT: tHEN i CAN REVEAL, tHAT GAMZEE IS WITH ME, aND FELT CALLED TO GO JUGGLE TORCHES, IO PSYCH HIMSELF UP FOR BEING A BADASS,
AT: aT LEAST I PRESURE, tHAT IS THE DESIRED EFFECT, i DON'T UNDERSTAND HIS RELIGION ALL THAT WELL,
AT: bUT HE SAYS, hE IS, "uP AND GETTING MY MIRTHFUL MADNESS ON," fOR THE, "mOTHERFUCKIN EPIC THROWDOWN OF A LIFETIME,

centau2sTesticle [CT] responded to memo.
CT: D --> What, in your new hivestem
AT: iT DOES, hAVE SOME GENERAL USE RECREATION AREAS,
CG: WHERE'S FEFERI? SHE'S THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF THIS SHIT.
TA: that'2 exactly where 2he ii2.
TA: ii 2ent her a me22age before 2tartiing the memo, a2kiing her two iiniitiiate 2ome ta2k2.
CT: D --> I have STRONG reservations about the early launch of this stratagem
CT: D --> While my surgical team seems ready enough, you said there were temporospatial reasons we were waiting to harness this e%ploit
TA: ii have 2ome re2ervatiion2 about iit two, but iit really can't wait any longer for a multiitude of rea2on2.

It really can't. You'd hardened yourself and factored Astris in as a liability every way you knew how; you'd brought in as many perspectives from outside yourself as you could without completely cratering information security; but this isn't a maddeningly sterile collection of elisions and euphemisms locked behind encryption anymore. This is the spectre in Astris' eyes that burned into you, hours ago, as you dragged yourself awake and away from him, now branded forever into your brain – for the sake of all your audacious plans, for his sake, it's time.

(No matter what it does to me. Your own voice echoes through the mounting haze of red behind your eyes, the gathering charged-restless twitch in your hands, as you do to yourself what you and Astris learned and tested together, charge into this sleepless, overclocked high open-eyed and deliberate until you're beyond the reach of any power that might touch your mind –)

Your lip still tastes of blood and you keep poking at it with your tongue.

TA: ed run the program ii 2ent you, np and kk 2end me22age2 two your weird acolyte2 ii mean iintelligence and deployment expert2.
TA: ii've got provii2iional head count number2 from the 2paceport but 2omeone need2 two veriify them on the ground.
CG: CAN I AT LEAST WASH OFF THE SOPOR FIRST?
TA: no one care2 about your a22 crack kk.
TA: be an adult make your own decii2iion2.
TA: for all ii care take 2elfie2 of the damage and 2end them two the reclu2iive protector2 of your bloodline for their 2acred 2pank bank.
CG: I'M GOING TO REMEMBER YOU SAYING THAT AT SOME CRITICAL JUNCTURE
IN THE FORTHCOMING SHITSHOW AND REGURGITATE MY CIRCULAR GRUPASTRIES ALL OVER SOME POOR IMPERIAL PEON.
TA: good, we need all the intimitiation technique2 we can bring two the table.
GC: 4S MR 4PPL3BRRY'S 4SH3N COUNS3L, BOTH OF YOU QU1T IT!
GC: WH3TH3R OR NOT W3 4LL SURV1V3 THIS 1 4M P3RSON4LLY B1T1NG BOTH OF YOU!
GC: SOLLUX, DR4G YOUR MUT4NT BR41N B4CK ON TOP1C
GC: K4RK4T, DON'T K33P 3NCOUR4G1NG H1M!
TA: tz ii'm fiine.
cuttlefishCuller [CC] responded to memo.
CC: )(e isn't fin, but t)(at's w)(y I'm wearing t)(is )(eadset!
CC: Teen captains can sc)(ool be)(ind me until I'm ensconc)(ed in t)(e arena.
CC: T)(at includes you, Sole-lux! You )(ave your work two do, and it's irreplacable. Now t)(at I'm )(ere, you needn't go swimming around after all of us. I'll be t)(e bass. 38D
CG: THREE OF MY SPACEPORT CONTACTS CONFIRM THEY'RE ON SHIFT, WAITING TO HEAR FROM TWO MORE. CESS TERMINAL IS CLEAR, BEDT PARTIALLY INFILTRATED.
CG: AYEM MAY REQUIRE SOME SITUATION MANAGEMENT, BY WHICH I MEAN OUR GUYS MAY NEED TO AGGRESS THE BIOLOGICAL WASTE OUT OF SOME OTHER GUYS.
AG: You know I could just t8ke on the whole 8unch, right????????
AG: Like, this isn't rocket surgery, it's coordin8ing large groups of trolls! And I happen to 8e in possession of the easiest way to coordin8 them, which is my 8rain!!!!!!!!!
GA: Need I Remind You Once Again That We Are Trying To Establish New "Social Morays" At This Time
AG: Naw, I'm just compl8ining, I know I'm supposed to lie in w8 ::::)
AG: I even know there's a str8egic purpose to it! I'm just frustr8ed!
CA: anywway wwe might not evven need ayem terminal if wwe handle this right wwe just gotta divert the trolls there from joinin us
CA: much as i like a good clusterfuck of vviolence wwe gotta savve our limited numbers for the big evvent
CA: by wwhich i mean there are still fivve thousand trolls on the b*tltleship c*ndescension an they arent goin downw quietly
AG: Did someone say 8attleship Condescension?
AG: Sollux didn't deprive us of our future selves' snide o8serv8ions so you could go on talking a8out the flagship like it's Troll Lord Voldemort!
CA: wwhos the strategist here because last i checked its me and if i wwanna givve things an extra layer of protection thats my business
CT: D --> Some superstitions have a solid basis in fact.
CT: D --> Even if that basis has long ago been e%punged from the record by interested parties.
apocalypseArisen [AA] responded to memo.
AA: this is n0t the first time the ship has been st0rmed by a seri0us c0ntender
AA: the previ0us incident was the event which 0ccasi0ned the ban of adults fr0m alternia
AA: but the summ0ner lacked the special intelligence which we p0ssess
AG: Heh, Tavros, you told me your ancestor was sm8rt!!!!!!!!
GA: You Dumbass She Means Military Intelligence
AG: It was a joke.
AT: aLSO, mAYBE LET'S LISTEN, WHEN ARADIA SPEAKS UP IT'S USUALLY IMPORTANT,
And now you're getting a blurry flash of memory that isn't yours, that tickles in the back of your mind - a coordinated chaos of trolls and lusii, and the beat of huge orange-limned wings and the flash of a lance that seems to be everywhere at once, a stampede that melts the ship's outer defenses as if they're made of sopor –

AA: they say you already have access to more information than any subsequent rebellion in the form of a certain diary
AA: but the ghosts keep memory that even your source may be prohibited from transmitting
AA: the summ0ner and the marquise rallied the people, claimed the planet, and calmed the speaker of the vast glub
AA: the beasts he commanded swarmed the earth, teemed in the seas, bloated out the moons like the depths of the cold seas
AA: but the ship itself swallowed them whole along with all its own crew

A hundred-camera-eye view of light so precise that it plucks out particles of atmosphere everywhere in your manifold vision at once and pushes them aside like a glimmering curtain, expanding, blossoming outward, and weapons fall to the catwalks and causeways of the ship and trolls choke and bleed and freeze into contorted death-masks in the dark of vacuum, and somewhere a cackle of that horrible laughter that booms and breaks and bubbles with incipient madness –

AA: and the summ0ner turned his lance on his matesprit to keep her powers from falling into the hands of the enemy
AG: ...Wait, she…
AG: It wasn't a betrayal
AG: ???????
AG: They didn't end as enemies???????
GA: Were You Planning On Betraying Anyone
AG: No!!!!!!!!!
AG: I just… alway8s thought she st8yd 8ad.
AG: Why didn't you tell me sooner, Ar8dia? You know wh8, never mind, it's not like I've given you any reason to have my 8ack.
AA: 0h
AA: did you wish additi0nal visitati0ns fr0m the ancient dead?
AG: Uhhhhhhhh
TA: 2he'2 been de2cendiing iintwo hii2tory gradually, ii don't thiink 2he knew iit before now.
GC: TH1NGS 4R3 G3TT1NG 33R1LY C1V1L 1N H3R3
GC: SHOULD I B3 WORR13D?

You're still getting flashes of things that aren't there, millions of drones wherever the gaze of your external sensors reaches (and a sense that there have never been so many before, that no one outside the brooding caverns knows where they sprung up from –) building thousands of ships – sweeps of this, and then roaring and rising in star-shaking unison and on every manifold screen in your network sneering fuchsia lips promise triumph and distant worlds around gleaming fangs – and far below your repaired hull the scarred ground of Alternia still dotted with drones, now building hives for the young – and it's all enough to preoccupy you at a level of yourself that thinks on too large a scale for digging at Vriska to matter.

TA: nah tz, all my fuck2 are ju2t genuiinely otherwii2e occupiied.
AA: i only relate st0ries t0ld t0 me
AA: and even the st0ries themselves are n0t stable the way y0u might think 0f hist0ry
AA: the hard anch0r p0ints in the f0g 0f what is p0ssible have changed
AA: and wh0 the st0ry is ab0ut matters
GC: H3Y 1M TH3 S33R H3R3
AA: i think y0u kn0w wh0 i mean
TA: can you clarify?
AA: n0
AT: wELL, aNYWAY, i HAVE TO SAY, i AM A BIT RELIEVED,
AT: sPEAKING, aS THE DESCENDENT OF THE AFORESAID, hISTORICAL FIGURE,
AG: Ugh!!!!!!! Stop 8eing so soft!!!!!!!
AG: I'd 8etter not 8e stuck with a kismesis who wouldn't kill me if the occ8sion called for it!!!!!!!
AT: sOMETIMES, tHE FACT THAT YOU ONLY POSSESS, sECONDARY KNOWLEDGE,
of THE ALTERNATE REALITY WE LIVED THROUGH, iS VERY AWKWARD, |
AG: And sometimes the fact that you talk in circles a8out it is downright infuri8ing!!!!!!!
AT: aNYWAY, cALM DOWN, vRISKA, i STILL H8 YOU,
AT: aND WISH TO CONTINUE, dOING SO FOR MANY SWEEPS UNINTERRUPTED, <3<
AC: :33 < as much as it is to s33 mew being furrocius at each other, is there anything else I
n33d to know befur I clawntact my crack team and proc33d to the spacepurrt?
CC: Tavros, run final c)(ecks on t)(e direct link system, please.
AT: tHERE, dID THAT WORK, oN YOUR END,
CC: Quite w)(ale, t)(ank you! )(as Gamzee returned from )(is preparations?
AT: nOT YET, bUT, tHERE IS A LOUD CHORUS OF, hONKING NOISES, oCCURRING IN
THE COURTYARD,
AT: aND ACTUALLY, kIND OF SHAKING THE HIVESTEM,
AT: i THINK HE IS BRINGING, sOME FRIENDS, wITH US, tO THE RENDEZVOUS,
CC: Good! I was :)ping :)e could muster t)(eir splinter sect in time.
AA: they say One is never truly ready f0r the miracul0us
AA: but One is 0bligated t0 prepare n0netheless
AC: :33 < nr ampurra are mew sure the furcenaries are going to show up?
AC: :33 < befur they arrive we can take the spacepurrt but we wont be able to hold it by ourselves
once the empurress arrives.
AC: :33 < i mean if they dont care who is in charge of the empurr whats stopping them from just
being cluckbeasts?
CA: mostly they care about money because they come from sectors of the galaxy wwhere imperial
control is stretched pretty fuckin thin
CA: they also care about bein in the good graces of wwhoewers gonna wwin for obvvious reasons
CA: so wwe leaked the scheduled routes so they knoww shes not supposed to pay a vvisit to alternia
right noww
CA: ergo wwhen she showws up its proof wwere actual wwizards
CA: theyre wwaitin on nearby planets wwith sol wwwatchin ovver their communications and bein
paid only wwhen they arrivve at all three terminals and provvide backup
CA: personally i havve no idea howw hes doin all this at once but i guess bein mental givves you a
competitivve edge

You actually managed to delegate that to an inner-circle hacker from the Signless cult, but you don't
mind taking the credit.

GC: M34NWH1L3 H3R3 1 4M W1TH 4 BLOCK OF TYR14N LUSUS 1NK SUSP3ND3D 1N
S34 1C3 TH4W1NG 4LL OV3R MY 4W3SON M34NWH1L3
GC: 1T SM3LLS L1K3
GC: YOU KNOW WH4T 1 DON'T W4NT TO D3SCR1B3 1T FOR ONC3
GC: 1S MY T34M GO TO ST4RT 4NO1NT1NG TH3 4R3N4?
CT: D--> Lest we become mired in f001ish squabbling and minor logisti%, someone ought to
remark on why we have undertaken this e%remely historic responsibility
CT: D--> Duty, honor, the opportunity to test our STRENGTH
CG: OH COME ON, YOU KNOW WHY MOST OF US ARE IN THIS.
CG: BECAUSE SHIT IS FUCKED AND THE MINISCULE POSSIBILITY OF MAKING
THIS WORK IS WORTH THE NEAR CERTAINTY OF THE KIND OF DEATH BY STUPID
ADVENTURE THAT KEPT EARNING US SHINY NEW SECOND CHANCES IN OUR
DREAM BODIES IN THE GAME THAT NEVER HAPPENED.
CG: EXCEPT THAT THIS TIME WE DON'T GET ANY DO OVERS IF WE'RE FORKED OR
SHOT OR VAPORIZED OR OH GOD OH FUCK WE'RE ALL GONNA DIE AREN'T WE
GC: YOU 4R3N'T TH3 S33R 31TH3R
CC: Maybe! 38)
CC: We cod (ave all died in t)(e game. We cod (ave died FLARPing.
CC: ...Apollockgies to Aradia. 38C
AA: n0ne are necessary
CC: T)(e drones cod alawves still krill us, or at least some of us.
CC: Ot)(ers would )ake it as far as Ascension, and die invading planets t)(e Empire doesn't even N--
E--ED! Alt)(oug)( at t)(is point, sooner or later t)(ey'd notice somefin susfis)(ious aboat w)(at we've
done w)( at t)(e build credits, so most would probubbly get culled before t)(at.
GA: I Think Sollux Is Rubbing Off On Her
CA: really kan wwhy wwould you say that
GA: Oh No Reason In Particular
CG: I HATE TO ADMIT IT BUT WE'RE ON HIS FAVORITE SUBJECT MATTER
BECAUSE IT'S LEGITIMATELY THE RIGHT THING TO FREAK OUT ABOUT RIGHT
NOW.
CG: NOT THAT I'M FREAKING OUT OR ANYTHING.
CC: Anywaves!
CC: T)(e point is, we may die or we may live, we may triumph)( or we may peris)(, but t)(ere's one fin
 t)(at s)(ore, and t)(at s T)(IS.
CC: Our lives and deat)(s will never be meaningless!
CC: T)(e game was supposed to give us a new universe. W)(at it gave us instead was our own, and a
 c)(ance to make it betta. We still )ave t)(at c)(ance.
CC: And it's a greater c)(ance t)(an any trolls )(ave )(ad in centuries, and I codn't ask for a betta
grouper to kelp me wit)( t)(is.
CC: We stand to c)(ange everyfin aboat Alternia. Not just for ours)(ellves, but for our entire species.
CC: No matter w)(at appens next, we won't die giving up.

terminallyCapricious [TC]responded to memo.
TC: my best bros what is motherfuckin banging
TC: IT'S TIME TO RUMBLE. :o)

The din in your head is building, though your cognition is clear, floating far above it. There are
voices you think would recognize if you heard them now, and others you wouldn't; and one that you
are very sure you would.

And you hold on to what you know: the voice you still don't hear amidst the onrush of deaths
approaching.

Chapter End Notes

The hyperlink which appears in this memo is meta-narrative, and not actually visible to
Sollux.
The next chapter (which happens chronologically before this one) should be up within a matter of days.
set my body free

Chapter Summary

You kiss him hard and bloody, the base torn-clawed underside of feeling everything for him - you care for him until it burns you out whole, the image of him wasting himself for this, for you, sears at you, and oh, there’s pitch in this -

And even molten as you are what he's asking slices straight through you, kicks your feet out from under you. You have made this choice already. You have sworn this vow, chosen him over and over, made this commitment and you cannot untrust.

And he is right. Even without your trust, this is in his hands, possibly hands beyond his. To believe that you can change this -

You remembered, once, not being confined.

Chapter Notes

Contents include: smut, agony, quadrant vacillation, brinksmanship, audacity, the Helmsman's massive monolithic deathwish...

We first wrote this, out of order, in 2013, before we had even finalized a name for Astris; and the characters did things we didn't expect; and so much of the narrative before, and after, came to hinge on it.

We've been punching ourselves in the heart with this chapter regularly ever since, and now, so can you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

==> Present Sollux: try.

This is getting harder for him, not just sex, everything, and you know it's your fault.

When you started to feed him your own sensory impressions - almost three sweeps ago now, amazed and thunderstruck and lit up all over with pity - you didn't know it would, didn't know it could do this, that the ability to feel would somehow carry through the bond between you and affect him tangibly. Oh, he could do tangible things to you, even to your hive, because of the way the space was anchored, because it was mostly his power building it, more than yours -

It's a cruel irony that the same power running through him would have consequences for his nervous system, would wake up nerve endings in him that had long since dulled out and gone dead, would paradoxically make it harder for him to be here without also dragging his awareness to his suffering body there.

And he tries not to show you but you see it when you touch him now - even with his dream-spun
body sprawled over cushions on the workbench to minimize the strain, even with most of the pain locked away in your head, so that you only feel the diffuse pressure of it, making your limbs heavy as if moving through sopor, making the backs of your eyes burst with tiny lights that are not red and blue.

You see it in the way he flinches when you curl your hand around his hipbone - a sweep ago he would have rumbled softly in his throat and arched into your touch and now he grimaces and holds still but you know that if you ask he'll say *keep going* - in the way his teeth clamp around the hiss of breath when you press a kiss to his shoulder blade, the way he tries to press back into you and tries to shy away at the same time and just lands suspended and trembling, claws embedded in the surface of your workbench. A sweep ago there would have been yellow beading down his thighs by now but the tips of your bulge brush dry skin and he’s breathing in long gulping draughts of air trying to relax, his body so caught up in its own tumult that it responds to your touch as just another jab of regrown nerves.

It was already getting worse for him then, last sweep, but you were getting stronger faster than that - and he waited so long to tell you, because he knew you would want to protect him -

Even the gentle stroke of your hand down his side hurts him because the more he *feels* the more it amplifies everything but you breathe in, take on the burn of that too, and for a moment you can barely keep hold of it and you feel bruised, all over, underneath your skin. But it eases for him, you feel that in the way he shifts back against you, and this is working again. And if you’re getting little flashes of it still - it’s *almost* too much to push down and in and stoke the arousal that twists in your gut, almost but not quite, and you’re holding him up again, even as your head feels light and your vision tunnels, you pull it in and you *adjust* and steady yourself against the table and say his name, soothing, steadying.

He makes a high whining outlet noise when you adjust, still pain-saturated but at least there’s voice to it, down from overwhelmed enough that the little keening sound helps, that hearing his name pulls him in toward you, an automatic movement but still one that rubs the darkening outer folds of his nook closer against your curling bulges and he breaks the keening to sigh at the contact, arch his back even though it forces his hips harder against the table. “I -” He’s hardly managing to speak, but - “I need this,” fast and quiet and lisping heavily, as much reminding himself as pleading with you, “Almost -”

Trembling, sweating, you wrap both hands around his hips now guiding and feel him growing slicker against your bulge, surface against surface, your own body answering you slow and distant, so that you have to think about it deliberately to push forward and give him what he’s asking for, the lower bulge slowly and carefully extending into him, halfway now and you sway a little on your legs, dizzy with sensation and strain, pulse pounding in your ears.

You know it hurts, even just this, after all this time his most hidden tells are obvious now, the muscles knotting up in his neck when he forces his shoulders to unhunch, it isn't going to *not* hurt in the state he's in, but at the same time he almost sobs in relief, the part of this that is pleasure rippling through him until his stomach muscles shudder against the cushions; the part that is pain distracting him from the rest of it enough to let his voice through, words more formed but still shaky and slurred, “Keep going - want you -”

- all the way inside now, feeling the tip curl and the way he squeezes around you, your other tendril twining aimless and needy in the space between your bodies, and you press your hips near-flat against his buttocks and interlace your fingers with his and it's too much, too dizzying, your feet wobble and you catch yourself with your other hand -
He lets out a sharp coughing noise that you just know was going to be the beginning of a scream and the whole sweep of his back sheens over with sweat, the walls of his nook forcing down on your bulge and his claws screeching divots into black paint, and you realize in a pain-streaked moment as gouts of what he is feeling crash into you that your hand on his spine covers the lowest jack point -

You’re frantically pulling it all in, you can’t even keep locking it down but it doesn’t matter, you just need to make it better and you don’t stop when everything blurs, don’t stop when you can no longer feel your body, when gravity and direction give out and there’s nothing in your senses but your thinkpan and a sea of pain -

===Astris: Catch him.

Sollux doesn’t make a sound as he overloads, just slumps onto your back toneless and sharp all over and crushing-heavy for all his bones and pulled-concave skin -

You’re so far this side of even being able to scream that catching him is hardly even a whispered hammered-flat thought, the sites of all your jacks jarred beyond bearing. You couldn’t feel him without letting in all this with it, and now just the act of pushing yourself up as he slides to the ground bends and creaks and burns at you, and each stretch of your joints to follow him snaps and sears like all your muscles ossified while you lay there, but you reach him.

You can’t feel his pulse over the booming resonance in all your own nerves, can hardly see him breathing as your vision blurs over with it - it’s shallow, but it’s palpable through your own shaking if you lay a hand on his diaphragm, and any other time you would be struck voiceless until you could stuff this pain under, yank yourself into the mash of meditation and brute force it’s come to take, but it’s him and you find it in yourself to reach from mouthing his name to croaking it, take him up under the shoulders and drag him into your arms.

He’s coming back in fits and starts, almost at once, eyes still shut but the way his head rolls on his shoulders has a kind of partial volition to it and his lips loose a single muzzy syllable, just lost and confused -

You hold your breath, suspended pity-struck terror, scrabble at his scalp with one hand half looking for bruises and half shakily trying to soothe at his hair, you can’t feel yourself breathing but somehow you’re still rasping, “Sollux, Sollux, I’m so sorry, oh god, I’m so sorry -”

- and his eyes blink open with your thumb on his forehead - in the halfway thrown-together slapdash desensitization you’ve managed, you see it before you feel it, even as you know his brows are rising under your hand and he vocalizes again, not yet speaking but now questioning-distressed and then he says your name, and his face crumples hard into the despairing look you know too well, the one that says I’ve failed -

“No,” you respond to what he hasn’t said, shake your head and it rings and smacks like there’s something loose in there. “No, don’t, I - didn’t control -” and you press your forehead to his, upside-down as he slumps in your arms, whisper tiny and wretched, “…I wanted you too much. I - I won’t - I’m sorry.”

He’s already trying to pull himself up, no room for stillness in him, no patience, scrambling and squirming, because neither of you can ever just sit still or give up or stop.

Every aching gush of pain you shut off from your mind also thins the slow, comforting drip of the sensations of being here: blurs the smooth of his hair between your fingers, dulls his warmth, until even the weight of him against your chest is nothing, unreal. But you do this for him, breathe deep and will psionic blocks into the major nerves. Wall yourself off from the bodies, dream and ship, that
are the site and canvass of pain and there will be nothing for Sollux to access or bear.

He doesn't need to know that you repeat his name like a mantra in your mind as you do this for him, reminded why, that you are swallowing this suffering back down like scattered glass so that he will not kneel in it. That some days you catch yourself chanting your own name, instead, the one he gave you; that it works, reminds you in moments of great pain of who you are -

- the name he’s saying now, forlorn, oh, Astris, as he turns in your arms, wrestles loose a lanky arm to balance himself against the ground, so he can stare you in the eye, still blinking half-groggy but the lines of his face are tensing into anger and loss and indignation. For a moment you think he’s going to start ranting out loud, lashing out at himself or at fate or at her cruelty, but instead all the hot emotion narrows to a point, and he says, tautly quiet, contained, almost as if to himself - “Well. It’s useful to know what my maximum tolerance is.”

You reach for him with numb but steady fingers, draw them over his cheekbone and down to trail away at the jaw, some nonsense instinct to ensure that he is still solid through your protective layers, still here however dim.

And then he’s reaching for you and you can see in the way he holds himself that he knows you can’t feel it meaningfully, that his hand is there not to stroke or soothe but to keep your face turned towards him as he speaks, so you can see the look in his eyes as he says, rueful, “We can sit here all day playing the competitive sport of whose fault it was until KK grows jealous of my straying pitch affections. Which one of us it was with the worse disregard for caution in the face of desire. Because, god how I want you -”

The words break off because he can’t maintain the calm in his voice, and his eyes - his eyes - and all the sharp angles of his face turned toward you are frantic longing edging into despair; he looks at you like he’s trying to memorize you, like he’s somehow trying to download more of you into his head than he already has, haunted and naked and fire-bright with grief and wanting -

Even cloaked from this as you are, this one thing can reach you, bright and engraved-immediate: these fierce strange vibrant places in himself that he turns on you, his piercing, shimmering gaze - and even knocked back onto your heels like this you want that, all of it, in a way that aches to be drowned out and consumed but at the same time longs to build and stoke and reciprocate -

But none of that is for this moment; now you wrap one hand around the back of his neck, stroke the other dreamlike-careful over brow and temple and lean in to kiss him slow and soft and hesitant around his lower lip, half-open and letting him guide this because you know that eerie space of coming back from being gone, know what its dangers are.

For a moment he sways into your hands, kisses back hard and frantic like he’s drowning and seeking air, and just barely it finds you through the haze of barriers, pinprick-sudden and out of focus, caught in a vacuum between the smooth curve of the front of his fangs almost cold against your tongue and the cracking forced-in spasm from your own spine, and you must have frozen up, gone too quiet trying not to let this through because he pushes himself away from you and is staring again, both desolate and determined, holding you half at arm’s length and he says, “There must be some way we can do this,” hot with determination and at the same time like he’s scared there isn’t -

You’re back in this almost before it all has time to reach you, hands still all over his face with the nagging compulsion that if you don’t keep them there you’ll numb him out entirely, fuzz over his angles but still you’re speaking over him, “Yes, yes,” you would do this with him even if you couldn’t feel it at all, know that time might be tomorrow or in perigees but for now you trust him to get through to you.
And now the center of his forehead furrows; you know that look, the way it calms him to be working on a technical problem, because it’s the same in both of you. “We could try the recuperacoon,” he says. “Buoyancy -” Dream-sopor doesn’t soothe, any more than stray sparks lead to combustion; chemistry doesn’t operate here, the simulacra you’ve made are congruent, but not to a molecule’s size. But the broader laws of physics are replicated.

You haven’t touched sopor in centuries, and just the thought of it cooling and coating your skin makes your bones ache for the relaxation of it, even knowing that it won’t sink in. “All right,” you say, distracted for a moment by his look of problem-solving focus, such a strangely everyday beloved thing against the specter of dammed-up pain - reach over and press a light trusting kiss to his jawline before remembering, asking, “Can you get up yet?”

“Yes, yes, I’m fine,” he says, half-reassuring, half-irritable, and he pulls to his feet, then stops, now standing stooped over you, concerned - “Tell me honestly whether getting up and moving now will make this more difficult to you later.”

“No, it’s all... bearable for now,” you manage, actually thinking about it, envisioning the route from here to the respiteblock and what you’ll have to numb and how much to get there. You shift a knee up and hiss, consider just admitting defeat and levitating yourself there but Sollux is already interjecting -

“In what version of the Alternian language was that an answer to my question?” - sardonic and prickly and he’s already reaching under your knees with one arm, getting ready to lift you and you realize this could be worse than the walk, bracing for an arm around your back, but instead he’s carefully floating you up on a cloud of psionics, letting his other hand tangle in your hair and horns, scrupulously careful and standing up now with your dream-body cradled between his arms -

You almost protest, just for form’s sake, that you were about to do this yourself, but you know that he’s carrying you because he wants to, and it’s been a long time since denying him anything was easy. You lean your head into his hand, rub against it for the faint brush of sensation against your scalp, but mourn the all-over shifting warmth of his power that you would feel if only you were a little closer in, a little less removed...

The adjustment is delicate, letting go of some of the choke points you’ve made around nerves sheathed in your spinal column, the slow-breathing welcoming in of the wash of energy under your back and knees without opening the floodgates entirely. You brace for new pain and it’s there, a creeping ache from the joints inward, but it doesn’t draw your attention enough to matter, and you know you’ve done this right when you regain that stealthy edge of awareness of your own skin under his eyes, where your limbs are and the expression on your own face and what you must look like to him, and you flush at the determined tenderness in his expression, at the way you can actually feel the give of his skin under your fingers, now, when you reach to get an arm around his shoulders, pull yourself in to be held closer.

He’s looking at you with a kind of satisfied joy, watching you unfold back into yourself from blank, and - you can’t get much further than this without having to shuffle off some of your pain onto him again. No matter how many times Sollux has done this for you - no matter how many times you’ve heard out his grave reassurances and given in, accepting the guilt of it as the price of something immeasurably wonderful - it gives you pause now because of what just happened; he’s suddenly fragile in your eyes even as he carries you forward, and anticipates - “I’ll be more careful this time, I know my limits now,” speaking with a familiar deep bitter offense against the fact that he has limits - “Let go, let me help, please.”

"You're going to get me there, and put me down," you tell him, maybe a little too gruff trying to hold
all the implications surrounding this in your mind at once, for him, for you, reason it out through the
pain. You used to pride yourself on cognition, before, interpretation, parallel processing, but pain like
this, whether held back or let through, tends to draw everything down in your head to simple and
binary, trust him or not, and you do, you do. "And then you are going to be careful, and yes, I'll let
you." His carrying you is a show of strength as much as anything, that he can do this still, can still
afford the toll in pain to have you, wretched narrowed thing that you are, and you're twisted all the
way through with close-knotted pity, still as sandpaper-immediate as that first time with the taste of
his voice in your mouth, that he would pay such a price for you, the fragmented wreck in his arms,
this stricken diminished thing you barely recognize as yourself.

The psionic cloud beneath you lets Sollux wrap his arm all the way around your head, firm, careful,
pressing it to him, curling his long fingers into your hair. In the closeness of his chest and shoulder
you can hear and just barely feel the way his heartbeat flutters, sped with arousal or anxiety or both,
the way his breath shudders near the edge of crying, but all he says is "Sounds like a plan," voice
firm, and quietly strangely grateful.

You're at the doorway to his respiteblock, too narrow for so many gangly limbs to press through
sideways, and he looks at it and keeps holding you up, still as stone, then he takes a much deeper
breath which doesn't shake and half the wall unmakes itself, from solid to a mesh of red and blue to
nothing.

You and he have done this before for small things, but that was part of the hive, built here sweeps
ago in overlay, and the overlay is suddenly removed leaving raw dream, an amorphous shadow that
he carries you through. Then he’s climbing the side of the recuperacoon and before he lets go of you
he holds you out for a long moment and just looks at you again and then his eyes drop, no longer
meeting yours, and he almost whispers like he’s not sure if he wants you to hear. “It won’t be much
longer, now.”

The words hit you physically, wash through you like a shiver, and you remember that you have a
bloodpusher in this dream body when your chest sears over like it’s getting smeared onto your ribs
from the inside, blinding vertiginous corporeal reaching into the future he’s offering you, so relieved
that he isn’t quite looking at you because you’ve only ever felt this expression from within it but still
you know that it is exponents worse than the harshest mania you’ve seen in him -

The ecstatic thread-thin clinging certainty that he has found a way, that he will help you die, because
anything else he could mean by that is unthinkable.

You can’t speak, won’t, because any words from your mouth right now would come out worship
and you don’t - you’re still here enough, sinking out of his hold and into the cool of the slime, seeing
him muted in the dim close light of his respiteblock, eyes downcast - you won’t conflate him with
some personification of the end of this, won’t collapse reverent at his feet -

You reach trembling out for him and you know you love him because it cuts through your sick
tumbling joy enough to steady you as you stretch toward him over the edge: the answering pang to
what he must feel, the dull thin sympathetic grief, the need to hold him close and soothe it from him,
just for now, just as long as you can chase the pain back enough to lift your arms and wrap him in
them.

The sopor, real or not, buoys you up and that does help, some, and Sollux lets himself be pulled in
next to you, a close fit in the tall narrow blue half of the recuperacoon (the first time you saw it, when
the two of you built this simulacrum of his respiteblock, you remember being amused by the
cleverness; now it’s quaint and strange and it’s as if light doesn’t know how to move through the
place where half the wall is gone.) And now the two of you are pressed skin to skin again in the soft
floating place under the surface. His chest still cycles through those strange, full, heavy breaths but he just hooks his arms under yours and up around your shoulders, careful, soothing, and murmurs in your ear, “It’s okay, let me in,” voice balanced on that thin edge of calm he’s been holding to this whole time.

Knocked off your axis as you are, you almost reconsider - he’s giving you this, the end, and still he wants - but you remember your intention, remember trust, hold the feeling in your mind of pain dissolving under his touch and let it stream in to replace the weird shameful exultation - it’s easier than you thought it would be, you’ve been without the soft coaxing brush of him inside your mind and drawing from your nerves since he fainted, and through the haze of guilt in the perigees of building pain this has come to be something you long for, as much as hands on skin -

“Now,” you whisper, pulling your bodies flush, hooking one leg around his; and somehow more contact helps this to work, feeds your ability to believe that he could lift pain whole from this dream body.

He’s pressing his forehead to yours and breathing hard against your face, panting as he concentrates, and you can tune in the feeling of his warm breath as the agony fades, feel the hard shudder of his all-over flinch - normally he tries not to react, not to show you - and if there’s more than strain in the harshness of his breathing, if there’s an erotic quality as well, maybe it’s the learned anticipation of the way you (used to) unfold from yourself, the way this frees you to respond to him - did - does, just barely, in the lightness of the sopor with the slick tendrils of his bulge pressing against your thighs.

You open your mouth and almost have to gauge what you’re feeling by the sound that comes out, spun disoriented as you are from spikes and ebbs of pain and touch - a breathy cut-off puff of it, the start of his name, a little surprised wanting noise as the slipping of his bulge over your skin comes into focus, as bits of backdrop click into place, the sense of warm distant stroking hands against the places where your nerves are regrowing, far away, a touch that hushes them into momentary quiet instead of sensitizing: the hallucinatory artifacts of him taking your pain in.

And you can’t quash an odd gratitude when he flinches under the brunt of your pain - grateful that he’s carrying it but more that he’s letting you see, this once, what it feels like, and you reach up a sopor-streaked hand to brush down the back of his head, staining his hair wet, blinking down tears that you never felt building, eyes fixed on his face and watching, respect and wonder and memorizing attention to what he is showing you but also resurgent desire tinged with new urgency.

Your other hand is on his hip, trying to get leverage in the weightless fluid space, pushing your sheath up against his hips and the tendrils of his bulge, your own just reemerging, the tips always painful-sensitive like this but in the frictionless slime it doesn’t matter.

His first bulge slides into you as quick as a drawn-in breath, and he's pressing kisses to your mouth, to your face, hungrily, as if letting you see him react took down some layer of guardedness that held him back, stripped away caution leaving the desperate yearning to pull you in closer, his lips vibrating with a near-silent purr. You make a wanting noise - it's almost as if the sopor was working because felt even through the few diaphanous barriers you have left this isn’t nearly enough, sweet and close but dim. Your bulges tremble and pulse and drift against the sopor, and you’ve managed the balance of this with him so many times before but not nearly as loaded-down with your pain as he is now. So you slip your hand down from his hip first, careful, rub soft circles along the outer folds of his nook, unsure whether too much stimulation could tip him out of consciousness again, your bulges aching now with it, barely held back.

He’s already answering your fingers with high whining whimpers and in the tight press of your bodies together his other bulge twines around your wrist, automatic, frantic, seeking more, and you hear him voice your name, just barely distinct, and “Yes,” his face warm and flushed against yours
and thrumming with his purring -

There’s a futile trembling in all the muscles of your back, trying to push your hips further together when you’re already pulled flush against each other, as both twined tips of your bulge slip into him at once, as you let go and curl and twist up, trust in his affirmation and his body that knows yours, now, to keep him here; and you’re keening over his purring, aglow with interconnection and the give and press of his nook around you.

And for a rare unreal moment pain recedes into counterpoint, into a complementary-colored background that brings his every subtle movement, every thrumming inhale as he purrs, the whole nameless awful-cherished weight of what you feel for him, into saturated brilliance, sharp and pure and utterly unexpected and you shudder all over against him, horn-tips to the soles of your feet, somehow coil your bulge impossibly deeper, near-blind yourself with reflected light from his face when your own eyes flare.

He thrashes against you and holds you tighter, every sharp line of him haloed in wispy brightness, his bulge straining forward like he’s trying to crawl up into you entirely, the second tendril pushing in pressed tight against the first. Everything is pressed tight and crowded and interlocked, and the angles and the hard thrusting and desperate clinging inside seem like they should be painful in their own right but it’s a tiny faint thing under the volume of sensation - you know intellectually you’re still hurting right now, that Sollux hasn’t siphoned off all of it at all, but the relief itself is somehow momentous enough to drown out what remains, the relief and the knowing that he, that finally - and the touch and the shivering and the sweetness -

And oh god you almost want to come now just for the patient coaxing unrelenting touch of him working you back up again, want this to be one of those endless days like at the beginning, when he would skimp on sleep for far too long and then crash and stay with you for dream cycle after dream cycle, both of you too stubborn to be the first to leave, to pull your overtaxed pinprick-sensitive bodies apart – but you know that you will be too buried in resurgent suffering for that. So you hold yourself in this, enthralled in that cut-open peeled-apart immediacy that sometimes used to creep over you at the end of those long days with him, but now – you can’t even look at him without being enveloped in it, now, and you’re open-mouthed reined-in whining, arms pinned under his, bulge swollen to barely able to move inside him, rippling and twisting slow -

And he’s breathing into your ear, "I love you, I love you" as his hips tilt and his hands stroke your shoulders and he pierces up into you like a promise, like a light through the core of you, like clarity and language and the memory of moonlight and that stark-simple trusting core of you can’t help but transmute all this into a vow, layered over with echoes of won’t be much longer, now, the slowed shaky drag of his hands, and you will feel this through every cell of you if he asks you to, thankful beyond bearing, sopor doing nothing now to keep you from overheating, tongued into burning, whispering the words that always hurt and catch in your throat, the awful truth you’ve promised him, “I - yours, only, Sollux, I love you -”

Tangled between the known, the sharp angles and inversions of his body, and the yawning pull of freedom, saturated through in the radiance of his pity, you let go, gasps and spasms and the flooding pressed-in inside of him and the long-to-unbearable clenches of your own body that slowly ease off and you emerge into hearing yourself moaning his name as he shakes and pulses and his nook grips you tighter, as his wetness washes out of you into the wetness of the sopor and his squeezed-shut eyes paint tears along the side of your neck, learned timing and the sound of his incoherent formless noise and for one blinding stretched-out moment you’re just here.

Still blank flowed-through content you manage to unlatch your claws from his sides, smear more sopor into his hair as you run palms and fingers through, lay your cheek against the crown of his
head and just feel for the drip of tears, just float twined with him and still and will away time, motion, breaths that measure seconds, and of all the innumerable times you’ve unreasoningly, desperately wished eternity into this - you stroke arcs and double curves around his horns and your whole, still softly trembling universe is Sollux, your pain still barred away inside his mind, and this fragile silence. He still encircles you, fingers pressed to your shoulder blades half-limp with exhaustion, purring again, the sound meaning trust and the thirst for consolation, and he still hasn’t let go, he’s giving you this moment of perfection, light and afloat -

Eternity is a meaningless thing, but still this time stretches long, heartbeats and inhales, cools sopor-splattered skin until you’re shivering and he’s hardly warm even with purring and closeness, and finally you murmur into his hair, “You’re exhausted.” And when he answers with half-hoped-for silence, “You’ve been exhausted, perigees now.”

Sollux looks up at you, calmly. “Yes, that’s true,” he says. The skin around his eyes has been etched dark and cavernous into his face for so long you barely notice unless you’re thinking of it, and the calm of his voice, the sound of the place where knowledge goes to be sealed away, makes you realize that he must have held back the words he spoke earlier, must have known them - protected them - for days if not longer -

“Can I...” You barely have any reserves left yourself, but - but you won’t need them - there’s a void in the air between you shaped like I’m fine, I’ll be fine, and you shudder from cold and the stark honesty in his voice; kiss his sopor-matted hair, and you can’t give him sleep, much less certainty, can’t even offer to listen, sieve for secrets that you could become (and the one thing you could give him, if you just said the word, called him off -) But you can - “I have psionic reserves, not much, but let me - let me give you what I have. Please.”

“No,” he says, sharply, and shakes his head - the motion jerks him away from your shoulder and then he stands there blinking, bobbing in the recuperacoon, looking at himself and at you, like he’s said too much with just the vehemence in his voice --

You stare across the rippling blue sopor at him, this sudden return of fierce closed-off protectiveness snapping that hovering vacuum of the expected and unsaid shut between you, a hard swing back from the unmasked flinch as he took your pain, the flat exposed exhaustion and -

Your mind struggles with this as if drugged, still soft-edged from orgasm, walled off from distant agony, wrought and colored with the only future you can bear to look into without going mad, and - and yet - and yet he held this in front of you and then -

And with your claws against his throat before you think to move, with a growl building acid-unfamiliar at the base of your sternum, with won’t be much longer, now, branded and inverted across your sight, you hardly recognize your own voice, low and torn-off, “Tell me - how many are you willing to sacrifice so that I can go on suffering?”

He stiffens and flattens out against the wall of the recuperacoon - "Did you actually think - for ONE - FUCKING - MOMENT," Sollux shouts - so loudly he has to pause to fill his air sacs, the muscles of his neck corded tight like steel girders, "that if I had a plan, I wouldn't have TWO of them?"

You forgot everything in a reddish haze when you lunged for him, so when he loses hold of your pain it catches you off guard, slips from his mind and crushes full force into you, ageless empty capillary-crushing nerve-snipping marrow-drenching agony, and you have no reach to call on his name or your own. Only ancient fight-or-flight clinging to consciousness forces it back and down, a howlbeast gnawing bone to escape a trap. “Really,” you interrupt, the pain-slammed slurring in your own voice evident even over the ringing in your ears, “And you think that helps,” and you could keep talking, saying as little as he is, the last fragment of your thinkpan that was rational before
starting to buckle under held-back pain -

His voice drops, tight with emotion and hoarse from shouting. "I'm prepared to accept the likely outcome," Sollux says, grating out every word, even though the wild, feverish light in his eyes is trying to say something else - "I promised to free you. No matter what it takes and no matter what that means. I will hold to that promise. I will hold to it if it kills me." And then he quotes a military strategist, a book that was famed in your time, that must have gone down to his with little alteration - "The wise general chooses a gambit in which the most likely defeat is another kind of victory. Is that enough? Have I told you enough? Or do I have to break down every rightly-held secret to satisfy you? Do I have to remind you -"

He breaks off, suddenly, and his face goes blank with the look of holding back actual secrets but torn in the wind of emotion you catch images, words: a flicker of a face with irises clearing to bright red, the concept of lives hanging in the balance both ways -

And when he lays out his own life in front of you, his life that you always knew was bound up in this... That slashes clean and bright through your rage and agony, transmutes them, and you're still baring your fangs but hungry, now, as well as vicious, and against the wall of the recuperacoon you kiss him hard and bloody, the base torn-clawed underside of feeling everything for him - you care for him until it burns you out whole, the image of him wasting himself for this, for you, sears at you, and oh, there's pitch in this, and you know that isn't what he wants from you, but right now you're so furious that if he wasn't the center of your universe you would tear him in two.

When you break from the kiss he's holding you again, his hands shaking hard against your back, and in this state you're still anything but numb, but the anger bears you up like a current that overpowers the pain and he's saying something, right in your face, forked tongue flicking spittle, continuing as if you never stopped him - "Just promise me, promise me you will trust me." The gravity of his voice cuts into you like a knife. "You must, you have to. The fate of every life on the line depends on it."

Including yours, he doesn't say; he doesn't have to.

Even molten as you are what he's asking slices straight through you, kicks your feet out from under you. You have made this choice already. You have sworn this vow, chosen him over and over, made this commitment and you cannot untrust.

And he is right. Even without your trust, this is in his hands, possibly hands beyond his. To believe that you can change this -

You remembered, once, not being confined.

You fill your lungs but the words don't come. They would be a scream until they aren't. His arms are still around you. Your thumb is over a sliced place on his lip, a mark your fangs left, the whole pad of it wet with yellow. "I won't turn away from you now," is all you finally manage, desolate in drawn-down exhaustion. Your gaze falls to his mouth and sticks there, the bite-swollen fullness of it, the little rivulet of blood that follows along your thumb to your wrist - just fascinated at the give of his lip under your hand, unsure whether you're trying to soothe or hurt in the touch or in the way you're giving in. Too drained now to bring your teeth back in and widen the tear; too closed-off still for regret.

Sollux is shaking, now, all-over trembling, undone with adrenaline and brinksmanship and his own wrung-out enervation, and he leans in, presses the side of his face to the side of yours, clutching and nuzzling and entirely blown open except for that wall which holds his secrets back. His voice drops to a low fervent whisper. "I promised," he says again, and a note in it sounds wounded. He takes a deep breath, and there's a sense of consideration from him, of careful restraint -
"I will give you your freedom. When I'm being a realist, I'm aware that - it won't work out the way I -," Sollux says, and his voice wavers so much just saying it that he has to let out a breath that shakes almost to sobbing, and he breathes a few times just to speak again, and then when he speaks it's fast and harsh and hard-edged, “but. I will do everything in my power to see to it that you get the chance to tell me to my face to kill you.” He’s drawn back again, meeting your eyes, his face pale and near-delirious with determination. “And if you do, conscious and coherent and fully in possession of yourself, I will.” He breathes out, near-mumbles: “No matter what it does to me.”

Your hand slides from his mouth to curl at the base of his throat, no claws or pressure but still hyperaware of his airway as he speaks, as everything swirls conflated together and it tears from you, a pupils-blown unraveled "Yes" that you recoil from like a needle, but there is no isolating yourself from it, the only way out is – "I – I used to imagine that there was a condition that could make me break my promise not to shut you out," you press on, going from shaky-soft to more coherent as you speak, "If I knew that I was going to die, I would try to be here with you for a while, before, I would – spend my last hours – but when it came time, I would close this space to you and be alone. I wanted you to..." You take a long, even, preparatory draught of breath – "I didn't want that to be the way you remembered me. But now -"

"...Now -" You're picking up steam, you're sneering, there's hot slow roiling in your veins again and this comes out almost as a formal challenge, like you'd offer if you really were black for him, only jumbled and pity-raw and stretched so much tighter, and the stakes - "I am tired, Sollux, I am ten times my natural age and half that again, I am beyond repair and I am in love – and yes, I want you to be the one to end it for me. So do it. Bring me to you. You, the only troll alive with the hubris to try this and the mind to pull it off, and I love you for it, unquestioningly, I trust you absolutely – and when I know my role I promise you that I will fill it, if it takes everything that I have left, if it takes more."

Your claws are scoring now against your will, clenching into his shoulder and the base of his throat, and you're hardly aware of what you're saying over the roar of what you mean, cresting a high of crushing agony and desperate turned-inward loathing and the black despair of giving into this, oh and that tiny sweet-bright-complex pinhole unnameable thing – he could - you never let yourself dream – he could -

His eyes search yours, caught between mad hope and despair, and the almost-silent gasp says he sees the thing you cannot name.

“I love you,” he says, again and again, like there are no other words left, and you know he’s going to fade out, wake up soon; and underneath it you hear the other thing he’s saying over and over, only silently in his mind. I'm sorry.

You condense into your body slow as the spreading of a fever, fall back into captivity tiny pieces at a time, wring and leech at memory, experience, and it's never taken this much from you, before, there have never been so many swathes of your mind to darken, one at a time, lit-up twists and folds in your brain to snuff and blanket and hide that which must remain unseen. There is hardly anything left of you untainted by what must be hidden; only a meager scrap of self that you can allow back into the Battleship Condescension. All else is secrets, and wonders, and terrifying anger, and love, and you'd be the gouged-down speck of yourself that returns to the rig for millennia rather than risk that.

You know slow-dripping anesthetics. You know coordinates. You know monosyllables.

And in the walled-up expanses of your mind the loss screams and batters at your barriers as he fades. In your forbidden reaches you answer him even after he is gone, again and again and loud and futile, I love you, but also Please, let it be soon -
It’s mere hours before you find out, with no warning, exactly what he is sorry for.

Chapter End Notes

(The working title for this chapter was Everything Hurts.)
come take the line and I'll take the line and I will pull you out

Chapter Summary

Well I'd wade ten thousand klicks for a just one more chance, just one more chance
To see your face again
Well I'd pull ten time the weight of the earth with my teeth, the earth with my teeth
To touch your face alive
-- Wax and Wire, Loch Lomond

First let pass the black steed,
And then let pass the brown,
Then run ye to the milk-white steed
And pull the rider down.
--the Ballad of Tam Lin (Traditional)

Chapter Notes

Some of the most intense pain described in the entire series. Use of needles (not extremely graphic). Epic brinksmanship. Some dying. A wild ride.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

==> Sollux: now.

It's not easy to travel by day; transport pods are a semi-restricted item, precisely to keep young trolls from traveling and associating freely. But they're not that hard to build, and now it doesn't matter so much if others notice you have them.

You wish the sun weren't up because you'd rather fly; it doesn't matter if anyone notices that now, either. All of you are converging on the spaceport, but Feferi came to you, first, away from her entourage, and now you're in the pod with her, staring out through darkened glass as it follows a plotted course toward the destination. By the time you arrive, the earlier crews will have cleared the way, or not; but either way you'll see messages about it. KK is updating the memo periodically.

Her hand is trembling, so slightly that you couldn't see it if you weren't holding it.

"I need to trust this," she says, "I need to just get into plaice and let fins happen, I've known forever that ascending the throne would be exactly this complicated and difficult or more, but you - you're so precious to me, and -"

"You don't need to worry about me right now," you tell her, pushing your face into her hair, breathing warm air on her face. "Focus on you. You're going to win, Feferi, and it's going to be amazing -"

"Is that the knowledge of our doom speaking, or are you just being optimistic?" she asks, a nervous smile playing on her lips, like she knows the answer.
"It's mostly just me, but I haven't heard anything to contradict it." Anytime you descend below the level of your thinkpan's forced confidence, you're scared shitless, but that much is true.

You ride in silence for a while, lost in thought, messages periodically arriving, and finally:

**CG:** AYEM TERMINAL IS CLEAR.

followed by,

**AG:** Cred8 where cred8 is due, 8nyone? ::::)

You take deep breaths. They don't seem to give you enough air.

"I hope he'll make it," Feferi says softly. "You're reely good at making fins happen..."

"...and if he doesn't, I'll stay here for you." You can barely get the words out audibly, but once you do, her whole body relaxes against you. "Aw, FF. Didn't you know that already?"

"I did, but so much has changed." She kisses you, on the lips and on the forehead, still having to lean up to do so, but only just; then she hides her face in your neck, her horns rubbing against the side of your head, her arms squeezing you tightly.

"Even more is going to," you say, and you meant it to be reassuring but you can't keep your face from a feral grin as the transport shudders to a halt.

The sun is disappearing behind the horizon now, and dimly through the glass you see faces you know coming to meet you - you pick out the keen-eared greenblooded scout, the strange seadweller scientist you've consulted with only by Trollian, legions of Signless cultists lined up in perfect Imperial militia formation, Gamzee's mirthful miscreants dripping with paint and regalia.

~~~

The block you're working from is set up to your specifications; a small medical team on standby here and another more extensive one in wait across the spaceport, ready to deploy sylladex-bound resources that amount to a portable high-tech hospital.

"You should have asked for a bowl of chocolate-shelled candies with the brown ones removed," Kanaya says dryly as she closes the block portal behind you. You laugh delightedly - it's been a bit of an inside joke lately, Troll Van Halen disguising engineering checkpoints as foolish particularities, and she's reminding you that she's on your wavelength about it.

The site team had their work cut out for them fitting everything you needed into this small and low-ceilinged place, tucked away in a half-reconstructed wing overlooking the main palace and spaceport. A bank of computers and Feferi's communications equipment are crammed up against an ancient stone wall, with shelves of medical devices and what looks like a fancy gaming chair some wriggler donated to the cause taking up the more modern parts of the room.

You sprawl out in the chair and close your eyes; no more waiting, everything is in motion now and you have one job to do.

You close out the world and pull yourself deeper into dream-trance than you've ever been before while waking. It's oddly forlorn, your mind rising up into blackness, bereft of all the constructs and comforts you usually steer toward.

This time you're coming to him.
It will take you all the power you’ve learned to draw on these sweeps; yours and his as well. The enthusiastic tealblood medic who you've been coordinating with for a while is standing by, monitoring your vitals, ready to inject you with glucose if you show signs of knocking yourself out. They wanted to give you a drip, but you need to be able to get on the move in a hurry.

He’s dim to you - the spark of consciousness buried deep - even as you know the ship is close, can imagine you feel its position in space, even from the outside, you’ve been staring into star-maps and projections until your eyes cross, running yourself through simulations until you can calculate the parameters of a jump yourself without a computer, just in case -

- and you're not on the outside for long.

You slip in, through your uncanny connection, overlay your mind into his, quickly enough that he can barely register your presence, thinking over and over again I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

When you first step into his mind it's a vaulted cavernous near-emptiness, so much of him held dormant away from this place, holding your secret close, that the ticking of code and the remnant hum of consciousness here are terrifyingly quiet, like a pared-down structural drawing of him and not him, not there –

Not until you speak, like tripping a switch, your own voice processed and identified and I'm sorry and - the rushing awake and the recognition and long waiting and the knife's-edge impression of strange depths to him that you barely knew in dream – You, you're here –

And as pain wakes and bleeds down from joint to joint in your fingers and out through your hipbones instantaneous but slowed to impossible insect's-eye detail, as you suck in information with it, breathe in coordinates, no, whole dimensions like pulling your 'pan sideways to receive them, like gasping in a flood – Do what you need to for me, it's all right, I love you, I'll always –

You wish you had time, wish you had the overhead to just stop for a minute and ride here in his head preparing and bracing and holding him, more than this fleeting lost instant, more than shouting I love you, I'm sorry, but the stream of data you've prepared by painstaking rote has to run now, and any wasted second is a second closer to being caught and stopped –

The scream of neural feedback is worse than it's ever been, so bad you can't stay with him even as you force your commands in through his body and his networks, and you shove aside questions you can't afford to ask – about whether he can even survive this level of resistance, because he certainly couldn't force it on his own – he will or he won't, and either way you must do this –

The worst is that even without anything that could truly be called contact, without speech or touch or sight – the worst is that the inside of his mind still feels like him, that this appalling maelstrom of crashing-roiling-onrushing pain is shaped like what you have held for him before, designed into the mold of his thinkpan and the shape of his body and where that mismatches with what you are it goes rushing past you, ripping at neurons as it goes but not settling in, not burning through. So you are able still to bend your mind to the sequences, figures and lines and the ways that this bypasses code altogether, odd involuntary jerking movements of your hands and legs where you sit, where you reach for the controls, where you yank at the ponderous engines and they pivot under your fingers, against the strain of the puny backup motors that might slow a rebellious Helmsman of lesser caliber but not one who has gathered and ascended in power for eons uncounted –

Bilocated, split, so you mark the moment when someone traces you, finds your slow-breathing self on Alternia and hammers on your thinkpan with fists that slide off like windblown feathers -

You are knife-hard and effulgent with power, at least for now - a perfect weapon against an Empire,
invincible, indomitable.

And helpless to protect your matesprit but you can’t think of that now, only of the sprawling mainframe that is your external mind, while it still answers - and it does, and you pull on all its might (every system responding with its own unbearable screech of agony at once) and bore a hole through space and time -

And through the screaming (from his body where he is trapped, because you cannot set him free of this, cannot risk taking it into yourself for even a moment – beyond anything he could tolerate willingly, beyond the ability to push through - you are aware, in slow motion, that you are interposing yourself into his nervous system, a meddling intermediary in the efferent side, substituting your own signals for linkages that would take hold of his reflexes, substituting yourself for reflex itself even as every afferent nerve tries and helplessly fails to make him recoil from every action - aware, through that, remembering dimly in some time-frozen moment that once, sweeps ago, he saw your neural networks and told you you were beautiful; that his complexity is one of the most sacred things you have known, and you are brutalizing it -)

Through the terror and the shocks that rend down and through you and follow veins and congregate around your – his – bloodpusher, through the catch and pause and restart and pain like being run through – you spread your wings.

Galaxies part before your soaring, the shape of all things ripples and snaps and the mass of the vessel is a triviality before your power that barrels like a swell. Beyond the confines of ribbed-in steel you are flight itself, you are motion beyond the confines prescribed to light.

Through the whistling rush and shuddering pulled-apart impossibility of the jump it's impossible to tell whether the searing clangor of something is about to go wrong speaks prophecy or mere deduction, outside your thinkpan or within, the patchwork edges where you rebuilt code to meet the Battleship Condescension at a more distant point in its trajectory nag at your racing mind and numbers blur past faster than stars and still you fly, weightless, standing on the engines like a colossus, feeding into their incinerating depths like a drying river – heat beyond suns lapping at your fingertips and fuzzing and permeating – heat and code and

And behind and between and within the onrushing stars omnipresent and surrounding through your skin that is all-over vision the void of space shimmers – flickers ruddy, draws together like an inhale – glows. Pressure like swimming beneath the surface of the world, force and current and crushing heat, and Astris' voice crying out as sensors scream and rip offline and gouge at your senses, missing swathes of knowledge where phantom perception bites at you instead like ice between the bones of your hands – stars press together like wrigglers at the mouth of the caverns and surround and loom in and there is no void, any longer, only the seethe of harsh coronal glow all around you and ahead fusion, ahead blinding brightness – ahead $meter:time&value:null –

And you know that you are on the edge of utter cataclysm because even now, even battered and repulsed and feedback-rent in Astris-mind where you know this anticipatory reaching for other than your own because you know the flavor of your own terror; know foreign mind by its utter absence – his yearning fixes itself on that light, he turns his face into the fiery countercurrent of feedback and longs for it –

(this is where your plan breaks in two, something in the distant reaches of your consciousness reminds you, you will still win if you lose - and the guilt you feel for wanting to win cannot reach you in your focus -)
- the coordinates ever so slightly wrong, in your haste, corrected to the position of the Battleship Condescension but not quite and you’re headed for - you run the numbers, shove them through straining computer systems faster than you could work on your own even now -

- for a point in spacetime that doesn’t quite exist.

You claw at the limits of your senses, the limits of computation, and find only a jumble of heat and wrongness, reality crunching in on itself - hurtling toward nothingness - no way to find purchase against the flickering walls of bad parameters - lost, careening toward disappearance without a trace - no way out -

Not from here.

It feels like a betrayal, is a betrayal to do this, to choose this defiance when death is guaranteed, and some tiny clamoring verbal part of you has never stopped repeating I'm sorry, I love you, I'm sorry through all of this but you don't know if he can hear your mind anymore over his own screaming.

Your own body, dimly felt - the other pole of the connection - reaching through yourself with his power and your own -

- and you're fully cognizant that you could burn yourself out, and it might be worth it. That you could die - and your only thought is that if you do, you had better fail, in the process, because if you died and succeeded - no.

With the sight that does not belong to your eyes you reach out - out and up, you know the jump points here, and it's a relief being able to think in three dimensions again, though a thread of your consciousness still rides trapped with him in the suffocating faulty wormhole - gathering power to yourself until you feel white-hot with the pressure of it, there must be some outward change in your vitals because you feel, very distantly, the pressure of fingers on your arm -

It's strangely intimate doing this, as if your power were a pair of hands, dragging through the fabric of the universe and tearing it like a cobweb, gathering space in luminescent rings that halo a rent into nothingness -

Arcing toward nonexistent coordinates, driving blind into no-space anchored only by the beacon of his presence -

The hole is thin and tiny and keeping it from closing up around you is harder than you could have imagined, without the amplification of a starship to push through, it takes all the power and focus you can muster - burning through energy like torn paper - the syringe drives home and you barely feel it, but you feel the boost not long after, bringing back clarity from haze - you think it's not long - time is not a sequence but a substance now to both sides of your split consciousness - perilous like ocean-bottom pressure on metal skin not your own -

- you are drawing a line toward yourself, a stitch of thread with one of Kanaya's needles, brute-force yanking when finesse fails, you're not sure what part of you is gasping for breath -

until you punch through, perforate a wormhole into a wormhole, and the ship jerks and wobbles -

You push commands up through his wires without any time to give warning, not that the warning would help against the searing-awful wave of futile punishment - angle toward the new trajectory - MEMORYOVERFLOWimmediatelyrepo.reformatting….....sysauth=)§ors=(9742.5??1, b07:N66, VALUEN03ALLOW2%, 000.00...n^3)rtsubversiMEMORYOVERFLOW.reformatting... - and reach -
Dizzy, barely hanging onto thought, this one thing only and you give yourself over to it completely - push psionic force ahead through the new-made wormhole, widening, clearing the path, and then the course is committed, the motion unstoppable -

- sting of another needle, barely felt, ghostly under half-numb skin - senses cutting out in bursts - draining faster than they can prop you up, overclocked and overheated and you feel yourself dwindling but you hang on, just moments longer, holding your anchor point ghostly-whirling in the sky -

and your head hurts. It’s almost too much to be pain, blazing through your thinkpan, and you try to say help and the word dissolves into yelling around you, dissolves into heat and the pounding of your head and then blankness.

~~~

==> Astris: grieve.

You float to the surface of your own mind like a leaf in stilling water, and everything is wrong.

You have fallen back into time, somehow, into familiar starry-crystalline webwork and space in which to orient yourself and tumbling end over end in great slow arcs, engines idle, red heat radiating from struts out into nothingness – Awoken into pain like being poured into a new mold, like dripping down the inside of yourself, like opening your eyes into noonlight and needles and – you remember a pinpoint in the onrushing distance, remember reaching, how are you here –

this shouldn't be, this is a daymarish impossibility, you're alive, you're whole –

No – the ship is whole. Your mind – you – you are torn in two.

You are halved.

Sollux is gone.

Minutes ago in turmoil and the unmistakable fading sparks and snaps of overstrain as the raw inside of the universe grasped you and carried you away – those last slipping scraps of touch, his mind to yours in final fragmented whispers of code to bring you here, even through his consciousness closing up on itself, the swirling-in descent into dark – and now you are empty of him, his hold on you slipped, you know the signs of a psionic overtaxing himself and he has let you drop and he is gone.

And the stars still wheel in their clusters.

You knew the shape of this end and so you marked out for him his limits, taught him the consequences, but it was never enough – he is you, how could it have been – somewhere on Alternia your love lies in a pool of gold and he left you here and you roar like a beast left mateless, there is nothing in your programming that proscribes grief and you howl. Uncaring what they know – the strictures you built in your thoughts against his name are meaningless, they will find his remnant shell, they will parade it in the streets, it won't matter – you open yourself to the whetted shear of pain as your feedback circuits flip from coercive to punitive and shred into you, you suffer and scream and wreathe yourself in hate, cloak yourself in its thorns and its teeth –

He left you, in his pride he would have had you for himself, in his callous manic ambition he denied you the one thing, the only thing when it was in his hands to give – Trampled on every oath made in pity and in love, when it came to the test, and left you alone –

But you can't. Oh god you can't, here drifting in some indeterminate oblong around the planet where he lies bleeding you cannot numb yourself against the tracery of new sensation that he taught you,
his living legacy under your skin, the newly-felt intricacy of tears as they gather one by one into wet yellowish crescents inside your goggles, sting in barbs of saline purity where the wires anchor.

You should hate, but all your memory turns on a fixed point now, sweeps ago, when hardly more than a child still he turned his pity on you enveloping like a light, like starbirth, ion-tiny and greater than galaxies. You mourn and cry in dumb futility for his hands as feedback crashes over and soaks through and orbit corrections trickle up connectors and – you were wrong, before, about how deeply you were broken. Even if your soul was reduced to dust, it could always be ground finer.

Even the barest touch of radiance, even the push of your home-star's solar breath could swirl away what is left of you now and the pain rises like a vicious storm-tide so much stronger than that and you are no one, then, no sapient thing to know loss.

Yawning staticy sensor gaps thundering for repair. Broken systems shot through with errors, fractured code like claws on glass – being ravaged and surrounding eerie vastness and the screaming —

The screaming whistles through your bones. Feedback circuits promise to force in more pain for every second that goes by without gravity. You batter your will against the centrifuges, but they are welded gobs. In parts of the ship where your pathetic grayish scrap of flesh is not, you jar and spin and paint your sensors cerulean, turquoise, violet. You batter your will against the stabilizers, but they are scrap metal. The feedback says that it will strip the sinew from your forearms thread by thread. The screaming howls.

...that something has the Helmsman, your most motherfucking Imperious Condescension, something picked it right the fuck up like a plaything and SHOOK it, you think I don't know when a motherfucker is up and POSSESSED, Highness?

OoooOoohhhhh, high and wavering, I knew it couldn’t be him, he’s Mine I made him mine in every shell and he would never betray me, could never, such care I took, you can’t begin to comprehend - we have to fix this, we have to stop it, it’ll be all right then -

You reel through space, a wriggler's spinning toy, a bird unfeathered. Your code says jump and you try. You will be wrenched past death and dragged back again, the voices of your punishment hiss as invisible hands force your own power back down your throat, you will be clawed bare and rebuilt all of agony. You aren't here, but there is nowhere else to be. Your code says jump and you try. The engines say core systems shutdown and the light you feed them slams back into you, red-blue crazing where you once had vision. Your code says jump and you try and the screaming is chorus, it's the ship, it's the dying, it's your body –

It's you, closing in smaller and darker than you have ever been, pared down to pain and the few thin lines of faulty code that insinuate through the great clots of conflicting commands snarled up and festering in your fingers, withered even beyond the capacity for finally, finally now –

– WE CULL IT BEFORE IT KILLS US, THAT’S WHAT WE MOTHERFUCKING DO. Ain't no shame in taking apart a traitorous piece of motherfucking HARDWARE, now is there, your miraculous Majesty?

You, you despicable hagfish, that’s trenchery and treason, how dare you defy Me, I have culled greater trolls for less insult -

– clean through a swathe of what little is left, through the dull hiss of low-priority information arriving too late, a great hacking cut and then dark –
Her hands pluck you out of the dark and you're a scrap of sea-wrack thrown aloft on the rise of something colder and larger and more forceful than you or even her, something passive that neither loves nor hates you but answers to her call every time, and she reaches into your bones with that and pulls with her fingers and wills more sweeps into you for every moment of resistance - 

(Her hands pluck you out of the dark fearful and determined and lips press cool on your forehead, gentle and steely at once, an icy tingle and the puff of her breath and her fingers closed around yours and you find the sound of her call and ascend it like a stair -)

Your lungs slam open deeper than they have for sweeps; air ramming in ice-edged humid and cold and your ribs scream and no matter much it hurts –

you're back because there is something vital for you to do – the gnarled skein of nerves in the wreck of your wrists knit themselves whole again but their distant endings in hull and sensor and system are no less mangled and and molten you wail and sob until your throat tears even as it mends and

she clings to you, wild eyes underlined with weary royal-tinged smudges, childishly round cheeks framed by brambles and arabesques and fractal coilings of dark hair, and she's saying –

she's growling through her laughter, claws and golden tines and dripping with indigo gore, crouched in the pool between wires that ascend into the screaming suspended flesh entangled with the drenched trailing ends of her hair and throbbing with new cold vitality and –

you're reaching out for something hopelessly distant from the reach of small teeming life but intimately close on the scale of stars –

but your hands are thin and dim and wispy so far away from where your newly-beating bloodpusher and your gray scrap of body limned by tubes and lines and humming machines lies, your hands are fading and curling back toward you, almost spent –

(hands all over you, from every angle, and the high clear voice calling Sollux? Sollux! and you have something to do -)

==> Sollux: Come to.

It's dark - your forehead is cool, tingling -

There's a funny echo where the thinkpan-cracking headache was, like your nerves are answering a cavernous silence -

A voice shrieking “OH COD SOLLUX -” that anchors you in the darkness and your instincts tell you to calm her but there’s no time and your hand flies out and clutches at her convulsively - knocks askew an IV needle - doesn’t matter - head clearing - focus - focus -

His crying out in mourning in your mind is like an open wound.

Feferi’s saying something, rattling off words and you’re answering them mush-mouthed barely knowing what you’re saying, it’s okay, I’ve got this, have to land -

Have to land, and you drag yourself up through exhausted scorched ache to interpose your will over his, into millions of afferent nerves, overlaying back into his wires and into the mainframe as if you’d never left.
There are no words left here, and if you hadn't heard him crying out into the darkness for you, you'd fear he was gone - but you can feel, still, in scraps and pieces, a dumbstruck recognition assembling from fragments, the dim coalescence of his consciousness reaching toward your name, beyond even disbelieving –

And you only know the shape of him by the way he folds around you, the seeking and the bare exhausted whisper of his mind and the reservoir of his power, matching frequencies - so close it's like touching, no longer a stretch across galaxies, and wordless and knowing - he pours power like love into your fingertips, and then you are lit up with it, and no longer in the ship at all, no longer needing to operate through it or under its threat, as he fades out and the million controls and sensors and awarenesses fade with him.

Your own body, head immersed in something cool, hand clasped in Feferi's, feels like only a small piece of you, and your real hands are made from energy, pulling the Battleship Condescension through space -

But easily now, this is physical space and the threats are simple ones, spatial and no longer temporal, g-force and momentum and obstacles, the atmosphere of Alternia. A child’s game only, like circling your hivestem writ large.

It circles you, looming, large as a moon and as silent, and you know its structure like the structure of your hand but you have to guess from a chaos of alarms and warnings filtered through remembered, imperfectly shared senses which structural anchor points might still be sound enough to close your newly given strength of light around and pull –

Like lifting your tablet pen or a stone, none of the visceral, dizzying knowing of height and speed and direction that comes to you in true flight.

You catch and hold on and the ship slows, loses energy, falls – for a strangely satisfying moment the rate of its fall keeps pace with the curvature of the planet and it describes a perfect circle in your grasp, and you expend more light than you might to move an ocean and still Astris' reserves run deep – unburned you hold the white-hot hull in your far-reaching grasp as it plummets into spheres of ions and scattered air, and the thunderous crack of its approach shakes your body where you lie.

In the distance mercenary ships converging to other landing pads, like small wingbeasts against the ponderous weight of this -

No engines scorch the earth when you drift the ship down to the field at the center of the once-ruined city – still configured for the interstellar void, bristling with instruments that rake over ancient spindly towers and crumble columns, it hovers over the newly smoothed old stones and you're burning more power now against gravity and atmosphere but you bleed off the last of its momentum as gently as if you were cradling something infinitely small, not city-sized (a strange dream of your bees, long ago) –

And you land, red and blue and dust and the building din of shouts and footfalls.

Everything is a blur of voices now, so close you can barely hear what other trolls are actually saying around you, but you know that everyone is beginning to move; that the fighting will come soon -

You pull another needle out of your vein and peel sensors off your arm through double images that swim before your eyes and lift your head up, hair dripping, and Feferi is scolding you and trying to stop you but there isn't time for that either, Kanaya is tugging at her, putting jewelry on her arms and legs, drawing sigils on her forehead -
You pull yourself upright, you know what you've done but your vision is coming back and you have to see - and when you step out into the corridor on wobbly legs it's there, the massive monolithic garish bulk of it visible on the landing platform through the wide window, units converging on it from every direction -

There's the banner of the Signless waving in the distance, and a swarm of lusii approaching out of the sky, and as you try to look closer the Mirthful Miscreants storm through the hallway so enthusiastically that you wind up flattened against the wall with greasepaint smeared on your clothing, the floor shaking with the roar going up from them as they charge forward.

You drift and stumble after Feferi and her entourage, aware on some level that you're barely standing but you feel good, still alert, still holding your wall of red.

And then cold, not in the salt-lush vibrant way that Feferi is cold but whistling through your bones like ash, subtly like light moves through you but –

Your palmtop buzzes.

AA: we have s0mething t0 d0 n0w
AA: y0u d0 n0t

And far ahead of you in the hallway as it begins to dim and spin, silhouettes of horns and the dully luminous colors of thousands of eyes seen through the backs of shadowy skulls and and among them, tattered gray skirts billowing.

Your momentum lets you dash forward with them for a moment, sighting the open hatches, the blaze of gunfire.

You pull on what is left to you of light, a thin sheen so far away and deep that it's tunnel vision reaching for it, a point in the dark, and you draw that point out of you and cast it fiery past the ghosts, into the dull clamor of distant explosions – and the tunnel closes around you and you fall sightless into someone's waiting hands.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is dedicated to chlorinetrifluoride (check out their fic!), in gratitude for all the beta-reading and reaction comments over the years and as a reminder that Captors need to keep their blood glucose up.

^o-o^\
to touch your face alive

Chapter Summary

An ambitious surgery; a ritual combat; valor and desperation, death and life.

"You don't need to stay for this," she tells you. "It's going to take a while."

At some point you find that you're sitting in a chair, with no idea who brought it and stuck it under you. Scraps of news cross your head and you barely record them in your mind; you are focused on two things and only two, but mostly only one.

Chapter Notes

Content notes: body horror, blood, violence, character death [major canonical/minor in-story character(s)], we swear this chapter is mostly supposed to make you cry in a good way.

It honestly wasn't planned that the first-time scene was chapter 14 of Initiation and this is chapter 14 of Consummation but we're happy about the resonance.

You've known what to expect for a very long time -

Known it by heart, as your team knows their orders - that this will be the most extensive biotech extraction surgery ever performed, successfully or otherwise -

Known how the wires close over his hands and feet entirely, the shape of the saltwater pool - not known that the ones running into his left hand would be crudely cut, dripping blood and ichor, that his arm would remain - crushed in onto itself in the air, in no position an arm should be in, unable to drop normally.

You were prepared for the dead speared through with the Condesce's culling fork, dead that you saw first through the eyes of his systems - prepared for the sight of him hanging there the wretched shell of himself, head dropped to his chest, a mess of blood and spit, face hanging slack - not prepared for small things. Tiny things, in the measure of it. Goggles hanging askew, and the torn side spattered with blood and purple fluid, and the side that remains sealed to his face is rimmed with pooled tears -

And you can't hear his mind.

Didn't hear his voice among the clamoring echoes of the future dead, either, and you don't now, only - his mind twined to yours is silent and the silence is deafening, and you know why, you think you know why, but - you can't take for granted that he's survived within himself until you know -

And you can't cry, can't construct what you're feeling, there's nothing to feel, everything is flat and icy and carved-out dull and logical while they work and you wait.

~~~
Later you will hear, learn, know - assemble to yourself from a fractured array of viewpoints the way that Gamzee Makara died -

How squadrons poured out from hatches, defending the ship, even as the Condesce fought her own subjugglators in the helmsblock -

How he stood and fought and his sect fought behind him, how he took the loyalists all down with him, how he flayed his own fingers to the bone fighting, *smiling*, deep in the wisdom of blood-rage, thirsting and quenched - exulting and sorrowing for every troll that fell, allies and enemies, his last breaths prayers of joy and adoration -

Probably some five hundred should have had to in his place, but Gamzee *did*, and he was as good as five hundred, the force of his dozens of compatriots as good as thousands -

Karkat will never accept that it wasn't his fault.

You will hear in tones by turns awed and grudging of the motley legion of ships that slunk out from the shadow of the Pink Moon as the flagship passed and descended on the spaceport, engines screaming – how they disgorged hordes of mercenaries, armed to the fangs, who charged into position at the sign of a bolt from Eridan's legendary rifle – you will witness through staticky video the haloes of covering fire that seemed to explode from every boulder and bit of rubble as Feferi advanced to the ship -

You will meet loyal Imperial officers now sworn to Feferi, will hear of hundreds of them, living when they would have been dead, because Vriska did something right for once and dragged them out of the way thinkpan-first.

And you will watch from the Helmsman's thousand cameras the record of how Kanaya Maryam fell, and rose again, her skin illumined with a strange inner glow -

How she guarded Feferi, how she held a wide berth around her, blue and violet blood spattering from her chainsaw, not stopping until they reached the helmsblock -

How Feferi stood and faced the Condesce, and spoke the words, once, twice, three times, her voice rising over the commotion until every troll still living in that hellish place stood or lay silent.

They will say that the final curse of the Sufferer became flesh and blades and fury – that the Second Signless spoke courage into faltering legions and shouted fear into ravening hordes, that a fearsome blur of green and claws rallied at his side, just as had been foretold – *We were on pawposite sides of the furmation from each other*, Nepeta will complain.

And they will say that just as the flagship was taken and Her Condescension was dragged out from the helmsblock some creature – some say a stag, others a great cat – bowed and laid a bloodied club at Tavros' feet where he rode at the head of the fighting lusii, who encircled him as he mourned. That he emerged, steely-faced, and marshaled his forces to guard the procession to the arena, packs and flocks and herds solemn and watchful, fending off those who would not respect a challenge made by law and right, who would have kept Feferi from ascending -
But all of that will come later. Right now scraps of news cross your head and you barely record them in your mind; you are focused on two things and only two, but mostly only one.

~~~

Every so often Equius or Evesta the seadweller or one of the other medicullers gets a short break and makes a beeline over to where you're alternately standing and sitting on the salt-damp floor. This time it's a tall woman with a Signless medallion and broad lowblood horns; you've been staring blankly as she methodically teases some wires free and severs others, leaving ends in place to be removed later. "You don't need to stay for this," she tells you. "It's going to take a while."

"And you don't know if he's going to wake up," you fill in flatly. "I got the memo." You're going back and forth between watching the surgeons working on Astris and watching your palmtop, tapping into a live feed of the challenge, exchanging messages with Terezi in between her duties as officiant.

The fight is long, but TZ thinks it might be shorter than expected; she says things are going as planned at the arena.

You don't have a feel for the physical intricacies of the formal combat. It's been going for hours already, and for hours more it looks like they are dancing around each other, 2x3dents not even touching, the Condesce walking with a predatory grace that makes fear clutch at the pit of your stomach.

But then you catch the odd way the Condesce is moving her head, tiny rigid flinches from something unseen, the way her feet stumble more and more with every circle around the arena, and you realize that she's not merely exhausted from fighting her own crew; the camera feed does not render angry ghosts comprehensibly. Thanks, AA.

At some point you find that you're sitting in a chair, with no idea who brought it and stuck it under you.

"Why don't you -"

"I'm not hungry and I'm not going to sleep." You won't do yourself the indignity of claiming not to be tired, but you don't think you could sleep if they hit you with hoofbeast tranquilizers right now.

At some point a nutrition loaf is pressed into your hand and you devour it, anyway.

~~~

You still don't think you've been to sleep but time drifts and skips in strange ways.

A shriek from the live feed sounds through your headphones and jolts you to awareness and you don't think you've ever seen Feferi so exhausted - except maybe in the game that never happened.

Your moirail is covered in blood and smiling grimly and yet there's something effortless about the way she holds and thrusts the 2x3dent twice her length, every moment of practice in the arena come to this point.

The Condesce is on the ground now, her culling fork flung far from her hand, and the fearsome dignity she held at the beginning has given way to venom and screamed curses. Secondhand memory would make the voice terrifying, if you weren't already too stimulated and exhausted to
have normal emotions about anything outside of the helmsblock where you're sitting.

Feferi's weapon catches the bases of her ancestor's horns and pins them to the ground, and the prescribed strife specibus and some of the odder specifications Terezi complained about suddenly make sense. The tines of the fork and the ridges of the stones are spaced exactly so that the tyrant cannot slide free, can kick and flail but cannot roll backwards or free her head.

Feferi opens her mouth and speaks in a voice that is high and clear but somehow *booms*, even through the tinny rendering of the feed. "Before all who witness this night of my ascendancy, before the deepest of all watchers, I proclaim my right by triumph!"

Her Imperious Condescension the Empress Meenah Peixes twists, struggles, hisses like an animal - trying to reach her weapon, wounds dripping royal blood into the flagstones.

"Do we acknowledge the combat justly won?" That's Terezi, who doesn't have an eerie horroterror voice and is thus broadcasting with a microphone from the arbiter's rostrum. You can tell that standing on her feet for the length of a night has affected her, but only because you know her well. The first streaks of dawn are changing the color of the sky.

A vast rumbling roar goes up, quietly at first - Terezi grins showing all her fangs and makes a gesture in the air - then louder and louder, and it silences any other sound that would reach you as Feferi kneels by the culling fork and deftly makes the cuts.

Blood spurts freely and the thrashing stops.

~~~

They've managed to dig out another spinal power feed, pulling it away with a weak trailing crackle. At least the psionic centers of his brain must be functional still. You'd worried the suppressants would make it hard to tell one way or another, but apparently the amount it takes to draw you down to null just takes him down to flashlight-class.

The oily iridescence to the blood matting his uniform, the glow mirage-dim and shifting and fitful – hardly identifiable in its colors but that you would know them anywhere, in sleep, in the extremities of desperate agony, stretching to ripple around his outline, receding, but –

– a wisp of glow lapping at his mangled arm and something *moves*, and it would be a flinch but that you don't dare *hope* for a flinch, the surgeons hover and assess and glance nervously at you and one of them must have touched –

Tiny movements, and you've stopped pacing now, you could be hallucinating the tightening in his jaw, wasted on exhausted desperation as you are, the fluttering spasm where his neck meets his shoulder, torn muscle straining against nothing –

Your eyes are everywhere at once, your thinkpan trapped in tip-of-the-tongue limbo listening internally for signals of consciousness with the unreasoning intentness of sweeps of repetition, of waiting on the floor of the darkened amorphous dreamspace for him to coalesce from memory and distant prison back to you – the new wetness gathering at the seams of his eyes, that could be hope and illusion, watery yellow marbled darker –

You draw nearer, look to Equius for permission before passing the line of the operating zone - the helmsblock is nothing remotely resembling a sterile field, you know how the biowires take care of that, but you're entangled in magical thinking and ridiculously grateful for him being here and doing the things you can't, and if following the protocol of the medical team makes a difficult job even a
tiny bit easier -

EQ catches your eye and nods, once, stiffly, and everyone pulls aside just a little to let you pass.

Astris is struggling toward consciousness now, clear enough to let yourself believe it, his chin lifts from his chest a feeble straining half inch and falls again with a squelch of blood-soaked fabric that seems louder than engines to you against the sounds of humming machinery and footsteps of mercenary guards outside, and his breath has been coming barely-visible shallow – once or twice you caught yourself dizzy and faint from timing breaths to his – but now his chest shudders expanding in a slow raspy gurgling inhale, and even in ruin you know extreme effort in him, smoky wisps of light dissipating up the dulling wires above him, fizzling cinder-sparks.

All that comes out of his mouth is a croaking scrap of unintelligible sound and a dribble of blood, and an even quieter grating hiss, and his throat moves convulsively but the third breath emerges open-mouthed futile silence and – you realize that he's using the critical dregs of strength left to him trying to scream –

"Astris!" You shout his name out loud, racing toward him through one of the narrow aisles they've cleared of wires, and as it leaves your lips you realize you don't even know whether he'll recognize it spoken, don't know how much of everything he always back-translated through code - can't reach what's going through his mind and can scarcely begin to imagine, waking to numbness and silence and the ship powered down and being disconnected point by point.

"I'm here," you tell him, "I'm here, we won," and you reach for him unthinking, and all the phantoms crowd around you, the memories of touching him in dream, and something locked down inside you is starting to crack, and you're making a high miserable sound of pity as your fingers settle on his face, shaking, barely daring to hope -

And Astris stops. Just stops, stops shaking, stops clawing for sound, stops breathing, the gauzy film of light drifting around his eyes freezes in place and dissolves into nothing and – you almost believe that he stops time as you freeze with him, the half-dried tacky mess of blood and sweat and dripping fuchsia and spattered indigo smeared down his face adhering to your fingers, his skin clammy even beneath that, eerily cold – stillness that if he wasn't weak and wounded and depleted might be the pause before attack – you think his red eye opens, a sliver of sickly muddied light – and the silence breaks, something tics in his cheek a beginning of movement and a wavering struggling inarticulate sound around one cracked fang dangling loose, thhhhhhh –

"Yes, it's me, it's Sollux," and your bloodpusher has gone to thundering in your ears, your voice hoarse and thick and cracking and you can't bring it out of the dregs of your fortitude to care who's watching you start to cry - "You can remember -"

You're telling him that he should unlock anything that's left of his safeguards, that it's safe to let go, but the words quaver like a question, because you're so afraid he can't. That he'll just keep whining mindless confusion, as the sound that was something like speech unravels into a whimper and his cheek pushes at your hand, more drooping into the pull of gravity than leaning into you – light washes static-spark fleeting across your face, the withered remnants of a wire anchored in his cheekbone scrape across the back of your hand, his battered mouth falls open and – he is so frail, so paper-thin and drained-pale and riddled with perforated places where wires sink in and faded scratchwork of old insertion-scars and everything he ever recoiled in angry shame from showing you and worse –

And he gasps as though sucking air around a lump caught in his throat, he's stuttering syllables but they're nonsense now, reach nothing in your thinkpan no matter how you connect them, no language that you know – until fragmented with sandpaper breathing they resolve into the lisping beginning
again, and between drowning gasps, hanging limp as if every resource left to him is still caught up in each expansion of his lungs, he manages the half-voiced shape of something jagged and interrupted but unmistakably your name, unmistakably lost and unbelieving and a call and a question and he mouths back to you *we won* as if repeating a fragment of an ancient scripture, grasping uncomprehending through centuries after lost meaning, and *don't* – as the teary-wet crescents gathered under his eyes form into spheres and drop – *don't*, but he runs out of voice again, trails off into undifferentiated scoured-harsh breath –

And you're used to sentences that finish themselves silently, used to luxuriant bandwidth filling in the gaps, but now you don't *know* for certain the words he's trying to say and even though you were very careful about the terms of your terrible promise, you're holding your breath, laid open under his judgment, because some of the words he could speak next would tear your heart.

Gape-mouthed he leaks a misty-fading halo of light that shears toward you as if blown on a wind but goes out before it reaches, an unearthly wail in light and finally in voice and "*Don't – don't leave, don't leave me –*"

Desperate repetition as if he can hardly hear himself, as if, having bent and folded space like clay with you to reach you, he now can't know if his words are crossing the remnant inches to your hearing – panting in scraping jarring too-fast breaths from the strain of speech, a new trickle of blood from his nose mingling into the lacerations around his lips, his eyes twitching behind puffy yellow bruise-swollen lids, hinging halfway for a moment bleary-unfocused and dim almost to black, and he slurs "*Don't go*" as his eyes and mouth fall closed and he sinks fangs into his own lip clawing at awareness, a sluggish, barely responsive muscle-jolt of pain in his neck and shoulders –

"I'm staying right here," you're saying as soon as he manages the words, tear-choked and loud to shouting, your hand on his face clutching desperately and *carefully* and you want to press warmth into him, you will, only there are miles to go before the moonrise - "I promise, I won't leave, yours, Astris, always -" and you're lisping worse than you ever let yourself in front of other people, still haven't comprehended quite that you *can* be in front of Astris and in front of other people at the same time, and remembering that makes hot tears stream down your cheek.

And if *you* can't understand then Astris must still wander unspeakably vast ripped-open synaptic chasms from even beginning to imagine that you are here together, and you have to hope that some warmth of comforting inflection can sink through to him even if your words fail to convey it – that you can press this truth in between the waves of lightless unconsciousness that he is fighting, that you're right when you think you see relief smoothing across his face however fleeting, the faintest yellowing of renewed strength creeping into his skin.

He is so close beneath your palm but so insurmountably distant in the claws of mind-crushing suffering, mumbling "It hurts" like a wriggler without enough language to describe fear or pain beyond that, leaning his head into your hand as if he could lean on you entirely, and you have to hope that you can trust your senses through the delirium of unnameable hope to name the soft strange sound he makes then, the grainlike seed of a tiny trusting chirp, almost the time-paled memory of a purr.

"It'll be better soon," and new tears choke your voice just from what it is to say that with *certainty* - you're still afraid for him in so many ways but - if he doesn't make it through he'll die knowing you were here to catch him, and right now that satisfies even the part of you that looks for doom in everything. "I'm going to be right here, the next time you wake up, I won't leave the helmsblock until you can come with me -" And you turn to the medical team and ask, "Have you got the blood samples figured out yet?"
They're looking at you, at Astris, thunderstruck and frozen in disbelief, Equius less incredulous than the others but still flustered - maybe from seeing you break down, or from the sheer improvidence and bizarreness of the situation. The seadweller calls up some information on her palmtop and breaks the silence by listing off concentrations of arcane drugs and substances in her odd voice - you've been doing your research and you still only know half of them; soon there's a discussion going back and forth about blood oxygen and tolerances and exactly what constitutes safe anesthesia, and you're still standing there with your hand on the soft fragile skin of Astris' face, feeling the flutter of his pulse at his blood-matted temple, when they crowd back in and you ask, quietly, "Is there a way we can do this where I won't have to step away until he's out entirely?"

"Up," Equius suggests. Just the one word. And you realize he's right: there's room for you around their implements if you take to the air. God, you're tired. But you start drawing power anyway, inhaling and flaring with light.

And you know Astris is still with you, still as close to conscious as he can be because he reacts to the surge of your power gathering near him, strains to lift his head again and croaks, "What –" Not panicked, just flat and exhausted but you think he means what's happening to me, think it might mean that he cares –

"We're going to get you down," you tell him, "we're going to get you out of here, and they've just figured out how to knock you out so it won't keep hurting -" You're rising as you speak, your hand still pressed to his face. Even the small effort of levitation makes your thinkpan feel scorched, brings on a sense of incipient migraine, and you're uneasily aware that the brightly lit operating space is not going to treat you kindly later. But you push that aside while you can and hover stretched out in the air, limned in red and blue, bring your face closer as the medics work below.

And Astris sighs, a slow whistling release of breath, and the light coiling around him slows to gradual circling, diminishing and fading as injections take hold.

Without the shimmery overlay of power his cheeks hollow into cavernous shadow, the sucker-welts and pressure-lines of the goggles and straps and wires better defined on his face in the overbright raking light than his own features are. Purple sludge dripping onto both of you from the severed wires' coldblooded slow-motion twitching above, and lengthening breaths and slowing pulse and the hum of lights and the whine of delicate medical tools and hushed footfalls, and even half-conscious Astris is still crying, tears dropping warm between your fingers, still mouthing wordlike shapes like the small involuntary motions of broken sleep, sometimes forming pieces of your name, once don't go again, a muffled disconnected fragment of distress –

And you don't realize how close you're hovering until the brownblood taps you on the shoulder gently, awkwardly, because you're blocking her way, she can't put the mask over him to keep him breathing evenly while you're nearly cheek to cheek murmuring that it's going to be all right, that you're staying.

You drift higher and brush against slippery biowire that makes your skin crawl to touch it and you press your lips to his eyelid, softly, carefully, covering over your fangs - then just drift there, saying his name again and again so that (if he wakes) he'll wake to echoes of your voice.
well I can make your face brand new

Chapter Summary

An awakening; a flight; a ceremony.

He relaxes his head and neck back into the hold of your power and for the first time looks away from you, up to the ceiling half-unseeing. He doesn't thank you, just adds, as if from far away, "In the dreams. Sooner than let you have me, they would –" Even exhausted to the point of burnt-down unfiltered he hesitates, fangs resting against his lower lip, harsh-breathing – "It won't be clean, or quick, but – it's an end. But... I always know you're coming – and I always – I want you to reach me first. I want you to stop them." The closest he can say to what he can't yet.

Chapter Notes

Content notes: hospital stuff, tenderness, vulnerability, hurt/comfort.

Oh, also a bit of ritual cannibalism.

Day into night into day -

You know you must have been sleeping, that at various points time has just gone away. You don’t really remember sleeping; you don’t remember dreams, except for one, where he was back in the helmsblock and screaming for you to kill him - the gory tableau of the vision stopped short by his real voice next to you only saying your name, and you woke crying, grateful for a moment that his eyes couldn’t focus enough to see -

Mostly though time just fades in and out and there is the smell of the hospital wing and the long shallow medical sopor bath next to you, telling you where you are; there is sprawling out between machinery and coming to consciousness when he needs you.

At some point you stopped having a terrible backache; at some point later than that you noticed that your hard metal chair had been replaced by a much softer one; and when your phone went off you remembered that this probably coincided with FF stopping by, and thanked her for it.

Feferi is the other constant in your world, when the world unblurs enough -

But she’s also the Empress now, and faced with urgent necessities of her own. There’s an up-and-coming oliveblood adminislayer by the name of Elesna whose job is, right now, entirely comprised of coordinating schedules between medicullers and highbloods and officiants and Feferi so that some of the breaks from her ongoing routine will overlap with points in time when Astris is fully unconscious, and making sure you both get down the hall to see each other; and you don’t remember if you’ve even been saying any words to each other, only the way her horns feel in your hand and the silky ends of her hair and how the world is slightly more bearable afterward and you’re going to find that adminislayer later and get her a promotion and a hot meal out.
Later. When you can think.

Right now -

The smell of medical sopor. Your hand on his face, on his head - it’s an awkward position for your arm, bent around trays and poles, you drift away and drift off and shift in your sleep and he makes a noise and you find him again - sometimes press your palm to his chest under the thin translucent warm sopor to feel his heart beating -

- lose contact again, wake up with dry sopor on your hand reaching up toward him and drool on the chair cushions.

Astris is murmuring in his sleep, rhythmic sounds and tiny mouth movements, incomprehensible at first but vaguely sweet in a strange way, that he is still and his eyes are closed and the noises are hoarse but quiet; that he seems peaceful enough, for once, as you lean closer, hesitant to touch – his breathing slow and even through the mumbling that, at least, isn’t screaming –

– propellant level critical –

...it’s worse.

– unit 0243 0.004% unit 0244 offline unit 0245 offline unit 0246 0.0003% –

“Astris,” you’re saying his name soft and insistent though your own voice croaks from thirst and chair-cramped sleep - you lean closer, rest your hand on his face - “Astris, hey, hey, I’m here - it’s Sollux, I’m here -”

His eyelids twitch. Muscles in his cheekbone jump and pull at the plasters and small bandages that dot his face and curve over his brows and he flinches, muttered numbers going to a soft whimper, ripples in the sopor casting eerie greenish smears of shadow under his jawline as he struggles up from dream. When his eyes finally slit open they’re still dim with half-sleep, a thin, cracking layer of dried tears and mucus smeared underneath – you don’t know how long you’ve slept, how long he’s been dreaming – dim, but his forehead furrows deep, creasing bandages, and the ghost of a spark drips from his blue eye, hovers tearlike at the corner for hardly a breath – thins into a dusty sheen and disappears into his skin and he makes a hoarse wordless noise of effort, rasping close to speech but closing into a whine halfway.

You want so badly to be able to hold his hand but both hands are carefully immobilized, in between surgeries, encased in blocks that let sopor flow through - there’s enough of them left to save, especially with your cloned tissues to fill in the patchwork of flesh, it’s just taking a while - and you stagger to standing, just to bring your face into view, to be able to hover close over him. “Astris, love, it’s okay, you’re just on suppressants so you can heal -” and so you won’t kill us all if you wake too confused, you don’t say. You leave that to be obvious in hindsight when he’s thinking more clearly. “You’re safe, I’ve got you, I’m protecting you,” you say, stroking his cheek with every word.

He recognizes you even like this, still climbing out of sleep and hardly half-present; not aware enough yet for holding back, he leans forward, or tries, as much as sedatives and muscle relaxants and hand restraints allow – opens his eyes as far as he can and blinks and squints to see – relaxes back, satisfied, and there’s a sound he makes only for you, a scrap of a hum, or a short purr, or a chirping sort of murmur. His face is still twisted into bewilderment, released from sleep’s stilling hold enough to start to shiver but not enough for words. But he knows you – can reach that sound even when your name is beyond his grasp, even when he would tear up his throat in barely-audible cough-studded growling at anyone else. He pushes his face weakly into your hand and the tiniest
static discharge clicks at your palm, his breath hitching around an unformed sound, almost a sob.

“I know, I know, I’m sorry,” you murmur - rub the grit out of your own eyes and lift a soft cloud of light under the back of his head, supporting him with your own psionics so he won’t hurt himself straining. Your fingers soothe over his forehead and the planes of his face, and you lean in and kiss at the edge of his scalp, and you’ve been too tired to care if you’re blurring the line into pale for a long time now. You knew a long time ago that crossing the distance to reach him was worth crossing a lot of other lines along the way, if it came to that, and surrounded yourself with people who would put up with it.

“Astris, love, don’t be afraid,” you breathe into his hair. “You don’t have to push, it’s okay, I’ve got you,” and your voice is still sleep-cracked and you’re repeating yourself but he needs that right now, at least until he’s aware enough to speak.

Sometimes the touch of your psionics helps when he's missing his and others he just shies away, no real pattern to it that you've found yet, but this time his sob lengthens out into a sigh at the lifting touch, and he leans into your power, rocks his head a little as if it was your hands holding up his head and neck, as if testing the support for a well-known shape. His lips are dry and his throat swallows convulsively and it takes a try and then another, a soft hacking catch, before his rhythmic whistling sighs become something like a true purr, or as close as he gets. You're still sure you hear distress in the sound, and he still keeps trying to reach and catch at your fingers as they cross his face, threads of power that fan uselessly into wisps the moment they touch your skin.

But the touching and the purring seem to help, and by the time you're finished speaking his eyes are open again, tired and unfocused but more present in a way that you couldn't describe if you were asked – but even in his scarred and inflamed face you know what it is to see through those eyes, and you know moments before his mouth moves that he will manage your name - and he does, though slurred to almost taken over by the lisped sibilant at the beginning, still straining to look at you.

"Hey, I'm here," you say again, quiet and steady. The awake parts of your head are full of updates on Empire business, and you scramble for something to babble about, trying to give him a thread to follow, with which to pull himself up to consciousness - it's hard to find the words sometimes, now that you can't fall into the easy rhythm of beginning a sentence and finishing it in your head, and so you wind up with a piecemeal of sentence fragments and nightly errata. "We're here, you're here with me, I'm not going away - the succession council is nearly over, you've got most of a cycle to rest and recover right now -"

Astris is still sloughing off the clouding drag of sleep, only half-listening, blinking as if trying to clear a film away, and you can almost see his cognition battering itself against the drugs' barriers, nearly as visible as the remnant wisps of his psionics rippling suppressant-trapped like reflected water under his skin. "...S – s'press'nts –" he manages, missing the sounds that take the most breath, and he must have heard you when you said it, even still mostly dreaming, that means he heard you – "You said – Sollux –" question-inflected and shaking his head thick-tongued fangs-bared frustrated, shoulders already quivering just with the effort of speaking.

And you're glad you're still up against a chair, just in case the romcom trope of fainting from sheer pity is something that can actually happen to a person, as you lean in, trying to keep your face just at the distance where it's easiest for him to see you - "Yeah, Astris, you're on a lot of drugs at the moment - I could name them all if you want - you need all of your energy right now to recover."

You stroke his face as the soft buoy of levitation cradles his head, the backs of your fingers dragging sopor-sticky against his cheek. "And because it could get dangerous if you woke up too confused. Won't always be this way, love -"
"Better not be – or –" And he mutters something about his claws and what you're fairly certain is supposed to be the name of a body part, either in an old dialect or else just slurred past recognition, but you're still almost sure you hear familiar sarcasm through the confused unfocused anger, and the recognition warms you.

He twists again in the hold of your power, testing its support, as if to break free – old diffuse caged-in stifled anger chasing confused struggles for memory across his face evident even through bandages, even through the opacity of his thoughts to you without the outreaching of psionics that laid them out for you to read – "Have I –" He's having trouble spitting this out, beyond forming the concept and physically moving through the words, and you leave him time; understand when he finishes – "Been... confused, have I tried to –" To hurt you, you know he's trying to say, flinching against even the concept, tensing all over under the sopor.

You breathe out softly, quick to reassure, "No, not like that, as long as you know I'm here you haven't tried to lash out, don't worry, at this point I could probably handle you even if you weren't on the drugs and even if you didn't even recognize me - it's just - wouldn't want to disintegrate some poor medicinian who startled you -" and you laugh tenuously, spreading your palm out across his sternum underneath the thin enveloping layer of slime, warm and soothing.

"Mmn, you could," Astris murmurs, satisfied, as if he'd forgotten how powerful you'd become until you reminded him. Struggles into something like a smile, but there's still that note of banked panic beneath his calm, of painted-over light. The muscles in his face cooperate only slowly and his eyes keep trying to droop closed and for a moment they succeed; balk back open in an urgent fluttering and half-spark again as he clings to being awake and with you. "Keep dreaming I'm back there – keep dreaming – they know you're coming for me – they've cut my power off – and they're – they're about to –" Still focused on you, face pressed close into your palm, and you don't realize until he reaches a question he can't ask that looking at you also means not looking down – "My hands," he says, close to whispering, "I'm numb all over, but – my hands –" Of course – local anesthetic. He can't feel them.

And your heart twists in your ribcage and you're quick to answer, still stroking his face, anchoring, trying to keep him present against the terrors and doubts - "Oh, love, they're there, all right, you're doing fine, you're in between reconstructive surgeries," you hadn't wanted the downer of reminding him, didn't want to bring to mind the tenuousness of his will to live, didn't want to risk why are we bothering with this charade or halfhearted pleas for you to turn away, but - "They'll be doing more work on your hands in -" both of your hands are on him and so are your eyes, you can't check your phone, you're cast adrift in your time-sense - "a number of hours, enough for you to rest. When exactly... is contingent on whether you want to witness some ceremonies in the meantime -"

"Ceremonies," he repeats, slurring away most of it, like it takes the repetition to get the concept fully through to his blurred-over thinkpan. But once he does he still understands more than you said out loud. "Depending on – how much of this you can get out of my system by then – they may regret –" He's stopped by a string of wet muffled coughs that seems to end only when his body is too weak to sustain the movement – and thinking that, it ends distressingly quickly. "- Inviting me." His smile is watery, his eyes glazed over yellow after the coughing fit, his voice raspier, but still he rolls his shoulders a little and manages, "It's your victory. You want me there – you know I'm not – a civilized, sane thing." Bitter and a little vicious and somehow a warning, but still he sounds somehow more like himself saying it.

And you can't help but smile hearing that. "It's my first priority to keep you safe - in more than one sense of the word - but it'll take a single text message to make sure what's left of her will be doused in extremely strong accelerant... and at that rate it shouldn't be hard for you to do the honors."
You're uncomfortably aware that you can only know the tiniest fraction of what there is to be angry about, but that fraction is more than enough. The Condescend hurt your matesprit and you've been too exhausted, too busy first engineering the coup and Astris' rescue and then caring for him, to feel the clean vindictive satisfaction a troll is supposed to feel about disposing of a threat to their matesprit's well-being, and it's - so genuinely ordinary that it's almost bizarre.

"That right is yours more than it's any one of ours." You know your eyes are overly bright and your voice rough with sudden vehemence, your mind filled with the last, worst moments of the Battleship Condescension's final flight, and the knowledge that everything you achieved was his, and won by pain.

He turns his head slowly, all strain against lassitude and wincing slowness, and presses his lips to your hand, dry and unmoving, eyes locked to yours the whole time, a heavy silence settling over both of you. (Shared memory and the quiet of the present strange set against old chaos and fear, as much seeking as offering comfort –) "Then I'll take it," his voice a scoured-down growl that comes from that remembered place, and he relaxes his head and neck back into the hold of your power and for the first time looks away from you, up to the ceiling half-unseeing. He doesn't thank you, just adds, as if from far away, "In the dreams. Sooner than let you have me, they would –" Even exhausted to the point of burnt-down unfiltered he hesitates, fangs resting against his lower lip, harsh-breathing – "It won't be clean, or quick, but – it's an end. But... I always know you're coming – and I always – I want you to reach me first. I want you to stop them." The closest to thanks he can offer.

The closest he can say to what he can't yet, and you bend down closer and kiss him softly on the mouth, keeping your hand there too, every point of contact you can, not really noticing that you're tearing up until leaning forward makes you have to gasp suddenly and swallow against the sting in your throat. You want to say so many things about keeping him with you, about the future; things that he's not ready to hear, that if he pushed them away would turn you to a sobbing wreck. So you settle for, "Thank you," for saying what he can say, thick-throated and barely voiced above a whisper, and, "I'm always yours."

He makes a soft sound when your lips lift from his, something close to content, and his smile is a simple, fleeting thing, belonging to this moment and meaning nothing beyond it as his eyes sink closed, dreamy and fading, speaking soft and softer until he's only mouthing words, "You're here with me, it's really you... really... here..." Forms love and only and here again and garbled scraps of old language and starts awake only mid-word, only when his tongue touches fangs to lisp what might have been your name and pricks a tiny bead of gold and he gasps, yanked from near-sleep, staring at you like a beacon, as if his eyes could cling to you all on their own, without holding light to issue from them. "Keep me –" Startling-clear before his speech dissolves again, old words or gibberish ones – finally – "Wait – keep me awake, I don't want to go back yet –" Climbing back in slow neuron-by-neuron motion to his lucidity of only a moment ago – "Want to stay – with you for a while – please?"

"As long as you want," you say, and in moments like this where you can't quite find words you can anchor him with your hands, tracing your thumb over his cheek and up along his horns, saying his name again and again.

~~~

==> Astris: see this through.

It takes hours to get your body cleaned up and dried off and dressed - actually dressed for a function, simple loose black robes embroidered with your sign - and it would be just another sequence of
events that happen to you, witnessed from the outside, blurred with the edges of drugged sleep. Except Sollux is with you the whole time, and everything he does, he asks first, or at least warns you - and getting into clothes, even with his help, is the first time you've moved some of those muscles beyond strained twitches in centuries - and you can't, won't just let it drift through, you are here even if your eyes wobble tired from following too much movement, even if your hands are locked into ungainly heavy dressings filled with medical sopor (the blueblood came to help with that part; it was too specialized for Sollux to do himself, but you got to see - stitches and wire and translucent temporary skin but more intact than you ever would have)

And every time you see yourself, every time a hand touches your skin you stumble across inflamed and open places, wounds that you wouldn't have thought of that way for uncountable sweeps, wouldn't have thought of at all, as much as you could help it, until inevitably she forced you - and you flinch from seeing or feeling but Sollux doesn't recoil, and in the steadiness of his hands you can let your eyes blur out of focus and let the canvas of your body be shapeless and unfamiliar and neutral.

Every time your mind drifts you find yourself reaching for your psionics, sifting through vivid daymares of failed system checks and disorientation and still you know they're right to have you medicated - you could half-wake and lash out and you know you are nothing like safe, that hundreds of sweeps distilled you into the most vicious and destructive parts of yourself, a mockery of a troll, even more awake than you've been yet before you still don't trust yourself - but you trust him to protect the world from you, at least right now. The reservoir of energy is a little less empty every time you try to tap it, and you keep trying, instinctive and obsessive, worrying at it as if for comfort. Sollux keeps telling you that you won't need it for very much, beyond shaping and forming a spark, and the concept is so foreign to you it almost doesn't register.

He carries you and you drift, lapped around and laced with his power, staring up into the abyss – a thought flickers through your formless dozing once, that his arms must surround you, that you wish – a greenish smudge in dark returns your gaze; you have eyes, but they are better for feeling the movement of air stinging at wetness than for seeing – he carries you and for a while a wisp of some sense opens to you and you feel that you are rising, rocking – but by the time you land your eyes are dry again and you've forgotten again how to feel the slowing, the pull of the planet, the stop.

"It's going to be easy," he says, and gives your arm a light squeeze. "We'll tell you when to do your thing. Don't worry about it." Are you worried about it? You're fretting over something, but you don't know what; the component parts of your emotions are opaque to you, hiding somewhere under a remnant fog of drugs, under fragments and echoes of pain and missing data-feeds and maybe that itself is what's disturbing you -

And you lose some time despite your best efforts; you remember the four-wheel device you're reclining in when you surface, and the blueblood - same as the one who's been acting as medic - is giving some overly stuffy speech about Empire and honor and tradition when you surface -

Surface in the open, on a high dais in the moonlight, where the crowd surrounds from all sides but blessedly at a distance - but Sollux is next to you, and the blueblood moves aside and you see -

You see, and the world goes starkly into focus.

At first the scene seems deconstructed, a surreal piecing-out of memory and fear and imagination. The Heiress is so small, her horns barely longer than your own, and yet she is standing.

Standing over - her, you would know those horns in the fractional shadow of their silhouette with your eyes half-closed, you know - the head now shorn, the body stripped of its garments - laid out on the ground, at the center, on ancient stone whose cracks and fissures you can feel yourself etching
into memory, you have seen her nearly every night of your life but never - naked gray skin bruised and sliced, the weak ooze of fuchsia blood, the unmoving ribcage.

In your mind the air tastes thick and foul with blood, rancid salt, chill and stagnation (You have lain antiseptic and half-comatose for nights, whirr of scrubbed air, sopor astringent-clean and smelling of the yawning edge of sleep and only dreams have come through so vivid –) in your mind the cold is sinking and abyssal and leaks out from the thing broken on the slab rolling across stone to drench you –

In your mind laughter echoes, slicing and malicious and empty as a hole in the world, those voids that pulverize light and swallow stone –

But the smell of fresh blood cuts through vivid and impossible, not your blood, hers, hers - welling up viscous-slow from the crack that opens up under the Heiress' claw.

And you have had your fill of fear, you are passed through fear and emerged from it and you don't need to clear the illusions from your sight, don't have to claw away the warplings and leachings-through of memory from the real, because you are the blazing descent of this sickening ruin to the ground that drinks its blood, you are the gnarled war-shredded wreck of one monster that defeated another, and there will be a choice, there will be the splitting and you will reimmerse yourself into the confines of terror to fight through it like a pursued beast through a swamp or choose to be cut free of it – but not yet, now you will watch the claws and fangs of the Heiress complete the destruction of your tormentor, the remnants of your power pulsing thinly triumphal through you, and know that you are not the cliff-face in the dark but you are the wave that drove the ship against it, you are still Death, even weakly haloed in dilute gloaming light –

The living Empress cuts through skin and cracks bone, bare-handed, some distant-aeon whisper of memory says that this is part of the rite - digs into the chest with razor claws and scoops her prize free, gelid-wiggling, slow and dreamlike - and Sollux standing next to you is braced careful, attuned to her every movement, you remember moirail and knowledge swallowed down and hidden from yourself -

Simple, methodical, her hands, and she lifts the heart to her lips and tears with her teeth, chews and swallows piece by piece - face stained with tyrian purple that gleams in the moonlight, and you cannot see either relish or distaste in her - only that it quivers and ceases to move in her hands, almost at once, and the blood runs down her chin - near-silent, but the crowd almost invisible to you begins to make a noise, whispers that run gradually to a massive roar -

Until there is nothing left of what was her bloodpusher, and the new Empress licks fragments and congealed blood from her fingers, and a silent gesture with her arm brings a troll closer carrying a can. She takes it up in her own hand and pours the contents over the empty carcass on the ground, wafting off vapors so pungent your eyes sting, and when she is done she turns to you directly.

"From here it is yours by right," she says, and her voice rings out small and sure and clear and utterly solemn, and she licks her lips. Then she takes a step back, and another.

You are aware, in some miniscule itching way in the very back of your thinkpan, that all Alternia – no, all the colonized universe, eyes in every disc and spiral of galaxies where you brought death and empire – watches you now; but you can hardly see beyond this circle of stone, beyond the swimming grayness of your periphery, it doesn't matter. In some way, in every way that you can reach, you are alone with this task and this corpse and history and anger and –

And you try to call three spectres into the circle of your mind, to see the faces of your friends and form the thought, in vengeance also for you – some moment on the First Ship and the taste of free air
and their smiles; or even the unworldly red of eyes that saw into some other, kinder, place, at least, just the color to carry with you.

But you can barely even feel the shifting-humming presence of Sollux behind you, hardly bear the weight of your own intent, and the images escape you; you face the powerless husk with its gaping splintered ribs and its nest of purple-black congealed – wires – remnants of arteries and its shrieking silent laughter and you will destroy every molecule left that encodes the identity of the one who did this to you, you will unwrite her name from the vast eternal memory of the universe word by word if you have to, you latch onto the source of your light and you could reduce her to ashes yourself without the flame, claw out every drop of light left in you and burn yourself to cinders in this and destroy –

You make the spark, a thin snip of power, and the pyre roars as it ignites.
for now as you awaken you're underneath new skin

Chapter Summary

Astris deals with being alive but not well; Sollux deals with Karkat; Karkat deals with grief.

Chapter Notes

Content notes: illness, hospital stuff, altered mental states, grief, hope, indirectly referenced suicidality.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Every time he comes out of surgery is the same ordeal, and it’s an ordeal you’ve almost gotten used to.

On those rare occasions when you have time to just think, you’ve been thinking of how incredibly possible it is to get used to just about anything. It’s a thought that used to be a dark one and is now apprehensively hopeful. But each time he snaps to alertness you imagine in the recesses of your mind that he’ll meet your eyes lucid-cold and say No more. I’m sorry.

And each time he’s awoken you’ve pushed the thought further away because you know, now, the way his gaze goes soft and shining when he manages to pull you into focus, when he hears your voice - even when he’s thinking clearly, even when he's totally awake, you see in him that he can’t and won’t make you do that, and sometimes it’s more and sometimes it’s not but it’s always there, like it’s there now -

And this is, or should be, the last iteration of that ordeal, and you’re smiling by the time he blinks once, twice, leaning over him, not letting him have to look for your face - “Hi,” you’re saying, “hey, Astris - how’s my matesprit - god I love saying that -”

He just looks at you for a while, still-drugged shaky smiling and his eyes filling at the waterline when you speak but still crinkled up at the corners – parts his lips for a parched hitching breath and says, wobbly and whisper-soft, "I've been better – but I'll get through –" and a tear breaks free of the sheen over his eyes and falls. You know now that it's just that he never expects to see you, he's always awaking from some dream of captivity and between the recognition and the rebuilding of memory and the lingering anesthesia you've learned not to panic when it overwhelms him. "You're lovely – when you're happy," he murmurs, choked-off hoarse, and the tears follow each other's paths down into the sopor – "Even if that's... against our nature," trying to grin through the crying –

- and you kiss the tears from his face, just feel the warmth of him with your lips for a moment, and the bandages on his hands now are thin and flexible enough that you can press your hand to his through a thin layer of sopor and you do. “KK says I’m the,” you mimic Karkat’s ranting a little, “most goddamned impossible troll he’s ever had the freakish misfortune of meeting’ - I try to live up to the title -"
He chuckles genuinely joyful but low and strangely careful, a harsh-edged rumbling that breaks up into "KK – hasn't met me yet –" and then into the beginnings of full-throated laughter – hesitates, a clicking back of breath –

And disintegrates, a short barking exhale and a long wet indrawing of breath and his coughing is back, quick spasmodic sounds like blows, he presses his eyes shut against it and remnant tears squeeze out –

The medicinicians had said, before Astris woke, that his lungs were retaining a little bit of fluid but they didn't see signs of infection; that he wasn't used to breathing for himself consistently and it would take a while for the muscles to strengthen - and now he's come through the last surgery, woken lucid and smiling and from here it's just a matter of time until he's going to be able to move around and breathe freely, and you lay your hand against his chest trying to soothe and comfort. "You're going to be all right, that was the last time, you won't have to go under again - Should I get someone?" you ask when it goes on longer than expected - though maybe that means he's getting stronger -

He closes in when you ask about bringing someone, shaking his head and wrestling his breathing harder under control, the clenchings of his chest gradually diminishing, sweat beading around his hairline and under his braced-shut effort-lined jaw. Opens his eyes like the lids are held down by fingers, unfocused but lit up – tries to speak, makes a sound like his tongue is stuck against the roof of his mouth – Even his ears seem to lower, he's been through so much to get here, to where it's up to his body to ravel in the repaired pieces (and to him, to resolve – but you aren't even thinking of that, not when he's awake to see it in you –) His voice is faint, dusty-quiet pleading, "Don't – just you – for a while –"

"Okay," you say, "all right, just me." He's been prodded and watched enough tonight, anyway, before they brought him back here, and it's almost morning. You lean in and press your forehead against his, shutting your eyes for a moment, murmuring, "You've been - you're being so good, bearing up so well for me -"

He tilts his head to rub his face against yours, rough scabs and the raised beginnings of scarring dragging at your skin. "But I'm still there more often than I'm with you – in my head –" He says it somehow like he thinks it's a betrayal, low-pitched and pained and his expression hidden behind closeness. "I try to remember – when they put me under – but it just gets worse – seems more real every time –"

And now you know why, you hear it, though you can't hear his mind and his voice is still flattened and damped and weak with coughing, still you hear the distant nebulous edges of what too much might be, even as he nuzzles up at you and purrs in the warmth of the present – the cycle of terror and relief, forced unconsciousness and dreams of the dying ship and then awakening to you and then under again, like being held down in water and breathing only in the troughs between waves, the exhaustion –

And you want to cry for him but you're scared to put even that strain on him, scared it'll push him over some breaking point or - back from the verge of accepting his nascent desire to live. "This was the last time," you remind him instead, in a tight voice, "you still need to rest but - you're healing now, love, they're done putting you back together, you're going to be here with me more and more -"

"Even when I couldn't see you, or speak," he whispers, "I knew when I was awake, because – my thinkpan doesn't have the pieces to imagine what you're doing for me – to dream of being pitied so beautifully. You are too perfect for... anything my mind could make – so even when you came to me sweeps ago, I knew you were real –" And he strains up to you like a branch growing into daylight,
all pain-hollowed cheeks and sparse tear-wet lashes and and eyes like embers, barely lit from within.
"I can't even think of what it would be like," he admits, raspy and sad and – "To be here – I try and
–" And strangely commonplace embarrassment, and you remember the way his sense of daily life is
an immense blank broken only by filings and fragments, draughts of experience passed from your
memory into his, cherished but desperately incomplete.

And this time his eyes close into soft arcs, light and slow, and so many times you've seen the lids
dragged down bruise-gold and weighted with soporifics and giving in, so many times you've waited
for sleep to finally bring him what it brought you all these sweeps, escape and skilled healing, the
warmth of the familiar, the glow of a hearth beyond place – still a wait beyond measuring, but you
leave your cheek pressed to his as long as you can bear, as long as you can go without being drawn
down face-first into the drowsy hiss and flow of sopor yourself, and then your hand –

His eyelids twitch and flutter in his sleep, his breath fast and raspy-shallow as his chest rises and falls
in little ripples under the sopor. You can tell he’s dreaming, and his dreams are never good - at best
he wakes and tells you of code and tedium and the slow slide past of stars - but you can’t wake him
now, his body needs sleep to knit itself together, so you just rest your elbows on the edge of the tub
and watch.

There’s color under his skin now, gold through gray, no longer bleached-cold pallor, and you hope
that's the effect of nourishment and rest, though he shivers as he dreams - you’ll let him rest, then
you’ll have the heat adjusted in the medical ’coon - soon you’ll bring him home, you’ll be able to
warm him -

==>

You open your eyes into the purply rippling light of the helmsblock and at first can't tell what called
you down into your body. Saltwater flows in its slow swirl around your feet, drips from wires in
sharp plopping sounds that you hear with your ears, not forcibly rerouted through microphones, the
air is cold but you aren't being made to –

And then you feel it, the chill of air down your raw throat, the way your breathing has gone shallow
because it aches in your lungs when you take it in too deep. The way you're going dizzy with trying
not to, and you brace your extended arms and the muscles left in your shoulders as your lungs slam
open with a strange wet noise –

This isn't a familiar pain, nothing you've learned to tolerate by rote, to meditate away, a piercing up
from underneath your chest, like your lungs are webbed together and would tear expanding, a
squelching organic noisy breath that doesn't help at all to clear your head, you're sluggish and stuck
in your own thoughts, like the gunk holding your chest tight has gotten into your thinkpan, you can't
keep all your systems up like this, you're running calculations on the composition of your blood and
they're coming up depleted – another rattling achy breath that disintegrates into sharp stabbing
coughs and you've been sabotaged, the air is wrong or your lungs are –

System.engage:auxilliaryoxygenation.authenticating.....

You exhale to clear your airway and don't breathe in again. This doesn't feel like the ship being
punctured and losing air, like breathing vacuum. The problem is in the body, but still the protocols in
place to keep the Helmsman operational in airlessness should keep you going until – you wait for the
trickle of chemicals from the shunts into your blood, as vertigo swirls around you –

authenticating.....
A shout, disjoint from context, from helmsblock and unanswering systems and the encroaching blackness - a shout, disconnected, cuts through everything because it is it is Sollux shouting your name and it drags you up murky because he has to reach you, promises to yourself and danger and - still shouting - more words that aren't your name - wake up and breathe and the thin high note of panic in his voice –

You waver, stretched thin between the helmsblock and – and elsewhere, there's a familiarity you're just beginning to discover here, in standing dizzy with a foot in each place, in releasing your hold on yourself there in the ship and making the step into the dark where your love's voice is. In this in-between you don't remember where it is you go when you surface but that it's good, it's safe –

You open your eyes to sting and blur and you know when he says breathe that you aren't, you haven't been, you're vague and weak all over with it, lungs burning, but you don't know why.

He says breathe and your body says breathe and you gulp air like summiting a mountain and nearly scream. Your lungs rattle like bags of stones pummeled and bruised and your throat grows teeth and tears at itself and the coughing would double you up but that your stomach muscles aren't strong enough to lift you, just weak useless aching spasms as you hack and half-retch and your vision purples over at the edges, shimmers at the center, your thinkpan going dim and brackish and beneath you to fall into is the helmsblock again –

===> Sollux: panic and freak out.

When Astris coughs and gasps and then stops breathing and doesn't start again for far too long you have just the presence of mind to hit the call button while you're still shouting, and the footsteps are too distant and they're closer but not close enough and you reach him and his eyes snap open and he shakes with weak helpless paroxysms, and this is a moment where you feel the redundancy, the duality of your existence very keenly because half of you is trying to curl into a terrified ball on the floor while the other half calmly lever him up, hands and the soft hazy press of telekinetic force, and you know they've just reinforced the makeshift patching of - how many nights ago? - and more permanently sealed up the open places in his central nervous system, and you're trying not to jostle those wounds as you reposition him so he can clear his lungs and get air - as he twists and shudders in your arms with the struggling of his lungs, with the short jerking starts of fighting off unconsciousness, wheezes like breathing through a mouthful of cloth over dampened panicky whining –

The medics are arriving, a pair you've seen once or twice before whose names you don't quite recall, you're telling them "He stopped breathing, he just fucking stopped -" It's definitely the half of you shivering in the corner that's talking right now, the other half is busy keeping Astris supported to near-sitting and listening to him, appalled by the loud effortful sound of his breath and frame-by-frame vigilant against the fear of its silence - and the oliveblood starts setting up equipment by the soper tank while the taller tealblood widens her eyes and turns around and goes briskly back down the corridor. Jarnra, that's his name, leans in to prod with some kind of sensor. The moment the sensor touches his skin Astris starts to struggle in earnest. You'd hoped to be able to taper his suppressants soon but now you're glad for them; he sparks impotently and snaps his fangs between gurgling coughs, a sheen of light spreading over the surface of the soper then dissipating like a popped bubble. He's forgotten where he is, to lash out like this, or reached the point in panic where he doesn't care, and Jarnra narrowly avoids a shoulder as Astris tries to throw himself sideways against the hold of your power. Beyond even recognizing the signature of your psionics – he's worse than you feared, must have been getting worse, you must have missed – but you lose hold of your self-blame as coughing echoes liquid and cavernous through the room again and he spits
gunk over the edge of the recuperacoon, frantically gasping.

You shout his name and catch him up in coils of light, to restrain as much as to support, trying to keep him from tearing at new stitches in his confusion - his breathing sounds a little better, you think, or would if he'd calm down -

"Astris," again, "shhh, I'm here, you're here with me," and you wrap a hand around one of his sopor-damp horns and lean in to the point where your face brushes his, hoping the suddenness won't backfire or overwhelm, surrounding him with every cue you know to give him of your presence; you know you're no substitute for a real moirail but he responds to you, instinctive, every time he knows you're there.

His whole body shivers, hardly more substantial than a pennant in a breeze, his legs kicking out as a disoriented seeking whine makes it through his coughing. He's breaking free from sleep more slowly than you've seen in nights, but still he's more careful with his breathing when you speak, as if trying to damp down the wracking repeated coughing just to stop the awful sticking and tearing noises and hear where your voice comes from, working to fit his tongue around your name but barely getting halfway before another weak thick ragged noise replaces it. At least your touch seems to suspend him from movement after a while; he stops trying to climb out of the tub and collapses toward you instead, all tense locked-in joints and gulping like trying to breathe sopor.

You keep saying his name, softer now, leaning over so he can rest his face against your shoulder without straining against gravity or your field. In the background you hear the teal coming back down the corridor with a cart of equipment - slowing when she reaches the doorway and sees the immediate crisis resolved - Jarnra managed to get a sensor adhered to Astris' skin somewhere in all of that and you see him trying to read it over your shoulder but you don't care, it's more important right now to keep him responding.

He adjusts himself with a ponderous effort so that his cheek nestles up to your shoulder but his airway is still free – though tiny and instinctive still a gesture of self-preservation, resting, saving his strength and just letting himself breathe, mouth dropped open and eyes closed. "Feels like – something heavy – sitting on my chest," he mutters, at first as much trying to make sense of the sensation to himself as to communicate about it. "This isn't – Sollux – what's happening to me?"

"I'm - not sure," you have to tell him, and you think he might know some of this but the drugs sometimes mix up his memory - "Earlier they said you'd aspirated some fluid but that it wasn't - that you were getting it out on your own but now - you were sleeping and you gasped and started coughing and then you stopped breathing and - I'm scared," you admit, not worth trying to keep the words back when your voice is wavering and nearly shrill with fear.

"I stopped...? Oh," he says softly, attuned to you enough even half-conscious to recognize both sides of your fear. "Thought I was – in the ship, I thought – I was trying –" He keeps trying to mouth words but for a moment no sound comes out; makes a strained gluey noise at the base of his throat and keeps going – "To engage – backup systems – I wasn't –"

He can't even name your fear, say trying to die, just rolls his face up against your shoulder to look at you, all narrowed, concerted focus, as if oblivious of the medics. "I'm not letting – my own damn lungs – take me from you," he's scrunching his face up pained but also as if the absurdity of being laid so low by something so commonplace as a cough offends him, more fire in him than you've seen, than he's let you see when he's been more together than this, and for a giddy moment you let yourself wonder if he's been holding back as much as you have, careful of your hopes, if his will to live is more even than he's let you see. "Not this – I'm holding out for you – Get me through –" It's as much an order as anything but even saying it seems to tire him, and his eyes dip closed.
"I will," you promise, "I will, I swear -" It's like rain on withered roots, you couldn't even acknowledge to yourself how much you needed to hear those words until they reached you, so desperate you stopped feeling the crisis, and now you can't shut down the crying, cringing that you're embarrassing yourself in front of the medics (why do you care, Karkat has said more than once, they already know you're completely deranged) and trying to stay silent and steady for Astris as they work.

===> Astris: observe.

You're watching what your visual sensors suggest with [redacted] probability is a conspiratorial conversation. Whispers somewhere in the medical wing, a pair of trolls in postures that set off an automated caution, and you focus in on their hunched shoulders and worried glances at the medicated sopor pod but sound doesn't come through – you aren't switching on your microphones in that sector, and you're processing why only slowly, working upstream through nights of computation backlog, diagnostic reports trickling in of your listening hardware reasonably intact but you still don't hear – as if you don't have to –

- 

You dream of your beloved and your old friend huddled over a medical pod somewhere in the labyrinth of your sick bay, whispering to each other. Sollux rests his spindly hand on the Signless' shoulder, even more gaunt than usual, his claw beds pale with exhaustion, and in the dream you wonder if he is sick – if you're dreaming of your feverish matesprit dragging himself out of medicated sopor to consult with ghosts – of Sollux folded in a gangly-limbed consoling posture that looks awkward from the outside but that you know works, as much as anything ever could – the Signless looks smaller than you remember by comparison, compact and huddled up to his eartips in an oversized sweater – you can't see either of their faces from this angle or through the fog of your own protective programming, but you watch for a while without opening your eyes, waiting for a bubble of panic to rise through medication and exhaustion and wake you –

- 

===> Sollux: comfort.

The trouble is that you've been awake for - you're not sure how long; Astris has slept for a while with a mask over his face and then for another while without, his breathing easier but his fever still spiking in waves, the medics said something about his immune system recovering a little too sharply.

The other trouble is that you don't know what to say, or you keep thinking you do but it keeps failing - it would, you think vaguely, help more if you could just snipe at Karkat about trivialities like you usually do, but earlier you tried that and got it wrong, too exhausted to be clever, and he took it too personally.

In a kismesissitude of a more epic bent, or on a less solemn occasion, that would be an invitation to trounce the sadness out of him, but you and KK are too soft for that. And too tired. He glares at you puffy-eyed.

"I just wanted us to all get to live." You only realize you're speaking out loud when you hear your own voice. "I guess I fucked up at that -" And your voice breaks, because you still don't even know if all of your quadrants will, and the half of you that believes it feels guiltily triumphant and also even worse for KK, and the half of you that isn't so sure is frantic, interrupting the conversation to repeatedly pace in circles so that you keep having to direct yourself back to being still and present for
"Yeah, and it says a lot that out of all of us, you're the only one who thought that was possible enough to be worth wanting – a lot about how fucking extreme your situation was – is – I guess. Fuck."

"...to be clear, I'm also legitimately crazy," you remind him.

Astris moves his mouth soundlessly in his sleep, newly repaired fangs jutting over sunken-narrow pale lips, and you and Karkat both peer over your shoulder for a moment, but the stirring subsides.

"I know this isn't like the game," Karkat says, "there is no spooky planet out there taking our secret beliefs into account to shape reality anymore, but I keep thinking that if I'd been less fatalistic then I might have been more careful –" He's turned his glare from you down to his hands clenched onto his knees until the sickle-scars stand out ghastly white across his knuckles.

"Are you kidding, you're the one who thought of setting things up so we could have the ship surrounded before it landed, and that saved Feferi's ass, for starters - and someone who could get a squadron to follow them was going to have to take point on the side with the shock troops pouring out -" You remember watching the recordings, after, one headphone in your ear, one eye on Astris, in the nights he was mostly comatose - the screen flickering with the spatter of violet and blue and green, GZ at the front of his tiny uproarious army, ecstatic with battle-trance, his fangs flashing bright and beatific as the Imperial shock troops fall and fall and fall, his armor slick with his own blood - "And I don't think any of the other contenders such as yourself would have survived either - or died that happy," and as you say it you realize it comes off excessively callous, want to apologize, can't think of the words, and just finish your sentence, "- shitfuck."

Karkat makes a high, tight-throated noise and pries his hand off his knee to punch your thigh, hard enough to sink a bruise down to the bone, and you deserve it. "If I could get my hands on the sick fucks who made those schoolfeeds about building stable, caste-appropriate moirallegiances for the benefit of the Empire – when it was like this for everyone, for millennia, the Empire sends your moirail off to war and what, you have to hope you're a failure as a conciliator and they die high on battle fury? Maybe if you're really lucky they send you the victorious corpse –" He laughs, shrill and panicked, and Astris' eyes slam open, a terribly, eerily faint two-colored light on your skin where the suppressants dim even their glow, and in a gulp between staccato barking coughs you think you make out stop –

You take a startled step toward the medical recuperacoon, heart pounding, eyes flicking between KK and the monitors. "Astris?" Your voice sounds almost as croaky as his.

You don't think he hears you; the coughing is a deafening hollow bark that rattles his fangs and bounces his chin off his bandaged chest – "Haven't you –" You read his lips and the disoriented far-away unfocus in his eyes as much as you make out anything audible other than horrible coughing but words resolve into Haven't you hurt him enough?

"I'm - I'm sorry," you murmur to both of them, confused, something about the way he says it not quite connecting, "I didn't mean - just that it was better than -" the way I was used against Aradia, you don't quite manage not to think, and you reach for the cloth to dab sweat off Astris' forehead.

Karkat is staring warily at Astris, drifting closer; he at least hasn't shaken off your other hand from his arm, though he's prickly with suspicion, breathing hard. You forget sometimes the way the numinous makes him uneasy; you forget sometimes, anymore, what is numinous. "For what it's worth I'm aware that if I wanted half decent words of comfort it was probably a moronic idea to go to my kismesis -" KK says it in a way that's miserable, rueful, turned more toward Astris than toward
you, and at least Astris doesn't seem to be suffering the alarm often set off by visitors who aren't you, in his state.

And you're not sure if Karkat sees it himself or is just being self-deprecating but you think just now that he's right, that something in him just wants to stay angry, that he came to you, consciously or otherwise, because you make him angry.

Astris wheezes and grimaces and his eyes dim even further with tears and you're familiar enough with his illness by now that you recognize the exhausted lull between bouts of coughing and don't get your hopes up when his breathing quiets and steadies — still, he takes in you and Karkat and the medicated slime and the bank of screens and lights on the far wall as if his focus is closing in slowly, from stars and centuries ago to this planet to this room and you wait for that soft chirping sigh of relief and recognition but he just mumbles, "Wait, you – did I make you say that – tell your kismesis I'm sorry –"

"What - you -" It takes you long moments to comb through what he means; that in a way, to Astris, the time he woke in Karkat's recuperacoon and spoke with your mouth was heartbeats ago. "He's here," you say meaningfully.

"What in the actual fuck is going on, I'm clearly insufficiently fluent in freaky numinous gemini dialect to translate you two vaguing at each other -" At least KK has gone from gloomy to just plain poleaxed at this point, standing with his hands on his hips and blinking.

And Astris' eyes seem to track you, finally, there's the soft intake of breath that might be the start of that quiet trusting sound, but also the drawn-in tension in his shoulders and the corners of his mouth that show he's finally recognized Karkat as someone else, other than you and here in the room, somewhere between the dizzying openness you've come to know when you're alone and the fang-bared panic that confronts the medics — "Oh – oh, I heard –" He coughs again, short and dry but ominous, and some words are lost in the voiceless aftermath of it and your habitual reaching for meaning in the broken bridge between your minds, between shapes of his mouth that look like dream and the dead — "What was his name?" he croaks, slow and formal and still looking at you, but something in the spaces between the words tells you he's addressing Karkat –

And somehow for all his general obliviousness Karkat sees this and leans closer, his eyes wide for all their puffiness, red irises in yellow sclera.

He answers soft and sonorous as if he's chanting the name for the Mother Grub, as if he's apologizing to his moirail across worlds - "Gamzee Makara."

Astris' chest rises creakily and shudders there, and the willpower he's throwing into this moment of silent acknowledgement seems to carve his scars deeper into his face as he struggles against his lungs, and then — "He is owed a title – by ancient custom – if you think he would want –" A rusty scraping gasp and he loses hold on his breathing again and coughs and coughs, until his cheeks pale almost to white striped with gold-tinged streams of tears, and by the time his breathing softens his eyes are focused out beyond the medical bay walls again and wandering, his voice whisper-quiet without any force behind it, as if he doesn't realize he's speaking aloud — "Titles and voices... I hold them in databanks... not all lost..."

Karkat's eyes spill over with tears, too, and he makes a noise in his throat like a swallowed sob. He lets his breath out long and shaky and something else begins to leave with it too, the tension in his posture that you couldn't begin to crack. "I... I should speak with Tavros. And the survivors of Gamzee's sect..." he says in a bare thin murmur, almost to himself.

You think about Aradia and how - she didn't die accomplishing something, but she died and also
accomplished something, if not in the usual order, and... you don't know that it would matter to her one way or another, now. But remembering that she deserves one by every standard now is still a tiny poignant satisfaction.

"Yeah," you say to KK, and squeeze his arm, "yeah, I think... that's good."

You stroke gently at Astris' face with your other hand, wiping at tears with the backs of your fingers, and check the monitors again - his oxygen saturation isn't fantastic but it's not bad enough to insist on strapping a mask on him; nothing outright in the danger zone, though his skin is too hot to the touch and you can see his pulse fluttering rapid in his neck with the exertion of the coughing fit.

"...you wouldn't have wanted it," Astris mumbles in Karkat's direction, scratchy-soft as if he's speaking through layers of fabric or far away through a thick fog, and the sorrow lining his face is distant, abstract, a different entity from the consuming anguish that etches him pitifully sharp when he's awake and lucid – "But history has you now, and I'm left to mourn you fragmentary and nameless and at vast risk – and I do, despite everything – I'm not sure you would understand –" Words coming through coherent and vehement for a moment and you're halfway convinced that Astris only stopped coughing because he's lost touch with the present enough to forget his body –

You watch Karkat carefully, worried for a moment that he's going to lose his shit over being conflated with his ancestor; but the look on his face hits you with the weird bright vividity of your sleep deprivation, annoyance melting into startled comprehension, and he just murmurs, "That's a new one, I guess it bugs me less when someone who actually knew him -" and stares at Astris, riveted, his eyes filled with tears, his hand hovering in the air like he wants to reach across that vast distance somehow.

And then he falls on your shoulder so heavily and all-at-once you have to use psionics to prop yourself up, muffling hiccuping sobs into your shirt, his horns pressing into your chest, and you wrap your arm around him and comb your fingers through his hair.

"I never thought I would need to know," Karkat mumbles into the tear-splotched sign on your shirt as soon as the hiccups ease off into just an extra squeak and click in his consonants – "How you've done it all this time," and you can't tell if he means just you or you and Astris in collective. The uncertainty is so ordinary and mundane that it wracks you with an excruciating pang of hope, and then you're leaking tears into your kismesis' hair, for Gamzee, for Aradia, for the dead and for the living - your mind stutters over the word - the living.

Chapter End Notes

At this point in his life, Karkat reminds Astris the most of the Signless as he was when he died. ;_;
if I had words at all they've gone golden

Chapter Summary

"You brought me here to give me more than a choice," and you can't help what creeps into your voice over teary rasping, pity and bitterness – even if what you stand to lose is darkness infested with vacuous horror – even if it is some half-held right to his bereavement – you still cry into his shoulder until your face slips in salt-water and even the best-healed scars sting.

Content notes: wrestling with suicidality, delirium, the thing where Alternia uses romantic relationships in place of mental health care, the thing where accepting hope after trauma is kind of weird and dizzying and suddenly possible and what do you do with all these feelings??

Chapter Notes

They'll turn me in your arms into
An adder and a snake;
But hold me fast, let me not go,
I'll be your worldly mate.

They'll turn me in your arms into
A red-hot brand of iron,
But hold me fast, and fear me not,
And I'll do you no harm.

Last they'll turn me in your arms
Into a naked knight,
Throw your mantle over me
And keep me out of sight.
--The Ballad of Tam Lin (Traditional)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Astris emerges from dream calmer than you've yet seen him, though his cheeks still glow golden with fever and his forehead shines hectic-damp. His eyes know where to look now; his face turns to seek you almost before full waking –

But there's no strange little whine of confusion as dream and reality scrape against each other this time, no cautious unbelieving ascent into relief. He just looks at you like he'll never be surprised by anything ever again and speaks your name, declarative, flat, as if naming a concept to himself.

"You –" When he does address you it's through layers of resigned weariness, but articulated clearly, as if not trying so hard to make himself understood actually helps him speak – "You aren't really here. You're dead." And turns his gaze back to the ceiling, stares at nothing, face as blank and peaceful as a mask but for being brushed all over with lurid color.
"No, I'm here, it's me, Sollux – Astris, I'm here – " You reach out and wipe the sweat from his forehead with the back of your hand, forcing your voice calm, steering clear of monitors and IVs. When his fever started spiking again a little while ago, the medics came in and dosed him with something; thankfully he slept through being tampered with, but it hasn't calmed down his temperature yet and you're starting to be worried. Well. More worried. You're not sure there's a mental state other than worried. One should theoretically exist, but you can't imagine what it could possibly be like.

He shivers as if your hand chills him, as if you really were a ghost. "I could have gone mad long before…” He keeps going as though you'd never spoken, talking to some vague point in the air. "They did their best to keep me sane but couldn't stop me... but why would I, just suffer the same but lose the tools to manage guilt and pain –" His voice goes dry and gravelly as he speaks, and when he stops for breath it whines and scrapes in his throat, even with his mouth wide open – "But this – isn't so bad..." And he sighs and closes his eyes, his cheeks looking even more hollow without the cast of red and blue to obscure their shadows.

He shouldn't be able to just stop breathing like he did after the last surgery but expecting his body to regulate normally has misled you before, and you're on-edge now, watching. "Come on, sit up," you murmur, "Oh, Astris, love, we're going to get you through this -" It's good to be able to say that, to know you've promised him – and you curl an arm around him under the sopor; you're mostly using your psionics, but the patched places have healed enough that you can touch him and it might help – can find a place on his ribcage where it's possible to jar him just enough to get him to cough, the painkillers make it easy for him to forget to -

Astris growls when you move him but doesn't try to resist; a sound that goes to hacking and rasping as he forces speech. "Oh – so the moronic unevolved part of my thinkpan that – thinks it's in a normal body and still – thinks repairing the damage is a good idea – looks like you now." He's still not coughing properly, breathing creaky-shallow between words like there's a burr stuck in his throat; but at least he lets his head loll to the side and looks at you again, a hazy one-dimensional half-sentient expression under the tired exasperation, as if important pieces of him still linger in deep sleep.

"We've called each other a lot of things, but I don't think you've ever called me that before." You're not sure if sarcasm is a good sign, but it makes you feel better, at least, to see his personality so intact. You tap a little harder on his sopor-slick back, still excruciatingly careful. "Come on, get your lungs moving -"

"Well... that was what you always wanted to be for me, wasn't it?" Even the whole words that drop into whisper-register as his vocal folds lock up do nothing to damp the sudden frigid ice-edge in his voice, his eyes locked on you in uncomprehending gleam, until he's barely mouthing, "Brainstem... life support... you died trying to be –" And he cringes and braces against your arm as a shuddering fit of coughing wracks him, not quite as terrifyingly spongy-wet as the sounds he made at what you thought was the low of his illness, but still he should be better than this –

Your eyes sting with tears until you blink them back; it doesn't bother you that he thinks he's hallucinating you but this – he doesn't recognize that you're real, but he recognizes that you betrayed him – and you did –

"I'm alive, Astris, you're going to know that later, I'm alive and you're on Alternia with me and I'm -" The words catch in your throat.

You can't apologize and mean it, and you've had enough of lying by omission to last a lifetime, and even knowing he might not remember this at all you feel terrible saying it but –
"I'm not sorry," you blurt, your voice ringing out louder than you meant. "I'm not sorry you're here – or that I'm trying to wrestle you back to health, if I have to drag you by the horns – I'm sorry I hurt you but – you told me to see you through, and I will, and I'm not ever sorry for that -"

His breathing slows and evens as he listens to you, though if anything his fever is worsening, sweat regathering across his face as quickly as you can wipe it away; and he takes in his surroundings slowly as if constructing them in dream, the sopor bath, the glowing readouts for pulse and respiration, as if they hadn't been there before he looked.

"So this is the form my delusions take," Astris murmurs, and leans into your hold, "This is so real, I – And this doesn't mean you had the right, but –" And he looks at you like he means what he is going to say to hurt, at least in part, to wound some part of him that is you; that look of contradictions and hopes held just out of reach – teeth knocking together with shivering when he speaks – "– But I must have wanted this so much more than I ever let myself know."

"You're so logical when you're delirious," you murmur, and you meant it as a wry private joke for your own benefit, but your voice cracks, because you feel a surge of admiration when you say it – your eyes are flooded with tears, your own logic filed down to nothing by this, as stupidly intense as your wrigglerish crush ever was before you ever imagined he'd deign to kiss you.

He slumps against you then, head into shoulder, and you curl your arm around him and let him lean there, soaking your clothes with sweat and medicinal sopor. You whisper that you love him, as his breathing slows, still labored and whistling a little but better than it was – watch the readouts carefully, poised to call the medics again, but his temperature starts to creep down, a little and then a fraction more, until you're sure whatever they gave him is working.

~~~

Astris wakes up with a groan like he ran a marathon in his sleep, his eyes dropping closed again almost as soon as they swim into focus enough to find you. "...think I'm starting to dream about you," he mumbles, raspy and sleep-thick but his breathing is clear, still shallow but soundless, his mouth lapsing into a puzzled half-smile.

You don't even know what to say to that; the words aren't coming. Holding still to keep from waking him became an effort of will a quarter of an hour in, and you shift to unkink your back; there's dried sopor encrusted on your shirt and your chin, and – you can ask questions later, check how his memory is doing, but right now you're just so glad to see the recognition. "Good evening to you too," you say softly.

He makes a little distracted mrrr sound as your shoulder moves under his cheek, halfway to dozing off again already, but he winces when the shift puts pressure on the bandages at the back of his skull. Drags himself awake enough to resettle, muscles twitching with effort, half resting his head on your shoulder and half leaning it against your chest, peering up at you blinking drawn-in quizzical – "Why are you – did I stop breathing again? I dreamed that – oh. Oh –" As his eyes widen with realization he goes boneless, forgetting to keep himself propped up, his shoulders untensing and his mouth going slack, starting to slide down your chest without his hands to support him.

He's still breathing, though, shallow but even enough after the little hitch of surprise, and you catch him and brace him back to where he was when he was sleeping. "It's okay," you tell him, the first words out of your mouth, "it's okay, I'm here, you're here with me – I'm glad you remember." You kind of want to keep babbling because you feel awkward about what you said earlier, but you're not sure how aware he is right now, don't want to overwhelm him with talking when he can't speak, so you just wind up saying his name and stroking his hair and his horns.
He mouths "I'm sorry" before he manages to speak it, slurred but audible, struggling a little in your hold but just to get his muscles back under control, not trying to lift his head or twist away. "The thing is that I – know I've been worse to you before, consciously in waking life, than I was just now thinking you were in my head, and I'm sorry, I – that made no sense, my thinkpan is –" And you know he's going to try to keep apologizing but he runs out of breath again, panting with effort, sweat breaking on his temples.

Even if the monitors weren't there you could still tell his skin is less alarmingly warm against your hand than it was earlier, as you blot at his forehead, flexing and resettling your shoulder blades, a little, now that you can afford to move, to try to get them to unlock. "I said it's okay, you don't have to be -" You sigh. "I'm – it hurt because you were right, though." You've learned from FF the value of just bending, sometimes, rather than overcomplicating it. "So maybe it took being delirious to deactivate the thinkpan-mouth filter. That doesn't make me any less.... over-invested in your well-being."

"Over-invested is what we do," and he's trying for certainty, even reassurance, but it comes out strained and he coughs a couple of times, dry and barking, eyes watering. "And I've been so grateful for that in you before – You know, I was half asleep, before, I was half wrong. You had no right to – risk me, risk everything – but you also had all the right in the world..." The sheen over his eyes that you had taken for a sign of pain in his inflamed throat wobbles and breaks, and tears fall intersecting through the runing of ochre scars around his eyes where the bandages have now all been lifted. "Our Doom tied together, two facets of one fate..." And you feel keenly the lack of vision into his mind, that he could be lost in dream or more here than you've yet seen him –

But in any case you feel in your hindbrain that Astris understands, that the essence of your choice is plain to him, and – you know a little better why you couldn't apologize earlier; half of you is certain what you did was unforgivable, and the other half knows there's nothing to forgive, and you're so used to trying to present a singular consensus to outsiders, it relaxes some part of you that's always tense.

"You're here with me now," you say, shifting to look him in the eye – he's stronger now sitting with your support than he's been yet, even still fighting illness – and you expect it to come out like a question but it comes out a statement instead.

"I am," he answers anyway, though there's still some teary helplessness in the look he gives you, that there are parts of him still unaccounted for in the choice to be here, but – "You brought me here... you're bringing me..." His arms tense but he still can't reach for you, and with a soft frustrated growl he presses his mouth to your neck instead, just a push of closed lips, and falls silent against your shoulder, careful tentative breathing and trapped psionics moving in a slow contemplative swirl along the surface of his skin.

"It's going to take time," you say softly, and you're not sure what you're saying, exactly, only that you're holding him tighter reflexively, tired and strung-out and feeling like you can finally say – what? – say words that don't even string together in sentences, talking in fragments like you're the one with the fever, like your effort to stay solid for him is giving out and leaving you oddly transparent – "Please," you manage, just that, and, "You don't have to say anything," and "I love you," and you don't want to examine why you're silently dripping tears into his hair, only flashing on the image of a hive-portal lit from within after a walk through stinging rain.

At first he leans his forehead against your neck and just purrs, fragmented and wavering, dilute nonspecific reassurance that dissolves into clicks and cricket-chirps as he blinks tears onto your throat then smooths again; until he mumbles something, words, but indecipherable – tries again, soft but certain, "Pity you," and, "Can't remember – when I last told you –" and "Couldn't think of how to
say—" And his breath stutters and he falls silent, as if there's more to the thought just beyond his reach, and you can't help but look to that faraway glimmer, but wonder if he meant say it without making it a promise, because it almost sounds like the deep-hidden seed of –

~~~

Astris keeps getting better, after that. You don't think you are actually contributing to this process by holding your breath every time you check his vital signs, but you can't bring yourself to stop doing that, either, or listening to his breathing in his sleep even once it eases.

~~~

==> Astris: Go home.

The first night out of the medical tank is footsteps and blur and breakthrough pain, pills and shots and being carried and too much light and not enough vision.

It's your love's voice, rendered in all the fine unmistakable nuances of speech heard through air, narrating the journey from one end of the palace to the other to you like it's an interstellar trek, rising and breaking and crackling with excitement and nervousness and pity. It's your battered hands pressed so gently to the walls of your new hive as he shows you where the windows are; that just the ablution block is bigger than your whole helmsblock and inlaid with carved tile; that the livingblock is warm as noon in the bright season and hung with tapestries. It's medics and more pills and tiny spoonfed sips of a soup that tastes like light from a yellow star.

It's finally being alone with him, held balanced in his power at the edge of the recuperacoon, and day is barely breaking, but you don't think you've ever been this exhausted.

You're pulse-deep certain that you've never been this happy.

He lets you slip in slowly, but still you almost think that you can feel it down to the molecular, sopor slotting into receptors that ached gaping-empty for generations, the reverse rush of being calmed and shepherded toward sleep. He's doing something nearby, probably pulling up a chair to drowse by your bedside the way he's done every day since you were pulled from the rig, but your eyes are overused and won't look where you point them and everything bleeds together too much to tell.
"Good morning, my love," you murmur muzzily, but he says "Wait" and it doesn't take more sight than you have to tell that the black blur over his head is him stripping off his shirt –

And even before he says, "There," and slips in with you and holds you, so gentle that through the painkillers his skin feels more like gauze, like moonlight in old woods – You think your bloodpusher has already shattered into a million crystalline pieces for him, enough light in each to feed its own new star, and you'll tell him so in the evening when you awake together, poor apology for the promise you still can't make –

Oh, but you're so close to it, it's in the tips of your fingers where you still have to reach out with your psionics to know that they’re brushing his hand, but you can feel the nerves unfurling for the surface, almost – it's in each breath indrawn to speak his name –

He reaches with his power to turn out the light and you're a fit-together thing with him curled around you, still thin and war-weary but so whole – you're enchanted with the sight of his smooth gray unbroken back, so unlike yours still too mutilated and newly-filled to rest against, never like yours, now – Your chin is slotted perfectly into the warm supple skin of his shoulder – You're almost asleep, and you know you're trembling a little, but you know you can't help it and you know he doesn't mind –
In dream she stands in the helmsblock with her back turned at a precise angle, her writhed-together turbid confusion of hair massed around her so that for all your camera angles you still can't see what she's doing. Just that her claws clink at the screen of a handheld husktop, and that she's humming to herself, tunelessly, some wriggler's ditty from centuries ago that no one would remember but her and you –

Information from sensors she silenced to bring you here, to your body, hovers as afterimages and fades away – that the ship looms near the dark and craggy roof of an enormous cavern, far above a circle of carved spires that rise like distorted stalagmites – a figure digging in the cave-dust stops to gaze up, white-eyed, unastonished –

Scraps of memory from senses that went dark an indeterminate time and an eternity of toneless straggling notes ago, and you know waiting, and fear, and the hollow where fear should be, and the rarefied boredom of the vastness between stars, and –

Tugging at your memory, there's a buzzing at the song's edges – there's a buzzing in the back of your thinkpan, where the wires push in, there's –)

You drift into the hazy curtain-filtered ruddy orange of dusk like a ship gliding in to beach, and as you wait for the careening dance of the room around you to slow to a precession to gentle wave-lapped rocking you taste salt on your lips. Your eyelids stick when you think of opening them. Your tongue trails through droplets and sheen on your cheek, and you remember being reached for and being turned away. You remember the fading unanswered voice, and echoes, and far-off cries like the refracted entreaty of another universe.

You've saturated your face with tears in sleep, in some mercifully half-shadowed dream, must have cried silently onto his shoulder not to wake him – but you remember being – a thing that could not answer if he called –

Your arms hang leaden by your sides, move slow as continents when you try to push them through the sopor, though your evening-dulled body barely registers the ache of muscles.

You're afraid to – to jar your own ears by speaking; to wake him and let him see – and when you blink out another tear to join the awful blotchy spill down your face you can name that you're frustrated, that you're embarrassed. That you have no place in your thinkpan to explain these tiny things, any more than to soothe the dream-ache still cold between your ribs. He floats sallow-exhausted holding you, an ochre spot on his shoulder where your chin rested in sleep, cycling through deep unconscious breaths.

You need him. You call his name.

Sollux blinks into consciousness with a little sigh, hair brushing softly against your neck as he raises his head, and the slow hazy curve of his smile reminds you that you know the look of him waking from sleep, the expressions that cross his face half-aware – so many times, you've seen – but always startled, before, never so relaxed and rested, he's been forsaking his recuperacoon for nearly a perigee –

"Astris," he says, the sound half-buried in vibrations against your skin, and it's hushed and it's trusting and he curls in like he's going to subside into sleep again, but then he gives a start, like he's replayed the sound of your voice in his mind and heard the note of distress, and his chin jerks up and
he wakes more fully, pulls back enough to regard your face – "Astris, love, I'm here –" like you still might not know, or like he just wants to tell you again, to boast of it –

But you like hearing it from him; still believe it more easily from his voice than from your own eyes and skin, that think they know his body pressed to yours from sweeps of knowing only – not an illusion, but not this – "I'm here," you echo, wondering, and – you wish – you could tap into his mind again, ask him to press a vision into you of what it would be to wake this way again tomorrow; or to wake to him calling for you and say to him I'm here –

(There's a cluster of words floating like a bubble that Sollux breathes into when he speaks to you, caught somewhere in the back of your thinkpan thin-skinned but still too opaque to look into –)

"I dreamed you needed me," you say, halting, trying to explain – if you look into yourself there are smoky-obscure patches in your recall that some sense of repulsion that feels like self-preservation warns you from – and that is new, too strange to handle, so you blink film from your eyes instead, resolve details in his face piece by piece, hairline folds in the yellow-dark smears under his eyes, flecks of sopor on his chin – meditative, as if in wrestling with vision and enumerating his features you might clear your mind enough for something to drop whole into it.

"I do need you," he says, his voice a little husky from sleep or emotion, and he's staring back at you, meeting your eyes. He draws a breath, as if he wants to speak, but he exhales again and only says, again, "I do."

And hearing him say it – the weight of it in that subvocal rasp – draws a half-sound from you, the inhale to begin a sob as the thought consumes you – hardly seems to originate in you at all, seems to filter through from some unchart place, though you know it to be yours in the splinter-lightning pierce of knowing – that you have never held him. Held his adored projection in borrowed dream-arms, but – moments ago you tried but let something stop you; now such a thing seems unconscionable, beyond imagining.

You bare your fangs and hold your breath and again force the signal through to your body, just to move one arm this time, but now you won't give it up when the sopor resists, or when last night's residual painkillers aren't enough to stop new neurons firing quills into your mind, then darts, then daggers, it hurts like someone is trying to wrench your shoulder back out of its socket, and when you don't stop it hurts worse, your muscles frayed elastic, your tendons buzzing surgical tools – you press the bridge of your nose to his cheek and drop pain-wrenched tears down his face – You wrap your arm around his waist.

He makes a noise, a little startled chirr that turns into "– oh," and leans closer against you. The shift of his body to settle into the arc of your arm is slight and gentle, and he fits there awkwardly and perfectly at the same time, cradling you close in the slippery sopor, and his breath goes shaky against your ear, nearly crying too, trying to contain it, stammering out words between little soft gasps, trying to explain – "I'm, it's not, I'm just so happy –"

"It's – it's all right, you can, I want –" –Want to hold you and let you cry until everything that's held you strained-tight overwound afraid all your life pours out – Want you to stop holding back how much you want me here with you, want you to scream it at me until I – "...Want so much, do you know that –" The immense devouring longings, but then the tiny skittering ones – you’ve cried yourself desperately thirsty, your tongue tastes like old salt, your throat and nose and the inflamed places under and behind your eyes feel encrusted with it, but the miniscule wondering thing is that you can envision clean water in a cool glass, that it even tastes blue-clear, feels skylke-cold for a moment pooling in your stomach – all of this you tucked away last night to think of later, and you dip into that small pocket of knowing and smile against his skin. You had no referent for fresh water,
before he brought you here – none for sopor, or birdsong, or the cycle of day and night – but had written indelible in your mind the shape of a scraggly self-aware smile, the gentling of precise technician's hands –

"Do you know you are everything I ever thought you were – that even in the wires for a while I almost –" It crouches in your chest, shards of meaning, of what it would need to be, you still can't say it, until you can say it whole, until you can – "Until things out of our control –" Pain and its familiars – "But now – you're here, and there's – water and moonlight and –" You feel wrigglerish and obvious the moment you start trying to talk about the world, blushing and hoping Sollux can't see it for closeness, but your thinkpan keeps veering back to him anyway, to falling asleep and fit and right and skin-hum of dormant light interweaving – "And I love you –"

"I love you," he says, plaintive, breathy, careful, like the words are something in his hands that he's trying to hold steady and not drop or break – "I want to – walk with you, here, somewhere else, the wilderness places you said you liked once – tag-team takedown some idiot on the forums, show you how my mainframe works, I want to give you, show you everything – I – always have," and he's navigating around the word but, navigating around the places where silences have swollen like glassy domes, leaking tears and – even though the heater has kicked on to warm the sopor for evening he's trembling, his hair brushing against your face with the tiny tight quivering –

The urge to pull him closer is convulsive, your body forgets that it can't and your arm twitches, jolts of pain branching down from your shoulder to rattle and dissipate staticky in your hand where it rests flat on the small of his back. Your knee brushes his, your shoulders touch, you feel the wrap of his arms only in scraps between numb gulfs around your back but it's enough, for now, it's small starry-warm speckles inset in ringing void, it's enough.

And what you need to say could be breath pressed into a thinning bubble – or it could be a treasure concealed in a hive-wall, plastered over and wrapped in rags, intact but desiccated, permeated with dust – or it could be a growing thing he planted into you unknowing twined in with other offerings, memories and visions, spine and hands, a spreading sun-searching sapling of a promise – a hatchling jumble of words, a prolific disarray – still hot and strange to the touch inside your head, too bright to think of except in oppositions, fear that outlines want –

"I dreamed that you were calling my name – and each time I tried to answer with another part of my mind – and each time there was pain or darkness before I could –" And you don't want to remember, some dark shape lurks at the edges of this memory but you can't stop – "And the wires were shriveled and the seawater pool was full of ash –"

The movement of his chin as he nods, his earlobe grazing soft against your cheek – "Tell me, it's okay – it's over now –"

"It isn't over," you growl-whine it, "It never happened, it isn't over –" And you're crying again, your head sinking to his shoulder, and it's that just even this is wonderful, curling up around him and crying, just that your eyes are puffy and stinging and his shoulder is a ridge that digs into your forehead, but his arms are steady and the relief is chemical-warm and –

You were so afraid to do this for so long, wanted so badly to be steady for him (though you faltered and failed and failed again) – Because you thought he only had you for – Because you saw into his mind once, saw him staring torn-down clear-eyed devastated into that future and swallowed a shard then of icy whetted grief –

(You dreamed that his voice was a lost spark at the center of nothing, you dreamed that he begged for you and no one came to him, you dreamed that his calling went stuttery-hopeful once, as if he heard an echo – but it wasn't you; you hung voiceless as another swathe of your attention winked
You gasp tear-choked lung-aching and break into sobbing that claws at the snap-tense muscles in your neck – *it has to be over* –

He wraps around you like a blanket, like the sopor itself, like light; drags fingers through your hair, against your horns, says your name reassuring and distraught at once, calling to you over and over again, but the distance is so close now and you know the drape of his limbs in perfect ease and slackness – recognize it dreaming and waking, so you know the shape of him now is not that, that in all but the deepest sopor-drenched sleep he's overstrung, rigid like armies at attention ready to fight for you – "You're here with me now," Sollux says, soft and tight-voiced in your ear, "it's all right, you can tell me," and you remember that nights ago when your fever broke he said *please*, and you wish he would say it again but he won't *let* himself.

And something he said moments ago comes wheeling parabolic back at you – You see it surrounding as in dream, feel earth under your feet cool and gritty and pliant – Walking with him hand in hand through ancient unspeaking forest, arced over lightless with canopy, gnarled trunks and clawed-up bark – the ache in your calves and heels and the backs of your knees, staggering and being caught, rising ground – You see emerging together like climbing above cloud, where woods give way and sky bursts into being above you spangled in light and bedecked with the moons and Alternia stretches out below you – But somewhere in the morass of centuries you lost the clarity of distinction between prophecy and simple envisioning –

"We can't know," you say, softly, almost to yourself, what you remember telling him once, what you wish you'd known long ago – "We see glimpses, but we can't *know* –" And you cling to your hold on him as best you can without the ability to curl your hand beyond a twitch – "I'm just – I'm exhausted of dreams and trying to see, I just want to be –" *To be unthinking here, a body wrapped in arms* – but that gift was left uncoded into him or you, and so you hang suspended between a vision of aching climb and the half-remembered burr of dark at the corner of a daymare –

"I brought you here so you – so you could choose freely," Sollux says finally, stumbling over the words, strained and wondering and scared, and he does say it, "Please," but the way it comes out bare and thin and controlled you know he's not speaking for his emotions, he's asking something different of you – "But please don't – it's *yours* to choose," and his voice is fierce with vehemence on that one word – and he's saying this now because he's recognizing something in you –

And this is where he brought you, here into this ragged scrapwork body, this bruised surgery-swollen heap that somehow feels and speaks – here, for the first time in a centuries-long life, into a true hive of your own – here into his warm known nervous-buzzing presence in the near-nightfall silence – "You brought me here to give me more than a *choice,*" and you can't help what creeps into your voice over teary rasping, pity and bitterness – even if what you stand to lose is darkness infested with vacuous horror – even if it is some half-held right to his bereavement – you still cry into his shoulder until your face slips in salt-water and even the best-healed scars sting. "You brought me here in an immense desperate arrogant gambit to give me this life with you – and you – you kept proving your capacity to care for me, over and over, and that *matters.*" And you shiver against him, finally almost dry of tears, it matters because – because you know the shape of the thing in your dream, the mass of coils and char and burnt-out cackling voice – but *that* wasn't why you woke tear-drenched and hollow with lingering fear – "Because I'm afraid of – Sollux, I'm *terrified* of myself –" Pain and shutdown – unhearing and turning away –

"I know," he says thick-voiced and quiet in your ear – "I know, and I *love* you," and the way he says it means *I'll match you,* could equally be pale or pitch, and he accepts, but you're not sure he *understands* – "and I want you here with me, I'd live through this last perigee a thousand more times,
until I tore my claws out of their beds, if I had to – I will do everything it takes, anything you ask – and he's curled around you warm and sharp-boned, as solid as he can be and yet shaking, from trying so hard to be still, holding himself back from pushing too far forward – he carried you into the hive and into the recuperacoon but there are places he can't carry you – no, won't, knows the error of trying –

"I won't always ask," you say quietly, serene and solemn in the aftermath of tears, you've found a way into that reservoir of words, you're backing in out-of-order, but in a way this is right, you're afraid of the temptation to stop after you say – but not yet – "I won't always – and when I do ask, it won't always be for what I need – Oh, beloved, I want – but –" And you lift your head, finally, quivering with the effort just of holding your chin up and your neck steady, peering at his face gone blurred again but still talismanic-comforting – you don't draw the same reassurance from your commonality with him as he does from you; you are a changed, shaped thing, but still – your imagination has contracted since he came to you, to the point where, even at the peak of pain, volitionally in waking life forming an image of a world containing one of you without the other was beyond its circle. "But I am the one threat left to me in the world – and I am dangerous."

You feel the change in him, the way his shoulders relax just marginally against you as he comprehends, the way he goes from quivering-rigid to... tense, still, but quiet, focused, breathing softly and steadying your face in his hands. Then, low and frantic, spilling out in the way of a thought iterated over and over in his mind, Sollux says, "What I swore, before – I promised in the knowledge that it would break me if you ever asked, and I still meant it – but I didn't realize how much the waiting would get to me; I need to know –"

"That was a time when – I wasn't free and everything was unendurable and pain-mad I thought – I truly thought I wanted you as my weapon against myself, no matter the cost, but –" And you don't apologize, you don't – you don't owe him your thinking, little as you were able to think at all, then – you know what you have been through, have no illusions of strength, know when and where you snapped and what snapped you, and again, and again, ten lifetimes or more, you know the crack of each break still echoes, illusory but powerful still, know what you need from him, however grim, still a lighter burden than before – "What I need – I need you to be my shield, not my sword, against myself, now, always. If you believe I'm lucid now, if you would accept a promise I made right at this moment – then I need you to swear to me that when I tell you tomorrow or in two sweeps or in fifty that this was all a mistake, that you won't listen. Because I will, I'll do everything to tear myself down, and if you let me die then, after all this – Promise me you won't let me raise a hand against myself, promise me you'll get me through – Just please promise me you'll remember me now and know that this is what I want –"

"I promise," – and Sollux can barely form the beginnings of another word before he's shaking and sobbing, trying to hold himself back from gripping too hard and still enfolding you so tightly that it makes joints grind and ache, and you've never seen him cry so freely like this, either, in the waking world – "I promise, always, always." And still holding you he pulls back a little, your vision is fuzzed but you know the angle of trying to gaze and comprehend and memorize – says your name like he's seeing you for the first time all over again – like you've given him something he couldn't even have imagined asking for – amazement but not disbelief, and you know why; without seeing into his head you still know his resolve and you know that he has to believe in this, to bear it up for you when you can't hold it yourself –

And you know that nothing changes, not really, the respiteblock doesn't flood with light and your skin doesn't sew itself together any faster and his crushing hold still hurts like hell and you still have to force awareness into your hands until they twinge and tingle to feel, even damped to almost nothing, the shudder and vibration of his back as he speaks and gasps – but still you soar inside, dizzy with happiness until your vision swims and your muscles go shaky-weak but you're crackling-
suffused enough to just charge through it, hardly wavering when you bend to kiss all over his face –
"I never let myself – never, even in our best times, never could have imagined – Even when freedom
was locked and buried from my memory and understanding, even centuries before you existed I was
calling out in wanting a life with you, and now you've given it to me I promise to cling onto it to the
last drop of my light, that I will never make you save me lightly –"

It takes him a while to be able to speak again, breath slowing from convulsive hiccups and chirps –
"It's – just to know it's all worthwhile, every inch I fought for you – there were times when I – knew
in my head you'd probably forgive me, but couldn't imagine you really would – much less have me
promise –" And he loses his voice again, but swallows, trying to compose himself – reaches up,
breathing ragged and soft, and cradles your cheek with sopor-wet fingers that buzz with the intensity
of his focus.

You make a soft wondering noise at the touch, its intentness and the flow of current – you still can't
tell if there is a thicker glow, a heavier concentration to his power coming close off his skin instead of
mind-to-mind etheric, or if the change is in your nerves dream-body to real – so much time, now, to
measure every shade and vibration of light, to know him here freely and in truth. And you tug back
at him with what power you have, in waves and curling-in pull at hands and shins and in snapping
pangs around the healing splices in your spine – Murmuring, half in reassurance and half in trance,
what you know clear-minded of the future without having to look – "So much to repair and relearn
and build anew for us, all worthwhile," And, feverish-excited now, shaking with it, needing more of
voice than your lungs can sustain but trying, "...all ours together – oh Sollux, my own – everything I
ever gave to you of myself as a slave, everything you ever were to me, every promise I made to you,
I give you again as free and sovereign over myself, if you'll have it – every joy I find in life as much
yours –"

"I will, oh, Astris – beloved – I always wanted –" Sollux kisses you, your hair and your forehead
and mouth. His power tingles from his lips, unfurls at the surface of his skin celebratory, euphoric,
like he can scarcely hold it back from escaping, even as he's nearly still against you, like all of this
has rolled through and left him a quiet sky, and he says – "It's – going to get easier from here, but I
don't think it will ever be easy for us – but as long as you'll have me, I'll give you everything I can –"

And you purr back to him in a steady hum, work your other arm around slow and creaking-aching
and hardly knowing the words of what you're saying, "Always yours" and "always here for you"
and "we'll make it through, no matter what, we will," just that for the first time you can say them safe
from forswearing yourself, can hold in your arms the swirling of galaxies pressed into an outline
shaped from your own and know that in resonance with each other there will always be light
enough.

Chapter End Notes

I dust away the plaster
From off your breathing body
You're touching your autonomy
You'll never be the same
--ThouShaltNot, Trial By Fire

Chapter Summary

Outside of time, Karkat and Tiresias discuss pailing anatomy for the reader's edification.

(What, you didn't expect abrupt, crass metafictional interludes? This is still a Homestuck story and don't you forget it.)

Chapter Notes

(Chapter 19, when we post it, is really chapter 18. This just helps it make more sense, particularly if you choose to accept the proffered command arrow.)

INT. Karkat, agin a fenestrated wall, conversing with a meddlesome busybody from outside of time.

KARKAT: I GOT HERE.
KARKAT: *COUGH*. *WHEEZE*.
KARKAT: AS FAST.
KARKAT: AS I COULD.
KARKAT: *PANT*. *GASP*.

You know, new writers commonly attempt to transcribe dialog verbatim, as it might be heard in a recording of a conversation. But in the literary medium you really don't need to spell out every pant and wheeze to indicate you're out of breath. Readers can be trusted to infer for themselves.

KARKAT: WITHIN THE LAST PERIGEE *ALONE* I'VE HAD ENOUGH EXISTENTIAL CRISES FOR SEVERAL HUNDRED PATHETIC MUTANT LIFESPANS -- SO I'M JUST GOING TO PRETEND YOU DIDN'T SAY THAT.
KARKAT: ANYWAY, I HEARD SOMEONE NEEDED SCHOOLFEEDING ABOUT QUADRANTS.

More precisely, about concupiscent relations. It would seem the authors have, in all the chaos of this narrative and the giddiness of their own quadrant vacillation, neglected to include some basic information about troll anatomy, so I have had to take up my usual duties.

KARKAT: WAIT JUST ONE FUCKING SECOND.
KARKAT: YOU CALLED ME OUT HERE TO TALK ABOUT SHAME GLOBES?!
KARKAT: THEY CAN'T FIGURE THIS OUT FOR THEMSELVES?
KARKAT: HERE'S A HINT, YOU INVIDIAUS MOUTHBREATHERS! THEY'RE CALLED THAT BECAUSE THEY'RE EMBARRASSING!

I'm sure it must be even more embarrassing for the reader, who knows little to nothing about them. But in any case I am informed that when it comes to schoolfeeding on these topics, you are simply the best there is.
KARKAT: LISTEN HERE
KARKAT: IF YOU THINK THAT FLATTERY WILL CONVINCE ME TO MAKE A VULGAR SPECTACLE OF MYSELF?
KARKAT: THEN YOU ARE *ABSOLUTELY* *FUCKING* *RIGHT*.
KARKAT: START TAKING NOTES HERE, PEOPLE.

KARKAT: FIRST THING: TROLLS DON'T DEVELOP OUR ENTIRE ANATOMY ALL AT ONCE.
KARKAT: JUST TO CONFUSE EVERYONE THE MAXIMUM AMOUNT, REGULAR SEX IS COLLOQUIALLY CALLED 'PAILING', JUST LIKE PEOPLE COLLOQUIALLY SAY 'SHOOSHPAPPING' TO REFER TO A LOT OF DIFFERENT MOIRALLEGIANCE ACTIVITIES. DON'T ASK ME, I DIDN'T WRITE THE LANGUAGE.

KARKAT: ANYWAY, WE START HAVING IT AT BULGE MATURATION, TO PRIME THE PUMP. THEN WE HIT A PARTIAL METAMORPHOSIS BETWEEN SEVEN AND TEN SWEEPS, TYPICALLY, DEPENDING ON WHAT HEMOTYPE YOUR MEATSACK IS SADDLED WITH.

KARKAT: THE INTERNAL DETAILS OF HOW *THAT* HAPPENS ARE EVEN MORE ABSURD AND DISGUSTING BUT FORTUNATELY FOR YOU ALL THE ONLY THING OF PRACTICAL RELEVANCE IS THAT YOU GET A FEVER AND YOUR ABDOMEN FEELS WEIRD FOR A WHILE.

KARKAT: THE POINT IS, BEFORE THAT POINT, 'PAILING' IS A FIGURATIVE TERM. WE HAVE A BUNCH OF SLURRY GLANDS LINING THE NOOK AND THE BULGE THAT ARE MOSTLY FOR PLEASURE AND CAN'T REALLY PRODUCE A USEFUL AMOUNT OF GENETIC MATERIAL.

KARKAT: AFTER THE SHAME GLOBES DEVELOP AND START FILLING YOUR MATERIAL SAC WITH GENESLIME, THOSE GROSS WRIGGLER BUCKET JOKES BECOME YOUR FUCKING LIFE, AT LEAST DURING THE FEW NIGHTS EVERY PERIGEE WHEN YOU'RE IN SEASON.

KARKAT: OH, AND YOUR PHEROMONE RECEPTORS HAVE TO BE CONVINCED ANOTHER TROLL IS GOING TO HELP. FORTUNATELY THAT'S USUALLY ONLY IF YOUR JUNK IS ALREADY CLOSELY ACQUAINTED WITH THEIRS. I CAN ONLY IMAGINE THE SURREAL MISERY OF THE EVOLUTIONARY PATH NOT TAKEN WHERE YOUR SEEDFLAP SWELLS UP ANY TIME A VAGUE ROMANTIC PROSPECT WALKS BY.

Yes, the bit of temporal continuity where you helped Sollux with that is fairly representative of the process. Care to help me tell the reader about it?

KARKAT: I GUESS I SHOULD FUCKING THANK YOU BECAUSE NOW I'M TOO BUSY BEING OFFENDED TO HAVE ANOTHER EXISTENTIAL CRISIS. BUT YOU WERE THE ONE HOLDING SAID CRISIS OVER MY HEAD LIKE A PARTICULARLY GLOOMY AND MENACING HORN DECORATION IN THE FIRST PLACE SO I'M NOT GOING TO DO ANY SUCH THING. ISN'T THERE ANY SUCH GODDAMN THING AS MANNERS THIS SIDE OF THE FENESTRATED WALL?? THERE ARE LIMITS TO EVEN *MY* AFFINITY FOR VULGAR SPECTACLES!

....

KARKAT: AND YOU KNOW WHAT ELSE? YOU CAN TAKE THESE AND *SHOVE*
Reader, it seems our guest has departed. Alas, I am always cleaning up loose ends.

Well. I am perhaps not so excellent a host as my never-extant predecessor, being neither inclined towards slavery nor nearly-invisible text colors, but I do still keep these in supply for my guests. Here, this will help you get where you're -
...No, that won't do. Try this one.
made up of water, carbon, light

Chapter Summary

This is the least complicated happily-ever-after we could give you.

If you want the more complicated one, it's in the next book. This is both a victory lap and a taste of what's ahead.

We called this "the Molly Bloom soliloquy chapter" in our workroom chat, years ago when we first wrote it - over five years ago, when we hadn't even met in person yet. Now we live in the same city and lots of things have happened and keep happening and we keep falling down all these feels??

Thanks for being with us for this whole strange journey - which continues forward in Apotheosis.

Chapter Notes

Here and now it doesn't matter
The highway you have taken
For now as you awaken
You're underneath new skin
I'm setting you in motion
And opening your eyes
And underneath these skies
You'll forget all whom you've been
--ThouShaltNot, 'Trial By Fire'

my story is for thee and the glory of bodies
made up of water, carbon, light
--Ex Reverie, 'Cedar'

Say my name
And every color illuminates
We are shining
And we will never be afraid again
-- Florence and the Machine, 'Spectrum'

~~~

Chapter content notes: h/c, slow careful painful sex attempted slightly too soon in the recovery process, scar worship, oral, self-penetration, service top Sollux, oblique discussion of suicidality, brief needle use (you'll know when it's about to occur).

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Astris made it out of the recuperacon and through the shower without relying on telekinesis tonight. Not that his powers would have availed him - though the suppressant dose isn't enough to shut him down completely, and his grasp on reality is getting steadily more certain, the medicullers have said he needs to learn to do things with his body right now to be in less pain long-term.

And you helped him – also sticking to physical measures, because fair is fair – and he still can't stand up in the shower, and everything important in the hive is pretty close together – but he did it, and you caught him stopping himself when he'd unconsciously try to bear his limbs up with sparks, and that's enough for before breakfast.

He's slumped back on the couch now, shaking with exhaustion, only half sitting up. You've fed him half a grubcake – and then he took over the process; you weren't going to tell him 'no eye lasers' on that, and even under the suppressants he could manage it – then set the plate aside, because you've both learned the hard way that he still needs to eat slowly and take breaks; and now you're just settled with your arm lightly around his shoulders waiting for him to get his breath back.

He makes a weak frustrated gesture in the direction of the plate but doesn't try to pull it back; it takes significantly less time for him to get to speaking than it would have even two nights ago. "On a scale from one to horrible, that walk was a nightmare. I walk like a... what do you call it... a long-necked spotbeast. That's just had a hip replacement." He's still so hoarse that it's sometimes hard to understand him, and when he talks for too long his lisp starts to eat up his syllables until he reaches completely incomprehensible. He gasps for a moment, winded. "...On rollerskates."

"Nah," you tell him cheerfully, "on rollerskates you'd fall on your ass much more quickly and efficiently." But you're stroking the side of his neck as you say it, gently, avoiding the still-healing place where they filled in part of his spine; you've learned by now that if he's clear-minded enough to be sharp-tongued, the level of pain control is probably not quite up to the level of pain he's having, either.

Knowing those tradeoffs, you're not sure how far he'll get today with his hands, but less foggy is also more determined sometimes. The best advice you've had from anyone is something you could have told yourself. Whatever you do, keep trying.

Astris takes a moment while you touch his neck to just breathe again, closing his eyes. You turn and resettle yourself on the couch facing toward him, and take his right hand in both of yours, carefully. The scars that crisscross over it are still yellow, not faded to white, and it's going to be better for him in the long term if he stretches and moves them as much as he can right now; you start working at his fingers, not moving them yet, just rubbing them, gently kneading at the skin to get circulation flowing. He lets you take his hand easily but tenses once you start rubbing, eyes open again and downcast, watching you work.

"No, I'd catch myself. Using freaky mind powers. That got me into this mess in the first place, and that I could just as easily have used to get to the shower, if I wasn't..." He's babbling over the ache from his fingers to distract himself, muscles twitching seemingly at random as you rub at them. "...Is that supposed to feel like all the bones in there are being chewed on?"

"Probably," you say, but you go more slowly. "We do get into a lot of unique messes, don't we –"

"Unique is one way of putting it –"
Even though part of you knew it all along, it still feels unreal to you that he's released you from your promise – that he wants to stay, your beloved, your prize beyond measure; and you can't help but pause for a moment just to look at his face, breathe out a soft shaky sound of wonder –

Astris senses your gaze, cuts himself off and meets your eyes, and his mouth almost immediately goes from a bitter line to soft, upturned. "...Hi," he breathes simply, and then flushes embarrassed, tongue-tied, and leans so carefully, falteringly, forward, the couch cushions rustling as he rests his forehead against yours.

You just hang there for a moment, breathing – the way all his muscles tremble with effort makes you want to wrap your arms around him, not just to steady but to bear him up completely, but right now he needs to gain strength on his own, and the feeling tears at you inside until you're making a strange high noise in the back of your throat, and you just pull one hand free and stroke the soft patchy regrowth of hair on the back of his head and kiss him soft, careful, openmouthed.

His mouth is still stiff and strange under yours, but he's making the beginnings of that stuttery choked-up relearning sound that passes for purring, leaning gingerly on the hand that you aren't holding to balance himself, even though you know it hurts, so he can keep kissing you.

He tastes of grubcakes and syrup and spices and now that you've got him out of the medicinal sopor bath and stumbling around a proper hive with you his smell keeps changing and you laugh out loud, delighted, when you break from the kiss –

But when you laugh the purring cuts out entirely and his face goes closed off, defensive, "What?" spat at you like an accusation.

His startled wariness gets you right in the bloodpusher. "Oh," you say, and you do wrap your arm around him a little more, careful of his balance still, trying not to give into the impulse to hold him too tightly – "oh, no, I'm just --" You grope for words, still foiled by the automatic expectation that he can read you more deeply and more accurately than he can. "I wasn't even really aware of what I was missing, in the dreamspace --"

Astris stills, baffled and still a little hurt, as careful not to lean on you as you are not to let him. and you lean in, again, nuzzle tentatively at his jaw, then just breathe in, smelling him.

"What are you -" He exhales a soft half-purr as your nose tickles his jaw, the palm of his hand that's still in yours twitching just slightly.

He smells clean with a residue of fruity-sharp surfactant from the shower, and sweaty but in the healthy way of fresh exertion – the odors of the starship still cling to him barely underneath that, scorched and seawater-sour and the scent of dried blood, but his own scent is stronger now, his warmth throwing it off his skin, sweet-warm-metallic in a way that you can't even describe. "You," you say, smiling, half-kissing his neck so you can press the smile into his skin, knowing he'll feel it even if his eyes might fuzz it out – "You smell like you. And your mouth tastes like breakfast."

"Oh --" Kind of a half-comprehending sound, enjoying your smile against his neck but not quite believing it – "Whoever switched out your glasses so you somehow see anything but a complete mess in me, still – I think I owe them enough to bankrupt the Empire --"

"You're beautiful," you murmur, using a word for beautiful that also means pitiable, one of those obscure multitasking adjectives you've picked up in your reading – "You're a mess beyond compare, you're an infinitely precious mess that I am ridiculously grateful to be entrusted with --" And that reminds you of what you're meant to be doing, and you rake your fingers gently through his hair again, reassurance that you're not pulling back for any of the wrong reasons, before taking his hand
up in both of yours again; you smooth out muscle and tendon, running your knuckles firm and careful from the base of his palm up to the end of each finger in turn.

"Well, that's good, because you're stuck with me now --" He gasps when you hit a particularly tense spot at the base of his thumb, finishes breathy and pained -- "And this mess of -- what you are to me -- I love you --" and it's meant so many different things, the times he's said it, but right now you know it means that he would kill anyone else who hurt him, even to help him, but just for you it's trust, keep going --

You want to curl your whole self around him and see to it that he never hurts again, but that's not what he needs right now: he needs someone to push him, and you will be that for him, because you can't take on his pain the way you could, here, now, in the waking world. So you keep going forward. You bend and flex each of his fingers one after another, pausing and going back to just rubbing them for moments when he holds his breath.

When you said how he was "probably" supposed to feel, you were making it up. From the few anomalous case reports you've managed to dig up - helmsmen who kept their hands being rare in the first place, ex-helmsmen being rarer still – he's "probably" supposed to feel phantom starship controls or nothing at all; the most similar case you found (which is not very similar at all, no one alive had ever been in the rig that long) could reportedly operate the knob of a blockportal with great difficulty after a sweep and a half. But they also didn't have an identical graft source, or –

Astris shouldn't even have the nerve map for this to hurt in any kind of localized way, and – you’ve been sure for a number of days that what you did for him in the dreamspace worked, you were mostly sure before you even got him out – but every time you see evidence it reminds you: that KK was wrong. That you’ve done the impossible for your ancestor-matesprit and he’s here to stay.

He watches the curling of his own fingers with as much fascination as pain, stopping you once, not to protest, but to tell you that he thinks his index finger can stretch just a little bit farther, if you push –

And when you finish and go to take your hand away Astris whispers, his cheeks dusted in yellow again, "Wait --" He brings your hand still clutching his up to his lips and softly kisses your knuckles, and there might even be mischief in his eyes when he meets yours and says, quiet and carefully spoken, "Thank you."

"Okay," you say wryly, "now let's try something really exciting," and you prop him up a little on the couch, carefully nestle yourself in behind him and hold the plate of grubcakes out in front of him. You wrap his hand around the fork, your own hand around it: the left this time, which had slightly less of your attention during the exercises - they're about equally dominant in you, and should be for him, once he's gotten some control back - and you tuck your chin over his shoulder and kiss him again.

He hisses through his teeth at too many fingers all curling at once but still leans back into your lap, making a show of relaxation. He tries to turn his head too far to kiss you from this angle; that draws an actual whine from him, a moment of pained panting when you break away. "Careful," he says quickly, trying to cover, "Or I'll wind up eating your arm instead. Are you sure that now is a good time? I'm the worst combination of hungry and uncoordinated after those stretches, I'm pretty sure my thinkpan is fooled into thinking my fingers are exercising on little two wheeled devices...” He pulls at the fork a little with his psionics, hard to tell if the movement is involuntary or if he's actually going to try to play tug-of-war with you on this.

"That's probably the best time," you say, and stroke his face with your other hand, softly, apologetic, giving him a moment to recover. "Determination is useful and don't think I didn't see that." Slowly,
cautiously, you guide him through skewering a piece of grubcake, levering it up from the plate and bringing it to his mouth.

By this point you think he's making those appreciative noises with his mouth full half because he's still incredibly enthusiastic about food and half just to try to provoke you into saying something about manners that you won't be able to live up to yourself. "Well, we've got that one, determination," he says vaguely as he reaches for the next bite, without any prompting from you this time. "If my recovery called for, say, restraint, or moderation, or actually taking a damn break every once in a while, I'm pretty sure we'd both be screwed." He's fulfilling his own prediction, little wisps of psionics still dancing around both of your hands as they move but not trying to lift anymore, multitasking, practicing these details with his body and his power at once.

So long as he's putting his hands through the motions, you can't bring yourself to care whether he's helping out with his psionics or what his table manners are like. "Pfft. We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Probably with at least one 'hey, watch this' followed by a plunge into the river and a quick save and lecture from FF."

He tenses slightly, almost imperceptibly, when you mention her - stops chewing for a moment - and you decide that talking about her is another bridge to wait before crossing, and keep helping him wrangle more pieces of grubcake.

Manners or no, you're stupidly mesmerized just watching him eat.

You can tell that his hand is starting to cramp up - but that's because he's actually participating; he's not just letting you move his fingers, they're actually hanging onto the fork on their own. He could probably already manage a doorknob. By the time he's gotten through another portion and you're setting the plate aside, his forehead is damp with sweat and you're petting his face again, craning your neck around his shoulder to just look at him and he's looking at you out of the corner of his eye with a puzzled crabby expression like what on Alternia is so fascinating and you're absolutely undone with pity. "If I told you you were beautiful," you quip, "would you start flinging pieces of grubcake at me?"

He grins like a satisfied meowbeast, back on ground he knows. "...How about I just fling myself at you instead? I promise you I'm more interesting than grubcake – most of the time – that was some really exceptional grubcake –" He turns again, much more cautious this time, and can't quite reach your mouth; nuzzles and feather-kisses at your jaw instead, too pain-careful and full and languid-tired to quite shift himself all the way.

And you can't help but make a little breathy-surprised sound –

You reach over and feed him a last little piece with your fingers, pressing your face to his, and he must be aware of how scalding-hot your cheeks suddenly are, radiating out to your ears – you want him so badly, and even two full sweeps of psionic dream sex doesn’t make it any easier to know how to ask, doesn’t give you a clear path through your sudden nervousness and his awkward shame, or tell you whether he’s even ready at all to go past the almost-pale affection of the last several nights, or make you feel less guilty for wanting this when he might not be ready for it.

"...Oh. Oh, hey, I, um. Sollux, love, it's OK, how do I explain this – you get all sun-colored when you blush, I'm never going to get over it – I'm still just as – embarrassingly, weirdly, desperately yours as before, your insane, absurdly wonderful wriggler adventure novel rescue didn't cure me, and I – wasn't sure if I was ready until right now –"

You can actually watch it as it comes over him, blindingly obvious as it always was, neon signs that the both of you are, the light in his eyes kicking up two notches and the fangy grin has barely melted
from his face when his forked tongue is dragging over your lower lip, and he's quivering to the core with the strain and the angle, and his hand is on the junction point of your neck and shoulder flat and scar-streaked and spasming, and when he breaks off he's hit that point of vocal strain where it's rough to almost not-language, speaking so slow and changed –

"But do you know how many times I dreamed of giving you this body? I don't want to wait any longer – It's going to hurt, it's OK, I want you to help me find a way –"

As if some physical law of magnetism or gravitation pulled you toward him, you feel yourself falling in. "Yes, oh, god, yes, I will –" And you can't help but pull him a little too tightly to you, responding to rhythms that don't apply, things your body knows that don't hold true anymore, and when he flinches you draw back a little –

He catches at you with his power, wide-eyed and a little surprised, instinctive this time, but when he draws you back in it's slow and absolutely deliberate, “Don’t even think about stopping because it hurts me –” He’s sparking hard around the eyes, threat, emphasis, passion – “I’ve wanted you too much, for too long, and you know better than to think you’ll break me –”

"No, I'm not stopping, I'm just thinking how best to do this, it's –" you laugh, giddy with the pull of his power and with his scent and warmth and sheer stubbornness – "It's yet another engineering problem - let me up, while I can still fucking think at all, I’m going to reposition us –"

Astris grins wide and lit-up amused at engineering. "Thinking, right, I guess one of us has to –" Lets you up but keeps you haloed, his power still dimmer even than the remnant he was able to spare, before, from holding both ship and dreamspace together – but growing, also, in control and brightness –

You slide out from your awkward angle behind him exquisitely carefully, kiss hard along the back of his ear along the way because you're about to break contact and Astris needs the reminder, physically, that you're not going anywhere. You adjust the pillows and settle him back into them, fold your glasses and set them on the table.

It's a very nice couch, much wider than the one in your old hive, and well-appointed and... probably going to stain. Well, you were kind of busy when the furniture was being picked out and you have more build grist now than you can easily imagine using. You come around to the other end of it and gently maneuver his legs apart, then sprawl out in between his thighs, resting your head on his chest, lightly as you can, which probably isn't lightly enough, though he weighs easily a quarter again what he did at first and is catching up to you quickly.

Astris groans softly as you settle onto him, not trying to hide that it hurts, but he wraps a trembling arm around your waist, takes a couple of tries to kind of brush your shirt up off your lower back with his wrist, and settles a hand there, walking sparks up your spine, still smiling. "It's the strangest, loveliest thing, that this held me up for so long, and now..." He closes his eyes to concentrate, and power swirls down your neck, around and over your back. The touch of his energy makes you shiver and arch, even though you're restraining yourself from flailing around too much, your arms braced on the couch carefully balancing; when he opens his eyes he's pale, beaded around the hairline with sweat. "I know exactly how it would feel for you if I just – I wish I could –"

You're used to answers filling in, used to unspoken things shimmering fully understood through the void between you, and it makes you weirdly shy to ask. "What – what would you want to do?"

"I would – I would show you just how much it means to me that for two sweeps I stood with your spine, touched with your hands – I would use everything I know from that on you, pass on to you every drop of pleasure that I ever felt with them – god, if I could trust my fangs right now, I'd use my
mouth on your hands – I would swipe at your palm with my tongue and make you laugh, I'd go
between pricking at your fingers with my teeth and my power and sucking and licking the pain away
until your fingertips are as sensitive as your bulge, I know they can be because I've felt it - I know
how much you're enjoying working with my hands every night, not just doing it because someone
has to –" It's one of the longest things he's said at a time without having to stop for breath since the
rescue, and he's panting now, licking at cracked lips, trying to pass it all off as too much speech at
once but it always did get to him a bit, hearing himself talk.

"I'd be worried if you hadn't noticed, I pity you so much it frightens me, so much I'm drunk on it,"
you breathe, sliding up to kiss him between words, "And you'll do all of those things, oh god, you
will absolutely, you're a wonder, do you know –" You haven't told him the half of it, were scared of
discouraging him in the nights before you were sure that tiny spark of will to survive would take hold
in him and now you're still overwhelmed with it and you don’t know where to start, to crack open
and show him the secret hope you held back from him those sweeps when neither of you dared plan
ahead for anything better than his death – "You still have that in you, everything I gave you –
everything you remapped, every nerve pathway that caused you such pain in the interim, there are no
less than five physicians blowing up my email who are going to make their careers on reports of
how you ate a grubcake this morning – if and when I deign to tell them – because," and you shift
sideways, lift up his hand in yours again, stroke a firm line down the center of his palm with the pad
of your index finger – "you can feel this and you're halfway to lifting a fork and all of that should be
impossible –"

Even unable to reach your thoughts without the dreamspace blurring you together there's only so
much that could be shaking your voice down to almost as hoarse as his, and he has to know how
moved you are now, how terrified you were for so long – and he's so slowly, wincing and halting,
curling his fingers trying to hold yours, trying to affirm and reassure; reaches up and kisses you back
still stiff and somewhat numb, but warm and smiling – "So – my nerves are still regrowing you-
shaped, and you're going to get a Nobell Prize in Mediculling for it. I'm just going to keep unearthing
more impossibilities you've accomplished for me, aren't I? I could live centuries more and still not
comprehend the extent of what you've given me – oh, come closer, my miracle worker, don't be so
careful, I want you –"

– and you want to say that the impossible thing he's done for you is the greatest of all, but he's
acknowledged it obliquely with all that talk of centuries and his relationship with that choice is still
more tenuous and halting than any of his slowly reawakening limbs – so instead you lift his hand to
your face and kiss it.

He's more right even than he knows, how much you adore his hands, they're made of pity and
potential – you lick across his palm, nestle the tips of your tongue between his fingers one by one,
tasting his tangy sweat-salty skin, moistening every scar with your mouth, slipping each finger
between your lips in turn –
It's like his throat can't figure out what noise to make, gets stuck and what comes out is a loud startled click before the rusty purring starts in. His index finger twitches and curls and jars into one of your fangs as you pull it in, and the marvel is that he feels it, manages, "It's OK, keep going -" and his whole hand trembles under your tongue, palm to claws, intermittent involuntary jerking movements at first but then sustained quivering, from the unaccustomed mash of sensation now and exhaustion from earlier. "Is it weird that – I know your mouth is warm, but feeling it right now I can't tell whether it's hot or cold, just that it's one or the other –"

You can't answer, of course; your mouth is full of his thumb; but you start purring too, call and response, hum against his hand a little, anxious and glad that this is good to him even if it's strange, because you want – you want to taste every part of him; you want to touch and hold and worship; you want to talk his body into remembering that living is good, the way he's already decided it in his mind. You lick and suck at his hand – careful, though not perfect, with your fangs – until he's groaning instead of talking and the tips of his fingers all curl rigid and you can't tell if he's overcome with pain or pleasure, only that there's the frantic breathy edge of too much to the sound of his voice and only then do you pause, hold his hand careful in yours, meet his eyes questioning –

Astris makes a confused-relieved huh noise, takes a long minute to get back enough shredded-up overused voice to talk, dropping some sounds even then, drawling others, still ochre-faced and looking at you like you've handed him the moons – "'S good – we have the best tongues, it's indisputable – but my scars are starting to sting and we're wearing too many clothes – by which I mean we're still wearing clothes – by which I mean hurry up, you incorrigible bulgetease." He tugs your hand with his to the neck of his robe; nudges at the back of your neck with his psionics, trying
to pull you down into a kiss.

You kiss him slow but hard, light nibbles at his lips and sweeping your tongue all the way across the roof of his mouth and then you strip down, shuck your clothes and untie his robe, pull it open in the front.

He draws in breath and holds it when you begin to drag your claws gently across his chest, like he expects pain, but exhales long and fluttery once he feels the touch. Every motion you make is experimental. This kind of boldness doesn’t fit into the cautious routines you’ve constructed for protecting him from pain, and you’re still trying to teach caution to the part of you that understands boldness. He’s still bandaged up in several places, still has a capped-off port for getting medication into his system quickly while he still needs it, but the lower pair of grubscars is far enough away from the worst of his wounds that you can kiss them freely – propped above him, bending down your head to lavish attention there, determined not to stop short of what he needs –

Your claws bump over scars, a few times, and his teeth click together, then, and wheezes with held-back whining – but for the rest, as you circle and swirl thin white trails into his skin, he shuts his eyes and tips his head back – wincing a little as the movement reaches his shoulders (wrecked to almost nothing and surgically rebuilt from the ground up) – and mimicking lines appear on your own skin, designs in red and blue, brushing and stinging. Digging in near your sides, dragging lighter at the center – and he’s showing you how it feels, beyond the deepenings and hitches in his purring; beyond the shiver when you lap at his grubscar, the liquid content hum – It’s not the same as being able to reach into each other’s minds but it’s a good substitute right now. You’re gasping half-voiced and closing your eyes, you have just the presence of mind to pull your claws away and rest your head sideways on his sternum – "Ohh - that’s good, too good, but it’s distracting, I just want to focus on you completely tonight –" You look up at him, try to meet his eyes, unsure if he’ll understand what you need. "You can give back another time, later on, we have time," and that's the crux of it, you're still unsure of him, there are going to be better nights and worse nights and – "I want you to remember that, I want to give you things to wait for –"

And for an awful moment you think it’s backfired; Astris stares at you all agony and wonder, one of those terrible stripped-down drops of the veneer when his eyes yellow over with tears – "I waited for you, centuries, not knowing I was waiting –" And in the glow that inundates you both the tiny scars that wreathe his eyes and line his forehead stand out white and ridged and gleaming, even as his gaze softens – "...Oh, my only, I trust you to – to do this right for me – yes, I want your focus – that look like you're studying me, mmm, it does things to me –" And he exhales the soft wet first breath of a laugh, releases you both from his light and falls back, smiling weakly up at you – "I'm sorry, I'm not the most cooperative engineering problem –"

You let out a shaky relieved breath, a purr edged with anxiety and affection, and smile up at him. "If you were, I'd be disappointed. Do I look like someone who picks easy challenges –" and the joke is funnier than it should be in context and you laugh too, high and strange and a little hysterical in your own ears.

He rises to the bait, shaky with trying to laugh and talk at the same time and not doing particularly well at either. "Well, no, you look kind of like me –"

You surge forward and kiss him again, his mouth and then all over his face, propped on your arms so as not to put too much weight on him, your knee gently grazing the place between his legs, and his breath kicks in like a door banging open at the first touch there, but when he lets it out it sounds even more like laughter than before, bright and warm for all its hoarseness, as you slide back down, kissing and licking along his neck, down the center of his chest, tonguing each of his grubscars,
breathing rapid against his skin.

Then you sit back on your ankles, between his legs – you want him so much your skin is flushed hot with it, and you're glad you're out of your clothes even if you're not letting him do anything to you right now because you're leaking-wet and your bulge is aching and twining with itself unrestrained.

And even still you need this on a deeper level than that – to touch him without being touched, to let yourself be ruled by the longing that coils in you, to offer him something purely made from that wanting, to press it into him until he can't escape the knowing of it –

You press just underneath his hipbones with the pads of your fingers, then you mouth at them, slowly, keeping your fangs back behind your lips. You're getting back into territory where wires once attached, now; it's impossible to avoid little circular lesions flecked seemingly at random across the span of his hips and down, healing well but still more yellow, like the scars on his hands, than white like the little quick-closing pinpricks on his face. He's reacting, in a way, like you've got his hands again: hissed-in breath when you press down too hard or where there's bone close to the surface; purring and short breathy moans when your lips cross softer skin.

Then suddenly he's whispering, "Oh – oh, Sollux, oh my god –" and you look and his sheath is opening, dilating as you watch, glistening dark and damp – His sides quiver, his thighs, his stomach, and he's trying to arc up, rub that skin below his hipbone against your lips –

When something spasms, keen and wrenching, in his back, the shock goes straight through his skin into your tongue. He falls back onto the couch, face wiped blank, barely a choked-shut whine before he's silent, breathing in fast shallow flutters, suspended in a state you know too well now, the quiet regathering just after sharp short-lived pain.

Your hands are trembling, hot and uncertain, but you refuse to startle away from him, remembering don't even think about stopping. Instead you go stone-still and cling close, bend down over him pressing your cheek softly to his stomach, holding him through it, murmuring reassurances, "I'm sorry – don't worry I'm not going away – do you need –" – he's told you over and over that he'll say if he wants to be redosed on his meds but you still haven't mastered the art of not asking.

"...Fuck." He rolls his head slowly against the pillows, blinking as his eyes refocus. "It was so good, I just forgot – told you there's only one of us thinking right now –" In deliberate steps of movement he brings one hand to rest in your hair. "Can you..." He's flushed bright still, still sighing out the last echoes of the spasm but relaxed now in your arms; but when he speaks again it's a fast nervous slur.
"I think you might need to hold me down, or I'll – I mean without – well –" Without hurting him or freaking him out.

These were reasons, as well, that you wanted to keep your attention on him fully. "I think I can do that," you say softly. You draw back a little for clear sight and focus, taking hold of his hand as you do: project a skein of power over him, meticulous, anchor him in its glowing mesh, press him to the cushions with overlapping lines of force at the waist and shoulders, gentle vibrations over his skin.
"Is this all right – I'll need to make it stronger but I want to make sure it's working for you first –"

Your joined hands light up as you work, his power enfolding and clinging to your hand in all the ways his fingers can't, but as you go it becomes clear that the connection is as much to reassure you as him. The more your mesh builds the more he sinks into its soft vibrating touch; the more his sputtering purr starts up again, and he rumbles, sounding almost sleepy were it not for the still-concentrated brilliance of his eyes, "It's like – it feels like being held, it's... strangely nice. Hmm, at risk of sounding like a broken record, I trust you –"

You guide his knees up and further apart, using your hands in addition to your powers; coil light around his thighs and legs, work into the lines of energy you've put in place and link them together -
he taught you this precision, sweeps ago, gave you techniques for using this gift to create and build, and you feel like you're thanking him properly for once as he settles into the restraint. He winces at the bending in his knees and hips, but he's flushed all down his chest and the twin tips of his bulge are starting to smear over his stomach – god, you can smell his arousal, a musky-salty scent that hits you on some animal level of awareness, you hear a sound between a moan and a growl and realize it's you, responding just to his smell, that perfect missing piece –

And at the sound you make Astris actually stops breathing, his bulge slides out further in a jolt of movement and he looks at you all thunderstruck unbelieving want – his power drags at your shoulders, slides warm against your face – and he recovers his breath into a near-voiceless, utterly unashamed please –

You're dizzy-light with desire that twists hot and heavy in your belly, reaches down deep in you and pulls you to him like you're magnetized, makes your breath go rough and irregular and time crawl slow around your head. You give him your hand first, slip your fingers along his belly behind his unsheathing bulge and let it draw out further, let it hook around you, the lightest touch, gently guiding – your heart pounding, half from wanting him and half from the sheer enormity of this – he's had you in dream but this must be the first actual physical touch he's known there in an impossible length of time.

His bulge wraps tight and frantic and ever-shifting around your hand, down to your wrist, both tendrils filling and thickening in a rush that draws a dizzy moan from him the moment they find your fingers to run between. He's tensing and trembling in waves, slow-regrowing and newly grafted muscle hardly even able to keep that up for long, but you're still glad of the psionic barriers that free him from having to stop those involuntary movements himself, and let him focus on you and this. "You – " A shivery gasp as the tips of his tendrils twine together and press into the crook of your thumb – "You always wanted to make me forget – now you can –"

– and it catches at you, just knowing that he understands how much you want to make this count, even if he can't see into your head he still knows you that well, and you settle back onto your ankles sitting-kneeling and arc down over him and exhale hotly over his bulge in your hand, then squirm your tongue up in between the tips, swirling it around one and then the other - so wound-up that you moan to actually taste him, slippery and warm and the tang of the dark-acrid thing that's slowly fading from his scent and the salt-earthy-sharp brightness that you know instinctively belongs –

The flat hypersensitive tips hitch and stiffen at the vibration of your moaning; twist around your tongue, up to your lips and coil and swipe there, trembling, barely held back from a hard instinctive push forward. But there's nothing held back in his low-gathered possessive-frustrated growl, the straining lurch of his abdominal muscles under your steadying hand. When you look up at him, his neck is corded with fighting to keep watching you.

You bring your lips soft and slow around him, keeping your fangs back, and your soft hum of encouragement to let him know you're ready can't be too soon – you use your hand to guide the tendrils in, to keep them cocooned in gentle surfaces, desperately meticulous against unruly twining, capturing the tips against the roof of your mouth with the pressure of your tongue as they coil and flutter –

His growling goes rolling and resonant as his bulges rub and strain and spasm in the confinement of your mouth, and there's a light ruffling touch in your hair – down your neck – before sparks shoot from between your horns and the ruffling turns to kneading at your scalp; wisps of power stroking at your ears. And it really doesn't matter if he means to, the touch is exactly the distraction you warned him against, sending a warm rush down your spine –
You moan and freeze open-jawed, panting, then break away, slowly untwining your tongue from his bulges, pulling them back with your fingers. "Careful -"

His rumbling trails off like a physical moving thing with its own momentum; but when he forces his eyes open enough to see the light on you he drags himself back to speech in a palpable act of will; stutters out "I'm sorry – I was thinking about it, want to touch you so badly, I must have – I know I need to –" And he whines in wordless disappointment, his bulges still twining together. The line between thought and action with psionics was always blurry for him and since the rescue it's been worse, and you know he's frustrated with himself more than anything.

"It's okay, it's - oh - hold on for me, please, Astris, I love you, I pity you, I want to do this right –" You close your hand around both tendrils, letting them curl and cling, rubbing slow with the pads of your fingers, trying to pleasure and soothe at once - stroke your other hand feather-light over the flat of his belly, bend down and lick once more at the base of his bulge, running your tongue over the place where the tendrils join together, keeping your fangs well away. "Trust me," you say, looking up at him again, "let me -" Then you unfold your legs along the couch, bend down and bury your face between his thighs, let his scent and the heat of his skin overwhelm your senses; let your mouth nestle up to the lips of his nook, fangs covered over, an insistent questing kiss, dazed with longing –

His voice is a frayed pandemonium of please and yes and yours balled up with purring voiced like a trill; his body all instinctive shuddering rebellion of hips and shoulders against restraints that thrum and soothe but don't yield. You hear and feel rather than see the rerouting of energy from trapped limbs, the snapping-off and arcing-over of power from the whole of his skin; a distant shift of internal muscles and a tinny charge across your lips. So suffused with heat and slick gathered yellow, so tinderbox-reactive to the first touch of your mouth, he must be aching –

With his bulges still twined around your fingers, your other hand lightly entangled with his arm to give him an anchor point, you lick, once, twice, along the outer lips, but you can't bear to draw it out too slow with his voice and his body begging you – you drive your tongue into him, pressing the tips outward against his inner walls, musky-moist and dark and hidden and your breath comes rapid-harsh through your nose, you didn't know how drunk you could get on simple animal senses, smell and taste and touch – your genesac is aching now, something you've never felt with him before; the part of your mind that always analyzes and criticizes has lost its language, you're leaving trailing stains under you on the couch and you want him so much it's exultation and despair, but to give not to take –

– and he draws you in, oh, slowly becoming made of the sensations you're creating in him, when you open the sight that goes beyond your eyes you can follow veins of colored light sinking into him from his bulges wreathed through your fingers, from those walls clutching in and forming to your tongue; joining at the base of his spine, radiating careless of old jack points and patched bones and atrophy – you watch the circuit you create together in the drifting outward of pleasure, the drawing in of desire. He's moaning now open-throated and cyclical and trying for your name like describing a delirium in fever, taking three, four breaths to get the sounds out. And even if there's an undertow of pain beneath it – if even immobile there's still futile twitching and quaking that tugs at bruised bone –

He asked for this with such certainty but still you're half-terrified, unable to feel his mind in yours, that he'll need you to stop and won't be able to say – but as long as he's pulling you to him this way, it's clear, it's all right – you shift position to brace him further, hook your arms around his thighs and hold firmly, familiar and strange in vertiginous overlay because you know the way his bulges twist against your fingers and you know the way it changes when he's close – you lap at him hard and insistent, press your tongue up and in, let yourself be submerged in taste and feeling and the warm wet gripping of his nook and the tingling light that washes off him and catches at you –
- And claws cold into your cheeks, that thinned-out edge to it that says his reserves are almost drained, and his long-drawn vibrating anticipatory mewl, the straining and his thighs knotting up –

Astris gasps harsh and screeching, and his psionics yank fiercely at your hair, crush into your back and shoulders, holding hard onto you as his nook pulses and ripples outward, genetic material flowing in streams over your tongue and rivulets down your chin – And you know it's hurting him, you should have known it would hurt him, but you still don't dare pull away as another wave hits him with a thick wrenching sob that's half lush emotive pleasure and half sharp internal pain in every not-yet-healed part of him; know he wouldn't – doesn't – want you to –

- the shudders push him closer against your mouth, even restrained to barely moving, none of your efforts can keep this from triggering off spasms deep in his spine and he lets off an awful choked whining noise but keeps tugging you closer even as he clamps down and the hot fluid gushes out harder around your tongue and you strain to drive deeper, lave against inner ridges, find the part of this that is pure joy and push into it further and there's nothing in your world except the way he fills your mouth salty-musky and soft and quivering and the helpless desire to protect and hold him through his overcome sobbing, until the tremors trail off, until he lets you go –

He lets out a weak wavering cry as his nook contracts in a belated pulse, pushing out a last small pool of yellow onto the ruined cushions. A thin flickering mist of energy drags urgent under your arms and pushes at your chest trying to drag you up but fades almost as soon as it starts – the wellspring of his power chemically suppressed to a weak trickle – and he rasps like he's going to speak or purr, but the sound chokes off into a short hacking cough.

You uncurl your hands from his bulge and your arms from around his thighs, your own body shaking from unslaked arousal and intensity and worry, and sit up on your knees, excruciatingly cautious again. You lever yourself over his leg and draw up to rest alongside him on the couch, half-draped across his shoulder but trying to keep weight off him – your hands are slick with yellow, and you grab your T-shirt from where it's flung over the back of the couch to wipe off before reaching to touch the side of his face, tentative as if you hadn't just –

"Are you all right, did I - oh -" Smudging at his tears with the back of your hand, even though his face is among the less messy surfaces between the two of you –

- Still, teartracks streak straw-colored under his eyes, stripe shaky past the corners. But he isn't crying anymore, just barely keeping his eyes open, his body rolled flat with exhaustion but balled up inside with aching, muscles still twitching and tensing under you. He has to stop biting his lip to open his mouth, and a single wet-gold bead forms there, quivering as he tries to speak. An aspirated sticking sound, then a long shuddery breath, then an exhale that hardly makes any sound at all –

You're – he wanted this but you pushed him too far, there was nowhere to go with it but too far and you should have thought of that. "I'm sorry –" You've let go the grip of your psionics in some places, holding on in others, to let him relax into another position if he needs to - if he can at all. "I'm sorry, I love you, I'm sorry – oh – should I get your meds –"

There's an abortive staticy sparking between his horns, a low helpless growl – and Astris is reaching for you, faltering and teetering and determined, his hand slipping sweaty at your nape until he pulls at you with his forearm, instead, pinned behind the back of your neck – little pained scratching noises as the the joints close, but still he pulls you in to kiss him, his lips hardly able to move and tasting of droplets of blood but his tongue stretching, tentative, to touch against yours. He nods, just once, against your mouth. Drops his hand from your neck, lingering to try to caress your cheek: quivering and a scuff of curled-in claws.

Your mouth and face are still sloppy-wet from his release and the kiss takes you by surprise – you
didn't know if he would want - and you exhale half-purring and press your hand over his, hold it there as you pull away, then finally let go. "I'll be back quickly, I promise, Astris, my own –"

"I -" He can't quite make it past there, but he manages a smile, trusting and sated through the pain. Puts his tongue to the corner of his mouth and even smirks a little, licking at the wet yellow smear you left there.

It doesn't take you long to wash up and return with one of the pre-measured syringes the medic team left and a cleaning packet; nobody is quite sure what he needs in the way of sterility precautions, how permanent or impermanent the effects of the biowire secretions might be in his system, but too cautious is better than not enough and you swab over the port in his chest before injecting the drug there, apologizing again like you've accidentally programmed yourself into an infinite loop of I'm sorry and haven't figured out how to kill the process yet.

He closes his eyes for a while as the drugs take hold, uncoiling and untensing slowly under you. Finally he yawns, jaw-crackling wide, coughs sharp and low in his throat, and less drawn away by pain now he can speak: "Don't say that, you – you didn't stop, I was afraid you would – thank you."

You don't even realize how shallowly you've been breathing, how still with concern you've been, lying there with your limbs curled over him lightly, head on his shoulder, until he speaks and you exhale all at once against his neck. You almost apologize again anyway, but you know what it is to want in a way that surpasses all fear of pain, and you can hear it in his voice, and so you lean over and kiss between his collarbones.

"You did warn me," you murmurr. "I pity you too much to deny you, you know that -" and your voice shakes with anxiety and you're trying to ignore the dim ache of desire, still, you can hear yourself making that weird high purr again, the deep-seated instinct to show vulnerability and you're trying to squash that down because you need to be caring for him right now.

"Wish I could have felt it, for you, the way you wanted me to –" And Astris breaks off long enough for your tight-strung purr to make it through and just – gasps, soft but permeated with the pebbly beginnings of rumbling – "Did I – you're still – I didn't think you'd want, the way I am –" And he's able to reach, now, a little wobbly from the meds but without flinching, to look at you, stroke down your chest with the back of his hand.

You're caught off-guard by the touch and by his sudden uncertainty, and you emit a small sound, half purr and half whine, unwilled and pity-laced and precarious. "My beautiful wreck," you remind him, "I want everything you are, I'll always -" and then you stop short, your heart in your mouth, and your voice quavers, "You did still want that for yourself, though - not just for me - I wasn't just - you weren't just enduring it?"

"It was my nameless impossible hope for two sweeps, you gorgeous pitiful numbskull, and it was perfect, you were so gentle, so good -" He’s flushed deep, stopped like he’s got his tongue stuck in his throat, and you know the look when he’s about to ask for something, no scarring could dim your recognition - "I just wish I had enough power left, to give back to you, I wanted to save some for you, but – I still want to see you feel it, pure, free from my pain, just – need to see that I still get to you like this –" And now he's the strangely shy one; buries his face in your neck, spit-slick and uncoordinated with tongue and fangs.

"Oh god do you ever get to me," and you just let the words come out rough with ardor, not trying to hide - "You were so beautiful, so pitiful, you are, you don't even know how much that did to me, touching you like I've always wanted –" Even diligently ignored for so long your bulge is still mostly out, trailing yellow forlornly along your thigh, and you lie back to let him see. "I'm going to pail myself, while you watch, and I'm going to actually need a pail this time, that's how you get to me,
fuck, I'm aching all the way up in my shame globes, have been since you unsheathed, since I caught the scent of you —"

He growls, narcotic-exhausted and glazed-over, "I want to pail you until we're both drained dry, until – until everything I can possibly coax from you is in buckets on the floor and you're a mindless purring mess –" Keeps going, trancelike, even when what he's saying stops being completely about sex; even when it's strange and too-much and probably impossible – "I want to remake this line with you, so it's yours as much as mine, like it should have been from the beginning –" And Astris puts a hand on your thigh, just rests it there, flushed so dark his scars stand out like constellations, all boundary-slurred sedation sheeted over in root-deep immobile wonder.

Just that clumsy touch makes you groan deep in your throat – you keep saying yes and we will even after he stops making sense, pull yourself up to sitting and swing around to balance on the edge of
the couch, facing so he can see you – can see the way your bulge twines toward his hand, contact-
greedy and moist and you reach over and swipe at his messy stomach with your hand and let your 
bulge grip at your slurry-wet fingers instead, faster than you can grip it back, involuntary, climbing 
further out of the opening as your genesac swells. "I can't stop thinking about what it will feel like 
when this is your hand on me – when you can – we'll get there –" Your tendrils writhe and whip and 
you give up on talking, feel your face going bright-hot under his eyes as you roll them between your 
fingers and pant.

His breathing speeds unthinking to match yours as his horns spark and flash, his almost-drained 
power stuck in a stop-and-reboot cycle, trying to reach for you but held back. "You're so – I didn't 
think, it didn't sink in until I saw you – That you would be just as lovely as you were, there, and now 
no one will ever change that – I'll heal just to make sure no one ever – ah –" His eyes flick between 
your face and your bulge and his hand on your skin like he can't decide where to look, so thirsty for 
all of it, so incredulous like you just stepped off the screen in the middle of a film and into his arms.

You cup your hand around your upper bulge and let it coil and shudder in the space you've closed 
around it - falling into a familiar rhythm, with the difference that you're doing it unashamed in front 
of him, meeting his eyes, calling his name. "Oh, Astris, I – fuck –" You knew you were going to 
need something in your nook, and now your lower bulge is surging in that direction, unaimed, 
guided by muscle memory and habit and the tip goes into you and you can feel your seedflap flutter, 
chemoreceptors answering faint signals –

You rock back, tilt your legs up to take it, reaching out your other hand to keep his steady on your 
thigh, just far enough away from your nook and bulge that you know it's going to tantalize and make 
Astris jealous of it and close enough that it's a tease to you as well – unhand your bulge for long 
 enough to decaptchalogue a bucket because by the time you need it you're not going to want to mess 
 around, and you're barely managing words between gasps as you push into yourself, almost but not 
 quite reaching deep enough – "– I didn't even know h- how badly I wanted to taste you, aah, can't 
 stop thinking of – the way you – looked when you unsheathed, I, oh –"

Oh, and he is jealous, hand twitching in yours, claws prickling into your leg and holding on, talking 
deliberately now, using the worn sandpaper edge of his voice to his advantage, the burned-down 
bass note of desire even with his body sated – “I'll wait as long as you ask me to, sweeps if you think 
it's right, I'll still know exactly where to press inside you when I fill you so you'll come undone, 
because I've felt that, too, from inside your head – Oh – Sollux, let me touch you, I – fuck, I want 
you so much, no one else, just –"

"You will, oh, god, hhmmn –" Your voice rises to a whine when your bulge just barely grazes the 
edge of your seedflap, it's not possible to trigger this reaction without another troll but the scent of 
him has crawled into your head and taken up residence, pheromones flipping switches you barely 
understand, and the pressure up behind your nook is a glorious heavy stretched ache that flares into 
pleasure when your bulge dips further – "you'll, you'll touch me every – every way possible – each 
time – something new –" Your breathing chops the sentence into ragged pieces and you close one 
hand over his and press your own bulge deeper with the other and don't even try to hold back the 
sudden keening noises you're making. "So close – already – you've done this to me, just from – 
touching you – tasting you – from your material – in me –"

"I wish you could see yourself, wish I could show you how you are to me, you're – you look 
obscene, you look seraphic, want to show you – oh, love, what it's like needing you –" And with an 
all-over shudder of will he drags his power under control enough to send a capillary tendril of it up 
your thigh from his hand, then another – not all the way in to where it would flare perfect against 
hidden nerves, not that controlled yet, just gives it to you, to pull inward if you want it, enough 
pulsing-oscillating radiance that it could bring you easily over the edge if you did. "You could have
dragged me into the light just by the force of how much I've longed to hear your voice break apart like that, just that alone–"

And you can't resist the implosive pull of his desire and yours, no matter what you had intended, you had a plan and there was a reason for it but you can't keep it straight in your head – but for a moment as you teeter on the brink you feel terribly lost, an echo of the emotion you shoved down so tightly before he was doing well enough to be coherent.

You gasp out, "Tell me again – tell me you'll stay –" and lean toward him dizzy-scared even as you hook your power into his, comfortable and familiar as parts of a whole, press tingling crackling light up against your seedflap until it opens with a rippling contraction and you're letting go - perched over the bucket, one leg on the couch with his hand still digging into your thigh and you're bent over at the waist, nuzzling your head into his shoulder and making shapeless sounds at him through the impossibly long clenches and surges of your release –

He's sobbing into your hair almost before you finish speaking, all in a rush as if he'd never stopped crying, before, when the pain lessened – damp-slurred and desperately breathless, "I promise it, I'm here and I swear to you I'm not leaving, I'll cling to you by my clawtips if that's what it takes to stay, I love you and I want to live--" His claws knitting into you, too moved to comfort, even as a soft awestruck purr creeps in below his tears when he feels his power pulled into your center, when you shudder deep around it – And he's shaking just as helplessly, overcome with crying, leaning hard on you as you try to balance –

And you gasp and whimper low in your throat and press yourself to him desperately, not for balance but for something far more important, and maybe there are tears on your face too but you're too far gone to notice, it's all you can do just to remember to breathe, his hot breath in your hair and his words allowing you to let go further, each tremor rocking you against him from deep inside and it feels like all the misery and fear of the last perigee is dissolving out of you, issuing from your nook and swirling into the pail along with your genetic material, seeping slower now, trailing off with your groans as you slump against him breathless.

Astris pulls his claws from your skin with a slow shaky effort that at first does nothing but twist them until some of the shallow crescent markings run bright with blood.

He barely has voice for "I'm sorry," nuzzled against the crown of your head, before hoarse uneven hiccups overtake him again, sounding like relief now, smiling tears. You know there's loss there still, even when you can't hear it, and he wheezes harder with each breath, as if even medicated each slamming open of his lungs still hurts him – but – "So that's – what I do to you –" But there's the gradual interspersing of creaky laughter, too; the reassuring warmth of his body under yours. The race of his heartbeat that hit pace with yours as he watched you, fast but strong. "You'll have to – keep reminding me –"

"I will, I'll never stop," you murmur against the side of his neck. You're parched with thirst, but too splayed-out with exhaustion to want to get up and drink something, "– do anything I can to keep you, Astris, you –" The thought comes clear to your mind but you can't speak it for long moments, it cuts too close for you to want to say, but you know he can't hear you, here in the flesh, and you push yourself to say it anyway. "– you remind me that – that being myself is worthwhile, because I see you and I know you deserve everything I can’t think of myself deserving –"

There's an odd calm in his crying as you speak, all deeply collected listening, and he's past moving, now, past making any gesture of repeated promise, but a ring of energy tightens around your hand and then dissipates, a simple pressure. "I know – I know that when the time comes you'll do what it takes to make me stay. We'll keep me here, you and I, we can, we will. But –" And he pauses long
and still strangely silent, his breathing dry and even but forced to it, counted in, counted out. "...But please don't talk to me about deserving just yet, I don't – I believe you'll be exalted by history, darling, and I believe you'll get that Nobell Prize in Medicine and another one in Putting Up With Impossible Old Ex-Starships, it's just that – I can't – I can't – I'm sorry –" And his voice finally breaks again, lets the tears back in, muscles quivering beside you like he's trying to form even more to you, trying to hold you but nothing comes – crying through flippancy and frank contentment both – "I'm OK, I promise, I just want to think about now, and how I think I might've bruised a rib but I really don't want you to move from where you are right now to find out – and... also, I think this might be what it feels like to be hungry between mealtimes?"

~~~

Thus ends Consummation and begins Apotheosis.

Chapter End Notes

*Initiation* and *Consummation* were Sollux's story, first and foremost; *Apotheosis* will be Astris' story, and if SGRUB and Vriska were the antagonists of *Initiation* and the Condesce the antagonist of *Consummation* then in *Apotheosis* the Captors will face down their own minds, and what it means to learn to live.

Special thanks to everyone who has given us art, reblogs, nice comments, frantic questions... and anyone who will do so in the future! All of these things keep us going, and we're being quite literal to say that we couldn't have gotten this far without you. We hope you'll stay with us for the final book.

If you're subscribed to *Consummation*, remember to subscribe to *Apotheosis* or on the series page to keep getting updates!

~~~

Some final errata:

* Suicide prevention pacts with loved ones are pretty useful if everyone's managing their boundaries well, but if you live on a planet where mental health care has been invented, please do your best to back them up with other measures and professional assistance. It really works better that way.

* Similarly, in real life, physical rehabilitation *does* require taking on challenges slowly. And even Astris' does, really, but having Tyrian immunomodulatory cell lines still thriving in your bloodstream is an excellent cheat code.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://archiveofourown.org) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!