Chaos Theory 2042: The Butterfly Effect

by Scarecrowlover

Summary

Once upon a twisted timeline, an odd mismatch of students, felons, and professionals traveled from city-state to shining city-state in a rusty-old van affectionately named "Vox Machina". Although poor, undignified, and perhaps a tad eccentric, having a good time was their specialty, even if their revelry often lead to a little more trouble than they bargained for...

Though fully aware that picking up a hitchhiker came with its risks, Vex was more than willing to roll the dice for the possibility of some extra gas money. Little did she know, it was a decision that would change their lives in ways she never thought possible.

Notes

I welcome you to a "comprehensive re-imagining of the ENTIRE Critical Role story", re-told in complex Modern Alternate Universe setting, albeit with some creative license to mix things
up just a tad. This first "book" will loosely follow the events outlined in this canon video summary of what happened pre-stream, narrated by the cast.

**YouTube Link**

Any other stories I have written in this universe are listed as part of the Chaos Theory series.

I must also warn you all: When I say this is a slow burn, I mean S.L.O.W. B.U.R.N. Although I do make some slight deviations to match a more progressive setting, I still go at the pace of canon. There are many more fics to come before things get remotely saucy. Ergo, if you are here for romance, come back in like...2 more years-ish?

As for everything else, expect all the things: low-key cyberpunk aesthetic, highkey polyamory vibes, way too much world-building, unresolved sexual tension, foreshadowing, Matt Mercer levels of descriptive violence, unnecessary drama, failed stealth checks, successful persuasion checks, social justice rogues, too many D&D references, even more music references, literal playlists to listen to, fan-art linked in notes, social commentary lamenting our imminent post-apocalyptic futures what?

Anyway, have fun. I suggest you don't speed through it because I publish slowly, but hey, you do you. Either way, I believe in you.

... Also bonus points if you catch typos for me. There are so many. Dyslexia is amazing.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#).
The white-hot glare of the freshly setting sun never ceased to make driving westward an irritating experience. It was nearly impossible to see, particularly on those damp, early winter afternoons when the humidity in the air propagated the sunlight across the horizon like a fog of pure light.

Not that it was really Vex’s problem. She wasn’t the one driving anyway.

The plan had been to leave the motel by dawn so they could beat the afternoon glare -- but of course, coordinating a group of seven people was never that easy. The mere fact that they had successfully managed to check out of the motel on time was borderline miraculous.

Vax grumbled to himself as he pulled down the sun visor, only to find that it did nothing to keep the blaring ray of white from finding his field of vision.

He huffed as he slapped it back up, before reaching a hand out. “Sunglasses Vex.”

“You know I wear them better,” she said, smirking as she checked herself out in the side view mirror.

“You wanna drive?” he threatened.

“And have you be a backseat driver for the next four hours?” she scoffed, handing over the glasses. “Not today…”

No road trip was ever complete without a hearty dose of bickering from the twins. Being confined in such close proximity

When compared side by side, Vax’ildan and Vex’ahlia looked nearly identical in body and visage, albeit Vax being a tad taller, pinch paler, and slightly slimmer. Still, they were similar enough that anything they did in tandem was a novelty to most and entertaining to a large majority, granting them ample social room to bicker like children long into their adulthood. Even now, the twins knew they were objectively difficult to tell apart, as repeatedly pointed out to them when seen in their interchangeable house attire. It was for this reason -- but likely for many more reasons still -- that the twins opted for fashion styles that were significantly distinct.

Vax was partial to wearing black everything, which was unsurprising, given his wardrobe contained little else. Today had been no exception: a leather jacket over a baggy ripped t-shirt, tucked into a pair of tight black jeans, complete with a studded leather belt with a silver snake-head belt buckle. His left eyebrow and both ears were pierced with silver, though he often took them out for work, albeit rather begrudgingly. Vex suspected he would have likely been the type of guy to dye his hair
black had it not already been of a lovely raven feather shade. He kept it long, and currently had it tied in a half-ponytail to keep it out of his face, a hairstyle he frequently adopted when he was too lazy to go for bun.

Although Vex would have loved to share in the luxury of easy hair, she had somehow managed to inherit both the coarse thickness of their mother and the follicle density of their father, resulting in a mane so frustrating to maintain that she had little choice but to stick with a single heavy braid down her back. It wasn’t a hairstyle she necessarily resented, though she imagined this was in part due to Vax’s willingness to help her every now and then. Back at home, her energy was spread paper-thin, causing her to find even the process of brushing her own hair a time-consuming burden she’d rather avoid. She’d limited most of her makeup to her eyes and lips for years now, finding her blemished olive complexion and dark circles familiar in her young adulthood.

She didn’t spend much time on her clothing either, though she could attest with reliable witnesses that her grungy attire helped her routinely messy hair look deliberate. Her go-to outfits were generally denim and plaid, though she certainly had some favorites among the sweater and jacket categories. She was wearing a bunch of faithful pieces that day, including a decade-old blue and green plaid button-up she’d stolen from someone at some point, and a gray graphic t-shirt with the face of a bear she’d bought in Old Trademeet during Wintercrest sales. To ward her legs from the cold, she’d learned to embrace the comfort of denim shorts over black leggings, especially because looking for pants that actually fit her was a waste of time and money. She occasionally stole her brother’s leather jacket when she could get away with it, but since it was his only semi-warm article of clothing, she’d opted for a baggy forest green sweatshirt instead.

Despite their occasional scuffle, and their tendency to steal each other’s clothes, and their bad habit of arguing right before bed, their love for each other was unmistakable. The twins were inseparable, and enjoyed each other’s company even during the most trying of times, including but not limited to long tedious road trips...

The drive home had been a comfortable one for the most part, given their mode of transportation. The van the team had affectionately named ‘Vox Machina’ was a rusty old bag of spare parts held together with duct tape and good luck. It was a miracle the thing still worked after all the years of abuse its previous owners had subjected it to. Frankly, they weren’t entirely sure how it was still running, or how safe it was, or how long it would keep working, but none of that mattered because it was the only vehicle big enough to fit them all.

Besides, they had all grown accustomed to traveling with a bit of flair. The spray paint job Scanlan had given it -- which was akin to 70s psychedelic graffiti art-- made it pretty hard to miss. This was, of course, intentional on Scanlan’s part. He swore on his life that it helped his image as a freelance performer, and considering he was the one who helped pay for most of the gang’s road trips and expenses in the first place, they didn’t dare critique the paint job despite the fact that it made them the most recognizable group of hooligans in the region.

Now Scanlan... he was the type of guy you didn’t forget. He was very short, nearing middle age, and smelled of booze, smoke, and cologne. And yet, there was a mysterious charm to him that caused nearly everyone to question their sexuality at least once. Frankly, a simple physical description didn’t do him justice. He was the type of man you just had to meet in person to fully understand his magic; the type of guy you’d be pleasantly surprised to meet after you’d cranked your standards too low after seeing the cringy picture on his online dating profile. He kept his brown hair at shoulder length and tied in a ponytail at the nape of his neck, with long sideburns and a well-groomed face. He always wore v-neck shirts and sweatshirts, flaunting his chest hair and natural tan whenever he could get away with it. Purple seemed to be his color of choice, but really, he had no issue wearing anything that matched the paint of Vox Machina, which had pretty much all the colors of this
The interior decor of the van -- lovingly picked by Keyleth -- was just as eccentric as its exterior but in a different, more holistic sort of way. She had made it feel like a home away from home, complete with flower print pillows, tie-dye curtains, and little hanging baubles she’d handcrafted that apparently brought good luck. She had also hung a clothesline of sorts on her side of the van where she had pinned numerous types of herbs and dried plants for quick access, which no one complained about because most of them had pleasant scents, save for the maybe the garlic. There were little wicker baskets where she stored food, blankets and toiletries, and piles of books tied to the sides with bungee rope.

Keyleth was arguably the most eccentric of the bunch, which was saying quite a bit considering Scanlan’s existence in the equation. Her flower-child attitude and old-fashioned naivety often prompted people to claim she was born a half a century too late. She owned nothing that was a solid color. Everything had to have some sort of intricate paisley or floral pattern with a minimum of four or five colors. Vex envied how she managed to make everything match, especially since she knew she didn’t actually try. Keyleth always chose comfort over what was in style, with baggy yoga pants and sweatshirts, flowing crop tops, or t-shirts with their collars and sleeves ripped off. She was the type who always looked beautiful, with her naturally wavy red hair and doe-eyed expression. She almost never wore makeup, and only sported jewelry she had made herself, fashioned out of shells, feathers, driftwood, or pretty rocks.

Tiberius, the focused one sitting right next to Keyleth was rather eccentric as well, albeit in his own pompous sort of way. He could be surprisingly polite given the correct context, though she often wondered if this inconsistency was the result of a very well disguised language barrier, or perhaps something deeper. Personality aside, in terms of appearance he was consistently more put together than anyone else in the party, and objectively better looking if the judge were a perfume company. His hair was always kept perfectly gelled and combed and trimmed, all of a rich auburn color. His tan complexion emphasized his broad and angular features and made it so he looked great in gold, which he wore often. He was the type of guy who had no issue flaunting rings, earrings, watches, and forest green suit pieces which he could afford thanks to the work he did for his family’s company, that is... before they cut him off. Thankfully he wasn't too snobby about it -- or at least he tried not to be if one discounted the fact that he wore stuff like this all the time. Overall, if you really got to know him, it was evident that he was more concerned with making sure his value as a person went far beyond the material, determined to prove to the world that he was more than just a product of good fortune.

Even now, he was busy studying something that he didn’t care to explain to the rest of the gang, especially after he’d learned that most of them tended to tune out before he could get to his point anyway.

Vax switched on one of Scanlan’s CDs, and some chill yet mildly eccentric music started to play. Nowadays, the only music Scanlan seemed to perform were quirky song parodies. However, back in the day, when he still played with his old band, he had created some original pieces that were actually quite enjoyable.

Keyleth took a hit from the joint she had rolled before passing it to the very back row where Pike, Scanlan and Grog were sitting.

Scanlan took a hit and blew out a few smoke rings before speaking to the front of the car. “Oi Vax, pick the next track. This one pisses me off. All I can hear is the mistake our drummer made.”

“Sounds fine to me,” Grog said, plucking the joint from Scanlan’s distracted fingers and taking a
hearty hit.

Scanlan shook his head slowly. “You’re a lost cause.”

Pike slapped Scanlan on the knee. “Don’t be mean.”

“What?” Scanlan asked, trying to sound genuinely shocked. “I’m just trying to underline the importance of rhythm in a piece. We went through seven drummers in two years you know…”

Pike rolled her eyes, while Grog kept smoking away, having apparently already tuned out most of the conversation. This didn't mean that he hadn't already internalized the conversation. In fact, knowing Grog, there was a pretty good chance he'd actually taken offense to what Scanlan had said, and was simply choosing not to acknowledge it out of a desire to avoid confrontation. He may have been a man of simple logic, but he most certainly was not dumb.

Pike knew this better than anyone, and not just because she was a decade older than all of them, but because she was a fucking monster when it came to spotting the good in people. Pike was, with almost complete certainly the stand-in big sister of the group. She was a bit older, having completed most of her schooling, though it didn't make her by all means boring or a party pooper. She was always the first to agree to one of Keyleth’s bar crawl proposals, and could drink almost anyone under a table. Yet despite her boisterous demeanor, she was currently interning at a hospital and was actually quite brilliant at her job, making her an idol for most of the Vox Machina crew. She was short and stout, with rosy cheeks and hair that would make a punk rocker jealous. She was a natural blonde, but for as long as they had known her, her hair was dyed black with a vibrant purple streak. She'd always mentioned how she planned on dying it back to her natural color for work, but she hadn't gotten around to it, and most of them knew she didn’t want to. Besides, her mild attire genrally balanced things out. She looked great in light blue because it complimented her soft colored eyes, though she refrained from wearing anything too fancy. She mostly opted for jeans and collared t-shirts, and avoided jewelry save for a praised gold pendant that had apparently been passed down for generations. Overall though, one could say Pike -- as a package -- was nothing less than adorable, which made her particularly interesting when seen walking alongside Grog, her roommate and best friend.

Grog was by far the most intimidating of the group, both in appearance and in reputation. Most people born and raised in the roving Midlander gangs did their best to hide, disguise, or surgically remove their tattoos, body modifications, or trace custom genes when they chose a City-State of residence; but not Grog. He flaunted his body art with a lot more pride than could be said for most who faced his brand of discrimination. At seven feet no one fucked with Grog, unless they were stupid or trouble, so frankly, it was nice to have him around. The story behind his friendship with Pike was a complex one, yet he was, in essence, a very simple man. He enjoyed women, beer, and a good honest fight, though Pike had tried to make sure he didn't dabble too much in the latter. His attire was kind of bland and of the sporty inclination, mostly going for loose fitting sweat pants and sports tops. Red and gray were his colors, contrasting heavily over his pale complexion and the series of black and brown tattoos curling around his arms, neck, and head. He didn't care that most of his clothing articles had been worn and torn for many years, and he likely wouldn’t spend money to buy newer stuff even if he could afford it. Although widely trusted in Westruun as "one of the good ones", Pike still worried and watched him closely, and he, in turn, respected her concern with friendship and trust.

“Hey, pass it up here,” Vex said, lazily reaching her hand back and waiting for someone to hand her the joint.

Grog snapped out of his daze and tapped Tiberius's shoulder, who didn’t indulge and instead passed
the joint forward to Vex in the passenger seat, never taking his eyes off the history book he balanced on his knee that was close to the size of an atlas.

Vex pinched the joint between her fingers and inhaled deeply, watching the bright orange ember glow hot before ashing it in an ashtray Keyleth had made out of clay. Her eyes drifted toward the horizon as she exhaled a thin ribbon of smoke that mingled with the rest of the haze in the van.

The snowy tree line seemed to drift by at the rhythm of the music, and she imagined herself in one of those cheesy music videos where the eccentric group of friends traveled in search of their fortune in a funny car. All they needed was a dog to complete the scene, but alas, they had left poor Trinket with their landlord.

Bringing him along would have made things far more complicated than they already were. The group had set off on a trip to find a traveling doctor Pike’s grandfather had suggested after acquiring a couple of Feywild Tech Festival tickets through subtly criminal means. They had needed someone to check out Grog for a while, and given the fact that most doctors in Westruun were either understaffed or terrible, hooking Grog up with both tests and treatment at the Feywild Tech Festival was a massive win for the group at large, even if it meant taking a two-day-long road trip to get there.

Not that anybody really gave a damn. They were all family now; a perfect mismatch of college students, professionals, and ex-convicts who loved spending time with each other. Had an author attempted to depict their ragtag group in a novel, an editor would have scrapped the idea immediately because no respectable reader would take it seriously, which was a real shame because Vex would have loved to read a book like that when she was still a teen with no foreseeable future.

Back then, she never would have dreamed of a life like this. She bitterly remembered a time when she was still surviving in Syngorn with her father, with nothing to keep her sane but her twin and the promise of independence once they’d hoarded enough money to buy a one-way ticket out of there. And eventually, they did.

It hadn’t been easy, but Vax and her were finally living a life that was -- for the most part -- enjoyable, despite the roller coaster that was their living situation. Sure, their current home was a ratty cramped apartment on the poor residential outskirts of their city-state, and sure, they seemed to be magnets for the oddest types of trouble, but at least they had a group of people they felt proud to call family; albeit a family that the twins had found by accident under... questionable circumstances, but a family nonetheless.

Vex sighed out another puff of smoke before passing the joint back to Keyleth.

Frankly, she felt pretty happy with the way things were, so much so that if her current state of existence were to stay exactly the same for the rest of her life, she honestly wouldn't be too upset about it.

She rested her arm against the door and stared ahead, her brown eyes drifting from side to side as they followed curious-looking pines and the occasional road sign or shanty-town ruin. The subtle purr of the van under the eclectic jazz and haze of the high were a recipe for drowziness that would have had her knocked out in minutes had her gaze not caught a hint of something curious in the distance. The glare of the sunset made it hard to make out details, but from what she could tell, there appeared to be a person standing on the side of the road with their thumb raised upwards.

Vex’s eyes widened and she sat up straight. “Vax, pull over,” she shouted, pointing her finger toward the figure on the road.

"Why?” Vax muttered, flinching at her sudden outburst.
Keyleth leaned over between the driver and passenger seat to get a good look at what Vex was referring to and gasped. “Oh my gosh!” she squeaked. “A hitchhiker!”

Tiberius perked up, glancing over Vex’s shoulder. “Ah yes, a wary traveler in need of safe passage over the misty mountain pass.”

“You’ve been reading too much Tolkien Tibs…” Scanlan mumbled.

Vax narrowed his eyes as he kept his speed constant. “I don’t know how I feel about picking up random people off the side of the road.”

“As if they’re gonna cause us any problems,” Vex said, already rolling down her window, which caused cold air to rush in and force smoke out in billowing clouds.

“True.” Scanlan laughed, slapping Grog’s massive shoulder, “One look at Grog and they won’t even wanna get in.”

“Yeah Vax,” Keyleth said, resting her chin against the driver's seat. "We’ll seat them beside Grog. Nobody is that brazen.”

“Besides,” Pike added, a subtle tone of concern hiding behind her own excitement. "Poor sap must be freezing out here in the middle of nowhere.”

“And we could have him pitch in for gas!” Vex singsonged with a grin.

“I don’t know…” Vax muttered.

“Just pull over!” Vex, Pike, and Keyleth said in chorus.

“Okay okay! Fuck…” he said, resigning to his passengers’ request and slowing down. “Guess we can at least see where they're going.”

Vox Machina eventually came to an awkward and shaky halt as the wheels struggled to get good traction on the icy surface of the road, just a few feet from the hitchhiker, who appeared to be a man.

Vex leaned out the window, her long black braid draping over her shoulder. She scanned the man with a curious expression on her face, trying to read him as best she could.

He was wearing a short, black leather jacket with a dark blue cloth hoodie, and a pair of worn out jeans that looked damp near the bottom where his studded black leather boots had failed to protect them from the snow. He had a large backpack slung over his shoulder, a pair of gray fingerless gloves protecting his palms, a gray beanie over his head and ears, and a sky blue plaid scarf that complemented a pair of icy blue eyes shielded by round, silver-rimmed spectacles. What little skin she could see was pale and frost reddened, and it seemed as though he had neglected to shave for at least a couple of days.

She couldn't quite place his age, but he seemed young-ish, though there was a worn air about him and a tiredness that looked more than just physical. Nevertheless, no red flags were going off in her head; not yet at least.

She gave him a warm smile before speaking. “Hello darling. Where you headed?”

Scanlan nudged Grog with his shoulder and stage whispered. “Sounds like she’s picking up a hooker.”
Pike almost immediately elbowed Scanlan in response, to which he complained audibly.

Vex rolled her eyes but tried to focus on the man before her, who apparently seemed more interested in the van than her, his eyes darting across it, scanning the thing with an expression that seemed confused with just a touch of curiosity.

His gaze eventually settled back on her before speaking. “Civilization would be wonderful.”

For just a moment, his voice threw her off. It was deep and pleasant and far too proper for a ragged young man who was literally asking for a lift on the side of the road. Meanwhile, she could feel her brother looming over her like some sort of predator. She glanced behind her and noticed that everyone else was plastered against the windows on the hitchhiker’s side, gawking at him.

Vex smirked, trying to ignore the awkward energy behind her. “Well, you’re in luck. Westruun is just a couple of hours away and that is where we are headed if you’re interested.”

“I am,” he said plainly, his hands gripping the strap of his backpack more tightly.

“Excellent,” Vex said before turning around to look at her brother with a telling expression.

Vax sighed, rolling his eyes before gesturing at the people in the back. “Alright, make some room and let him in.”

The man muttered a few quiet thanks as Keyleth opened the massive sliding door and shoved a bunch of pillows on top of Tiberius so she could take the middle seat. “You can sit by me!” she said, rapidly patting the spot beside her. “Oh, and watch your head,” she continued, pointing at her clothesline of dried herbs.

The man quirked a brow at her and glanced inside the vehicle, looking more than a little suspicious.

Keyleth smiled, patting the spot beside her once more. “Come on.”

The man stared toward the snow-ridden horizon, let out an exasperated sigh and eventually hoisted himself up, placing his backpack between his legs and closing the door behind him.

Vax started off again, grimacing as the van lurched forward with a sound that wasn’t very comforting.

Tiberius closed his book and stowed it away under the seat in front of him before outstretching his hand over Keyleth toward the newcomer’s gloved hand.

“Greetings and salutations! I am Tiberius Stormwind. What is your name?”

Vex studied the man’s reaction in the rearview mirror and found it to be rather standard for anyone who was faced with the outgoing and unusual nature of Tiberius.

The man half smiled, returning the handshake with an uncomfortableness that either indicated shyness, or some form of unrevealed discomfort.

“Percy will do fine. A pleasure, really,” he said just in time before Scanlan leaned over his shoulder, his face inches from his. “Scanlan Shorthalt, professional musician, world traveler, and de facto owner of this lovely vehicle that so graciously warms you.” His mouth stretched into a pearly white grin, raising a newly rolled joint in front of Percy’s face. “You may have heard of me.”

Percy’s lips parted as he stared at Scanlan, then at the joint, then back at Scanlan. “I... don't believe I
have,” he said, carefully nudging the joint away from him.

Scanlan smoothly handed the joint to Grog before continuing. “Well, you have now! Come to my next performance. Here’s my business card,” he said, flipping one to Percy seemingly out of nowhere like a professional magician.

“Hate having to remind you Scanlan,” Vex said, turning to face him, “but just as a quick side note, we all pitched in to buy this bag of bolts, and I technically own it on paper…”

“But who made the biggest contribution?” Scanlan asked, though he already knew the answer.

Vex sighed. “You did…”

“And who pays for most of the insurance, hm?” Scanlan asked, wiggling his brows.

“You do, allegedly,” Vex said, glaring at him. “Check does say your name on it.”

Scanlan pressed his hand against his heart. “I am an honest man Vex’ahlia! I am both hurt and shocked at your accusations.”

“No one ever accused you of anything.”

“Allegedly?” he air quoted. “I am a master of the common tongue. I know my vocabulary and its connotations.”

“Okay, settle down you two,” Pike urged. “Not in front of our new guest.”

Percy, who had been following the conversation wide-eyed, let out a nervous laugh. “I don’t mind,” he said, slowly rubbing his arms to warm himself.

“We’ll behave, we promise,” Pike said, smiling back at him. "I’m Pike by the way. Pleased to meet you.”

“A pleas-”

“And I’m Grog,” he butted in, reaching a flask over and shaking it in front of his face.

“Hi,” Percy blinked, nudging the flask away with his pinky. “and...I’m good for now, thank you.”

“Suit yourself…” Grog said with a shrug, downing some of the flask’s contents before pocketing it.

“And I’m Keyleth!” she said, leaning in to get a good look at him. Her expression then morphed to one of immediate concern. “You look cold. We can turn up the heat if you want.”

“I’m quite alright.”

“No, no! We can,” she urged. “Vax, turn up the heat.”

“Honestly, I’m fine.”

“I have blankets if you’d like! Let me get you some blankets,” she said as she unbuckled her seatbelt and started to crawl over her seat.

“It’s fine, really!” Percy said, gripping her wrist and ripping the beanie off his head to prove his point. “I’m very comfortable. Warm even!”
Vex’s eyes widened as his hair was revealed, and she could tell Keyleth was having a similar reaction. It was short, thick, a little messy, and most certainly white as the snow outside. She could tell it was an exceptional dye job by the way it seamlessly faded into a dark gray towards his sideburns. It could have been mistaken as natural, but not on someone his age. He rocked the look though, and Vex almost felt a touch of jealousy.

“You’ve got to forgive Keyleth. She can be a little overbearing,” Vax said, still looking forward.

“Aw, c’mon Vax!” Keyleth wined with a pout. "I’m just trying to be a good host.”

“Which is rather respectable, I can assure you,” Percy said, trying to reassure her. “And thank you,” he said, turning toward Vax. “For picking me up I mean. I hope I’m not a burden.”

“Don't thank me,” Vax said. “It was the ladies that insisted. I was perfectly fine with leaving you on the side of the road.”

Percy swallowed once. “Understandable.” He stared down at his damp boots. “The cars that drove by before you certainly did.”

“Aw…” Keyleth said, resting a hand on his shoulder.

“How long have you been out there?” Pike asked.

“Not sure. Lost track of time when my phone died,” he said, pulling his phone out of his pocket and staring at it dejectedly.

“Oh!” Tiberius perked up. “What model do you have? I have chargers you can plug into portable batteries,” he said as he started to rustle through a bag after getting a quick glance at Percy’s phone.

“Ignore my brother,” Vex said, whipping her head around to wink at Percy. “He’s been in a foul mood after driving all day. I’m Vex by the way.”

“A pleasure.” Percy nodded with a smirk, running a hand through his hair. “And I don't blame him. I wouldn't trust myself if I saw me on the side of the road either.”

“To be fair,” Vax said, giving Vex a bit if a glare. “You’re pretty brave for agreeing to step foot into this rusty can on wheels.”

Percy raised a brow. “Such harsh words for such an amazing machine.”

“Thank you!” Scanlan exclaimed.

“You’re kidding…” Vax said.

“Not at all. I was actually rather excited to see it coming down the road,” Percy continued. “I was hoping it would stop so I could take a better look at the model. No paint job can hide a relic like this.”

“You familiar with cars?” Vex asked.

“I dabble.” He shrugged. “And by the sounds of it, seems as though your brakes need checking out.”

“Had them changed a month ago,” Vax said.

“It’s not the pads. I have my suspicions on what it might be but I’d have to take a look at it.”
The group was silent for a moment before Vax finally spoke up. “Would you?”

Percy’s eyes widened, but when his eyes met with Vax’s in the rearview mirror, his expression softened and he adjusted his glasses. “Of course. Least I could do.”

Vex smirked smugly as she settled into her seat, crossing her arms and raising her chin to the universe. She could already tell that picking up Percy had turned out to be a decent gamble, and she couldn't wait to get home so she could have her “I told you so” speech with Vax.

Chapter End Notes

This first chapter was a challenge because I wanted to make sure I got the character descriptions just right. It was very important to me because this work will actually involve the other characters quite a bit, and there may even be some point of view shifts, so I wanted to establish their importance to the narrative early on.

EDIT: So in the last Talks Machina episode (4/18/2017), we made the shocking discovery that Pike had black hair with a purple streak in it pre-stream before she died. It turned white after her resurrection. So, since I am trying to keep things as close to the spirit of the canon as possible, I made the change. Don’t be alarmed...
Poor and Homeless

Chapter Summary

Last time, on the Butterfly Effect:
While heading to Westrun, the Vox Machina team picks up a strange hitchhiker by the name of Percy, though how useful or trustworthy he will be is yet to be decided…

Chapter Notes

No Content Warnings this chapter.

There are references to real music in this chapter. YouTube links are in the end notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The drive was as peaceful as it could ever be, given the fact that they now had an absolute stranger on board. Vex had taken on a self-imposed responsibility to keep an eye on the newcomer, since she took partial credit (or blame) for his presence in Vox Machina.

Her first impression of Percy painted him as an agreeable young man. He didn't judge them for smoking in the van, nor did he complain when Scanlan decided to play his harmonica, which was a sign of noble patience. Although he was shy, he was not rude; a rather apparent trait, considering he'd missed more then a few opportunities to roast Keyleth while she talked his ear off for almost two hours straight. In fact, he almost seemed genuinely interested in what she had to say, giving Vex ample evidence toward her initial verdict of the man: he was either a person with vastly varied interests, or a great actor.

The others occasionally gave him some relief by asking him questions about cars and his other hobbies, to which he responded with brief and mildly vague responses that were typical of someone who didn't really care to reveal his whole life story to a car full of strangers.

He’d apparently been traveling for months because he didn’t like the situation at home, hopping from town to town in search of odd jobs so he could make enough cash to move to the next larger city. His goal had been to find a more lucrative job in a location he liked so he could settle down and perhaps start some schooling, though he hadn't been able to get his footing the last few weeks.

Vex couldn't help but feel a twinge of sympathy for the man. It wasn't too long ago when her and Vax were also on the road, trying to make something of themselves, wandering for years without a home or purpose, living off of odd jobs and the purses of others. It hadn't been easy, but at least they had almost always had each other to rely on. She couldn't even begin to imagine what it would have been like to live that lifestyle completely alone, and knowing that, she felt a budding sense of respect toward Percy, even beneath that heavy veil of standard mistrust she draped over everyone.

About two hours before reaching Westruun, the team stopped at a small gas station for one final pit stop. The sun had just set over the wooded horizon, though the sky still retained the oranges and purples of the once bright winter day. Percy slid out of the car, put on his beanie, and leaned against
the van, reaching for a packet of cigarettes from his jacket pocket and popping one into his mouth.

Vex stared at him from across the parking lot as she waited for Keyleth to get out of the restroom, her arms crossed to shield her hands from the icy wind sweeping over the fields. She studied him as he fished around for something in his numerous pockets. His mannerisms were graceful even in his flustered state as he struggled to find what he was looking for. He patted himself down, cigarette pressed between his lips, before eventually finding his lighter. Vex smirked as he attempted to light his cigarette numerous times, shielding it with his hands, changing the direction he was facing to protect it from the wind, shaking the lighter a few times, before slumping his shoulders in apparent defeat. Tiberius rushed over to assist him, pulling out his own trusty red leather-bound lighter and lighting both Percy’s and his own cigarette.

“Handsome, don't you think?”

Vex nearly jumped in response to Vax’s sudden appearance behind her. She slapped him on the arm and he playfully slapped her back.

“He would be your type, wouldn't he?” she said, narrowing her eyes at him.

“I was actually thinking the same about you,” he said, grinning at her.

“I don't have a type,” she sneered.

“Bullshit.”

“And even if I did, he isn’t,” she scoffed, crossing her arms. “Poor and homeless isn’t exactly what I’d consider attractive.”

“Vex’ahlia...” Vax’s expression grew serious. “Since when did you become so awfully superficial?”

Vex frowned at Vax. He was right of course. She had not intended to be so callous, especially considering her and Vax had been homeless for many years of their life, and were still very much poor. She wasn't the type to judge someone based on their monetary belongings, especially since she knew plenty of people who had money who were bags off pure bullshit, like their father, for instance. Sure, it was no lie that a small part of her envied those more fortunate, but it by no means meant she looked down upon the downtrodden.

Frankly, she didn't exactly know why she had blurted out such an abhorrent comment. She figured it was probably because she just wanted to shut her brother up, and thus chose the first obvious flaw she could find in Percy.

“I’m not being superficial! I’m just…” she bit her lower lip. “Look, just because you fancy him doesn't mean I do. We don’t have to share everything in life.”

Vax laughed. “At least I have the confidence to admit it when I find someone good looking.” He flipped his hair over his shoulder and glanced at the van.

Vex’s eyes followed Vax’s, trying to not look conspicuous as she watched Percy and Tiberius chat away, their cigarette smoke getting lost in the wind.

Vax cleared his throat, nudging Vex with his shoulder. “Actually… jokes aside.” His expression grew a little more serious and he gave her a knowing look. “I was sort of hoping to get your opinion on him.”

Vex’s brow furrowed and she dropped her shoulders a little. “Oh…” she muttered, biting her lower
lip again. She took some time to reflect, staring down at her boots before shrugging and looking back up at Vax. “He seems trustworthy enough. I don't get too many bad vibes…”

“Too many?” Vax quirked a brow.

“I don’t know…” Vex said, staring back down at her feet. “He seems too polite. Too refined to be your average homeless guy, you know? Something doesn't feel quite right, but I can't put my finger on it.”

“Should we leave him?”

“No, of course not.”

“Vex…” he said, stepping closer and taking her hand. “I trust your judgment of character more than anyone else. If you sense he's dangerous then-”

“I don’t think he's dangerous. Just, something feels off, that's all.”

“Should we not have him look at Vox Machina?”

She shrugged. “Honestly? I see no problem with it. I doubt he’d gain anything out of damaging it. At the most, he’s hoping to get some sort of compensation, and that is a stretch considering we’ve done him a massive favor.”

Vax bit the inside of his cheek, staring her straight in the eyes for a long moment, probably trying to glean something off of her. He wasn't good at reading people, but he could certainly read her; better than anyone, as a matter of fact.

Vex stared right back at him; she had nothing to hide, and she wanted to make sure he understood that. Vax was a very emotion-driven kind of person. Once someone planted an idea into his head, it was hard to get it out, even if you tried to rationalize with him. She worried that perhaps admitting she felt iffy about Percy was a bad idea; that Vax would take that as a reason to distrust him more than he deserved and harbor an unhealthy bias against him.

In an attempt to relieve some of the growing tension, Vex rubbed his arm, which prompted Vax to let out a drawn-out sigh.

“You’re probably right,” he said, patting her on the shoulder.

Vex lowered her hand to his palm and squeezed it a little, and his expression softened in return. This was how they always did things. She was the judge of character and he was the blade. It was a survival method they had almost refined to perfection, though even they could make mistakes. They had in the past.

“Besides.” She half smiled. “He’s good looking.”

“True.” He smiled back at her.

“Vax!” Keyleth shouted, barging between them as she looped her arm around his. “Let's go get snacks.”

“I’m not that hun-” he gasped as she dragged him into the convenience store.

Vex closed her eyes and shook her head with a smirk before heading to the vacant restroom.

***
Once everyone was watered and rested, they took their places in the car, only this time, Scanlan sat behind the wheel next to Grog, while Vax and Vex took the spots in the very back row beside Pike.

Scanlan adjusted the height of the seat, put on his seatbelt, adjusted the rearview mirror, and started up the van as he spoke to the team with a great sense of pride. “So... I just got a new gig. You impressed Pike?”

Pike rolled her eyes but tried to sound cheerful, just like a mother when a child shows off a horrid drawing. “Oh, good job Scanlan, how’d you do that?”

He turned up the music and drove toward the main road, a big grin still plastered on his face. “A guy in the store recognized the van.”

“Of course he did...” Vex said, side glancing at Vax.

“Advertising at it’s finest.” Scanlan smiled. “Learn from the master guys...learn from the master.”

Percy glanced around as he listened to everyone groan.

“Well anyway... ” Scanlan said with a dramatic pause to make sure he had everyone’s attention before continuing. “Turns out he likes my stuff, and wants me to play at the Cloudtop next month.”

The energy in the car immediately shifted from one of exasperation to utter bewilderment. Some gasped, others leaned forward, as if trying to soak in the information they had just received.

“In Emon?” Vex squeaked, her brown eyes wide. “That’s really high end.”

“I know, I know... Guess the guy couldn't resist the good ol’ Shorthalt tenor.” Scanlan grinned. “I’m incredibly brilliant.”

“More like incredibly lucky,” Vax muttered, pulling his sunglasses over his face and leaning back in his seat.

“Oh, don’t undermine what I just got us,” Scanlan said, raising a finger.

Vax crossed his arms and shrugged. “You need to give Lady Luck credit when she deserves it. I know I’m not gonna take her for granted.”

“Okay fine. Let's give luck half of the credit and call it even shall we?”

“Sure,” Vax said half-heartedly, looking like he was trying to catch some sleep. He’d driven for most of the day, and he wasn’t too keen on continuing a conversation that could go on for hours.

Vex sighed and slowly shook her head. It wasn’t that they doubted Scanlan’s musical talent. He knew how to DJ, and he was very good at playing a myriad of musical instruments, though how many exactly, Vex wasn’t sure; she was quite certain he knew how to play the accordion because he once performed this insane mashup of popular songs called “Polka Face” with said accordion, a performance that could only be described as... disconcerting. Now his singing, well, his singing was good per se, as in he could hold a tune and reach some pretty high notes...However, that wasn’t exactly the problem.

The real issue that made this sudden job offer so perplexing was Scanlan’s genre. The only time they had ever heard him sing was through his wildly funny, though mildly offensive parodies. Vex remembers a particularly poignant instance when he dedicated a cover of “Like a Virgin” to Pike when she started her internship, only he named the song “Like a Surgeon.” He even made his own
music video for it, in which he filmed himself pulling foreign objects like spaghetti and alarm clocks out of a teddy bear. The whole performance was both dark and a little bit gory, and the worst part about it, Pike wasn’t even training to be a surgeon...

For this reason (and frankly this reason only), the group had a little trouble comprehending how crowds at the Cloudtop would react to his style of music.

Scanlan sighed. He changed the music to something more relaxing and glanced into the rearview mirror. “So Percy.”

“Yes?” he said, pulling his attention away from his phone.

“Since we're on the topic of luck... do you think we can count on luck making sure this baby’s brakes hold out all the way to Emon?”

“I personally would not. But I can give you a straight answer once I get a good look at them.”

Scanlan hummed to himself, a mischievous expression spreading across his face. “Well, I don’t know about everyone else, but I vote that once you check them out we can call us even. No need to pitch in for gas or that sort of thing. Does that sound fair?”

“Sounds agreeable,” Percy said with a polite smile.

Vex perked up. “Wait a minute.”

Everyone looked at her, save for Scanlan, who looked like he was having a jolly old time as he kept an eye on the road, drumming his fingers on the wheel.

“Oh? The treasurer thinks otherwise?” Scanlan said with theatrical shock. “You think we should have this poor young man look at our van for free and pay for gas? But I thought you were all about trade and bargaining?”

Vex narrowed her eyes at him. “Scanlan, I fucking swear…”

“What? It’s why I brought it up. I thought you liked democracy?”

Vax, who was clearly only pretending to be asleep, started to snicker under his breath, his arms still crossed with his chin tucked against his chest. Vex tensed her jaw and elbowed him in the ribs, and he kicked her in the shin in retaliation.

“I think that’s fair,” Pike said. “You’d be doing us a big favor Percy.”

“Yeah, I agree,” Keyleth said.

“And you seem to be quite knowledgeable on the matter, so we thank you again for your expert services,” Tiberius added.

“Yeh, what ’e said,” Grog muttered.

Vax raised a thumb in the air before curling back up in his resting position.

Vex huffed and crossed her arms. “Alright, fine.”

“Good, it’s settled then,” Scanlan said with a wide smile across his face.

Looking both annoyed and defeated, Vex crossed her arms and started to mutter silent curses under
her breath as a means of coping with Scanlan’s provocations. However, her moment of private spitefulness was cut short when Percy turned around to look at her with an air of seriousness that she did not expect. It didn’t look like he was necessarily trying to antagonize her, more so that he was trying to understand what was bothering her.

Her eyes widened and she immediately tried to salvage the situation. “No, really darling, it’s fine. I was kidding.”

“You sure?” Percy asked, sounding genuinely concerned.

“Yes, of course,” she said, feigning a smile.

Looking a little less than convinced, he gave her one final side glance with those icy blue eyes of his before turning around.

Vex exhaled slowly, trying to mask her sigh as best she could. Of course, she hadn’t been kidding. It would have been nice to split some of the gas money. It was a half of the reason she’d even suggested picking Percy up, and Scanlan knew it. Frankly, she didn’t think just looking at the van was worth that much, but then again... she knew nothing about cars, and everyone else seemed to outnumber her with their opinions. The last thing she wanted to do was seem greedy in front of her friends, though it was probably too late.

“So what ‘appens if you find something wrong with ’em?” Grog asked rather suddenly. “Then what?”

Vex raised a brow, curious.

“Now now,” Percy said with a small smile. “Let's not go borrowing trouble,”

Vex rolled her eyes. That was a cop out response if she’d ever heard one.

There was a long pause before Grog spoke up, furrowing his brow. “Borrowing?”

Percy’s expression went from smiling to confused as he tried to understand what he had said that was so confusing.

“It’s a saying Grog,” Scanlan said, sounding a little patronizing.

Percy looked mildly embarrassed by his own inability to communicate, but Tiberius came to the rescue and whispered into Percy’s ear. “Grog’s a little bit slow. You need to use very direct language with him.”

Percy nodded slowly with an air of sudden understanding, before pressing his glasses on his face and speaking up. “We’ll worry about it when it becomes a problem Grog.”

“Now that makes a lot more sense,” Grog said, raising a thumb.

“Indeed it does. Thank you,” Percy said, smirking.

Vex chewed the inside of her cheek. Once again, Percy didn’t seem particularly phased by the group’s eccentricities, which was possibly another point in his favor, though he was still hard to read, and she couldn’t be certain about whether he was genuinely understanding or just tolerant enough to stay on their good side until he could find a better ride.

Nevertheless, she would keep track. Each right answer helped him tally up a higher score on her
internal human decency meter, which in turn dictated whether he deserved her and her brother’s respect: He was civil and polite toward his saviors, a behavior that was -- although expected -- worth maybe a few brownie points; he’d very promptly agreed to take a look at Vox Machina, which was rather gentlemanly of him, but again, unimpressive considering they had saved his ass from possible dehydration, hypothermia, and/or other forms of bodily harm; and of course, he hadn’t tried to murder any of them yet, which was fantastic way of gaining points, if not a little cheaty.

Sure, maybe she was being a little harsh, but everyone competed in Vex’s little game, and very few ever won...

The van eventually grew a little quieter as the group finished processing the fact that they were most likely going to Emon in a month, which was a rather impressive feat considering it was one of the most expensive cities on the continent.

As the last bit of light vanished behind the mountains, Vax finally fell asleep, leaning against the window. Vex tried to stay awake so she could keep an ear on the conversation and an eye on Percy, but eventually, she succumbed to the tiredness that had struck her brother, resting her head on his shoulder and falling asleep as well.

Chapter End Notes

Yes...I know...

I am writing a weird alternate universe where Scanlan is somehow producing "Weird Al" Yankovic's music.
But bear with me. Just picture our good old Scanlan Shorthalt signing these masterpieces and thank me later.

"Polka Face" Link
"Like a Surgeon" Link
Bad News

Chapter Summary

Last time, on the Butterfly Effect:
The twins privately discuss their thoughts on Percy while getting gas. They can’t quite decide whether he can be trusted, but they can certainly agree on one thing. He’s hot. When the team gets back on the road, Scanlan tells everyone that he's been asked to perform in the a high end club in Emon, and the group is absolutely stunned and eager to go.

Chapter Notes

No Content Warnings this chapter.

I know nothing about cars. I have a vague idea of what’s wrong with the van but... I kept things vague at the risk of sounding stupid.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Darkness had overtaken the sky by the time Vox Machina and its passengers made it past border control into the little city-state of Westruun. The urban landscape glowed softly against the evening air, outlining the skyline with gold, blue, and white lights. Although there was a general sense of relief in finally making it home, they could not escape the inevitable twinge of sadness that came with splitting the party.

They dropped Pike and Grog off first, who lived the farthest out of the city, close to her grandfather Wilhand. The neighborhood was a far more modern part of town: the apartments there were small but comfortable, complete with the latest Ashari solar roofing and pre-filtered water in all the pipes. With a fantastic and direct light-rail system to downtown, it was a great place to live if you were elderly, or had the money to afford it... Most of Pike and Grog's earnings, along with a little help from Wilhand, could afford them a single one-bedroom apartment. Grog slept in the living room on this dusty brown futon in front of the TV that he could fold into a three-person couch when he wanted to work-out. So in a way, giving him direct access to the largest room of the house (and also closest to the kitchen...) was less of an inconvenience and more of a happy stroke of genius. So overall, a pleasant place to live. It was too bad that Vex and her brother lived on the exact opposite side of town... Pike gave her hearty goodbyes and wished Percy good luck with the van because frankly, he was gonna need it. Grog showed his friendliness the best way he knew how and informed Percy that if he planned on staying in town they needed to get drinks sometime.

Scanlan was dropped off next, closer to the downtown area where he had this “studio”, that was really nothing more than an attic with what was essentially an airplane stall for a restroom, a microwave oven, and enough recording equipment to pay for a year’s worth of rent.

Downtown Westruun was quite the wonder. Held within the original walls of the city-state, and built back when wars were fought with a lot more horses and a lot fewer tanks, the downtown area was a
strange mismatch of old and new structures, systematically replaced by the architecture of the time as wars ravaged the city through the centuries. Given that the most serious war within Westruun’s borders was about fifteen years ago when Thordak Enterprises went rogue, there weren’t many buildings that were newer than 2020s in the downtown area, though, on occasion, a glittering new structure found its place in the relatively short skyline. Though not as slick as the newer structures where Pike and Grog lived, Scanlan certainly didn’t have it bad. Almost all public transportation connected downtown Westruun, and he even had a bus stop right beneath his complex. *Buss 69* ...of course. Vex was still pretty certain he’d picked that specific studio apartment just for that very reason.

As they dropped Scanlan off right in front of his stairs he -- of course -- insisted that Percy stay in touch on the off-chance that Percy wrecked something in the van and he needed to sue. He also handed him another business card, just in case.

Tiberius then drove the rest of the way toward Vax and Vex’s apartment, located in a part of town made of outdated apartments and neglected infrastructure. There were no real businesses, save for a couple of strip malls and a BigMart, which was all you really needed when you didn’t have the money to do anything else anyway; no need for movie theaters or nightclubs or bowling alleys or anything else that may have suggested that people had the time or gold prints to have fun. It was a beige and gray part of town, packed thick with apartments of all shapes and sizes, all in various states of disrepair and topped with terrible adverts sporting lawyers with their disturbing smiles and dishonest apartment ads with way more trees than actually existed in the entire neighborhood. Still, the perks of living in the dusty backstreets of the Westruun "avenues" were worth the smell of piss and gasoline. The apartments were cheap, public transportation was decent, and they lived right next to one of the only places in town that would actually hire Vax with his criminal record: The BigMart...

Upon entering the crumbling parking lot, Tiberius maneuvered into a space closest to a little plot of land that had a few flower beds, which were far too nice when compared to the rather gloomy collection of apartments buildings connected by external walkways. In front of the plot of land was a cheerful looking sign lit up with spotlights that read “Graystone Apartments”, written in bright, clashing colors. It contrasted rather horrendously against the buildings themselves, that were of an ashy gray color and in moderate disrepair.

The van came to a shuddering halt and everyone got out, starting off with Percy, who nearly took a hanging rosemary branch in the face as he was pushed out of the door by an all too eager Keyleth. She dragged him toward the sign and posed next to it like an infomercial model. “The landlord here let me repaint it. You like it?”

With his heavy backpack over his shoulder, Percy stood staring, as if he were trying to fully comprehend what it was he was actually looking at. He slowly adjusted his glasses and cleared his throat before finally speaking. “It’s colorful.”

“How very observant of you,” Tiberius said cheerfully, puffing away at a new cigarette.

“Oh! And I planted these... *and* these...and these...” Keyleth continued as she kneeled down and started pointing out the individual flower plants one by one.

Vax crawled out of the car and stretched out like a cat, letting out a mighty groan as he cracked his neck. “Fuck... I’m getting ol- gah!”

Vex shoved Vax out of the way and ran toward the apartment in a frenzied haste. She scurried to a door that read “Management” on the front and knocked incessantly.
Percy perked up at the immediate sound of barking on the other side of the door, and Keyleth clasped her hands together, smiling at the apparent source of the noise.

Vex got on her hands and knees, and with her cheek pressed against the concrete and her ass in the air, she peeked underneath the door and started to speak in baby talk. “Oh buddy...yes I know. I know.”

“What the-” Percy muttered to himself.

Suddenly, the door swung open, and out bound a massive dog that immediately pounced on Vex, knocking her prone.

“Oh good grief!” he shouted, his voice cracking slightly.

“Don’t worry Percy,” Keyleth said, lightly slapping him on the shoulder and resting her hands on her hips. “That’s just Trinket.”

Percy slowly turned toward Keyleth without taking his eyes off the dog. “Trinket?”

“Oh buddy, I missed you so so so much,” Vex said as the dog lapped away at her face, messing up her hair and clothing.

Meanwhile, an elderly disheveled man with round spectacles stared down at Vex with a raised brow. “Glad to see you happily reunited,” he said with more than a hint of annoyed sarcasm in his voice. “That bear you call a dog is a menace! The amount of food it eats is disturbing and scientifically puzzling...”

Vex pulled herself up with the help of Trinket and brushed herself off. “Thank you so much Eskil.”

“Mr. Ryndarian!”

“Mr. Ryndarian,” she corrected with a sigh. “Thank you. You know how much this means to me. How can I ever repay you?”

“Just pay your rent on time!” he blurted out before slamming the door behind him, causing Vex to flinch.

She stood staring at the door a few seconds before turning to look back at the others whom she realized were all staring at her. Her gaze met with the eyes with a very nervous looking Percy and she grinned. “You’re not afraid of dogs are you?”

“Not at all,” he said perhaps a little too quickly. “I was just surprised, that’s all.”

Vex walked up to Percy with Trinket by her side and smiled down at the dog. “Trinket, this is Percy. Percy, meet Trinket.”

The dog barked, and Percy flinched before trying to compose himself. “She’s... rather large.” He said, clearing his throat.

“Trinket’s a boy,” Vex said with a furrowed brow.

“My apologies. So sorry,” he said quickly, his cheeks and ears turning a little rosier. “I can’t tell with all that...” He gestured wildly, trying to come up with the word, “fur.”

Vex smirked at him with a raised brow and crossed her arms. “Well go on.” She nodded at the dog. “You can pet him. He’s rather friendly and so soft.”
Percy let out a long exasperated sigh. He cautiously began to reach his hand out, but not quite closing the distance. Trinket made up for Percy’s insecurity and nuzzled his hand.

A small smile spread across Percy’s lips and he scratched behind Trinket’s ears. “Hello Trinket.”

“Aw, he likes you,” Keyleth said, resting her palms against her heart.

“Trinket likes everyone,” Vax said in a rather monotone voice as he grabbed his backpack from the back of the van and slung it over his shoulder.

“That’s not true,” Vex protested. She raised her chin to the sky. “Trinket is a wonderful judge of character.”

Vax reached in to grab Vex’s backpack as well, and as he strolled past the group to head toward their apartment, he turned to look at her specifically. “I’m pretty sure he just hates anyone you hate...”

Vex stuck her tongue out at him, and he flipped her the bird.

Percy suppressed a small chuckle, “Well I guess I need to make sure you don’t hate me then,” He said, glancing at her.

Vex turned her attention back toward Percy and glared at him with a furrowed brow, thrown off by the remark. That was the kind of thing someone said when they intended on sticking around long enough for that to become a problem.

Percy cleared his throat and quickly looked down at his feet, and Vex bit her lower lip, now growing conscious of her own facial expression. She had a tendency to overanalyze little throwaway comments like that. He had likely just made a sly joke to point out how dangerous Trinket looked, though there was always the off chance that he was hitting on her, and she wasn’t quite sure how she felt about that. Either way, she’d let her death glare get off the leash again when she didn’t mean to.

Her lips parted as she started to blurt out some sort of clever rebuttal when Vax interrupted her with a tap of her shoulder.

“What?” she said with just a hint of annoyance in her tone.

Vax narrowed her eyes at her, then looked at Percy, then back at her. “The keys Stubby. I forgot you had them.”

As she did, Percy turned to Vax, “I can check the van out right now if you’d like.”

Vex felt a slight sting of guilt at his words and she masked a frown, now realizing that he was probably more eager to leave than she’d initially thought. Too be fair, they were all pretty fucking weird, though realistically speaking, it was more likely that he wanted to get away from the greedy woman with the scary dog who kept on glaring at him like he’d done something awful to her. She didn’t blame him.

“It’s pretty dark,” Vex said, trying to at the very least have him believe they weren’t rushing him.

“It’s fine, as long as someone gives me a little light I should be good to go.”

“Ah! I can be of assistance,” Tiberius said as he quickly stomped out his cigarette and jogged up to
the van. He pulled out a large torchlight and turned it on, shining it in everyone’s faces. “Light!”

Everyone groaned as they squinted.

“That will do,” Percy said, sounding a little pained as he shielded his visions with his palm.

Tiberius clicked off the light and smiled widely, raising a thumb.

“Guess that works out then,” Vax said. “The sooner we get this out of the way the better.”

Vex chewed on her lower lip. Her brother seemed to be eager to get Percy out of their hair as well. She could already tell there was something Vax didn’t like about him, and she partially blamed herself for it.

Vax began to wander back toward the apartment when he spoke again. “Gotta take a piss break before you start?”

“Um…” Percy looked a little thrown off by Vax’s bluntness but responded promptly. “Sure, thank you.” He briefly glanced back at Keyleth and Tiberius who were busy reorganizing things in the van, before turning back toward a fast-moving Vax and jogging after him.

Vex quickly followed suit with Trinket by her side, observing Percy as he walked up the stairs in front of her. It took them a couple of flights of outdoor stairs before reaching their apartment which was on the third and last floor of the complex.

Eventually, they made it to a very plain door with a welcome mat in the shape of a dog paw, which seemed to catch Percy’s attention, if only briefly. As they waited for Vax to open the apartment door, Trinket sniffed Percy from crotch to toe, rather intrigued by the new individual in his presence, and Percy absentmindedly pet him on the head.

Vex’s eyes met with Percy’s and he half-smirked. She gave him an awkward smile back before quickly looking back at the door. She felt nervous, and it didn’t take her long to understand why. She couldn't quite believe it, but part of her actually felt embarrassed showing Percy where they lived, though she couldn't imagine why he would expect any more from them considering their mode of transportation.

The door creaked open to reveal a tiny living room with a very basic kitchen attached to it. Chilling in the middle of the room was a frayed looking olive green couch with gnawed corners and some dusty looking pillows, and a teal blanket was tossed over one of it’s arms. Although it was facing a wall, there was no television; just a coffee table that looked like a vintage piece and an empty bag of chips Vex forgot to throw away before they left. Besides an oversized, half ripped dog bed in the corner, there were no other furnishings in the room save for an oddly resilient potted plant by the window.

“Down the hall and on the left. Can’t miss it even in you tried,” Vax said as he walked toward the kitchen and grabbed the empty bag of chips on the way before crumpling it up and dunking it in the garbage.

Percy really couldn't miss the bathroom without making a fool of himself. There were only three doors in the hallway: a small but thankfully clean linoleum-floored bathroom to the left, a storage closet at the end, and a single bedroom to the right that Vax and Vex technically shared, though she slept most of her nights on the couch because Trinket snored and she didn’t want to leave him alone in the living room.

Percy didn’t say much. He simply thanked Vax and left down the hall. When they heard the door
close and lock, Vex immediately looked up at Vax, expecting him to say something.

But he didn’t.

He was staring at their calendar, sipping a glass of water, his expression neutral. As if feeling her eyes on him, he turned to look at her, but again, remained quiet. Neither of them seemingly wanted to say anything. In all honestly, Vex preferred keeping conversation to a minimum in the eventuality that Percy heard them and thought they were talking about him, and considering they didn’t really have much to talk about besides him, they just remained quiet, both staring awkwardly at each other for what felt like almost too long.

Eventually, Vax spoke up. “I’ll go grab what tools we have. He’ll probably need them.”

With that, he disappeared into their room, leaving her standing in the middle of the living room with Trinket, her attention now taken by the same calendar Vax was staring at.

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Vex, Vax, and Keyleth all stood staring down at Percy and Tiberius’ legs sticking out from under the van. They’d been under there for nearly twenty minutes, and the others were growing rather bored listening to them mutter to each other like awkward lovers.

Trinket was roaming around, sniffing the parking lot and occasionally playing with some indeterminate object, though Vex would occasionally snap at him when she spotted him trying to eat it.

“Little to the left. No, your other left. Up. Yes there. Hold it there,” Percy said as he directed Tiberius with the flashlight. There were a few clangs, then the sound of muffled swearing that came from Percy.

Vex sighed and bent over, squinting at the light shining underneath. “Everything alright darlings?”

As if reminded that he belonged on the surface, Percy hoisted himself out from under the van with a grunt, soon followed by Tiberius who had a smear of grease on his face and glasses.

“Oh, one second Tibs,” Vex said as she walked up to him and wiped him off with an old kitchen towel, before handing it to Percy.

“So…” Percy said with a huff, accepting the towel from Vex and rubbing his hands clean. “Do you want to know the bad news or the worst news?”

Vax answered before Vex could. “The bad news…”

Percy smirked nervously, adjusting the beanie on his head, “Well...the bad news is that your brakes have the problem I thought they had. It would be an easy fix on your average car, but the issue here is finding the part. It could cost you upwards of a thousand for the vintage part, and that’s if we can find it. I could try to find a less expensive newer version, but that would take some time and research, and then someone would have to tweak it to match.

“And you could do it, right?” Vex said, her eyes wide.

Percy tilted his head and looked at her curiously, as if not expecting her question. “I mean...yes, of course. I just didn’t think you actually wanted me to work on it.”

She glanced down at Trinket who had now wandered back over and was sniffing Percy’s boots.
“Well if you know what you’re doing, perhaps we could strike some sort of deal...”

Percy continued to look at her curiously. She could feel his stare on her more than usual now.

Vax raised a brow at Vex before speaking up. “How long would it take if you did this? I know nothing about cars.”

Percy let out a drawn-out sigh, staring back at the van with an expression of subtle longing. “Well, it would certainly take some research...and to do the custom job I mentioned I’d need an actual workspace, which I’m assuming you don’t have, so that’s off the table.”

“Yes, but how much time?” Vex asked.

Percy shifted his weight and raised a hand, listing off factors with his fingers, “That depends on how much you are willing to pay, my ability to find what I’m looking for, your internet speed, and whether you have overnight delivery…”

Vax wrinkled his nose at him.

Percy sighed. “The time it would take is closely correlated to the budget you give me. You tell me how much you want to pay, and I start looking for parts that fit that price range. The higher the budget, the quicker it will be. It’s simple.”

“Okay fine,” Vex said, rolling her eyes. “Then what is the worst news?”

Percy closed his eyes and a nervous smirk spread across his lips once more, “The worst news is that’s not the only thing wrong with the van.”

“Fuck me,” Vex blurted to the sky. Part of her wished he hadn’t looked at it so she could live in blissful ignorance.

Percy started listing off problem after problem, to which Vex’s form seemed to shrink shorter and shorter with every new reveal. Keyleth and Tiberius both rubbed Vex’s back as they tried to comfort her, while Trinket rested his snout on her feet.

“I’m texting Scanlan,” Vax said with a sigh as he pulled out his phone.

“And how long will that take?” Vex muttered, her face in her hand.

“Same factors as the ones I listed before. If I had all the perfect parts in front of me I could get it all done in say…” he paused as he actively calculated the time, “six to eight hours. Labour doesn’t take that long if you have a person that knows what they’re doing. Though I must add, the longer I look at that thing, the more problems I’m probably going to find…”

She looked up at him with wide eyes. “Well do you think a month would be enough to get this taken care of? We need to go to Emon!”

Percy matched her desperation with a slight smile and a low shake of the head. “I can do my very best…”

Vex released some of the tension in her shoulders and she kneeled down to rub Trinket, as she often did in moments when she was a little less than calm. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure,” he said. He paused a moment, allowing the information to sink in just a little longer before speaking again. “But listen, there is one last wrinkle to your car troubles if I’m to do this for
you guys. And don’t get me wrong, I want to, because you seem like a friendly bunch and I don’t meet many like you very often.”

Vax and Vex looked at each other, Keyleth smiled with blushing cheeks, and Tiberius nodded with a hum of satisfaction.

“Thing is…” Percy continued. “I sort of need a place to stay. Preferably near the van. You know of a motel, maybe a hostel nearby?”

Keyleth perked up. “You could stay with us!” She wrapped her arm around Tiberius. “It’s about as close to the Vox Machina as you can get.”

“I don’t recommend that,” Vax said very quickly.

Percy looked at Vax a little confused, but Tiberius made sure to clarify as best he could. “Our current sleeping arrangement is…how would you put it? Well... cramped! You see, we are waiting for our new lease to start in these here Graystone Apartments, however, not wanting to pay twice the rent, which would be outrageously expensive for Keyleth and a poor college student such as myself, we wisely chose to not renew our lease at our prior residence, thus rendering us, for lack of a more tasteful term, homeless, for the time being... But thankfully, Vox Machina is quite large and comfortable thanks to Keyleth’s keen sense for furnishing! We have toiletries, and blankets, and plenty of portable chargers, and—”

“Like I said…” Vax interrupted, “I don’t recommend it.”

“A kind offer nonetheless.” Percy smiled, trying to reassure Keyleth.

Vax sighed, rubbing the back of his neck, “Look... you can sleep on our couch for the time being.”

Vex glanced at Vax wide-eyed, and mouthed the word “what”, making sure Percy didn’t see.

Percy spoke rather humbly and genuinely. “Thank you, that’s very kind of you.”

Vax shrugged. “Consider it payment for your labor. We’ll get you the money for the parts,” he looked at Vex, as if looking for confirmation, “somehow...”

“But um,” Vex interjected quickly, raising a finger. “Perhaps... work on the more important stuff first and work your way up, yes?”

“Of course,” Percy said.

“Good.” She nodded.

They all stood staring each other for a while.

Percy sighed and started to pick up the tools off the floor, placing them back into their case. The others all traded awkward glances with each other until Keyleth finally broke the silence.

“Oh my gosh guys…You know what this means?”

“What?” Vax said.

She hopped in the air and did a pirouette as she sing-songed her words. “New roommate!” She steadied herself beside Vax and pulled out her phone. “I’m order us some pizza.”

“An excellent idea!” Tiberius added. “Nothing like a cheezy celebration to call it a night.”
Vex’s expression gained some warmth as everyone started to chat up Keyleth to tell her their preferred toppings. She certainly knew how to bring people together. Sure, her outbursts could be a little startling and even obnoxious at times, but Vex wouldn't change a thing about her. It was people like Keyleth, Tiberius, Pike, and Scanlan who knew how to bring sunshine into the lives of those who couldn't shake their own dark clouds. Vex often wondered if it was why they’d all gravitated toward each other in the first place.

Her eyes drifted toward Percy, who had distanced himself from the others and was now busy smoking a cigarette, staring at Vox Machina with his back facing her. The dark shades of his clothes contrasted starkly against the van’s color scheme, and his slender form created long dark shadows beneath the flickering street light. Little tufts of silvery hair escaped from under his beany at the nape of his neck. The illusion of his statuesque stillness faded as he lazily lowered his cigarette toward the earth. He flicked some ashes onto the asphalt, and with one slow exhale, a thick plume of smoke rose from his form and spirited away into the night.

Something about the whole presentation was begging her to take a picture, but she figured some things were best left to memory.

Chapter End Notes

There is such thing as too many insight checks Vex...

Now, the trickiest part about this chapter was finding the perfect NPC to be their landlord. I had to dig through CritRole Stats to find info on NPCs they knew in Westruun, since it was all pre-stream. I finally settled on Eskil, which works out rather well because he has recently become relevant again in the show. It's a win for everyone I suppose.
Pound's Worth of Dog Hair

Chapter Summary

Last time, on the Butterfly Effect:
When the team arrives at Westruun, they learn that their van Vox Machina needs some serious repairs, and Percy agrees to help them out in exchange for a temporary place to live. Vax and Vex agree that he can stay on their couch.

Chapter Notes

No Content Warnings this chapter.
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Insight checks...insight checks everywhere. Vex always assumes everyone is a liar, and maybe this time she actually found one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There were few pleasures that topped the experience of enjoying pizza and beer with a couple of friends, and those that did exist were either too expensive to afford, or too awkward to pursue in a reality where Vex had to share a one bedroom apartment with her brother.

When the pizza finally arrived, Vex and Keyleth decided to sit cross-legged on the floor as they ate, a position they figured was far more comfortable than trying to squeeze on the couch with the others. Besides, it made viewing funny cat videos off of Vex’s laptop far less straining on their necks.

Vax, Tiberius, and Percy had sprawled out on the couch, although one may argue that Percy did a lot less sprawling than the other two; in fact, he actually kept to himself for the most part, confining his elbows and knees to one end of the couch to take up as little space as possible. Tiberius on the other hand -- who was sitting right next to him -- seemed to disregard Percy’s apparent attempts at gaining some form of personal space, and instead continued to wave his hands about as he talked about things that were somehow both interesting and obscure at the same time.

None of Percy’s mannerisms escaped Vex’s scrutiny, though she couldn't quite discern whether he was cornering himself out of discomfort, or because it was simply his way of doing things. He never voiced his concerns, nor did he show any expression that revealed any resentment toward his current predicament. He simply sat quietly and respectfully, eating very little and instead opting for liquid sustenance; Vex could see he had already consumed two bottles of beer in half an hour.

He wasn’t being asocial by any means, and he occasionally contributed to the discussion with witty remarks that even made her crack a smile every once in a while, though he didn’t do so without a constant modicum of reservedness.

Vex was on her third and last slice of pizza when the conversation shifted to discussing the van again, a subject that had already sparked enough anxiety in Vex’s psyche.

Vax sighed as he checked his phone. “Scanlan hasn’t gotten back to me. Bet he’s already drunk in
someone else’s apartment.”

“That is rather unfortunate,” Tiberius said. “Might be wise to assume he doesn’t have any extra money to spare and that we’re going to have to split the costs evenly.”

Vax pocketed his phone. “Without everyone here it’s gonna be kind of hard working out a sum. Anything left in the Vox Machina fund?”

“Checking right now,” Vex said as she logged into her account. “After a few seconds, she faked a grin. “And we have exactly 12 gold-prints and 38 cents. Fantastic. That should be enough, right Percy?”

“Oh yes, of course,” he smirked, indulging in her sarcasm.

“Look, for now, let’s just say the budget is...” Vax paused to think a moment, “420 GP for fixing the breaks. That works out to 60 GP per person, which I think we can probably afford, right?”

Keyleth shrugged, while Tiberius thumbed through his wallet, mumbling to himself.

Vex rested her face in her hands and groaned something incomprehensible, and Vax nudged an unopened beer bottle toward her. “Don’t worry about it now Stubby. We have time.”

Vex grabbed the beer greedily and opened it with her lighter before chugging part of its contents.

“It’s a start,” Percy said, taking a sip of his own beer. “I’m gonna begin looking for possible options tonight and get to work tomorrow morning.”

“Well,” Vax said, standing up with a grunt and picking up the empty pizza boxes. “I’ll send a group text and let the others know what’s going on.” He nodded to Percy, “I’ll send it to you too so you can collect everyone’s numbers.”

Vex dramatically slumped onto the floor, looking utterly defeated, and Trinket wandered over and licked her face before slumping beside her.

She’d get over this. All she needed was a million gold-prints.

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Keyleth and Tiberius eventually took their leave after Tiberius and Percy finished smoking outside and Keyleth collected all the glass bottles and cardboard pizza boxes so she could go recycle them in the morning. They both took turns brushing their teeth in the twin’s bathroom and made sure to hug everyone goodnight before leaving.

With the two gone, the apartment grew quiet once more. Vex let Percy borrow her laptop while she finished cleaning up with Vax, though even while she swept, she couldn't help but toss curious glances in Percy’s direction, even if it made her feel like a creep. There was just so much about him that intrigued her. During this time, Percy had finally taken off his leather jacket. Underneath, he wore a simple, yet slightly tighter fitting long-sleeved black thermal shirt, though he hadn’t taken off his scarf off yet. Nevertheless, without the jacket, she could now see just how thin he truly was, so much so that part of her wondered whether he was actually healthy. He certainly hadn’t eaten much for a guy who had supposedly been hitchhiking for hours.

“I’m going to bed soon,” Vax said, kissing Vex on the shoulder. “I’ve got the early shift tomorrow morning.”
Vex knew this was his way of saying that she needed to head to bed too. He probably didn’t trust her being alone with Percy, but she didn’t give his desires any mind. They were in a one bedroom apartment with a dog who could kill a bull. She wasn’t afraid.

“Good night Vax,” she said.

“Good night,” Percy said as well, taking his attention away from the computer. “And thank you again for the hospitality.”

Vax yelled from the bathroom, “We may not be rich assholes but at least we have better standards. Good night.”

There was the subtlest hint of exasperation in Percy as he let out a drawn-out sigh. He then stretched his neck, muttered some indeterminate words under his breath, and continued typing away.

Vex smirked. She was almost certain Vax couldn't say the word “rich” without it being directly followed by “asshole”; in fact, he probably wrote it hyphenated. To be fair, she didn’t like rich people either. Their father was a corporate tool, and he’d never graced them with any sort of kindness, except for perhaps sending them to a private high school where everyone treated them like trash anyway. Tiberius came from money, and even he was treated poorly by his family, despite all his attempts to get close to them and prove that he was worth something to the firm. Keyleth supposedly came from a well off family as well, though the few times she spoke of them, it was always prefaced with how her childhood had been wasted because they made her study all the time. Poor Pike had to invest every cent she made into paying off her ridiculous college debts, which was probably the fault of multiple rich bastards. And then, of course, there was what happened to Vex and Vax’s mother... but that was something she rarely thought about anymore, because even a reminder of what those corporate dragons did to her made Vex’s blood boil.

Overall, considering the evidence before her, Vex could gather that rich-assholes were good for three things: setting high expectations, defining narcissism, and killing people.

While Vax got ready for bed, Vex sat with Percy on the opposite end of the couch, warming her feet under Trinket while she pretended to casually look at her phone; of course, she was actually looking at him.

Now that he was distracted by the computer and in a well-lit room, she wanted to take this as an opportunity to properly study his features. His skin looked worn and tattered as if the elements had damaged it. His face sported the occasional cut or scab, and his lips were chapped. His pale eyes were framed by long dark lashes, and his brows were also dark, matching the dark gray near his sideburns. The stubble around his jaw and chin was salt and peppered, and it confused her because, well... it looked natural. She was oh-so-very close to asking how old he was, but ultimately chose against it; she’d come up with a way to find out sooner or later, even if it meant sneaking a peek at his ID.

Nevertheless, she figured it was best she say something lest she look like a creeper gawking at him like a cat in a widow.

“Any luck?”

Percy adjusted his glasses and continued typing, keeping his eyes on the screen. “I found a few things, but the pictures don’t say much about the quality of what they’re trying to sell. Last thing I want to do is replace a faulty part with another faulty part.”

Vex pursed her lips and nodded. “That would be bad.”
“Yes,” he said flatly, taking another sip from his beer.

They sat quietly a little longer. Vax got out of the bathroom and Vex caught him peeking into the living room before crossing the hallway and going into their bedroom.

Silence returned to the apartment once more, save for the gentle yet rapid sounds of typing coming from Percy’s long fingers. She found herself staring at them for a while, trying to figure out what he was typing but realizing he was simply too fast. By the volume of letters he was inputting, she assumed he was likely writing emails, though she didn’t exclude the possibility that he had actually decided to fuck everything and start his novel, because that’s what mysterious homeless men did with other people’s laptops.

Trinket yawned loudly, and as if in response, Percy did too, covering his mouth with the back of his hand.

He then closed the laptop and turned to look at Vex intently. “I had a question.”

Vex perked up, and fluttered her lashes at him, mildly surprised. “Yes?”

He readjusted his position on the couch, making himself more comfortable as he faced her.

“Everyone is always talking about a fund. When Scanlan called you the treasurer I just thought it was an inside joke, but your friends seem to genuinely turn to you when money is the topic of conversation. What’s that about?”

Vex looked away with a bit of a smile and started playing with a frayed part of the couch. “Ah yes…”

“Forgive me if I’m being rather blunt.”

“Oh no, it’s fine.” She moved her feet from under Trinket and crossed her legs on the couch. “You see, as you may have gathered, we’re kind of like one big family.”

Percy smirked. “I gathered as much.”

Vex smirked back at him for just a moment before returning to her fidgeting. “And so... we share a lot of things: food, travel expenses, gas. Pretty early on, we realized that we needed a communal fund to make things easier to organize. At first, we just kept a bunch of spare cash in a jar and we’d draw from it whenever we needed money. But eventually, our expenses got greater and greater, especially when we realized we wanted to buy Vox Machina. We needed a better method, so that's when I opened an account in my name, and thus the Vox Machina fund was born,” she said with air quotes and a sarcastic flair of excitement.

Percy furrowed his brow. “Why you? I hate to pry, but didn’t I hear Scanlan mention he paid for the insurance?”

Vex smirked, now playing with her hair. “Because I have a half-decent credit score; Scanlan has shit credit for reasons unknown, as does my brother; Pike and Tiberius are too busy to take care of finances that aren’t their own; Keyleth hates dealing with “organized institutions”; and Grog is...well he’s Grog.”

Percy hummed. “And does it bother you?”

“Oh, not at all,” she said, trying to sound as convinced as she felt. “I actually rather like it. Back in the day, I briefly considered going into accounting, but what with having bills to pay and the horrid job market...” she turned to smile at him to hide a touch of sadness in her eyes. “You know...”
Percy simply nodded with a long drawn out sigh before slowly looking away.

Vex followed suit, and they both sat staring at the empty wall for a while, quietly contemplating; or at least she was. She wasn’t exactly sure what Percy was doing with his own idle silence.

Feeling bored and perhaps a little awkward, she stood up on the couch. “Well anyway,” she said, trying to change the conversation to something more practical. “Might as well show you how to survive in here.” She hopped over the back of the couch and went directly into the kitchen. “Glasses are up here.”

Percy turned around and watched her as she instructed him.

“You can just drink the water from the sink, it’s fine.” She started to look through shelves, only to realize that they were all but empty. “We don’t really have much in terms of food but we have cereal if you get hungry. No milk I’m afraid. We cleaned out our fridge before leaving.” She eyed him for just a moment. “You can help yourself to the rest of the beer. Keyleth will probably get more even if I tell her we don’t need any.”

Percy chuckled, resting his elbows on the back of the couch and his chin in his hands. “Beer and cereal. Sounds lovely.”

Vex grinned back at him. “I don’t know you well enough to know if you’re being sarcastic or not.”

He feigned surprise. “Why would I be sarcastic about that?”

Vex laughed and shook her head. “Anyway…” she said, staring up at the very top shelf. “Interestingly enough, we have a whole bottle of ibuprofen up here if you need it.” She hummed, relishing in the sudden morbidness of the situation. “Funny... We literally have three ingestible products in this kitchen and two of them combined can kill you.”

“The cereal and beer,” Percy said flatly.

She laughed loudly, but quickly covered her mouth when she realized Vax could probably hear them. “Yes,” she said more softly. “The cereal and beer.”

She could tell Percy was entertained by her outburst, and she sensed just a hint of smugness in his expression, one that finally matched his timbre.

Trinket ambled over to Vex and wagged his tail, looking up at her with big brown eyes. She ran her hand across the length of his back as she walked past him toward the storage room in the hallway. “Oh right. We have dog food too. But I don’t recommend you take that with beer either.”

Percy simply hummed at the statement, turning back around so he could reach the beer bottle on the coffee table and finish its contents.

It took her maybe a minute to find what she was looking for. Vax had a tendency to just toss the clean laundry into the bottom of the closet without folding it and it drove her just a little more insane. She eventually made it back to Percy after she tried her best to fold the linens she’d chosen for him.

He was casually looking at his phone when she tossed the items beside him one by one.

“Here’s a towel, and here are some pillowcases you can put over those couch pillows, and here are some extra blankets; you probably don’t wanna use the one Trinket and I use. I also have this fitted sheet we can try to pull over the couch so you don’t die inhaling a pound’s worth of dog hair.”
Percy looked at her funny as he slowly took the sheet in his hands, half smirking at her. “Thanks.”

She crossed her arms and scanned him from head to toe. Now that she compared him to the couch from her current vantage point, she realized that he was a bit taller than she’d originally thought. She worried he wouldn’t be very comfortable.

“Sorry if the accommodations are a little smaller than what you need. I usually sleep on the couch and it’s quite comfortable.”

Percy glanced at the couch before standing up. “Sorry if I stole your spot.”

“Oh no, it’s fine. You’re just...” She looked up at him, “a lot taller than me, which isn’t very hard to do, unless you’re Pike or Scanlan of course.” She laughed at herself, realizing she was rambling a bit. “Here, let me help you pull that over the couch.”

As she tried to tuck the sheet in as best she could, she continued talking to fill the silence. “Besides, I’ve shared a room with my brother for as long as I can remember.”

Percy mirrored her actions, tucking the sheet underneath the couch pillows. “Are you two twins?” he asked, glancing up at her momentarily.

“Yes.” She smiled. “I know, it’s pretty obvious.”

He smiled back at her, though there was something in his eyes that revealed a sadness she could not place. “You referring to the bickering or the fact that you two could cosplay as each other?”

She smoothed the sheet with her hands before backing away from her handiwork. “Sorry about that...Trust me, we can get worse.”

Percy shrugged as he plopped back down onto the couch, closing his eyes and readjusting his glasses with a sigh, “Don’t stop on my behalf.” He looked up at her. “I find you two pretty entertaining to watch.”

“Really now?” she said, crossing her arms and raising a brow.

He shrugged again. “Sibling love at its finest.”

Vex smiled. He seemed to be pretty perceptive and it was nice to talk to someone who seemed to know what he was talking about. She tilted her head and tossed her braid over her other shoulder. “Do you have any siblings?”

Oh. This time she caught it.

Had she blinked, she would have missed it, but nothing could escape her once she was actively looking for a tell. It was a rapid series of subtle movements: A quick brow twitch, followed by a split second lapse in eye contact. He was good, but not good enough for her.

As if nothing had happened, a small smile spread across his face, and his lips lingered open for but an instant before answering softly and politely. “No.”

Vex bit the inside of her cheek. She didn’t exactly know what to make of his behavior, but tried not to show that she’d noticed anything.

“Oh, that’s too bad,” she said, glancing down at her laptop on the coffee table.
Perhaps there had been a miscarriage in the family, or maybe falling out? She honestly could not tell, and she certainly didn’t want to pry, especially since he was making such an effort to hide his feelings on the matter. He looked genuinely drained.

Percy shrugged, rubbing his eyes underneath his glasses and muttering something along the lines of “yes” or “yeah”.

Vex casually glanced at her fingernails. “Well anyway, let me know if you need anything. And again, sorry if you have to sleep with your feet hanging off the couch.”

Percy chuckled, removing his glasses and wiping them on his shirt. “Trust me, it beats what I’ve been resorting to the last few days.”

Vex furrowed her brow. “What do you mean?”

Percy glanced up at her with a half smile, then reached over to his backpack, pulled out a rolled up something, and tossed it to her. She caught it with relative ease and her jaw dropped as she recognized it: It was a camping hammock.

She looked at him with newfound pity. “How long were you on the road before we picked you up? You said you lost track because your phone died. I thought you meant a few hours…”

“I did,” he smiled softly, leaning back on the couch and crossing his arms. “I lost track of how long I’d been walking that day. But I had camped out for three nights and was preparing for a fourth.”

Vex was certain the shock on her face was rather unbecoming, for she had a tendency to open her mouth a little more wide than was considered ladylike in sexist circles, but honestly, she didn’t give a damn. Percy didn’t cease to intrigue her. With all his oddities, he came off as an incredibly resilient individual.

“I’m sorry,” she eventually said, gaining some composure.

“Don’t be sorry.” His soft voice and warm smile emphasizing his energy. “You have nothing to do with it. I’m just glad you guys stopped.”

Vex closed her eyes, and she felt a shiver crawl down her spine as imagined a universe where they decided to just drive on by. He’d still be out in the cold, bundled up in a hammock, hanging a few feet off snow in a dark, damp forest. She shook off the thought and stared at him once more, smiling at the far more pleasant reality before her.

He ran a hand through his hair as he sighed. “This has been a great change of tune, really. A warm place to sleep, pizza in my belly, and some pleasant conversation…” A comforting smile spread across his lips, and Vex felt herself blushing.

“I’m glad,” she said, not quite knowing how to respond.

They both looked at each other a little longer, but as she spotted Trinket curl up on his dog bed, she was reminded that perhaps it was a good time to call it a night before things grew even more awkward.

“Right,” she said. “Well I’ll let you enjoy your warm sleep then.”

“Thank you,” Percy said, though he continued looking at her, almost expectantly. She could tell something was running through his head, but she didn’t want to stick around too long lest she feel tempted to find out.
She picked up her laptop and hugged it to her chest. “I’m probably gonna watch some shows before going to bed.”

In reality, she felt like crashing the moment her head hit her pillow, but she didn’t want him to know she didn’t trust leaving one of her only valuable possessions in the hands of a sketchy, albeit oddly charming acquaintance. It’s not like he’d given her much of a reason to distrust him, but if she were in his position she’d have no issue running away with someone’s computer.

“Alright,” he said, his polite smile never wavering. “Sleep well.”

“Night,” Vex replied, giving him a quick nod before slinking toward the hallway.

She nearly reached her bedroom before stopping, realizing she’d forgotten something. Biting her lower lip, she backtracked and peeked her head into the living room one last time. “Oh, by the way…”

Percy was in the middle of pulling off one of his boots when he looked up at her, mid-action, his brows raised.

She grinned at him nervously. “Yes, hi.” She cleared her throat. “Vax will probably be gone by the time you wake up, but if you need a ride just be sure to ask Tibs for his class schedule. There’s also a bus stop like a block away that way.” She pointed in the direction of the kitchen. “And don’t worry about being locked outside the house. Keyleth has a key and usually house-sits anytime neither of us are home.”

Percy chuckled to himself, looking mildly entertained for reasons irritatingly unknown, “Alright.”

“Cool,” she replied, before pausing to see if he had anything else to say.

However -- as she should have expected -- he just stared at her, still holding his boot in his hand.

Vex grinned nervously, realizing this needed to end. “Well, good night again!”

Percy smiled at her patiently. “Goodnight Vex.”

With that, Vex ducked back into the darkness of the hall and snuck into the lightless bedroom. She shut the door behind her and exhaled deeply, closing her eyes and allowing her to cringe away the memory of the awkwardness Percy had just been forced to witness.

“Have fun?”

Vex flinched as she heard Vax speak up from the darkness, before rolling her eyes. “Oh, tons. We’re getting married and everything.”

She plopped her laptop on the bed and started to feel around on the floor for something to sleep in and her towel.

“I could hear you two talking out there for almost an hour.”

Vex finally found what she was looking for and headed back toward the door. “Aren’t you supposed to be asleep already?”

“Oh? Not in the mood to talk to your own brother?”

Vex groaned and opened the door, only to find her path blocked by a wall of fur. “Oh Trinket. No buddy, back to your bed.”
He looked up at her with glossy brown eyes and whined.

“No...Trinket. To your bed. Go on.”

“He can sleep in here,” Vax groaned. “For tonight.”

Vex shoved Trinket into the bedroom and closed the door behind her. She tiptoed toward the bathroom and tried to not look into the living room as she went inside.

After quickly showering and brushing her teeth, she opened the bathroom door to find that the light had been turned off in the living room, although she could still see the faint blue glare of a phone screen illuminating a tuft of white hair. She tiptoed back into the room, hoping Vax was asleep this time.

She settled under her covers and tucked her legs underneath Trinket, who had very unceremoniously sprawled out at the foot of her bed. She could hear the sound of Vax breathing slowly but regularly, and this familiar rhythm calmed her. As she closed her eyes and sighed into the comfort of her sheets, the sound of the shower running caught her ear. She figured it was Percy, unless Keyleth or Tiberius had snuck into the apartment and decided to take a late night shower, which was unlikely but always a possibility. A low familiar clearing of the throat coming from the bathroom confirmed her suspicions.

Although she was tired, she decided to spend some time listening to the sound of water running so she could reflect on everything her and Percy had spoken about; it had to have been nice, being able to shower after such a long time in the wilderness. She tried to piece together some of the things he had told them, like the fact that he had started traveling because “he didn’t like the situation at home” and that he’d been wandering for a while now. She figured his family needed to be real garbage if he genuinely preferred being homeless than dealing with them, and the more she reflected on it, the more she realized that perhaps him, her and Vax had more in common than she would have ever imagined.

Her thought process continued to jog between all the possibilities that surrounded the mystery that was their new guest, yet as she started to drift in an out of consciousness, her mind began to swerve in weird directions, like his hair color, and his beard, and whether he had chest hair, and...well it was probably a good time to stop there.

Chapter End Notes

So before I say anything, here is a song that I believe fits with Percy's plight so far. It's called "Hopeless Wanderer" by Mumford and Sons. It's a lovely song. Definitely worth a listen.

Link

Now, I struggled quite a bit writing this chapter, so I apologize for its clunkiness.

I originally wasn’t going to have Vex and Percy speak to each other alone so early on in the story, but then I remembered that I wanted this to be Perc’ahlia fic, and burn couldn't be THAT slow. (I once wrote this Undertale fic where the main love interest of the story didn’t even speak to the main character for 11 chapters, which was 71 google doc pages worth of content... This time I made it in 4 chapters and 33 pages. Are you proud of me?)
Look, point is, being concise is not my forte, so if you are here for smut, it ain't happening in a LONG time. But, if you’re here for the story, and the drama, and me doing horrible things to Percy and Vex, then sit back, relax, and enjoy. Drama is coming very soon.
Chapter Summary

Last time, on the Butterfly Effect:
After a pizza night with friends, Vex learns quite a bit about Percy during a brief private conversation with him. She starts to feel as though she can almost relate to him, though she cannot shake the feeling that he’s hiding things from her.

Chapter Notes

No Content Warnings this chapter
--
Brace yourselves, the timeskip montage chapter is coming...complete with punk rock tunes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Vex roared a mighty yawn and flicked a tear out of her eye as the meandered into the sunlight shining through the living room window. It was already ten o’clock but it felt like four in the morning, which made her feel like an asshole because Vax had actually woken up at four that morning to go to work. She couldn't believe she was already getting too old for this sort of lifestyle...

She stopped in her tracks when her eyes settled on a groggy looking Percy who was sitting up on the couch, legs crossed, face freshly shaved, white hair disheveled, and lazily fixated with a very cheery Keyleth who was humming away as she watered the plant by the living room window.

Keyleth turned around and perked up as she spotted Vex. She wiggled her fingers at her. “Good morning Vex!”

Vex winced at Keyleth’s volume, but patiently raised her hand and waved back.

“Wow... you look kind of tired,” Keyleth said, resting the mug she was using to water the plant on the windowsill. “You want me to make you some coffee? Or I can roll you a joint if you wanna wake and bake.”

Vex slowly blinked at Keyleth, before turning her attention toward Percy once more. While her sleep-deprived gaze gradually focused on his form, she spotted his scarf thrown over the arm of the couch, his phone precariously balanced on the back so it could charge from the kitchen, and a very familiar black shirt folded on the coffee table. Then, as if she’d been zapped with a jolt of electricity, her eyes widened when it dawned on her that he definitely was not wearing what he’d had on the night before. It looked like he had changed out of his jeans into a pair of gray sweatpants, but what really had her taken was his dark blue tank top. Her gaze immediately zeroed in on his arms, that were not only toned and muscular, but covered by what looked like dozens of dark tattoos running up his wrists and all the way to his clavicles.

“Coffee sounds great...” Percy said, now staring at Vex with a suspect expression, slowly covering
himself with a blanket as if he felt violated. His voice was a tad hoarser than usual but proper nonetheless.

Vex practically smacked her own face with her hand as she rubbed her eyes once more, trying to play off her gawking as a mere symptom of tiredness. “Yeah, coffee sounds good,” she said, her voice cracking a bit. “I might take you up on that joint later though…”

“Alrighty,” Keyleth said, heading into the kitchen with clasped hands. “Want an extra kick in your coffee? I brought some dry mint I’ve been drying in the van. Or maybe some cinnamon?”

Trinket bound past Vex and pranced toward Percy to lick his hands, apparently excited that his new friend hadn’t left. Fortunately, it seemed to distract Percy just enough to give Vex some time to scurry into the kitchen, temporarily hiding from his view and recovering from her embarrassing first encounter of the day.

“No thank you…” Vex said, biting her lower lip as she glanced over her shoulder.

As she refilled Trinket’s water bowl, she noticed that there were new groceries in the kitchen, and she was fairly certain Keyleth had brought them in, judging by the familiar canvas bags. She cracked indeterminate sore joints, and as she stretched, she tried to get another peek at Percy’s tattoos that seemed to go around his shoulders as well. However, to Vex’s disappointment, Percy pulled his shirt over his head before she could determine their exact design. The forms seemed abstract; indeterminate.

It looked like he was about to turn around and Vex immediately scooted next to Keyleth and started helping her with the coffee, trying to look innocent.

“Keyleth scared the hell out of me when she walked in,” he said, glancing at Vex with a smirk on his face.

“That’s funny…” Vex said, not really knowing what else to add to the conversation. Honestly, she would have loved to witness it.

“Yeah, sorry about that Percy,” Keyleth said, smiling nervously as she prepared the coffee. “The twins are pretty used to us just walking in whenever we like.”

“That’s alright,” Percy said with a shrug. “A good scare in the morning gets the blood pumping.”

Vex thought of plenty of better ways to get the blood pumping in the morning, but she immediately tried to stomp those ideas out before they sprouted into something too lewd.

Percy ambled over and leaned against the kitchen counter, crossing his arms but not saying anything else as he patiently watched them make the coffee.

Vex kept quiet for the most part as well, helping Keyleth out as best she could, given her current state of blissful confusion. As she accepted a cup of coffee from Keyleth, she stared at the calendar in the kitchen and sighed as she counted off the days, trying to work out how many more work shifts she had left before the end of the month.

“How’s today Percy?” Keyleth said as she passed him a cup of coffee.

He mouthed a silent “thank you” and held onto the cup for a moment, warming his hands before answering. “I’m going to check out the van again and make a proper list of what I need. Then I’ll head downtown to buy some basic supplies, maybe learn to get around the city…”
Vex traded a few nervous glances with him as he spoke and he caught a glimpse of her.

“Don’t worry about reimbursing me,” he said, clearing his throat. “It’s on me. It won’t cost much anyway.”

Vex shrugged to not give away just how relieved she felt. After taking a few more sips of her coffee, she rested her cup on the counter and reached for some cereal on the top shelf because she desperately needed something to settle her stomach that early in the morning. Just as she did so, the apartment door swung open and in walked a tired looking Vax who immediately tossed his boots aside as he entered the living room. He had his black, slightly greasy hair tied back in a bun, and he was still wearing his red work shirt that read “BigMart” on his breast.

As he strolled into the kitchen, he patted Percy on the shoulder and snatched up Vex’s cup of coffee. “Scanlan still hasn’t texted back,” he said, leaning on the counter next to Percy and taking a sip. “Leave it to him to bounce when we need him the most. Grog hasn’t even seen him.”

Vex felt like protesting against her stolen caffeine but figured this was a battle best left surrendered. Besides, she had no desire revealing to Vax how tired she actually was, since she already knew it would trigger some sort of rant about how he had to get up hours before her and how he was doing just fine, relatively speaking…

“We’ll figure it out,” Vex said as she started to munch on cereal straight out of the box.

“How was work?” Keyleth asked, walking up to Vax and rubbing him on the arm with a small smile.

Vax shrugged dejectedly, though there was still a subtle grin on his lips. “Just as you’d expect from a five to nine shift. Lot of freaky undead looking people working at that time of day. Surprised I didn’t get eaten.”

To be fair, Vax was looking pretty freaky and undead himself. His eyes were sunken and red, and he had dust smears all over his outfit. He worked the morning shift with Grog unloading boxes from trucks, and although it built muscle and paid better than some entry-level jobs, Grog seemed to enjoy it far more than he did.

Vax never believed it when Vex told him, but she genuinely respected him far more than she respected herself; all she did was bust tables at a nearby restaurant: an inconsistent, tip reliant, part-time job with very few hours a week. At least her brother had a daily gig thanks to Grog’s recommendation, who was supposedly a reliable source because he’d already been working there for a couple of years.

That being said, she still didn’t like Vax working there. She could see it in his eyes, the way he carried himself, the way he occasionally braced his back and stretched with a grimace, the way his eyelids would grow heavy during conversation. It wasn’t right. The physical activity strained on his body and the awkward hours strained on his social life, though to be fair, it did make the relationship between him and Grog a little more interesting. Nevertheless, she constantly hoped that one day he’d stumble onto something that was less strenuous, or that he’d get promoted to a more managerial job, though she knew it was improbable. Vax’s and Grog’s criminal records kept both of them grounded, like birds with clipped wings.

Eventually, after Vax finished Vex’s coffee and Keyleth convinced Percy to have something to eat, everyone headed in their own separate directions, leaving Vex to her own devices as she waited to get called into work that evening. As she picked up stray coffee cups around the kitchen and swept up some dog hair, her gaze settled on Percy’s backpack, left unattended.
Oh, how she wanted to look through it, but her conscious convinced her otherwise. Besides, he seemed like the type of person who would notice whether someone had disturbed his stuff while he was gone.

With the day growing late and the winter sun reaching its apex, she figured it was as good of a time as any to go walk Trinket.

***

It took some time getting used to seeing Percy in the living room, or anywhere else for that matter. Anytime she ran into him, whether it be in the kitchen, or outside, or in passing on the stairs, it always seemed to elicit in her a strange feeling in her gut, like a small jolt of excitement, only perhaps a touch more unpleasant.

Nevertheless, she actively tried to not make a big deal and maintain a semblance of normality in her life, which she found increasingly easy with each passing day. He wasn’t the type of person who took up much space, and the little space he did take up was entirely geared toward being productive.

Sometimes he’d bum rides with Tiberius into town to get the odd supply or grab groceries, which was rather kind of him because he never asked for money; sometimes he even agreed to walk Trinket. Other times he’d ask Vex to borrow her computer so he could write a few emails to see if he could get in touch with scrap dealers in the area. However, he spent the majority of his time underneath Vox Machina. He wasn’t one for conversation -- or at least not as much as he’d come off to be the first night they spoke -- and he didn’t really address anyone unless spoken too, or if he had a specific question about the van... or Trinket.

On warmer days, Vex would spend time sitting inside the van with Keyleth while he worked away, playing music out of their phones to give him some company, not that she was exactly sure whether he appreciated it or not. Vex was more of a punk rock type of girl, and Keyleth listened to vague 70s music that nobody knew, so together, maybe there was a small chance that they’d find something that appealed to him. The tricky part was that Percy never made any song requests, leaving both girls at a bit of a loss. Perhaps he was too shy to make suggestions, or maybe he just happened to be the type of guy who liked grungy punk ass hipster music. Well, he did sort of look like one...what with all the leather and the ripped jeans and the plaid and the tattoos and the silver hair that was disconcertingly realistic.

Now, there were some days where Percy would just flat out disappear; sometimes all day and almost all night. He usually gave them some sort of warning, claiming he was going out to chat up potential part dealers or something, but when he did leave, it was nearly impossible to get a hold of him on his phone; complete and utter media blackout. It was on those days that Vex often wondered whether he’d ever come back. In a weird way, it saddened her, even though she figured he would return considering he often left most of his stuff at their apartment. In fact, as the scenario started to repeat itself, it made her feel kind of shitty about distrusting him with her laptop.

***

Percy had lived with the twins for almost a week before Scanlan finally texted back while Vex was at work. The message had excited her so much that she hid away in a storage room so she could read it without getting yelled at by her bosses.

Scanlan: srry for late reply.

Vax: What the fuck happened to you man? We thought you died or some shit.
Scanlan: busy. i can pitch in $250

“Typical”, Vex scoffed as she replied to the group text. “Thank God though…”

Vex: That’s great. That brings us to $622 Thanks Scanlan.

Scanlan: np

Vex let out a little sigh of relief, feeling like a bit of weight had been lifted off her chest. Yet just as she was about to lock her phone, it vibrated again. She opened the group message once more.

Percy: Excellent. Thank you.

She quickly closed her phone, swallowing hard. It wasn’t a good idea for her to text while at work anyway.

***

On those late evenings when Vex would return from the diner tired and smelling of fries, she’d often find Percy smoking outside their door up on the third floor, staring out into the distance completely alone. On nights like those, he’d politely greet her with a nod and maybe a smile, though he very rarely initiated any sort of actual conversation. Not that she cared to socialize anyway. Work did a number on her social batteries, so the last thing she needed was someone who genuinely cared to engage her in conversation, save for perhaps Trinket; she always had time for Trinket. Still, his silence in her presence started to weigh on her, and as the instance repeated itself time and time again, she couldn't help but suspect that perhaps the conversation they had shared that first night was simply inspired by alcohol, and to be fair, Vex had counted about four empty beer bottles besides Percy’s feet by the end of that particular pizza night.

But then, some nights she’d notice him chatting with Tiberius about who knows what. Perhaps he was simply humoring Tibs for the sake of having a smoking buddy, but Percy didn’t seem like the type to waste time on idle conversation, especially since she’d seen them talk long after they’d finished their cigarettes. To be fair, Tibs was certainly the academic type, and she imagined that perhaps Percy was a bit of a nerd as well. He wasn't an airhead by a long shot. In fact, it was entirely possible that he had already gone to college, and that he simply hadn’t told any of them, and that he was actually some thirty-something year-old guy on sabbatical writing a novel, and that he was using their ragtag group of losers as inspiration. Out of all the conspiracy theories she had come up with, this one was starting to become her favorite. Nevertheless, he was certainly more talkative with Tibs than he was with her.

And then there was Percy and Keyleth: a relationship that had practically fallen right out of the sky and blossomed like the very spring flowers Keyleth had planted next to the van. She couldn't quite pinpoint when it actually happened, but it was definitely a thing. Vex had woken up multiple mornings to Keyleth and Percy chatting away on the couch, smoking weed together and laughing right after she’d missed the punchline of a joke. Turns out Percy enjoyed smoking pot more than she’d originally thought, which wasn’t necessarily a bad thing since it stimulated his otherwise nonexistent appetite. And of course, both him and Keyleth shared a ritualistic love for alcohol that could only be matched by their love for weed. Oddly enough, Keyleth seemed to be the only person Percy allowed himself to be lazy with. Once she’d even caught them sitting on the roof of the van, staring up at the clouds and laughing as they whispered into each other's ears.

There was no doubt: Percy knew how to be social. Just apparently not with her.

***
One night, while Percy was using Vex’s laptop and Vex was getting ready for bed, he posed a simple yet telling question, almost entirely out of the blue.

“Are Keyleth and Tiberius dating?” he asked, resting his elbow against the couch with his face in his hand, rubbing his chin as the computer screen reflected on his glasses.

It was in that very moment that Vex started to hypothesize what was probably going on.

She laughed, trying to cover the nervousness in her voice as she filled Trinket’s bowl with fresh water. “No, they’re just good friends who have a high tolerance for each other…”

She -- of course -- kept things honest, though part of her really wished there were no repercussions lying about something like that.

“Why?” she asked, maintaining her innocent smile.

Percy shrugged. “Just curious.”

She didn’t have to know Percy long to understand that he wasn’t the type of guy who simply asked questions out of curiosity. If she had to sum him up in a few words, she’d write him as a man who did things with purpose: he didn’t like small talk, he didn’t like watching shows or playing games, and he certainly didn’t like asking questions when he didn’t care about the answer. Honestly, if what she theorized was true, it cleared up a lot of Percy’s behavioral inconsistencies. It would explain why he was being so friendly with Tiberius, and it certainly explained his behavior around Keyleth.

It sort of disgusted her how jealous she could be, and then it dawned on her that she was indeed jealous, and she felt even more disgusted.

Chapter End Notes

Before I say anything, I would like to dedicate the song "From Eden" by Hozier to Keyleth and Percy's blissful relationship. Link

So this chapter and the one that follows were meant to be one big chapter, but I soon noticed that it would have ended up being too large of a chunk of text. Thus, I give you a rather short, bland chapter with a lot of character development but little plot…

But hey, this is the first time I’ve ever written a time skip this long. Had I gone with my normal writing style, each one of the events described would have ended up being a chapter or two, and we all would have grown old before the group ever made it to the Cloudtop.
Killing Two Birds

Chapter Summary

Last time, on the Butterfly Effect:
As the week progresses, Vex notices some odd eccentricities in Percy’s behavior, which include his manic work pattern, as well as his odd interest in Keyleth...

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings for this chapter are in end notes.

This chapter has a little music I’d like to dedicate to it. You may give it a listen before you start reading if you’d like. It’s a great song called “First Things First” by Neon Trees. Great song; I could see Vex or even Vax listening to this on repeat when commuting to and from work.

Link

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

While Percy continued to become gradually more social with the others, the relationship between him and Vex remained relatively stagnant. It was remarkable how quickly he’d managed to creep into everyone’s hearts, and as each day progressed into the next, he grew more and more willing to socialize. One night, he’d even returned to the apartment a little tipsy, after having apparently gone out drinking with Grog and Pike, which was quite a feat, considering their hearty constitution. Vex had wagered that Percy wasn’t going to make it home that evening, and now she had an obligation to do Vax’s laundry for the rest of the month.

However, one thing that didn’t seem to change was Scanlan. As the days passed, the group heard persistently very little from him, save for the occasional “lol” in the group text. His messages weren’t particularly indicative of what he was up to, and judging from varied accounts, including the text conversations Vex often had with Pike, one thing was certain: he had cooped himself up in his studio ever since they’d returned to Westruun.

Meanwhile, progress on the van was about as slow as it could be without it being utterly nonexistent. It wasn’t that Percy wasn’t trying, in fact, he was actually quite adamant about getting work done as often as he could. It was the funds that were keeping him at a standstill, and Vex suspected it was starting to get on his nerves.

Now -- in the beginning -- Vex originally read Percy as a pretty mellow guy, with an odd yet charming sense of humor. However, as their time together crept into their second week, she began to notice one of Percy’s more disconcerting idiosyncrasies.

He’d go through these random spells of... hyperactivity, though one may argue that they were more akin to mania.
There would be days, or sometimes even late nights, where he’d literally run and in and out of the apartment, checking the computer, then going back under the van, then checking the computer again, then going back under the van. Frankly, his stamina was quite remarkable.

More than a few times, when she got up to use the bathroom in the dead of night, she’d see him typing away, sometimes even early in the morning, though she was always unsure whether he’d stayed up late or woken up early.

She remembers one night in particular when she walked in on him pacing back and forth as he furiously typed away on his cell phone. His forehead was glistening with sweat, his eyes were wild, his jaw was tense; though as soon as he noticed her, he simply cracked a nervous smile before storming out of the apartment, not saying a word.

Sure, he got things done during these manic spells, but there was something uncomfortable, almost aggressive in his mannerism, and Vex wasn’t the only one who had noticed; Vax had gotten so paranoid that he’d more than once confided in Vex that he wanted to kick Percy out. Still, Vex made sure to reassure him that it was a non-issue, unlike so many other things in their lives. Percy was so damn pleasant the rest of the time she figured it was best to just let this particular eccentricity slide, and she simply wrote it off as his “method.” She’d read about geniuses that worked that way, though even she knew that it was a stretch to call Percy a genius.

***

Sooner than Vex expected, the sun set on the second week since Percy had joined their motley crew, though progress on the van remained unsatisfactory. He still hadn’t managed to find a part for the breaks that fit their current budget, and it was starting to burn away at both his and everyone else’s patience.

However, not even the stress of Vox Machina’s expenses could compare to the looming darkness that had finally reared it’s ugly head around the corner. She’d known it was coming for a while now...

One night, when the air was cold and foggy, she got home from work relatively late, feeling utterly drained. It hadn’t been a good day at work. The tips had been shit, the customers rude, and a colleague had yelled at her for not cleaning the tables right.

The very act of climbing up the flights of stairs to her apartment made her process just how tired she truly was. As per usual, Percy was standing outside their door, typing something on his phone with a cigarette pressed between his lips.

He didn’t seem to take note of her arrival when she walked past him, but as she opened the door, he muttered a very soft, “Good Night.”

Trinket was of course very excited to see her, and she spent a little time giving him the attention he deserved, and in turn, she received the love she also deserved that particular evening.

When she made it into her room, she was startled by Vax, who was sitting on her bed, as if he had been waiting for her. He had a tendency to do that.

She dropped her backpack on the ground and tossed her jacket -- which was coincidentally actually Vax’s leather jacket -- over her chair as she always did, but tried to not make eye contact with him. “Good evening brother. Would have expected you asleep by this time. It’s already ten.”

“We need to talk about rent,” he said bluntly.
Vex shut her eyes hard, grinding her teeth as she felt his words cut deeper than they needed to. She exhaled slowly, before standing straight and turning to look at him. “What about it?”

“It’s due in a week,” Vax said again, his tone of voice still flat.

Vex looked away, removing her plaid scarf and flinging it over her chair as well. “We’ll make it.”

“No we won’t,” he said quickly, almost interrupting her.

Vex stared down at the floor. The carpet was frayed. There was a stain in the corner where she had spilled coffee once, and she knew they were probably never going to get the deposit back because of it; she remembers how angry she got at herself for it. She heard Vax stand up and take a few steps toward her until she could see his feet in her field of vision.

“I saw our account,” Vax continued. “Two hundred and thirty-seven gold-prints shy, and that’s not including utilities.”

“Fuck,” Vex muttered, but not because she didn’t know. Of course she knew. She’d always known. She had stared at those numbers just as intently as she had stared at their calendar. “We’ll make it,” she said again. “I might get weekend nights this week, and the tips might.”

“It won’t be enough,” Vax said. “And I already got paid for the month.”

She was aware it wouldn't be, but she wished he’d just back the fuck off and believe her lie for one fucking second so she could hear herself think. With rent and utilities, they needed at least three hundred gold-prints. And that wasn’t even scraping the surface. What about food? Gas for Vax to go to work? If one of them got sick they were as good as dead.

“We can-” She stopped mid-sentence as she heard the apartment door open and close. It was probably Percy. She lowered her voice to a near whisper and stepped closer toward Vax. “We can ask for help.”

“I’m not owing money to anyone,” he hissed back, his face getting close to hers.

And there it was. There was the recurring problem that Vax always brought up when these sorts of issues arose. It was a stubbornness he had developed through their hardships that he could no longer shake. It had become part of him, ergo, part of her.

“Vax, we can take some money out of the Vox Machina fund. Our money. Just our money.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “That’s only a hundred and twenty gold-prints.”

“Then we’d be just over a hundred gold-prints shy,” she said, trying her hardest to reassure him, though she could tell he was already passed the threshold. “Vax, this isn’t going to be a problem. We’re going to make it.”

“And if you don’t get enough tips?” His words were acrid, almost threatening.

“Then we can just borrow some-”

“I don’t want to owe anybody anything anymore Vex!” he said, grabbing her by the shoulders more tightly than felt comfortable.

Trinket barked at Vax, his ears back and his teeth bared.

Vex shook Vax away, and shoved him back a few feet, raising her voice. “Then what do you expect
we do? Eskil has already been nice to us once, but he warned us. We can’t turn it in late anymore. We’ve used up our free pass. It’s gone. Burned.”

Vax’s eyes were hard and dark, just like her’s when she tried not to cry in front of a mirror. “I have ways.”

She pointed a tense finger at him, her eyes narrow slits, a single tear rolling down her reddened cheeks. “No you fucking don’t.”

“Vex’ahlia…”

“No Vax! You won’t!” She started to cry. “You can’t. You really can’t. I won’t let you.”

Vax’s voice was shaky. “We’re only a few hundred goldies shy. A hundred goldies is easy.”

It was not just a hundred gold-prints. Now he was the one trying to lie.

“Then why can’t we just borrow it!? Keyleth has-”

“I’m not borrowing money from Keyleth! She’s living out of a fucking car.”

“Scanlan might-”

“I’m not borrowing any fucking money!”

“And you’re not fucking stealing it either!” she shouted. She didn’t care if the whole apartment complex heard them. Her voice was thick with anger, her words came out like snarls as her teeth clenched. “Do you realize what will happen if they catch you? Has that sunk into that stubborn little head of yours?” She stepped forward and shoved him again, this time causing him to stumble into the bedside table. “You’re done. You’re done if they catch you again! Do you understand?”

Vax stared her down with a poisonous glare, but he did not say anything else. Instead, he grabbed his leather jacket and simply stormed out of the room, nearly slamming the door behind him. After a few seconds, she heard the apartment door open and close loudly, causing the walls to tremor.

She stood motionless, staring at the door with red eyes, her expression frozen in shock. Trinket slowly walked up to her and sat on her feet, leaning his head against her thigh and whining softly, which caused tears to roll down her cheeks once more. She dropped to her knees and wrapped her arms around him, fur getting in her face as she cried against him, trying to muffle her sorrow as best she could.

She’d fucked up. She’d really fucked up this time. She felt like she’d shot her brother and then shot herself. Her chest felt like it was bleeding everything horrible she’d bottle up inside over the past few weeks, and it hurt. It hurt a lot.

She agonized for what felt like an eternity before she felt her phone vibrate in her pocket, and her eyes widened.

“Vax,” she gasped.

Still sitting on the floor, her shaky fingers managed to pull her phone out of her pocket and she unlocked it.

It was a message from Percy. A personal message.

Disappointment rippled through her chest and she closed her eyes, swallowing hard. She didn’t want
to read it, but she didn’t want to worry him either. She could only imagine how awkward it must have been for him. He’d likely witnessed Vax storm out of their bedroom.

She opened the message, letting out a quivering sigh.

*Percy: Is everything okay?*

No. Nothing was fucking okay.

She looked at herself in the mirror hanging off the door. The makeup she’d worn for work had smeared down her cheeks. She looked like she was melting away.

Frankly, her whole world felt like it was melting. She couldn't lose Vax, not again. Those months without him had been hell; it almost killed her. She didn’t want... no, she couldn't let it happen again.

Yet there she was, crying in the middle of her floor, with Vax out roaming the streets late at night, trying to wrap her mind around the fact that this was entirely her fault: She was the one who didn’t make enough tips that month; she was the one who didn’t feel like smiling and winking at the customers as much as she usually did; she was the one who didn’t feel like insisting for a bigger cut of the tips; she was the one who missed work shifts because she wanted to go on the road trip to accompany Grog to the hospital; she was the fucking one who didn’t assert herself when she believed Percy needed to pay for gas. She was the fucking reason he was even in her apartment texting her right now.

She should have chased after Vax, but she knew it would have been futile. When Vax didn’t want to be found, there was no use trying.

She let out another shaky sigh as she stared at her screen, her eyes darting across the letters over and over again. After what felt like probably minutes of processing, she mustered up the strength to respond. The tears in her eyes made it hard to type.

*Vex: sort of.*

With that, she tossed her phone across the carpet and slumped onto Vax’s bed. She could smell his scent on the sheets and it upset her. She dug her fingers into his pillow and held it close. She wondered if a hug would have convinced him to stay.

She tried her best to calm herself, breath, think of what she needed to do next. She figured it was probably best to sleep off her emotions so she could function tomorrow and plot out her next course of action. She’d likely have to lie and make others lie if she did decide to borrow money, though even she acknowledged the painful truth to Vax’s stubbornness. None of their friends had any actual money to spare, though they would never admit to it; it would only make them feel like shit knowing they couldn't help their deadbeat friends. She could potentially try to plea for another extension on their rent deadline, perhaps in exchange for favors around the complex: gardening, repainting, paper shredding, anything. Or...worst came to worst, she could draw money from the Vox Machina fund, though she found that to be the most deplorable option. Not only would that be akin to stealing, but it would also further cripple Percy’s ability to fix the breaks, and they needed to head to Emon in less than three weeks. She’d get them all killed if those brakes failed on them.

Her phone vibrated again. She sat up and saw the screen light up. Rubbing her eyes, she crawled back toward it and read the new message.

*Percy: I made some tea if you’d like some.*

Vex couldn’t help but half smile when she read the message in Percy’s voice, and she wiped a tear
out of her eye. He seemed like he genuinely wanted to help, even if it embarrassed her. She knew things had gotten bad if _Percy_ cared about her well being.

She read the message over again.

Honestly, she would have preferred beer, but the responsible side of her knew that perhaps tea was a better alternative.

After a session of heavy breathing to try and calm her nerves, and a bit of spit to clean the makeup streaks off her face, she peeked her head out into the living room.

_Percy_ was sitting on the couch, legs crossed, looking at her with a small smile that attempted reassurance. He was holding a steaming cup in his hands.

“The hot water is still on the stove,” he said.

_Vex_ sniffled, and without saying a word, she walked over and poured herself some tea. She settled down on the other end of the couch, and _Trinket_ curled up at her feet as usual. For a moment, they traded no words with each other. _Percy_ simply sat quietly and respectfully, staring at the plant by the window. He cleared his throat, and for a moment _Vex_ thought he was going to say something, but instead, he took another sip from his tea.

The silence was eating away at her. She had to start the conversation, though she didn’t exactly know how. She figured it was probably best to think of something simple, unimportant, inoffensive, but her mind kept running in circles around the image of _Vax_ storming out the door.

“Sorry,” she finally said.

_Percy_ did not respond, at least not at first. It didn’t mean he wouldn’t. In the little time that _Vex_ had spent with him, she had gathered that it usually took him a while to warm up to a conversation.

He shifted in his seat, adjusting the pillows underneath him, and he rolled his cup in his hands. For a moment, his attention seemed to be drawn toward something distant, much farther than the plant, or the window, or the buildings in the distance. He took in a deep breath and exhaled hard. There was always a slight wheeze to his sighs that worried _Vex_; it aged him.

He ran a hand through his hair, and as he did, he finally spoke. “People often get the maddest at those they care about the most.”

He turned to look at her and she could see her own reflection in his glasses. She felt small, and immediately closed her eyes to take another sip from her tea, trying to keep herself from crying in front of him.

His cup made a hollow sound as he rested it on the coffee table. “At least… That’s what I’ve been told.”

_Vex_ opened her eyes again and stared down into her tea. The steam rose up and warmed her face. “Seems a little unfair…”

_Percy_ smiled, his signature sadness creeping at the edges of his eyes. “I know.”

More silence filled the space between them. She didn’t exactly know where to go from there. Perhaps this was as good a time as any to be serious with him. He seemed willing to listen, or at least willing to pretend to listen. Worst came to worst, he’d be gone as soon as he finished fixing the van; there was no risk in sharing personal sorrows with an almost stranger.
“I worry about him,” she said, starting off with the only thing she knew was certain. “And he worries about me.”

Percy was watching her intently. There was no doubt that he was paying attention, though the intensity in his blue eyes made her nervous.

She closed her eyes and took in a shaky breath. “It’s...normal.”

It wasn’t easy, but she wanted to be as coherent as possible. She reflected on her words as she spoke them, trying to get a sense of how she wanted to phrase things.

“But sometimes, we get lost in all the worrying.” Her eyes opened very slowly. “Paranoia eats away at us, but…”

Feeling anxious, she stood up and started to pace back and forth with her tea in her hand.

“It’s all we’ve ever known. Every day, we live our lives assuming something bad will happen so at least we are ready to face it when it does. And yet, it’s never enough. Every corner we turn there is something horrible waiting for us, and every time it takes another bite out of us.”

She stopped her pacing, realizing what she was doing and turned to look at Percy. “Paranoia is part of our everyday life. I don’t know what we’d be like without that...”

His expression solemn, he studied her for a few seconds before his eyes drifted back toward his tea. “I understand.”

Tears started to roll down her cheeks again, but she quickly wiped them away before he could catch her. It was strange, but out of anyone who she’d ever heard say those very words, she actually believed him. She believed he understood.

She swallowed some of her anxiety and turned away from him. “Thank you.”

Followed by Trinket, she quickly walked toward the kitchen and poured herself some more hot water. She hated when her tea got cold, in fact, she wouldn't even drink it if it wasn’t degrees away from burning her tongue. However, when she took a sip, she found that it still wasn’t hot enough. She poured it down the sink and turned the stove back on, the blue flame lapping at the sides of the kettle.

Trinket huffed and wandered over to his dog bed, followed by Vex’s contemplative gaze. She tapped her fingernails against the counter as she waited for her water, but flinched when she noticed Percy creep into her peripheral.

“I have a thought on the matter,” he said, very softly.

Vex turned to look at him. He had rested against the counter, his arms crossed.

“Yes?”

His gaze was focused on the fire of the stove. The blue fire reflected in his eyes. “It sounds to me as though you two know how to prepare for the worst,” he turned to look at her, “but have forgotten how to hope for the best.”

Vex laughed, though it was more of a sarcastic reaction to the absurdity. “It’s a kind of hard to hope for the best when things continue to not go your way.” She snickered nervously, though her expression was cold. “I used to believe that I was in control of my own life; that the decisions I made
would ultimately change my future or even the futures of others. It gave me meaning. But... the older I get, the more I start to believe that fate is unavoidable, and that there is no point in even trying.”

Silence grew between them once more. Percy’s gaze moved back to the stove as he sank into a state of deep contemplation, standing so still that he might have been mistaken for a statue but for his eyes, which tracked the movement of the flames. The illusion was broken when he furrowed his brow and gave a half-grimace before he closed his eyes and sighed, rubbing his arms.

He then turned to Vex and smirked, “You never struck me as a nihilist.”

Vex narrowed her eyes at him. “I don’t think I am.”

“No, you aren’t. Though some of the things you just said are creeping dangerously close the philosophy, and I suggest you stop. It’s not a friendly one.” He sighed, looking mildly nostalgic. “Full of destructive and anarchic beliefs fueled by the absurd theory that nothing matters because nothing exists.”

As pedantic as Percy’s words sounded, they seemed to hold some truth. She tried to remember what she had just said, but frankly, her mind was still a fuzzy mess. She’d have to take his word for it.

“Fine,” she said. “It’s just...a bit hard to not be so negative when things like this happen.” She bit the inside of her cheek, her expression turning cold. “Vax is out there, mad at me, mad at the world. He does stupid shit when he’s mad. It’s not that he’s stupid. He just does stupid shit.”

Percy’s face turned more serious. “Like what?”

Vex felt something crack inside her once more. She didn’t want to think about it, but the thought kept recurring in her mind: The sound of Vax’s shaky voice over the phone, the horrid realization that she couldn’t afford bail, the anger she felt when her father refused to get him out, the cold nights spent in a parked car next to the prison.

She tried to sigh away the swelling pain but all it did was fuel the fire. Unable to fight it any longer, she started to cry once more, her words choked by tears. “I don’t know.”

And just like that, without another moment of hesitation, she threw herself onto Percy and hugged him as hard as she could.

She felt him tense as she held him, but he didn’t back away. He just stood very still, not returning the hug at first, but not pushing her away either. Eventually though, she felt his arms wrap around her, granted a little awkwardly, as if he didn’t know of where to put his hands. She breathed into his shirt and found he smelled of smoke and alcohol, but she didn’t care. She could feel that his body was warm and sturdy, and it was what she needed.

They stood quietly for a while, and sure enough, beneath the sound of the water boiling behind her, she could hear the subtle wheeze in his breath, and his fast heart rate.

“Listen,” he finally said, patting her on the back.

She pulled away and looked up at him. There was a little redness to his complexion that she had not initially noticed.

He adjusted his glasses and cleared his throat. “Before I say anything else, I’d like to apologize for listening in on your financial problems.”

Vex furrowed her brow.
Percy’s lips parted as if he were ready to say something else, but then he stopped and reflected a little longer before actually speaking. “In fact, on second thought, I think I should just not preface this with anything.”

He reached his hand into his pocket, and Vex took a suspicious step back. Yet as he drew his hand back out, pressed tightly between his fingers was a wad of cash. However, this wasn’t just your average folded-up bundle of gold-prints: It was a thick roll of gray, lightly gilded banknotes held together with a rubber band.

Vex’s eyes grew wide, taking another step back. “What is that?”

“It’s money,” Percy said bluntly, seemingly surprised by the question.

“Clearly,” she said, her voice cracking ever so slightly.

He glanced at her inquisitively, seemingly thrown off by her reaction, before rolling his eyes and grabbing her by the wrist.

She squeaked, “Wha-”

“Here.” He pressed the wad of cash into her hand.

Vex reactively pulled away from him, but as she realized the weight of the cash in her hand, a lump formed in her throat.

With a shaky hand, she lifted the money to her eyes and started to thumb through the bills, mouthing numbers as she counted: forty, sixty, one hundred, two hundred, two fifty...

She slowly looked up at him. “H-how much is this?” Her brown eyes were straining to stay in her own skull.

“One thousand three hundred and forty-one goldies to be exact.” A bashful smirk spread across his lips. “I have fourteen coppers in my pocket, but you can have that as well if you’d like...”

Vex looked like she’d just been stabbed in the gut. She’d never seen that much cash in her entire life, much less held it in her bare hands.

“Percy!” she gasped.

“What?”

“You’re not giving this to me!”

“I already did.”

“No.” She slapped the wad of money on the counter and pushed it toward him with a pinky finger. But oh, how it hurt doing so...

“Vex...”

Her mouth was wide open as she tried to come up with the proper words to articulate how she felt, which was problematic because she didn’t know. “I... I can’t accept this.”

“Yes you can. And you will.”
She rested her hand on her chest and braced herself against the counter, staring at the floor. “That is a lot of money Percy...”

“I know.” He picked up the roll of money from the counter and looked at it longingly. “I’ve been... saving it for a rainy day.” He cleared his throat. “It’s everything I have.”

Her eyes shot back toward him. “What the fuck?”

“I know. I know…” he said, gesturing his hands as if he were trying to calm a wild animal.

“Do you though?” she squeaked.

He closed his eyes for a moment and smiled nervously. “Listen, I...” He bit his lower lip and looked up at the shelves, his eyes darting across the woodwork.

He seemed ever so slightly pained, though she couldn't quite discern why. Perhaps it was because he was trying to give away all of his fucking money.

He turned toward her again and his voice grew calm and calculated. “I... objectively believe that it is better in your hands than mine.”

Vex could not believe what was happening. For a moment, she wondered if she had fallen asleep on the floor and this was all some visceral dream, yet when she tried to fly, her feet remained grounded.

She looked up to him, her eyes still disbelieving. “Why?”

“Please, just take it from me.” He pushed the roll of cash back into her palm and he squeezed her fingers around it with both his hands. It almost hurt.

She glared at him and grabbed his fingers with her free hand, meaning to pry them away. Yet as she did, her eyes drifted toward his fingertips; they felt rough to the touch. Her brow furrowed as she recognized burn marks, some fresher than others, and as she lightly brushed her thumb over them, Percy pulled away before stuffing his hands in his pockets.

“Please…” His eyes were pleading now. “For my sake and yours. I’m honestly killing two birds with one stone here.”

Vex took a deep breath and exhaled some of her initial stress and shock. He was dead serious about this; he wasn’t just trying to be nice. She could see it in his eyes, hear it in his voice. There was an urgency to his request.

“But…” she muttered, her voice growing a little calmer. “If this is all of your money, how are you going to pay for anything?”

“That’s not going to be a problem. The past few weeks I’ve managed to create a decent network for myself. I made that money working odd repair jobs across town.” He smiled nervously at her. “Not that that matters. It’s all going to go to you.”

Vex cocked her head like a confused dog, “Wha...”

“From now on you will be the one who makes financial decisions for me. You choose where to allocate those funds, whether if be for my food, the van, beer…” He smirked. “Maybe not beer.”

“I can’t do tha-”

“And...part of that is for you and Vax.”
She looked at the cash and then back at him. “You want me to pay rent with this?”

“Well I have been living here for two weeks doing fuck all,” he said, crossing his arms.

“That’s not true,” she said insistently. “Tiberius told me how you fixed that…” She furrowed her brow. “What did you fix?”

“The radiator.”

“Yes, that!”

“It was an easy fix.”

“Look, point is, you’ve been useful. And not only that, you’ve done errands for us, gone grocery shopping, cleaned the house, walked Trinket, worked on Vox Machina. That was the deal. That’s how you’ve been paying rent.”

“Okay then...” He ran a hand through his hair and sighed deeply. He looked mildly distressed; like he was trying to think. Then his eyes lit up. “See this as you doing a favor for me then. I don’t have a bank account, so I need someone to hold onto it for me. I can’t go roaming the streets with hundreds of goldies on my person. Only people who are bad news walk around with that much cash on them…”

Vex crossed her arms and quirked a brow at him.

He leaned in and whispered in her ear, “Besides, it’s in my own self-interest that you two don’t get evicted.”

Vex bit her lower lip and looked up at him as he straightened his back with a smile. There was something about his confidence that felt off to her; a veil of underlying emotion that had stained the entire conversation. Had she been forced to coin it with a single word, in all honesty, she probably would have chosen “fear”, though even that didn’t feel perfectly accurate. Nevertheless, even in the face of Percy’s constant eccentricities, she could not help but feel touched by everything he’d done for her, and everyone else for that matter.

She cracked a small honest smile for the first time in a while. “You’re very strange…”

“I know,” Percy said, grinning back. “Oh, I know...”

They both stood staring at each other. The water was still boiling. Steam was drifting from the pot and it had made the air rather humid where they were standing. At least, she assumed that’s why she was perspiring.

“So what are you going to do?” she asked, pressing the wad of cash between her fingers. “Just give me money whenever you get your hands on some?”

He shrugged, “That’s the general plan...”

She continued to look at him a little dumbfounded, and he seemed to catch on that perhaps he needed to clarify.

“...” he said, looking down at the floor. “I feel like I finally have a network of people I can genuinely call friends.” He then looked back up at her and smiled. “For the first time in months, I feel like I actually have a fighting chance at getting back on my own two feet. With your help, of course...”
Her eyes rested on his kind expression. He was such an odd combination of strength and fragility, that she wondered which of the two attributes was the lie.

She thumbed through the bills, and a deep quivering sigh escaped her lips. “Percy...I don’t know how to thank you. I really don’t.”

“Well...” He smirked. “You can start by texting your brother to warn him that he needs to get his rear end back into this apartment or he’ll have trouble waking up for work tomorrow.”

She nodded, swallowing hard as she quickly pulled her phone out of her pocket. For a moment, her eyes darted across the linoleum floor as she tried to think. She needed to write something clever; something that would get her point across in one simple text. If she wrote something too long there was a risk that he’d blow it off and wouldn’t read it. She knew how he was when he got mad. She needed something direct. Something poignant.

Her nervous gaze drifted toward the cash in her hand and she squeezed it between her fingers a few times. Then her eyes went wide, inspiration finding her with a grin.

She quickly pulled a few fifty marked gold-prints bills out of the roll; she figured four hundred would do the trick. She then crafted a lovely money fan and took a picture of it with her phone, making sure to catch the lighting so her turquoise polished nails shined just right against the green.

“Clever,” Percy said with a grin.

“This will definitely get his attention,” she said as she typed a quick message.

_Vex: Come back_

With that, she slapped the money on the counter with a relieved sigh and pocketed her phone.

“Right.” She glanced up at Percy with a smile that was just a little bit forced, but only a little. “What should we do while we wait for him?”

Percy blinked at her, a little thrown off by her sudden change in mood. “Um...” He glanced around the kitchen, before pointing at the long boiling water with his pinky. “Did you plan on having more tea?”

“That’s right,” she said cheerily. “Thank you for reminding me.”

“Of course...” Percy said, clearing his throat. He held his wrists behind his back as he watched Vex pour hot water into her mug.

She dipped a new teabag into the cup and leaned her hip against the counter, looking up at Percy. “So. What else?”

He tilted his head curiously at her. “What else...”

“What else should we do?”

Percy pursed his lips, glancing at her from head to toe, looking as if he didn’t exactly know what to do with himself now.

“Hm?” Vex hummed expectedly, bobbing her tea bag in her cup perhaps a little more aggressively than was customary.

“You...” He stared at the stove, then at the fridge, then at her tea, then at Trinket at the corner, then
at the couch, before finally looking back at her. “Want to look at car parts?”

Vex chuckled at him, relishing in his awkwardness.

“What’s so funny?” He half smirked. “I figured you’d want to check them out now that I’m offering to contribute to the Vox Machina fund with that money I just gave you.”

Vex’s face lit up. Every single thing that was coming out of his mouth was getting her higher and higher. Now all he needed to do was reveal that he was actually a secret millionaire writer who went around funding underprivileged young adults in exchange for ideas, and that she was secretly on live TV.

“Oh Percy…” She winked theatrically. “You sure do know how to make a woman happy…”

With that, she grabbed him by the wrist and dragged him back to the couch. They both plopped down and she sat right next to him so she could get a good look at the screen.

He gave her a suspicious glance as he slowly opened the laptop. “Obviously, I still think we should be sparing with how much we spend, considering there are other problems with the van, but…” He started to type in the password she’d given to him as one-way trust exercise. “I think we might actually be able to afford one of the pieces I found. I hadn’t considered it before because it was a bit out of your price range.”

Vex leaned in to look at the screen. “Let me see?”

Percy opened the tab, and on the site was a listing for a part that cost eight-hundred and fifty gold-prints.

“It’s a decent price,” he said. “And the video the guy posted indicates that it’s in pretty good condition, but like I said, it was originally out of your price range.”

Vex narrowed her eyes as she read over the details. “And it’s a person selling it? Not some company?”

Percy nodded. “Yes.”

“So just some guy trying to make money off of scrap.”

Percy nodded again. “Seem like it.”

A wicked grin spread across her face and she stared at Percy dead in the eyes with an intensity that caused him to lean back just a bit, before she grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him close. “I can get that price down for you darling…”

Chapter End Notes

CW: Mild domestic violence (Grabbing, shoving, shouting.)

Holy guacamole. This was a nightmare to write, what with all the dialogue and the emotions and all the unintentional symbolism. I struggle quite a bit with emotion transition. Vex was all over the fucking place this chapter and I wanted to make sure her emotional roller coaster felt natural. I’m not sure if I succeeded and I might have to
My second struggle was, you guessed it, Percy. My version of Percy in this AU is something rather experimental, so we will see how he fares later on in the story. I’ve had to do a lot of research and talk to a LOT of people. I’m sort of curious to see if you’ve caught on to what’s going on with him. I feel like it’s pretty damn obvious by this point, but maybe I just think it is. I might tone it down if I feel it’s too clear. So let me know in the comments. I won’t tell you if you’re right or not...
Chapter Summary

Last time, on the Butterfly Effect:
Vex has a heated argument with Vax when they realized they won’t make rent, followed by Vax storming out of the apartment. Percy overhears this, and after a heartfelt conversation with Vex, he decides to give her all of his money, which leaves Vex utterly shocked.

Chapter Notes

No Content Warning this chapter.

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Deception checks, Persuasion checks, Intimidation checks. All the checks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

While waiting for Vax’s return, Percy spent nearly half an hour listening to Vex plot a plan that would supposedly ensure a much better price on the part they intended to buy: It was an elaborate scheme that involved a little seduction, a lot of lying, and a fake advert that sold the part they needed for a realistically lower price than the one Percy had found...

Although he had his reservations, Percy eventually agreed to be an accomplice to such a scheme, considering they didn’t have many other productive things to do with their time while they waited for Vax anyway. Together, they spent another hour creating the advert, complete with pictures, a vendor biography, and an email address belonging to Billy, the retired mechanic turned goat herder.

However, despite all their efforts to kill time in the most productive way conceivable, Vax remained a no-show, causing Vex’s enthusiasm to falter and fray just like her braid, that had become quite a mess with all the crying and the grabbing and the yelling and the hyperventilating. Frankly, she felt like she’d gotten sex hair without any of the fun. Nevertheless, having already waited this long, she was determined to sit this one out, and she would not give in to the evils of her more tired half.

For the following hour, she tried her best to entertain herself with Percy’s quiet company, craning over his shoulder as he scrolled through various websites and listings, studied maps, or read up on mechanical articles that were far too complex for Vex to understand that late past her bedtime. Yet as the night grew long and the hours still, Vex’s hopeful mood regressed into gloom as her previously high expectations of Vax returning withered away along with her remaining physical energy.

A bolt of lightning flashed across the sky and the sound of rain began to patter outside the window, followed by the soft rumble of thunder in the distance. Vex’s eyes fluttered open, realizing she had dozed off, her head now rested against Percy’s shoulder. She sighed, idly watching the screen with a blank expression on her face.

“Maybe you should go to bed,” he said, now apparently typing something new on a blank document.
She knew it. He really was writing a book

“Are you kicking me out of my own living room?” she mumbled.

“No...” he said, clearing his throat. “You just seem tired.”

Growing conscious of her own position on the couch, she lifted her head off Percy’s shoulder and scooted away from him, pulling her knees to her chest and huffing into her jeans. Trinket huffed as well, rolling over on his back and melting into the carpet.

“Both of you actually,” he corrected.

Perhaps Percy was hinting at the fact that he was getting tired of waiting. As much as he tried to deny it, he was human too, and occasionally needed sleep. In theory, there was nothing stopping Vex from simply waiting in her room, but the loneliness tugged at her soul like a gaping wound, and in that moment Percy’s mellow presence was the only thing keeping her from ripping her stitches again.

Vex slowly turned to look at Percy, though he wasn’t looking at her, nor was he looking at the computer screen anymore. He seemed lost in thought.

“Perc-”

Trinket rose to his feet and his ears lifted up just as the apartment door flung open, causing Vex and Percy to both flinch and back away from each other just a tad bit more.

Soaking wet and breathing heavily was a very bewildered looking Vax, his wild eyes darting between the three of them before finally settling on his sister.

“What the fuck Vex’ahlia?”

“Vax!” She scrambled to her feet and leaped over the coffee table, striding toward him and squeezing him tightly, not caring that he was dripping all over the place. “I’m sorry...I’m so so so so sorry,” she babbled, burying her face into his jacket.

Vax grabbed her by the shoulders and pushed her at a distance where he could look at her straight in the eyes. “Did you always fucking have it?”

“What?” she said, sniffling a bit.

Vax narrowed his eyes at her. “The money Vex, where the fuck did you get that money?”

“Oh.” A little grin spread across her lips. She wiggled out of his grasp and pulled the wad of cash from her pocket, resting one hand on her hip. “You mean this?”

Vax glared at the cash for but an instant before trying to snatch it from her, but Vex was too fast. She snapped it away from his hand and shook a scolding finger at him. “Oh no you don’t.”

He wiped some rainwater from his eye. “C’mon...”

She smirked. “For this you will have to thank our illustrious guest,” she said, turning and presenting Percy like a nobleman.

Percy glanced to his left, then to his right, and then behind him before looking back at Vax with a little smile. “Oh... I guess she’s talking about me.”
Vax stood motionless for a moment, leaving a slowly growing puddle in the middle of the carpet. He didn’t seem necessarily angry, but he wasn’t exactly overjoyed either. Instead, he simply stared at Percy with a look that hinted just a modicum of distrust.

“Why…?” he finally asked, his voice a little hoarse.

Percy shoulders laxed and he let out a drawn-out sigh. His blue eyes studied at Vax, unblinking, almost challenging.

Vex swallowed hard, her eyes darting between the two, clasping her hands around the money still in her hand. Trinket walked over and sat beside Vex, tilting his head and looking at Vax curiously, his tail lightly thumping against the carpet.

After some uncomfortable silence between them, Percy raised his chin to Vax. “That is something you are going to have to discuss with your sister.” As he said this, he stood up, closed the laptop, and reached for his jacket. “Meanwhile, I’m going to go smoke.”

He started to walk past the two twins when Vax spoke up. “It’s raining cats and dogs out there.”

Percy opened the door and pulled his hood over his head before stepping outside. “I don’t care.”

With that, he closed the door behind him, leaving the twins to their own business.

As the sound of rain decorated the silence, Vex bit her lower lip and approached Vax. She mustered a kind expression, and moved a strand of wet hair out of his eyes. “It’s a long story brother…”

Vax looked at her blankly for a moment, but as Trinket wandered up at him and licked his hand, a small smile cracked across his lips. “I have time.”

Needless to say, it wasn’t easy explaining to Vax what had happened that night. Frankly, Vex had trouble fully wrapping her head around it herself. It wasn’t common for a homeless man with thousands of gold-prints worth of pocket change to just randomly give it all away to some acquaintances simply out of the goodness of his heart. They’d suffered on the planet long enough to know that it wasn’t how things worked; that it simply wasn’t something that happened.

Once they had rested, they were certain they’d dedicate some time to properly theorize on a possible explanation, but for the time being, they knew that it was probably for the best to just count their blessings and go to sleep. They weren’t going to get evicted that month, which was all that really mattered at the moment.

After many tears and apologies, the twins eventually went to bed. Rest was of the utmost importance, as Vex needed to make sure her mind was sharp and ready to tackle the adventure that awaited her the following morning.

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Despite everything that had transpired the night before, Vax still managed to wake up for work, or at least, that’s where Vex imagined he’d headed off to at four o’clock in the morning.

She groaned and covered her head with her pillow as the sound of the bedroom door opening interrupted her peaceful slumber.

“Percy said he’s ready to go when you are,” Vax said as he tossed his jacket on his bed.

For a few still moments, there seemed to be no reaction on Vex’s end. But as the words slowly
started to skin in, she threw her pillow off her face and sat up wide-eyed, glancing at the alarm clock on Vax’s bedside table. It was 10:42.

“Shit!”

She practically jumped out of bed before bum-rushing Vax out of the room. “Out. Need to change.”

“Wait but-”

She closed the door in his face. She didn’t have time for “waits” and “buts”.

After hastily strategizing the perfect outfit, she settled for a pair of skinny jeans, a teal shirt she could unbutton as low as she needed to, and of course, the most aggressive push-up bra she could find. After hopping into her boots, she nearly left the room before eyeing Vax’s leather jacket and snatching it greedily.

She re-braided her hair while she was pissing, brushed her teeth, and collected all her best makeup into her backpack before storming out the bathroom door, nearly running into Vax on the way. She stopped and shook him a little. “Car keys!”

“They’re in my-” he paused and stared her down, “jacket…”

She patted herself down and when she heard a rattle, she gave him a toothy grin and playfully booped him on the nose. “Thank you.”

With that, she strode into the living room, her arms wide and shouting out like an overly enthusiastic game show host. “Who’s ready to save some money?”

Percy, who was sitting on the couch part way through sipping his coffee, lowed the cup from his face and traded a few confused glances with Keyleth and Tiberius who were sitting next to him, before raising a cautious hand like a terrified elementary school student. Tiberius happened to raise his hand too, but Vex didn’t pay him any mind.

“Excellent!” she said with a wink. “Let’s go!”

Percy chugged his coffee, and quickly hugged Keyleth and high fived Tibs before running out the door after Vex.

As they made it down to the parking lot, Vex bumped Percy with her hip before sneakily pressing the car keys into his hand.

“You mind driving darling?” She asked, nodding toward the mildly broken down black sedan. “I need to put my makeup on.”

“But-”

“You want a deal on that part or what?”

Percy simply raised his hands in surrender as he walked toward the car, shaking the keys as emphasis that he was doing as he was told. With a foxy grin plastered on her face, she slipped into the passenger’s seat and immediately started to apply her lip liner. She’d make this a good day whether the universe wanted it or not.

***

The guy selling the part apparently did business at a junkyard slightly outside of town. Percy had
gotten in contact with him over the phone that morning to confirm that they were interested in the part, and he was supposedly waiting for them there. It wasn’t a long drive, as Westruun wasn’t a remarkably large city, but it was far enough for Vex to use this as an opportunity to get some much needed info out of Percy.

“So Keyleth?” Vex asked with a grin as she applied some eyeliner while they were stopped at a red light.

“What about her?” Percy asked, sounding innocent enough.

She closed the bottle and searched for her mascara. “You two seem to be getting pretty close.”

“She’s fun.” Percy shrugged, side glancing at the tiny glass bear dangling from the rearview mirror. “It’s kind of interesting to meet someone who is almost your complete opposite and yet find that you still have things to talk about.”

She’d never consciously contemplated it, but Keyleth and Percy truly were opposing entities. Keyleth was hyper all the time with just a touch of mellow, while Percy was mellow with just a touch of hyper; Keyleth had a classy background but chose to be homeless, while Percy had a homeless background but chose to be classy. Keyleth was all about being healthy and tending to nature, while all Percy seemed to do was starve, smoke, and care for machines. The more she thought about it, the more she acknowledged that Percy truly was Keyleth’s antonym.

“Well, opposites do attract,” she said, applying dark mascara in heavy coats. She knew it would be hellish taking it off but she was willing to make the sacrifice for the purpose of saving money.

“A rather misleading saying, but true in part,” Percy said, drumming his fingers on the wheel as he carefully watched the light. “To be brutally honest, I sort of treated our friendship as a social experiment at first…”

She let out a brief chuckle, putting her mascara brush back down as the light turned green. The last thing she needed was to accidentally poke her eye out. “Why does this not surprise me?”

Percy half-smirked, glancing into the rearview mirror before changing lanes. “Because you sadly seem to already know me better than I would have hoped.”

Vex hummed. Knowing people was honestly one of the only things she was good at. Well, that and maybe giving head. So she took it as a compliment. “Anyway, go on.”

“That’s about it.” He shrugged. “She intrigued me, so I decided to see if I could become friends with someone like that and we did.”

“Keyleth intrigues a lot of people.”

“I must admit, her optimism is oddly contagious. And she’s a lot wiser than she looks. It’s been a while since I’ve managed to find someone I can speak with freely about philosophy.”

Vex raised a brow with a smirk. “High talk?”

He laughed. “Yes, high talk…”

They drove down a wooded avenue and started to head toward the outskirts of town, closer to where Grog and Pike lived.

“Um, left on this intersection or the next?” he asked.
Vex glanced down at her phone. “The next one.”

“Thank you,” he said as he accelerated a little. “No, but seriously. She’s interesting to talk to because she has no filter, much like Tiberius. If she doesn’t like what you’re saying she’ll just say it. She has very strong opinions about things and I sure do enjoy a hearty debate.”

“What do you talk about?”

He shrugged. “The usual. Politics, religion, economics... Pretty much all the things that you shouldn’t talk about at a dinner table.”

They stopped at another red light and Vex finished putting on her mascara. “I thought that was Politics, religion, and sex?” She smirked.

“Hm.” He glanced at her and a sly grin spread across his face. “Odd, we always used to talk about sex at my dinner table.”

Vex laughed. “Fascinating.”

“Very.” The light turned green and he turned left, heading down a more industrial road. “But no, we don’t talk about sex. In fact, now that I think about it, we rarely go into anything extremely personal.”

Vex furrowed her brow. That was where she and Keyleth seemed to differ. The few times she’d spoken to Percy, their talks had only been personal, which she found interesting given this most recent discussion. Perhaps Percy was the type of guy who liked categorizing his conversation partners: Keyleth was for philosophy, Tiberius was for academics, and she was for personal shit. Thus, they rarely spoke because he never wanted to talk about personal shit. It was a theory worth looking into.

“However, she occasionally brings up her family’s organization,” he continued, “which I find interesting. I never would have imagined that she came from money.”

“I know right? Far too nice...”

There it was again. The very subtle yet certainly present hint of annoyance in Percy’s expression. He seldom seemed to get annoyed by much, but when he did, it was clear to a keen eye. His jaw would tense and his lips would press tighter together, as if he were containing some sort of complaint, though Vex could never tell what ticked him off, so she usually tried to just shut up when it happened.

“Never judge a book by it’s cover, I suppose,” he eventually said, coating his words with a little more weight than your average throw away stock sentence.

He glanced back at his rearview mirror as he changed lanes, preparing to turn onto the industrial road that supposedly lead to the junkyard, according to her phone.

She didn’t know how he did it, but Percy had this magical ability make things cryptic on command. Knowing herself, she’d probably dwell on what he’d just said for quite a while, as if she needed more things to think about.

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They drove up onto a gravel road that lead through an open gate to what appeared to be a rather extensive junkyard, car and appliance corpses piled in precarious mounds surrounded by a tall chain-
linked fence rimmed in barbed wire.

Toward the end of the rugged gravel road was a small metal shack with a TV antenna and some electric wires connected to a couple of dusty solar panels. As they came to a crunching halt on the gravel, Vex spotted a small hand-drawn sign that read “office” in red sharpie.

“This looks right,” she said.

Percy pulled up the handbrake and rested his arms on the wheel as he narrowed his eyes at the shack. “You sure about this?” Percy asked, “You know we can just pay the full price and leave.”

“Course I’m sure,” she said as she adjusted her bra under her shirt. “If not, what was the point in making that fake ad last night? No one in their right mind pays full price for things.”

“I...um.” He pursed his lips. “Fair.”

“Right.” She huffed and rubbed her hands together. “How do I look?”

Percy briefly side glanced at her before continuing his scan of the junkyard, “Yeah, you look good.”

Vex crossed her arms and pouted. “You didn’t even look.”

With an exasperated sigh, Percy dramatically turned to face her and made a point of showing that he was most certainly looking this time, widening his eyes and adjusting his glasses, and even leaning into her personal space as he scanned every inch of her in a mildly irritating fashion.

She pushed him away with a grimace. “Okay, no need to be weird about it.”

He huffed in amusement as he straightened himself, glancing into the rearview mirror and adjusting a stray hair. “Teal is a good color on you.”

She smirked with a roll of her eyes. “Thank you.”

“Right,” he said, drumming his fingers on the wheel once before unlocking the car doors and getting out. “Let’s just get this over with.”

Both got out of the car and cautiously peaked into the shack, staying close to the car just for good measure.

As they did, the shack door swung open and out walked a bald, slightly portly man with a thick red beard, his hands shoved his ripped jeans pockets. At the first sight of him, Vex inconspicuously unbuttoned an extra button on her shirt and glanced at Percy, who walked ahead of her to meet with the man.

“Darrell?”

“That’s me,” he said as he scratched his stomach. “Percy Robinson?”

“Yes,” Percy said, exchanging a handshake with the man before covertly wiping his hand on the back of his jeans.

Darrell then nodded toward Vex, giving her a long hard look at her from breasts to toe.

“That your girlfriend?” The man asked, clearly still speaking to Percy as if she weren’t even there.

Utterly caught off guard by the sudden question, Percy not only looked confused, but appeared to be
rapidly phasing into some form of mild distress as his mouth tried to utter a response.

Vex immediately jumped in to save the day. “Cousin, actually,” she said with a smile as she shook the man’s hand that was most definitely clammy. “Vexy Robinson.”

“How you doing?” he said with a grin as he held her hand a little longer than was appropriate.

“Just wonderful, thank you. I’m sure you two have plenty to discuss. Don’t mind me…” She winked.

With that, her and Percy followed Darrell behind the shack where he’d already prepared the part for easy browsing. She didn’t feel like standing around looking pretty while the men spoke, but she bit the bullet and did so anyway. She needed to pay attention so she could properly study the man’s mannerisms, despite the conversation topic being far beyond her realm of understanding. She couldn’t help but occasionally lose focus, her gaze drifting toward the piles of rusted metal in Darrell’s backyard. She couldn’t imagine anybody being interested in that junk, and yet there they were, talking to a clammy bearded man seeking to buy a very select and very expensive piece of junk.

Eventually though, as she sensed their conversation wrapping up, she snapped her attention back toward the two men with a toothy smile.

“How much did you want for it again?” Percy asked, baiting Darrell so that Vex could hopefully jump in, as they had planned.

“That’ll be eight fifty. For a fully functioning product it’s the least I could ask for.”

Vex took a few steps forward, positioning herself next to Percy, giving him a telling look. “Well, that’s unfortunate…”

Percy clicked his tongue. “Yeah…Bit of a letdown really.”

Darrell tilted his head in confusion. “Thought that was the price we’d agreed upon?”

Vex immediately turned toward Darrell, and crafted an unapologetic expression. “Oh you see, the guy on the other side of town was supposedly selling one for six hundred…”

Darrell’s expression immediately shifted from one of confusion to suspicion as his attention slowly turned toward Vex.

Vex pouted her lips. “I mean surely you don’t really intend to keep the price at eight fifty with that kind of competition?”

Darrell narrowed his eyes at her. “I didn’t see another ad.”

Vex feigned understanding. “Oh yeah, they posted last night.” She reached for her phone, showing him the ad that she and Percy had fabricated, puffing her chest out so her cleavage was in full view. “We were so very close to going there instead, but we figured we’d at least give you a visit.”

Darrell leaned in with a bushy furrowed brow, mouthing the words silently as he read. Vex bit her lower lip and eyed at Percy, who was currently standing wide-eyed with his hands in his pockets, his jaw moving from side to side nervously.

Eventually, Darrell’s back straightened, puffing out his chest and crossing his arms. “Seems like a no-brainer to go to that other guy.”
Percy visually deflated a little and Vex chuckled.

“Well yes, of course,” she said. “But you are so much closer and we assumed you’d be reasonable enough to make a deal. In fact...we talked about it in the car, and we agreed that we’d be willing to even pay six-fifty for the saved trip. We’re all about supporting local business.” She rolled her eyes theatrically. “And traffic in Westruun can be such a bore…”

“Aha…” Darrell’s expression morphed from mildly annoyed to mildly irritated, and in that moment, Vex realized that perhaps he was a little keener on making his money than she first expected.

Vex gave a fleeting look at Percy who was standing far to the side, desperately trying not to step on any toes as she did her thing. She turned back toward Darrell again and drew out the most sultry timbre she could muster. “I mean really now... we’re doing you a favor by even giving you a chance to stay competitive by asking you to lower the price.”

For but a moment, it seemed like Darrell was genuinely considering the deal as his expression grew contemplative, but as he let out a deep burp and scratched his belly, she realized that it was probably just gas.

“I ain’t lowering my price that low. You think I’m stupid?”

She chuckled, trying to mask a frown. Things weren’t going as smoothly as she would have hoped, though even she knew that batting her eyelashes and showing off her B cups was a cheap trick. In her experience, pure seduction rarely worked as a lone tactic, but she always liked to stack the deck before walking into these sorts of transactions, just on the off chance that she ran into a true moron.

Nevertheless, now she needed to switch gears and pull out the big guns.

She hummed as she stood up straight, crossing her arms. “Oh, quite the contrary. I think you are very clever. Clever enough to jump on an opportunity to sell your part before you lose us as potential buyers.”

He mirrored her stance. “Go right ahead. Go to the other guy. I can wait for someone else to come along.”

Percy looked like he was containing a cringe as he watched the exchange, but it didn’t shake her. She just needed to find what this guy feared; appeal to his strain of logic.

“How soon do you genuinely think you are going to find another buyer who has this exact problem with this exact model of van?” She smiled wickedly. “Percy told me they are pretty rare.”

Darrell half shrugged, though he didn’t offer a rebuttal. She contained a smirk and tried to suppress any shade of smugness on her face.

“With each passing day less and less of these vans remain in circulation.” She said. “How far are you actually going to push your luck?”

“That’s why I gotta charge what I’m charging. It’s a rare part,” he said, his annoyance persisting.

Vex shifted her stance a little, acting as if she intended to turn away. “Well, by all means, you may keep it as a keepsake if it means that much to you. I could see how you might consider it a collector's item.” She sighed. “We were gonna pay in cash, but I suppose we can just spend the rest of our day driving to that other guy Percy...”
"How about eight hundred?"

A little adrenaline surged through her as she smirked at the first success. "Really now…That’s still two hundred gold-prints over what that other guy is offering…"

"Look, I got a business to run."

"Which is why I generously offered to pay fifty more than that other seller for your trouble. I mean in theory, the way these things usually work, you should at least try to match him. We’re the ones being generous here."

"Two hundred off is a lo-"

"Do you want six hundred and fifty gold-prints now? Or quite possibly eight hundred and fifty…never? There are quite a few things you can purchase with six hundred and fifty goldies darling…” She wiggled her brows at him.

He looked at her, beady eyes narrowing to slits under bushy orange brows.

She leaned in and whispered, “Meanwhile that other guy is never going to have those six hundred goldies he’s asking because no one is ever going to need that part for the rest of his goat herding life.”

Darrell’s nostrils flared, gears clearly turning between that red pair of ears of his. “Seven hundred…”

Vex grabbed Percy by the arm and acted as if she was pulling him away, “Percy, we’re leav-”

“Alright. Six-fifty! Fuck.”

Vex whipped her head around and gave the man the biggest smile she could muster. “You kind sir, have yourself a deal.”

The feeling in her chest was indescribable. She’d had orgasms that were less exciting than the high she was feeling in that very moment. She squeezed Percy’s arm to cue that they’d won, and as she turned to wink at him, she found that his face could only be described as thunderstruck.

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Vex and Percy tried to keep very straight faces as they got into the car, trying to not make eye contact with Darrell as he watched them leave with a bitterness that could kill. Yet as soon as they exited the lot and drove a few feet down the road, Percy started to snicker.

“What?” Vex asked, smiling.

And then he started to chuckle… and then laugh, and laugh even louder, and then laugh so hard that he deemed it best to pull over, resting his head on the steering wheel, and exhausting his breath.

Vex furrowed her brow, though her smile persisted. She had never seen him act so silly. Perhaps he was actually having a psychotic break and this was no laughing matter at all.

“What?” she asked again, shaking his shoulder.

Percy wiped a tear from his eye and took a deep breath, looking up to the sky. “Vexy…”

Vex crinkled her nose and slapped him playfully. “Don’t you ever call me that.”
“No promises,” he said, straightening himself against his seat and running a hand through his hair, taking another deep breath before sighing out his words. “Holy shit though, that was brilliant.”

Vex narrowed her eyes at him. “And you doubted...”

“I’m sorry.” He took her hand and pretended to kiss it. “Forgive my lapse in faith...”

Though she felt a blush coming on, she masked it with as much smugness as she could muster, lifting her chin and flipping her braid over her shoulder dramatically, “I forgive you.”

He stared down the road, scanning the brick buildings and metal smokestacks. “I mean... I feel like this calls for some sort of celebration.”

Vex smirked, crossing her arms and looking at herself in the side view mirror. “Oh darling, we are going to get so fucking high when we get home.”

Chapter End Notes

Lighter chapter this time around. I’ve been told that it’s good to let good things happen to characters every once in awhile...

And just for shit and giggles, here is AC/DC’s “Thunderstruck”, because why the fuck not?

[YouTube link](https://www.youtube.com)

Also, here is a little WIP fanart for this chapter (5/4/2017)

[deviantART link](https://tumblr.com)
Chapter Summary

Last time, on the Butterfly Effect:
With a little persuasion and a lot of truth stretching, Vex gets a ridiculous discount on the part Percy needs to fix the van, and they are both overjoyed and ready to celebrate.

Chapter Notes

No Content Warnings this chapter.

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Ever heard of the song “Solitude” by Black Sabbath? Might be worth a listen, especially for this chapter. Keyleth certainly has this in her playlist, and it may or may not have given Percy some feels. Frankly, I’m surprised this wasn’t in Taliesin’s playlist for Percy.

It’s mentioned in this chapter, that’s for sure.

YouTube Link

So much weirdness ahead…Brace yourself for the weirdness. High talk makes no sense.

Just as she had promised, the first thing Vex and Percy did when they made it home was walk right up to Vox Machina, knock on the brightly painted door, and inform Keyleth that they were going to get so fucking high that they’d be able to take a selfie with a martian.

Of course, Keyleth was more than happy to oblige, her green eyes growing bright as she clumsily gathered up her paraphernalia in a canvas bag and ran past them toward the apartment.

Now, Keyleth was not just your average stoner. She was very particular about where she acquired her medicine, yet her pickiness was not solely tied to quality. Her opinions on the matter were set in stone, and one could argue that her investment in the industry was borderline cultural. Vex didn’t exactly understand all the details -- given that Keyleth wasn’t the most articulate creature on the planet -- but supposedly, she got her supply from a “sustainable commune” of sorts. This community of a few hundred individuals or so, known simply as the “Ashari”, produced everything from marijuana to cooking spices, all organic and all grown with allegedly no carbon footprint. They sold most of their products for medicinal purposes, and used the money they earned to continue their work taking care of the land, volunteering, recycling, building homes for the homeless, investing in green technology, and expanding their influence. However, the more interesting part about these people was that there was more than one of these little pocket communities on the continent. In fact, Keyleth had supposedly lived in one prior to meeting up with the rest of the gang, and to this day, she consistently got her supply of marijuana, herbs, spices and sometimes even food from this web of people, harboring the belief that investing in their lifestyle was investing in a better world.
It was thus no surprise that she was happy when her friends wanted to partake in a smoking session, and it was also why Vex always felt comfortable asking her to provide. Not only did she feel like every puff she took was going toward something useful, but it was also fucking good herb, a win-win situation in a world where everything she usually did was a lose-lose.

***

Keyleth’s choice of music wasn’t usually Vex’s cup of tea, yet when she got high, it seemed to somehow gain a whole new level of depth that she’d failed to previously recognize. It was as if the playlist itself told multiple stories at once, changing according to how baked she was, and this made her come to terms with the fact that Keyleth was far more brilliant than most people gave her credit.

Vex had long lost track of what time it was and was too lazy to check her phone that was charging in the kitchen, though she figured it was getting closer to mid-afternoon judging by the sun’s position on their carpet, which also meant that they’d spent at least two hours swaying to the hypnotic rhythms emanating from Keyleth’s phone while they munched on cereal and debated about everything from the absurd popularity of cat videos, to chaos theory.

Nevertheless, now they had reached a stage in their high where active conversation had become less of an option, and where hibernation seemed like a more and more appealing alternative. Vex’s legs were tossed over one arm of the couch while Keyleth’s were tossed over the other, both their heads leaning against Percy’s lap as all three of them stared up at the ceiling. Percy’s arms were outstretched across the back of the couch like some sort of vertical snow angel, basking in a light that no one else could see but him. Meanwhile, Trinket was on the floor beside Vex, rolled on his back snoring away, his drowsiness quite possibly influenced by the haze in the air, but most probably caused by his full belly after Vex spoiled him with a little too much dog food.

The song “Solitude” by Black Sabbath finished playing, and for what felt like an eternity, there was silence, save for Trinket’s snoring and the sound of slow-moving commuter traffic in the distance.

As a new song began to play, Keyleth blew a smoke ring upwards and it clipped with Percy’s jaw, snapping him out of his daze. She lazily passed him the joint and he took it between his fingers, inhaling deeply with closed eyes and exhaling a seemingly never-ending stream of smoke with his chin in the air.

“Percy Robinson…” Vex muttered as her eyes followed the smoke.

Percy ashed the joint in the ashtray in front of him before handing it to Vex. “Yeah?”

Vex took a hit, sighing the smoke out her nose before looking up at Percy. “I mean, that even sounds like a writer’s name.”

Percy shifted his position ever so slightly, sinking a little deeper into the cushions so his head could rest more comfortably on the back of the couch. “Why?”

Vex sighed, taking one more hit before passing the joint back toward Keyleth. “You know.”

Percy furrowed his brow. “What does that even mean? Sound’s like a writer’s name…”

“I don’t know,” Vex huffed.

He chuckled, his eyes scanning the indeterminate shapes frozen in plaster on the ceiling. “You need to know.”

“What?”
“You need to know so I can know.”

Vex groaned as she sat up, growing tired of her position and feeling her legs fall asleep. She crossed her legs and leaned her head against Percy’s bony shoulder, her gaze getting lost in thought. “You know when you go through a bookstore... and you start reading the names of the authors and you think ‘woah’, their names are just... they sound so good; like too good.”

“Oh yeah...I totally know what you mean,” Keyleth said, holding the smoldering joint between her fingertips as she bobbed her feet back and forth to the rhythm of the music.

“Yeah,” Vex said.

“Yeah,” Keyleth replied, allowing smoke to float out of her mouth at its own pace.

“Yeah but why are we talking about writers now?” Percy asked, looking very confused.

Keyleth hoisted herself up and leaned against Percy’s shoulder as well, lifting the join to his mouth. “They need to sound good to catch your attention. Most of them are made up.”

Percy pressed his lips against the joint like a delicate kiss and inhaled, holding the smoke in his lungs as he reflected on the implications of the conversation before exhaling. “Are you saying my name sounds made up?”

Keyleth tapped Vex on the knee and handed her the joint, who finished it off before tossing it in the ashtray.

“Yeah, I guess so.” Vex shrugged.

Now sandwiched between his accusers, Percy sighed, weaseling his hand into his pocket and pulling out a thin, worn out wallet. As he did so, both Vex and Keyleth leaned in to look at what he was doing. He opened the wallet and pushed an I.D. card out of the clear plastic compartment, displaying a relatively recent picture. His hair was already white and he was wearing glasses, though his expression was more akin to a mug shot than an I.D. picture.

With little warning, Vex daftly snatched it from his hands and studied it with serious scrutiny, lifting it high and reflecting the light off of its surface before finally speaking. “No fucking way.”

Percy raised a brow. “What?”

“No way you’re thirty-two”

“You’re thirty-two?” Keyleth gasped.

“Give me that.” He pried the card out of Vex’s fingers and put it back in his wallet. “So now you’re saying I don’t look thirty-two?”

“I don’t believe you’re thirty-two.”

“Cause you think I’m older?”

“No, I think you’re younger.”

“Even with the hair?” He pointed at it.

Vex smirked. “The hair makes me think you’re younger. It’s fun.”
“What?” The connection was clearly lost on him.

“It’s funny?” Keyleth asked as she worked on rolling another joint.

“No. It’s fun hair,” Vex said, leaning back to get a good look at it. “And people only dye their hair fun in their twenties.”

“That’s bull,” he scoffed.

“Vex... that’s ageist,” Keyleth groaned, though not taking her attention off of her handiwork.

Vex huffed. “Well, that’s mainly how it works.”

Percy traded a tired smirk with Vex before looking back up at the ceiling. “Doesn’t matter because it’s not dyed.”

Vex stood up on her knees and started bouncing up and down as she pointed at Percy in an accusatory manner. “I fucking knew it! I was baiting you, you mother fucker!”

Percy leaned into Keyleth with wide eyes as he watched Vex bob up and down. “Why do you always do that?”

She stopped, her shoulders laxing and quirking her head. “Do what?”

He slowly blinked at her, “That thing you do…”

She leaned in closely and rested her chin on his shoulder. “What thing?”

Percy turned his head to face her, their noses now dangerously close. “You know”. His eyes narrowed and a devilish smirk spread across his lips.

At this distance, Vex felt a wild intensity in his persona that was far more censored at a distance. She could smell the smoke on his breath. His eyes looked like shattered stained glass, turned almost green by the contrasting redness in his bloodshot eyes.

She wanted to take off his glasses to see if it would unleash something, but chose against it.

“C’mon, what?” she asked with a coy smile. She absentmindedly brushed one of his stray hairs back into place.

His eyes followed her hand. “You really like doing that.”

“Holy shit…” Vex whispered.

“What?”

“I’ve never touched your hair,” she said. She started to run her fingers through his silvery locks, combing it back over and over again. “It’s so soft and thick.”

“I…” Percy seemed at a loss for words, distracted by the contact.

“Keyleth, touch his hair.”

“Okay,” Keyleth said cooly. She rested the half rolled joint on the ashtray and ran her long fingers through his hair like a hairdresser at a salon. Her eyes grew wide and she gave Vex a toothy grin before looking back down at Percy’s hair. “So soft…”
“So thick,” Vex sighed, a big smile on her face.

For a very awkward couple of moments, Percy sat frozen, eyes darting back and forth as Vex and Keyleth propped up on their knees, kneading through his hair like kittens to the rhythm of subtly psychedelic music. Their fingers would occasionally brush against each other and they’d giggle like middle school girls, which would also prompt Percy to smile through the oddity of the entire situation.

“I could do this for hours,” Keyleth said.

“Me too,” Vex purred.

Percy winced, noticeably weirded out by the entire ordeal, though he could not wipe the perennial smile on his face. “This feels…” He cleared his throat. “Inappropriate.”

“Why...?” Vex asked.

He closed his eyes and let out a nervous chuckle. “Well…”

“No, I mean why is it white?” she interrupted.

He furrowed his brow, eyes still closed. “I don’t know, shitty genetics?”

“More like awesome genetics.” Keyleth grinned. “It looks so good on you.”

“Yeah, you silver fox you…”

Percy expressed his resignation in a drawn-out sigh as he sunk deeper into the couch, wrapping his arms around Vex and Keyleth as they continued playing with his hair. “Thanks, I guess…”

Moments turned to minutes as the two women continued caressing Percy’s mane, their heads slowly sinking back down onto his shoulders as the music continued to play, lulling them all into another state of existence, anxieties and worries replaced by quietude and nonchalance.

The sheer complexity of the moment stirred sensations in Vex’s mind that she couldn't exactly categorize. Emotional processing was not something she was particularly good at even when she wasn’t stoned out of her mind. She theorized it was likely a combination of the residual joy after having saved two hundred gold-prints on a deal, along with the surrealness of Percy giving her all of his money, and his very existence on her couch, spending time with her and Keyleth, letting them caress his hair to the melody of God-knows-what on Keyleth’s phone, and -- of course -- the lingering sensation of three separate joints in her system.

“I want to finish rolling that joint but your hair is so silky,” Keyleth whispered.

Percy sighed once more, eyes closed softly. “First world problems...”

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Vex didn’t know how many songs had started and ended. It was all one big blur to her. Before she knew it, she had yet another joint against her lips and she inhaled deeply, her eyes closed, her head rested against Percy with his arm wrapped around her. She exhaled and blindly passed the joint to whoever wanted it, and she felt feminine, slightly cold fingers take it from her.

Her brow furrowed as she heard a familiar low chuckle coming from the hallway. She opened her eyes and spotted Vax, leaning against the wall with a smirk on his face, his hair braided similarly to
how Vex often kept hers to bed. He was currently wearing one of her many bear shirts; the black one that had the graphic of a roaring bear with the words “Mama Bear” underneath.

“Such a charmer,” he said, scanning the couch.

Vex mustered the strength to crane her neck over to see where Keyleth was, and sure enough, she was in the exact same position as her, also leaning against Percy who was sitting rather confidently between them with his arms wrapped around their necks, looking half asleep. She could only imagine what was going through Vax’s head, but she didn’t care to entertain his childish taunts.

“Hey Vax,” Keyleth said, waving a lazy hand in the air. “How was your nap?”

“Best five-hour nap ever,” he said with a yawn before stuffing his hands in his checkered PJ pockets. “You three seem to be having fun.”

Trinket rolled over on his side and huffed loudly.

“I mean four.”

“By all means, join us,” Percy said as he rested his bare foot on his knee, eyes still closed. “We can make room.”

“Wish I could. They drug test the hell out of us at work, and they don’t care if it’s medicinal or not…”

Percy hummed. “What a shame.”

“Not really,” Vex said with a chuckle. “Vax get’s weird when he’s high.”

Vax quirked his brow at the evident irony, “Sure, unlike Stubby here, who gets all touchy-feely…”

“I like high Vax,” Keyleth said, raising a thumb to the universe.

Vax smiled at Keyleth before wandering over behind the couch, staring down at Percy.

Percy opened his eyes as if he’d sensed the presence behind him, and he looked up at Vax with a sweet smile. “Hello.”

“How did this morning’s excursion go?” Vax asked.

“Rather swimmingly. We got the part. Perfect condition, and...wait for it.” Percy squeezed Vex’s arm.

Vex smirked. “We saved two hundred goldies off the original price he was offering.”

Vax raised his brows, looking genuinely impressed. “I am so proud yet feel so very sorry that Percy had to go through whatever he had to go through to achieve that sort of discount.”

“Your sister has a talent,” Percy said.

“I know. Though don’t encourage her. It’s gotten us into a lot of trouble.”

Percy simply shrugged in response, watching Vex try to throw a few lazy punches in Vax’s direction.

Vax absentmindedly ruffled Percy hair before pausing and sensually running his lean fingers through
“Huh...you have freakishly soft hair.”

“I know.” Percy, Keyleth, and Vex said in chorus.

Vax blinked in confusion, clearly processing something before shaking his head and readjusting Percy’s hair. “Anyway… When do you think you’ll be done fixing the breaks?”

“As soon as possible I suppose,” Percy said as he released his arms from around Vex and Keyleth, leaning forward and picking up the joint. He lit it once more and took a brief hit, staring at the potted plant by the window as he exhaled. “I’ll probably wake up early tomorrow morning to get it taken care of.”

“And then what?” Vax asked, now in the kitchen staring at the contents of the fridge.

Percy glanced down at the handmade ashtray and twisted it around a few times. “Depends.”

Vax chuckled to himself as he shook the contents of a nearly empty milk carton. “If you intend on actually leaving us once you're done you are going to be horribly disappointed.”

That remark grabbed Vex’s attention. Had she misheard? Because she was pretty sure she had just heard Vax admit to Percy that he wanted him to stay.

“Never said I wanted to leave,” Percy said as he studied at the joint’s glowing ember and lit a few corners to make it even.

“Good, because it would be a real asshole move after everything you’ve done.”

Vex’s expression softened. She knew what he was referring to of course: the money. This was probably Vax’s way of publicly telling Percy that he was thankful for what he’d done for them, even if it was just in front of her and Keyleth. Knowing him, he probably thought it was best to do so in the presence of fewer people so there would be fewer questions.

Percy nudged Vex and handed her the joint. “Well I didn’t plan on it anytime soon. Let’s just say I put all my eggs in one basket for the time being.” He winked at Vex.

Keyleth parked her butt on the back of the couch so she could get some higher ground and face Vax, dangling her feet. “Yeah, you sort of belong with us now Percy. Tibs and I already decided that we’re taking you as our third roommate once our lease starts.”

Vax crossed his arms and glared at Keyleth. “Pretty sure he’s already our roommate.” There was a touch of competitiveness in his tone.

“You’re making him sleep on a couch!” Keyleth shouted. “No one likes being forced to sleep on a couch.” She leaned over to theatrically whisper at Percy. “We’d give you a bed.”

Vex shook Percy. “We can get you a bed too!”

Percy laughed nervously as he adjusted his glasses. “That is something we can discuss later. Maybe when Tiberius gets back from clas-.”

As if on cue, the apartment door flung and Tiberius peeked his head in. “Did someone say my name?”

“Speak of the devil…” Vax muttered.

“Hey Tibs!” Keyleth said. “We were talking about how Percy is going to be our third roommate.”
“Ah yes!” Tiberius said as he dropped his backpack by the door. “We believe you’d be an excellent addition to our living situation.”

Percy smiled nervously. “Yes, so I’ve been tol-”

“He’s our roommate,” Vax droned from across the room.

“Poppycock!” Tiberius furrowed his thick brow. "And you decided this when?”

“When he started living with us and we started liking him!”

This would wind down eventually, Vex thought as she rested the joint on the ashtray. Surely she lived in a household where people knew better than to argue over human property? And yet, somehow, that was exactly what her apartment had become: a wild cacophony of people talking over each other in a show of dominance over who would win over Percy’s affections, who in the meantime had inconspicuously hunkered down with the joint pressed between his lips as he stared at his phone.

Vex rested her face in her hands, trying to process the insanity. Technically speaking, Percy had already sort of “paid rent”, so that was one argument toward him staying with them, though she felt like that was a confidential aspect of his relationship with her and Vax that she didn’t feel comfortable sharing with the others. Of course, there was also the fact that she had gotten jealously used to Percy. It would be hard parting with such an interesting member of the household, but again, this was something that she’d never admit publicly.

“Well I find that Percy melds with our group dynamic the best!” Tiberius said, tossing a balled-up tissue in Vax’s general direction.

Vax dodged out of the way with an eye roll. “Oh sure. It’s easy to get along with someone when they aren’t actually living with you.”

“I see him a lot more than you do!” Keyleth shouted.

“Percy’s already proven that he works well in our household!” Vax shouted back.

Vex stood up, raising her voice. “You know, since we are on the topic of discussing group dynamics, I feel like now would be a good time to talk about Emon…” She needed to end this discussion before it got out of hand. “Scanlan’s show is in what? Like two, three weeks?”

Everyone stopped what they were doing and glanced at each other.

Vax bent over to pick up the tissue and he tossed it in the trash. “That feels like a discussion worth having with the entire group.”

Keyleth’s eyes widened and she threw her arms in the air. “We could all go to dinner together!”

Vax smiled. “That’s actually not a bad idea. I mean it is technically Friday. I don’t have work until seven tomorrow morning.”

“And I suppose while we were all there we could also discuss Percy’s living situation…” Vex added with a groan, hoping she didn’t relight the fire she’d just extinguished.

“Oh my gosh, this sounds like a plan.” Keyleth grabbed her phone. “I’m texting the others right now. Vietnamese sound good?”
“Sure,” Vax said.

“Yeah,” Vex added.

“Sounds lovely!” Tiberius said.

Percy shrugged.

Sure enough, a few moments later, Vex heard her phone vibrate once. And then almost immediately a second time, and a third time.

She groaned. “Vax, toss me my phone.”

Vax did so promptly, and after catching her cell mid-air, she unlocked it.

Keyleth: Dinner at 7 at Pho King!

Grog: fukin swet

Pike: So down!

Vex had a weird feeling this was going to be an interesting night. Not that she minded. She had a serious case of the munchies and could really use some Pho King.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, this was just as weird to write as it probably was to read.

I must say, the Percy/Vex/Keyleth vibes may have come off a little strong in this chapter. But I can’t help myself sometimes. When the moon shines just right, I often ship pretty much all of Vox Machina with each other, so consider this just an innocent byproduct of that mentality.

I do actually have Keyleth's playlist, which is a combination of 60s/70s music. If you ever have any suggestion for the playlist, don't hesitate to let me know!

YouTube Playlist
Chapter Summary

Last time, on the Butterfly Effect:
Vex, Keyleth, and Percy cuddle on the couch while getting stoned out of their minds and talk about philosophy and soft hair. Vax and Tiberius show up and they briefly argue on who deserves to have Percy as a roommate, and then they all agree to get Pho.

Chapter Notes

No Content Warnings this chapter.

If you people have never had Pho, definitely google what it is. And as a note, “Pho King” is a restaurant that actually exists. We all know what they were thinking when they named it...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Pho King was a little hole-in-the-wall Vietnamese joint in downtown Westruun which served enormous bowls of noodles and broth for a price that even Vex felt comfortable spending, though everyone knew the real reason they were return patrons was because the place also served beer on tap.

It was a rather painless outing, especially considering Vex didn’t feel the need to dress up since she had already dolled up for ungrateful Darrell earlier that morning. Nobody else seemed to make a huge effort at looking good either. Vax didn’t even bother changing out of her ‘Mama Bear’ shirt; he simply threw on a black sweatshirt, pulled on a pair of skinny jeans, and called it good. As for the others, the lazy sentiment was shared. Tiberius didn’t change out of the red dress shirt he’d worn to class, Keyleth threw on a poncho over her already colorful baggy attire, and Percy simply combed his hair to remedy the ravaging it had endured prior to their outing.

Vex, Vax, Keyleth, Tiberius, and Percy all decided to carpool their way over to the restaurant in the twins’ car, though the drive there was relatively quiet, mostly because the stoned trio in the backseat was too busy power napping to participate in any sort of discussion Vax and Tiberius were having. One Theory of Law and Entrepreneurship conversation later, the party of five eventually made it to the front of the restaurant where Pike and Grog where already waiting. Pike looked adorable as usual, with a yellow sweater and her blue scarf, while Grog was dressed in a gray tracksuit and a red scarf that Pike had probably given to him because it was far newer looking than anything else he was wearing.

“Hi guys!” Keyleth said as she stumbled out of the car, followed by Percy and Vex who waved lazily.

“Hello Pike, Grog. It is so nice to see you!” Tiberius said as he hugged both of them.

“Sup big guy,” Vax said as he high fived Grog. “Where’s Scanlan?”
“Not ‘ere,” Grog said with a frown.

“Oh, he texted me saying he couldn't make it,” Pike said, looking a little bummed but not irreparably so. “Apparently he’s ‘busy’ again,” she said with air quotes.

“What’s going on with him?” Vax asked.

“I don’t know. Ever since he got that gig at the Cloudtop he’s been cooped up in his studio.”

Grog stretched his shoulders as he spoke. “Me and Pike went over to ‘is studio to see if we could catch ‘im, and when we got to the door...”

“...We could hear a violin playing from the other side,” Pike continued. “He let us in when we knocked, but he said to not bother him again because he had a lot of recording to do.”

“Well that’s fucking fantastic,” Vex groaned, crossing her arms. “The whole reason we’re here is to talk about his show.”

“And to drink,” Keyleth added, raising her hand.

“Yeah,” Vax said. “Enough standing around in the fucking cold. I need a beer.”

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The group headed inside and were immediately greeted by the owners, who spoke very little Common but knew all of their names by heart, save for Percy of course, who presented himself politely before they were all herded to their usual booth at the back of the restaurant where they could be as loud as their big hearts desired.

It was a pleasant little place with soft lighting and an interior decor that was some sort of awkward love child between traditional Vietnamese and a sports bar. With Scanlan missing, having a new person at the table didn’t disrupt things too terribly, although Vex could tell that Percy -- who was sitting directly across from her between Keyleth and Tiberius -- seemed a little thrown off by the extensive menu.

“I usually get this and call it good,” Vex said as she leaned across the table and pointed at the beef broth noodles.

Percy nodded and immediately closed the menu, seemingly content with the suggestion and not bothering to look at anything else, which Vex found curious but not insanely out of place. The little time she’d known Percy, she’d gathered that he wasn’t the biggest eater on the planet. He seemed like the type of person who ate for the sole purpose of nourishment rather than for pleasure, a personality trait that she’d heard of but never witnessed in person. She didn't exactly know how she felt about it. Once again, it was more evidence to point toward one of her more far fetched theories: That he was actually an android; that everything he did needed to be performed with purpose to avoid futile energy waste. She wondered whether he was one of those people who didn’t believe in sex without procreation either, or if pleasure served as a good enough purpose partake in the activity. Then she wondered why her mind had gone to such a dark and lewd place again and blocked the thought out promptly...

Pike tallied up who wanted beers and ordered for the group, and soon, everyone was armed with a tall one in hand.

“Been awhile since we’ve gotten together like this,” Vex said with a smile.
Pike returned a warm grin. “I know...I wish we could do this more often.”

Keyleth rested her chin in her hand and pouted. “Scanlan’s wrecking everything by not being here.”

“Everybody put your beers in the middle,” Pike said. “I’m gonna take a picture and send it to him.” She waited for everyone to get in position and stood up on her toes, raising the phone as high as she could in order to get a decent shot. “J-just one second. Vax, move closer to Keyleth.”

Seeing her in a bit of difficulty, Grog decided to take the task into his own hands. He grabbed her phone and lifted it plenty high enough. “Everyone say cheese.”

Vex rested her face in her palm.

“We’re taking a picture of our glasses Grog,” Tiberius said. “The purpose of saying cheese is to-”

Grog furrowed his brow. “Just shut-up and say cheese!”

Everyone groaned in chorus and said cheese before raising their drinks.

“What shall we cheer to?” Tiberius asked.

“Scanlan being an ass?” Vex muttered.

“Actually,” Vax said with a grin. “I think Vex and Percy deserve a toast for getting that car part we’ve been waiting on for so long.”

Percy, who looked lost in thought and perhaps a little tired, perked up at the mention of his name and sat straight.

“Wait really?” Pike asked excitedly.

“And at a wicked two-hundred dollar discount,” Vex said as she raised two fingers and winked.

“That’s fantastic!” Pike said with bright eyes. “You fix the van yet Percy?”

“Tomorrow,” he said with a half smile as he ran his thumb across the condensation on the beer glass.

“Well, I say we raise our drinks to nerds fixin’ our problems!” Grog said as he lifted his beer high in the air.

Everyone else followed suit, and Pike stood up and clinked her glass with Grog just to prove that she could do it. Then, in a swift and fluid motion that indicated years of practice, both her and Grog started to chug their drinks.

Vax raised his brows at them. “Woah now, who’s driving you guys back?”

Pike lifted her finger, signaling him to wait a moment as they both continued drinking, beer vanishing down their throats at an alarming rate. Vex often wondered where it all went. There had to be a trick to it surely.

Vax crossed his arms and waited patiently until both of them finished, almost exactly at the same time.

Pike slammed her glass on the table and gasped. “Who won?”

Percy gave a little smirk and pointed at Grog with his pinky.
“Ugh. Really…? Butt nuggets…” She punched Grog in the arm and he laughed. “Anyway, to answer you question Vax, we took a taxi.”

“Which means we’re gettin’ another drink!” Grog shouted with a toothy grin. “Percy, you’re chugging with us too this time. We seen you can do it.”

“Wait wait wait!” Vex said, slapping a notebook on the table. “Before you all get drunk, I want us all to discuss our plans for Emon. I want to find out where we’re going, book rooms, plan the pitstops.”

“Aw, such a bore…” Pike groaned.

“C’mon Vex…” Keyleth groaned, dragging her vowels. “I’m so tired of homework.”

Tiberius narrowed his eyes at Keyleth. “You don’t have homework.”

“Scanlan has all the info,” Pike said, resting her cheek on her knuckles.

“Yeah, and he’s not here,” Vax added.

“We could call him,” Tiberius said, shaking his phone. “Perhaps put him on speakers and discuss the plan in detail so you may then resume your inebriating pastime.”

“Yeh, that’s a good idea, call ‘im up,” Grog said.

Tiberius quickly dialed the number and put the phone in the middle of the table. Everyone held their breath as they quietly listened to the phone ring once, twice, three times...

“Oi,”

Some of them fist pumped, while others cheered before quickly being shushed by Vex.

She let out a relieved sigh, “Scanlan we-”

“You’ve reached Scanlan Shorthalt’s phone.”

The whole table groaned.

“Some call me guitar slayer, some call me king of polka, other’s just call me when they want to have a good time... To leave a message, wait for the kazoo…”

Awkward silence lingered around the table as everyone waited for the sound to go off, and after a few seconds, laughter came through the speaker.

“Just kidding. What do you people want? Can’t a guy get some thinking time?”

“Scanlan!” Vex squeaked.

“That’s me.”

“Seriously Scanlan.” Vex was practically climbing onto the table as she spoke into the phone, and Percy visibly sank into the booth in the wake of her aggressiveness. “We’re organizing the trip to Emon. Could you please give us the details of your gig so we can plan accordingly?”

“What’s there to plan? We just go to Emon and make the city come aliiiiive…..”

“Why aren’t you here?” Vax asked as he leaned in.
“Scanlan we miss you!” Keyleth shouted.

Vex shushed everyone, waiting for Scanlan to answer.

“Nothing, I’m just a busy man like I imagine all of you ladies and gents are. Money doesn’t just grow off trees like Keyleth may think.”

“Hey!” She furrowed her brow.

“Yeah anyway, what do you need from me?”

Vex closed her eyes and muttered a few silent swears before answering. “I need the venue address, the time you’re suppose to be there, the time the show starts, who you’re performing for, that sort of thing.”

“I’ll just forward you the e-mail they sent me.”

She slouched a little. “I guess that works...”

“Kay, I’ll do it in a bit.”

“No Scanlan, you’re doing it now, while you’re on speaker. I’ve got my phone on me and everything.”

There was a long drawn out sigh on his end of the phone, followed by the sound of shuffling. After what felt like way too long, Scanlan got back on the line. “Okay, it sent. You got it?”

Vex refreshed her phone and sure enough, the e-mail was in her inbox. She leaned in and spoke as cheerily as she could though there wasn’t one hint of a smile on her face. “Thank you Scanlan.”

“Yeah no problem. Have fun getting drunk. Oh, one last thing; did Percy take care of my van?”

At this point, Percy leaned in. “Tomorrow.”

“Oh great, Percy’s there. You know who to call if you fuck something up kay?”

Percy pressed his lips together and drummed his fingers on the table once before answering in the most patient tone he could muster. “Absolutely.”

He then looked at Keyleth and mouthed a ‘What the fuck ’ to which she mouthed an ‘I know right?’

“Alrighty. Keep me posted on what you guys come up with. Scanlan over and out.”

With that, he hung up promptly before anyone else could say anything. There was a long moment of silence, and during that time, the waiters brought everyone their food.

“Okay. Now can we drink?” Grog finally said, breaking the silence in utter exasperation.

“Sure...” Vex rolled her eyes as she broke her chopsticks apart and started stirring her noodles.

“Yes!” Grog said enthusiastically. “Pike, get us like, seven more beers. Two for each of us.”

Pike turned toward the waiter and lifted six fingers when Percy interrupted.

“I still have this one,” Percy said, nodding at his half empty glass.

“Well then you better catch up,” Grog said.
Pike lifted six fingers again with a smile and a nod.

“Oh! Get two for me too!” Keyleth said.

Pike lifted eight fingers.

Vex lifted her chin to the sky and groaned dramatically. “Two for me as well…”

“Should I just get some pitchers?” Pike asked.

“Yeh do that,” Grog said.

Percy closed his eyes and lifted his beer to his face with a smile. “This feels like a horrible idea.”

“Woooo, pitcher niiight,” Keyleth said as she lifted her drink to the sky.

Vex closed her eyes and shook her head slowly with a small smirk on her face. She couldn’t agree more with Percy. It was absolutely a horrible idea, but then again, their entire group was just one happy collection of horrible ideas all melded together into something wondrous. They drank on work nights, smoked away all their savings, bought rusty half broken vans, picked up strangers off the side of the road, and yet somehow they were all still alive and kicking. If money problems weren’t such a constant weight in her life, she’d go out a lot more often. She loved food, she loved fresh air, and she loved her friends, even when they got on her nerves.

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Vex knew she was getting drunk was when she could convince herself that previously bad ideas were actually brilliant ones. She was immensely thankful that Tiberius didn’t drink and had freely volunteered to be their designated driver, because otherwise they’d be in trouble.

She’d lost track of how many pitchers of beer they’d gone through, but she had gone to piss at least four times, and she was pretty sure she’d left home with her shirt buttoned a little higher than it currently was. But it didn’t matter. Pike had agreed to pay for a good percentage of the drinks, and almost everyone at the table was as drunk as her or worse, which made her feel a little better about her level of inebriation.

Keyleth was doing her best to keep her head up, and by ‘doing her best’, it implied using either Percy or Vax as headrests, who weren’t looking too great either. It was rather apparent that they were trying pretty hard to keep up a modest facade of composure, leaning their head against the back of the booth with a glazed over yet content expression on their faces. It was as if they felt some sort of obligation to keep up appearances for Keyleth, which Vex found funny given the fact that Pike and Grog couldn’t care less about how much they slurred or how much beer they spilled on themselves or each other.

Keyleth looked like she was just about to nod her face into the table when Vax managed to catch her head and prop her up against his shoulder.

“I think-” Vax covered his mouth and burped. "I think we should probably ask for the check. Keyleth is looking rather…”

“I love you guys sho much,” she slurred.

“...rather drunk.”

Vex nodded and nudged Pike to go ask for the check, while Keyleth continued to babble.
“I’m sleepy…” Keyleth said.

“We’re gonna get you home in a bit,” Vax said.

“If you can stay up a little longer I’ll show you a trick,” Percy said, slurring a little but otherwise looking relatively composed, save for his glasses that had almost slid off his face.

“Why would you wanna trick me?” Keyleth whined.

“It’s fun. Here look.” Percy took one of the leftover half limes from the platter of vegetables used to season the pho and held it in front of her face.

Keyleth rested her chin on both her hands to keep herself steady as she analyzed it carefully. “That’s a lime.”

Percy pressed his glasses back up on his nose. “Keyleth starts with a ‘K’, yes?”

Keyleth hummed in confirmation.

“Excellent. Now...I’m going to prove that I can cut your initial into the skin of this lime with…” He reached for his pocket, pausing for dramatic effect as he pulled out his weapon of choice, “...a cigarette.”

Keyleth blinked a couple of times. “Are... you a wizard?”

Vax finished off the last of his beer and rested it on the table with a thud. “Bull.”

A smile curled across Percy’s lips. “Want to make bet?”

With little hesitation, Vax shuffled through the pocked his jacket currently wrapped around Keyleth and lazily slapped what looked like forty cents worth of pocket change and a hair tie. Frankly, if Percy won, he’d be doing Vax a favor for clearing him of all those pennies, but at least he was in the spirit of things.

Percy chuckled as he handed the cigarette to Vax. “Go right ahead then.”

Vax furrowed his brow, examining the cigarette between his fingertips for a few moments. “What am I doing again?”

“Carve a K into the lime with that cigarette.”

Vax tilted his head at Percy, narrowing his eyes at him before glaring at his new green nemesis. After a few moments of inebriated scrutiny, Vax went to town on the lime, poking and prodding the skin with the cigarette from different angles, pressing it against it, tapping it repeatedly like a crazed woodpecker.

The whole party observed Vax try and fail repeatedly as his expression grew more intense by the second

After almost a minute, Vex laughed at Vax’s frustration. “Give up brother.”

Vax was straight up rubbing the side of the cigarette against the skin by this point, apparently assuming that friction would somehow do the trick.

“I don’t believe your strategy will produce the desired result Vax’ildan,” Tiberius said, sipping his water out of a straw.
“You’ve failed me Vax…” Keyleth said.

Vax roared out in frustration and smacked the lime and cigarette in front of Percy. “Alright pretty boy; show me your magic.”

Percy chuckled as he picked up the cigarette and reached for his lighter in his pocket. “It’s just chemistry really…”

Vax leaned in closer to observe Percy, as did the others. Vex was hoping there was actually something to this trick and not just some silly play on words.

Being as inconspicuous as possible, Percy flicked on the lighter and ran the flame under the cigarette filter for a few seconds, causing it to blacken quickly.

“As the fiberglass in the filter melts, I shape it a bit…” Percy said as he pinched out the flame and squeezed the filter between his fingertips. “until…” he lifted the cigarette to show the table, “I produce an itty bitty shiv.”

Vex raised a brow at Percy while Vax gawked at the cigarette with a furrowed brow and a lax jaw.

“Fascinating,” Tiberius said wide eyed.

“Neat,” Pike hiccuped.

“Ooh, can I touch it?” Grog asked almost giddily.

Percy reached the cigarette toward Grog and allowed him to gingerly poke his finger against the now sharpened end of the cigarette.

“Dats pointy,” Grog said, examining his finger for any sort of damage.

“Indeed it is.” Percy grinned. “Pointy enough to do this.”

And with that, he daftly carved a very clear K into the lime’s shiny surface before handing it over to Keyleth with a proud look on his face. “What’s your verdict?”

Keyleth brushed her finger against the lime and sniffed it a few times, clearly processing before finally speaking up in a half burp. “Percy’s the best.”

Vax leaned in to look at Percy’s work, his scowl morphing into a small smile. “Maybe he is.”

Percy scraped his measly winnings off the table and shoved them into his pocket, including the hair tie. “There is just no wooing you is there?”

Vax grinned at Percy, tucking his hair behind his ear and winking at him. “I’m hard to pin down.”

Vex suppressed her gag reflex. With her brother reaching his flirtations stage of drunkenness, the check couldn’t arrive fast enough.

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The evening wound down to a jolly yet hasty series of goodbyes as the party went their separate ways. Keyleth’s level of inebriation put an additional level of urgency to their return home, so Tiberius wasted no time getting everyone into the car.

Greeted by Trinket, Vex, Vax, Percy, Tiberius and Keyleth stumbled into the apartment. With no
hesitation, Vax rushed Keyleth to the bathroom, where she promptly threw up into the toilet.

Vex peeked into the door and watched as Vax held Keyleth’s long red hair back. It was remarkable how graceful she looked even when she was hurling her guts out. Vax asked Vex to bring Keyleth some water but she beat him to it. She knew the drill.

Once the worst was over for Keyleth and they had informed Tiberius that she was okay, the twins sloppily helped her to their bedroom, struggling to keep their own balance as the alcohol settled in their systems.

“You can sleep in my bed tonight Keyleth,” Vax said. “I’ll take your spot in the van.”

Keyleth muttered some sort of incomprehensible protest, but Vax respectfully ignored her. Vex helped Keyleth change into one of her more comfortable t-shirts and they both tucked her under the sheets, arming her with a trash can by her head, a box of tissues, and a tall glass of water.

“You sure you’ll be comfortable sleeping in the van Vax? I can go instead. I don’t have to wake up early like you do.”

“It’s fine. Tibs and Keyleth sleep great.” He smirked. “And I’m sure it will be especially comfortable not having to hear your snoring.”

Vex playfully punched him in the arm. “I don’t snore!”

Vax stuck his tongue out at Vex before walking out the door, leaving her alone with an already snoring Keyleth.

With little else to do, Vex stripped out of her clothes, released her breasts from her awful push up bra, and changed into one of Vax’s over sized t-shirts he used to wear back when he skateboarded as a teen. Vex caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and was reminded that she still had to take off all that ghastly makeup that had since smeared quite a bit since it’s hasty morning application. It was something she’d have to take care of more sooner than later, but first, she needed more water; even drunk Vex knew that she’d regret not hydrating in the morning.

She meandered into the hallway, supporting herself against the smooth wall as she turned a quick corner into the kitchen, nearly bumping into Percy who seemed to have also had the same idea.

“Oh, sorry,” Percy said, holding a glass of water in his hand. His cheeks were incredibly rozy and the smell of beer on his breath was strong. He had already changed into his more comfortable attire, though his damn tattoos still evaded Vex’s vision under a green zipped up sweatshirt that seemed to belong to Tiberius, given it was quite baggy on Percy.

“I was gonna get some water,” Vex said, smiling.

Percy glanced down at his own glass and stared at it for a long while as if he’d noticed something floating in it or something, before abruptly lifting the glass towards Vex’s lips. “Here you go.”

Caught off guard, Vex didn’t refuse, given it was an offer that made plenty of sense at the time. Thus, an awkward exchange ensued where Percy tried his best to get as much water into Vex’s mouth while she tried her best to protect her clothing from the inevitable fallout. Neither of them were very good at whatever maneuver they were attempting, though there was a stubbornness that motivated the charade, even if it meant getting her t-shirt wet and clinking her teeth against the glass multiple times as Percy clumsily watered her.

Feeling a dangerous laughing spell rising from her gut, Vex pushed the glass away and gasped a few
thanks as Percy nonchalantly took a few sips from the glass as well.

“Today was really fun,” Vex said as she wiped her mouth on her wrist.

Percy took a few more sips of water before bracing himself against the wall, “Agreed.”

“That guy was so fucking gullible.”

He nodded once. “Agreed.”

“We should definitely go on little shopping trips together more often.”

“Agreed.”

Vex narrowed her eyes at Percy. “Are you just going to agree with everything I say?”

A goofy smile spread across his face and he leaned in a little closer, whispering to her. “Yes.”

Vex hummed as she looked up at him. “Don’t tempt me. You’re giving me far too many horrible ideas.”

He raised a brow, his eyes intently fixed on hers. “Care to share? I’m quite the fan of horrible ideas…”

Vex bit her lower lip and she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

There it was again; a wildness behind his eyes that was attempting to claw its way out again, drawing her in like a trap. Part of her just wanted to sink her fingers into his soft silvery hair and lock lips with him right then and there, but somehow even drunk Vex knew that was the worst idea on the planet. She had never not regretted a drunken hookup, and her extensive experience had imprinted this strong sense of dread that intermingled with her desire anytime the opportunity arose, and that was all under the assumption that Percy felt the same way, which was in itself an unclear aspect of her current predicament.

The only thing she was certain of in that moment was that if he were to make a move on her, she would not resist, and knowing this about herself pained her immensely.

She gazed up at him and wondered whether her thoughts were as transparent as she felt them to be. As he stared her down, she felt naked, and she quickly glanced down at her feet. She needed to say something fast. She couldn't even remember what he’d asked her.

“I…should probably get to bed,” she muttered.

With a change as immediate as a flip of a card, Percy straightened his back, smiled at her softly, and offered her his glass.

Vex accepted the water sheepishly, looking up at him and returning the smile. “Good night Percy.”

He adjusted his glasses, gave her a little bow, and glanced up at her with a devilish grin. “Good night Vexy.”

In that moment, she was so very glad she had decided to not make out with him, but she was probably even more proud of her remarkable restraint given her sudden desire to pour water all over his stupid, beautiful head.
Yes, the lime trick works.
Chapter Summary

Last time, on the Butterfly Effect:
The Vox Machina team go out to get Vietnamese food and get silly drunk. Vex rants at Scanlan over speakerphone for not showing up, and she briefly discusses their imminent trip to Emon with him. Percy shows off a fun trick involving a cigarette and a lime and then they all head home just in time for Keyleth to throw up.

Chapter Notes

No Content Warnings this chapter.

I mean, surely Taliesin has listened to “Behind Blue Eyes” by The Who. I can’t think of a better song to describe Percy’s plight, both in the canon work and in this AU. The lyrics are potent and disturbingly accurate. It’s probably a good time to link the song.

YouTube link

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Vex didn’t know at what time Percy woke up, but when she got out of bed to use the bathroom around six in the morning, he was already gone. A flair of groggy curiosity prompted her to check outside the window, and when she got a glimpse of his feet sticking out from under the van, she felt more at ease and stumbled back into bed. When she woke up a second time around nine to the sound of Keyleth dry heaving, she took care of her before checking on Percy again, only to discover that he was still outside, this time with Tiberius watching over him. By the time she finally got out of bed around ten thirty, Percy was nowhere to be seen in the apartment. Sure enough, a quick glance out the window revealed him to be crouched by the van, clearly still working on something.

With Trinket by her side, she wandered down into the cold, snow-dusted parking lot with a steaming cup of coffee. She bent over to look at Percy, who was busy working behind one of Vox Machina’s tires, dressed in his warmer clothing.

“How’s it going?” she asked.

At first, he seemed too focused on his work to give any sort of reply, but as his stare drifted toward her, he closed his eyes and sighed out a quick, “Fine.”

Vex tilted her head, trying to get a read off of his expression. He clearly had dark circles around his eyes and his nose and ears looked a little frost reddened.

“I brought you some coffee,” she said, half smiling.
“Just leave it on the curb,” he said a little too quickly for Vex’s liking.

Vex furrowed her brow. He sounded pissier than usual. There was no doubt in her mind that he was tired, given the fact that they both went to bed around one, and it wasn’t unreasonable to assume that he was hungover. Percy was a remarkable drinker when surrounded by other remarkable drinkers, and the fact that he barely ate didn’t bode well for the state of his metabolism.

She cleared her throat and glanced up at the sky, trying to sound as cheery as she could. “Well, let me know if you need anything.”

This time, Percy didn’t answer.

Knowing how to take a hint, Vex beckoned Trinket over and put on his leash, heading toward the park at a quick pace and leaving Percy to his own devices. She didn’t want to intrude on his personal workspace more so than she needed to anyway, especially since he seemed to be in one of his weird moods again. She knew he could take care of himself just fine.

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Around noon, when Vax arrived home from work, he helped Vex prepare breakfast for a morbidly hungover Keyleth, who was currently curled up on the floor next to their house plant with a joint between her fingertips. Her coppered hair looked like it had just been through a hurricane.

Rather unexpectedly, just a few minutes into their little morning cooking session, Percy wandered into the apartment with intense exhaustion in his eyes.

“Everything okay?” Vax asked as Percy closed the door behind him.

He dropped the tools beside the door with a thud and ambled toward the couch, sounding utterly drained. “Breaks are fixed.”

“Already?” Vax asked, sounding genuinely surprised.

“That’s fantastic!” Vex said, raising her egg covered spatula in the air with excitement. A little bit of egg splattered on the floor but Trinket was quick to take care of the mess.

“Yay for Percy…” Keyleth said hoarsely, her voice barely a whisper.

Percy plopped on the couch lengthwise with a groan, his boots visible to Vex from the kitchen. She slapped the spatula in Vax’s hand and wandered around the counter, peeking her head over the couch. He had pulled a pillow over his eyes.

“Percy?”

He noticeably flinched, as if he were startled by her voice. He then let out a drawn-out sigh before muttering out some tired words. “What is it?”

He didn’t sound any less annoyed than he had earlier that morning. Nevertheless, she couldn’t help but feel a little sorry for him. “You want some eggs?”

There was a long pause, though Vex was unsure whether he was thinking of something to say or simply ignoring her. Then, without removing the pillow off his head, he spoke softly. “I’m quite alright.”

“You sure?” She furrowed her brow. “Did you even have anything to eat today?”
“I’m not very hungry. Thank you though.” He had clearly forced a little extra cheer into those final words; she could almost hear the inevitable eye-roll underneath his pillow.

She turned to look at Vax with a little concern but was only met with one of his half shrugs as he carried two plates of scrambled eggs and toast toward Keyleth, before joining her on the floor.

“Oh look… I found a lime in my pocket…” Keyleth said as she lifted the lime Percy had carved into the night before.

They were all clearly a mess, that much was certain. So it wasn’t unreasonable for her to assume that Percy was perhaps a little more hungover than she initially presumed. Either way, she figured it was best she let him sleep.

And sleep he certainly did.

For the rest of the day, Percy didn’t rise back up from the couch, presumably sleeping for most of that time. Vex and the others did their best to not disturb him by maintaining most of their conversations in their bedroom or outside. Nevertheless, this was not an unusual Saturday for them. Having lazy hungover weekends was oftentimes part of their routine, and Percy was fitting in just fine, or at least, that’s what Vex initially thought.

As the weekend came to a close, everyone recovered from their night out as per usual, save for Percy. He didn’t seem to spring back as well as the rest of them; in fact, one could argue that he was experiencing quite the opposite.

For the next couple of days, Percy’s demeanor grew increasingly more lethargic, his long naps only interrupted to piss or smoke. He seemed to become a little more active at night, but only barely. She would occasionally hear the shower running at two or three in the morning, which she found odd but not particularly out of place. Percy was the type of guy who didn’t like taking up space, and he had a tendency to take care of his own business when he wasn’t getting in the way of anyone else. More so than ever though, he had become awfully quiet, and perhaps even a little nervous, though Vex couldn't imagine why.

This being said, he wasn’t dreadfully opposed to conversation, at least not at first. For a couple of nights, Vex even tried coaxing him out of his dark place with popcorn and a show on her laptop, though to little avail. Even the high provided by theater-style popcorn and half a season of Friends just didn’t seem to make the cut, but at least she got some calories into him.

Nevertheless, Vex wasn’t going to let his own personal struggles take up too much of her mental faculties. There was only so much she could do for someone in his condition, and she had plenty of other things to worry about, like her own sanity, that was gradually being shaken by the presence of someone who was growing darker by the day.

***

Vex woke up with awful period cramps around three in the morning; the types that felt like someone was skinning her guts from the inside with a rusty spoon. She clawed for her personal stash of painkillers in her nightstand only to find that she’d finished them all off. This was what she got for compulsively storing empty medicine containers.

With a grimace and groan, she hoisted herself out of bed and tiptoed into the kitchen where her and Vax kept their communal stash of ibuprofen. She couldn’t tell whether Percy was sleeping or not because she heard no snoring, but the fact that he wasn’t on his phone was a good sign, so she needed to be careful not to wake him. After a bit of reaching and a lot of tiptoeing, she acquired the
pills with minimal disturbance. She didn’t even inform Trinket of her waking activities, which was a remarkable feat, and a good sign that she likely didn’t wake Percy either.

When she turned on the light in the bathroom and closed the door behind her, she was startled to notice that an alarming amount of pills had been consumed. Vax and her always liked buying the bulky, five-hundred count container of ibuprofen because it lasted them forever, and yet, as she analyzed the jar, she could see that nearly half the bottle had been emptied in the past couple of weeks.

Vax had mentioned hurting his back a few days ago, so perhaps he was taking extra pills keep up with his workload; she could imagine that the stress of the past few weeks may have contributed to his muscle tension. Tiberius and Keyleth also took the pills sometimes, and there was, of course Percy, but she couldn’t imagine that all of them could go through so much medication so quickly. She shrugged off the thought and downed a couple of pills with some water. There was no point in dwelling on some missing over-the-counter medicine so early in the morning.

She stared at the sexy fireman calendar Scanlan gifted them while she sat on the toilet. Winters were so damn long in their part of the world, and she couldn’t wait for summer to come along so she could go hiking with Trinket again. Of course, she rationalized Winter as a useful season in their lives because they were theoretically supposed to feel more motivated to get work done around the house. And yet, as she glanced down at the floor, she could see all sorts of weirdly shaped dust bunnies and mixed species hairballs all across the peach linoleum. Both her and Vax had fallen behind on their chores ever since they had gotten back from their last road trip, and they had no one to blame but themselves; not one of the hairs on the ground was white, which was actually rather remarkable considering how long Percy had been living with them. Struck by a burst of morbid curiosity, she started to scan the floor, intently looking for even one hair to prove that Percy was also contributing to the mess. Surely she’d find something to incriminate him, but instead, she noticed something else; something orange underneath the sink.

She narrowed her eyes and reached for it while she was still sitting on the toilet and studied it carefully. It was no bigger than a couple of grains of rice, but she could tell that it was about a fourth of an ibuprofen pill, broken off unevenly. She glanced back down at the floor and started to notice a couple more little fragments gathered against one of the baseboards. It was as if someone had accidentally stepped one. That is when an odd theory came to her mind: perhaps one of her roommates accidentally spilled a bunch of pills and didn’t tell her. It would certainly explain all the missing pills, so she allowed this new headcanon of her’s to settle the mystery.

***

As the week continued, Percy’s demeanor didn’t improve. Something about his mannerisms revealed pain and exhaustion. If Vex had to search for an adjective that adequately described his behavior, she’d argue that his mood was almost akin to grief. He didn’t eat, he didn’t go far from the apartment, and he certainly didn’t talk about it with anyone. Occasionally, she caught him smoking with Keyleth or exchanging a couple of brief words with Tiberius, but she didn’t imagine it to be anything more than small talk.

But there was more to his current state of being. Sometimes, when Vex walked into the living room later at night, Percy would flinch as if he’d been startled. He wasn’t the type to be so skittish, but the last few days had turned him squirly and paranoid. As more days passed, Vex noticed him migrate whenever people were around, but never far from the apartment. When Keyleth and Tiberius weren’t in the van, he spent time there, and when she and Vax weren’t home, he spent time in the apartment instead. Either way, there was no doubt that he was isolating himself, and this concerned Vex greatly.
One night, after a week of Percy acting like a frightened squirrel, she decided it was time to discuss it with Vax.

“Percy’s been acting strange,” Vex said as she sat in bed, flipping through an old book she used to read as a teen. It was one of those old Endless Quest books where your decisions dictated what happened to the characters in the story. She still wasn’t quite certain whether she’d discovered all the possible endings, mostly because she’d stopped reading after she discovered the ending where she encountered the owlbears. Trinket was lying next to her, acting as her own personal giant hot water bottle and occasionally pawing her arm to remind her that he required petting. His presence was rather pleasant given the colder nights they’d been having.

Vax was busy brushing his hair out in the mirror as he got ready for bed. “No shit.”

Vex rolled her eyes. “Well I figured you’d notice. I just wondered if you had anything to add.”

He quickly braided his hair, staring at her through the mirror. “Honestly, I’ve got no fucking clue.”

Vex pursed her lips. “Have you tried talking to him?”

“Have you?”

“Not really,” she rubbed Trinket’s ears. “Not about his mood at least... I’ve just been giving him space.”

Vax rested his brush on his bedside table and hopped into bed. “Maybe you should talk to Keyleth. They’re buddy buddy aren’t they?”

Vex stared up at the ceiling and snickered nervously. “She noticed the same thing but she thinks it’s allergies.”

Vax snorted. “Allergies in the Winter time?”

“Fuck if I know?”

“Well...” Vax reached for his phone and set his alarm. “I say just give him a little more time to decompress. He worked really hard for us, not to mention he saved our asses.”

Vex sighed. “That’s exactly why I didn’t confront him about it.”

Vax reminded her of another oddity in Percy’s behavior that she had yet to reflect on: Percy hadn’t yet asked for any of his money back; in fact, the few times she’d hinted at it he’d adamantly refused it, saying he didn’t need anything yet, save for his cigarettes, which he’d increased the consumption of tenfold. He didn’t even want to go errand shopping anymore, offering to do their laundry instead. If she were any more nosy she’d probe him for an explanation, but she didn’t want to bring up anything that would upset him any more than he already was. Perhaps she needed to be pushier about it. If she remembered correctly, the deal was that she would hold on to his money and help with his finances, but with that established, she wasn’t going to just go up to him and say, “Hey Percy, here’s ten goldies. Go buy yourself some food or you’ll wither away. Stop being a dick.” It simply wasn’t something she felt comfortable doing. And yet, part of her worried that his current state of being was her fault; that he was too shy to ask for any sort of help now that she had all of his money in her account.

“Don’t know what else to say,” Vax said as he turned off his lamp and bundled under the sheets. “You’re the people person. Talk to him.”
Vex put her book away and turned off her own light. “Perhaps you’re right…” She rolled over on her side and stared at the blank wall that she knew connected to the living room. “Good night Vax.”

“Good night Stubby.”

But she never did talk to him. There were so many times she had plotted exactly what she’d say, but the moment she had him in front of her, she simply chickened out. All she ever really did anymore was occasionally deliver his new boxes of cigarettes on the coffee table before promptly heading to her own room. Besides, the few times she’d even vaguely asked whether he was feeling okay, he had grown defensive and harsh, and frankly, she simply didn’t have the patience to put up with his shit anymore.

***

A couple of nights later, she woke up around three in the morning to the sound of the shower resonating through the walls. She let out a sigh and rolled over in bed, wrapping her arm around Trinket and warming her arms against his fur. However, just as she sensed sleep finding her one more, she flinched alert when she heard the subtle sound of someone throwing up in the bathroom. She sat up in bed and turned toward Vax’s bed. There he was, sound asleep. She closed her eyes tightly, feeling a knot in her stomach. She was pretty certain it was Percy.

Surely there was no better time to get up and ask whether he was okay, but something was holding her back, tightening around her throat; a social awkwardness she hadn't experienced in quite some time. In every scenario she played out in her head, it always ended along the lines of Percy blowing her off or asking her to leave him alone, and she simply didn’t know if she could handle it.

She laid back down in her bed and tried to ignore the sounds coming from the bathroom. Perhaps she’d address it in the morning when things were a little less hectic.

***

Percy was in a far worse condition than Vex had previously imagined, and Vax confirmed it with her in the most disruptive of ways.

“I think Percy is dead.”

Vex’s eyes fluttered open and she groaned into the sheets, confused out of her mind. “The fuck…?”

“He’s on the couch out there and he looks dead,” Vax said as he tossed his jacket on his bed.

Vex sat up, rubbing her eyes. “Ugh… Don’t joke about that sort of thing.”

Vax sighed and looked at her with an annoyed expression. “Just go check on him. Seriously. Pretty sure he was breathing but I can’t make any promises.”

Vex hoisted herself out of bed with a groan and Trinket followed after her. She stared at herself in the mirror for a few seconds and adjusted a few stray hairs, attempting to look a little bit less like a hag before heading out into the hallway.

As she reached the living room, she slowed to a halt, the vision of Percy’s state striking her with more intensity than she predicted. Gesturing Trinket to keep calm, she tiptoed in front of the coffee table where she had a full view of what had become of her poor roommate.

He had bundled up in his blankets and nestled himself in the corner of the couch, his head rested against some pillows he had stacked to keep his torso upright. With his glasses placed on the coffee
table, she could clearly see dark circles around his sunken eyes. His hair was disheveled, his skin looked pale and dewy; had she not noticed he was breathing she would have worried he was indeed dead.

Vex let out a quivering sigh and bit her lower lip. The vision of his current state caused her to feel a deep sense of discomfort in the gut. It was as if all the feelings of pity she’d been trying to ward away rushed into her mind all at once.

Swallowing hard, she took a step forward and leaned in a little, speaking as softly and kindly as she could. “Percy?”

He flinched awake, and as he slowly opened his eyes one at a time, they revealed themselves to be dreadfully bloodshot.

“I’m sorry,” she said, trying to not speak too loud. “I just...well Vax said you didn’t look too hot.”

Percy blinked away some tiredness as he squinted at her. He licked his dry lips and a shaky hand released itself from the bundle of blankets, clumsily trying to reach for his glasses that were just a little bit too far from his current position.

Witnessing his struggle, she quickly intervened and reached them over to him. He clawed them out of her hand and as his fingers brushed with hers, she felt they were clammy to the touch.

He did his best to not stab himself in the eye as he put his glasses on. He blinked a few more times as his vision returned to him before looking at Vex and struggling the most pitiful smile she’d ever seen in her life. “I’m not feeling very well.” His voice was so horse she could barely make out what he was saying.

“No shit Sherlock,” she said, trying to return a smile. “What happened?”

He simply shrugged and closed his eyes again.

She pursed her lips. Even in his current state, he wasn’t being very cooperative. “Do you think it’s the flu or something?”

“Yeah, probably,” he said, eyes still closed. “I wouldn't get near me.”

“Shit…” she muttered to herself. It hurt her far more than she would have imagined seeing him like this. “Well do you want me to call Pike? Maybe see if she can help?”

“No,” he said coldly.

Vex furrowed her brow at his bluntness. “Percy, she’s training to be a doctor. She knows her shit.”

He tilted his head back against the back couch. “If it’s the flu, there is nothing she can do. I simply need to rest.”

“But what if it’s not? She can check.”

He let out a long exasperated sigh. “I’m pretty sure it’s just the flu. I’m fine.”

Vex bit the inside of her cheek. She didn’t know what else to do with him. How was she to know whether he was actually okay or not? She wasn’t even sure if they owned a thermometer anymore.

She waited a few more seconds to see if he had anything else to add before speaking once more. “I
“I said I’m fine,” he snapped, raising his voice far louder than was probably good for his current state.

Vex blinked at him, taken back by his behavior. She couldn’t believe what she had just witnessed. Her tone grew more impatient, her teeth clenched around her words. “I was gonna say, I can make you some tea if you’d like.”

Percy let out a deep sigh that was more of a wheeze. He shifted his position a little, grimacing in pain before speaking his final verdict. “No.”

Vex tightened her fists, staring him down with an intensity that could kill, even though she knew he wasn’t even paying attention to her. She was perfectly aware it was selfish of her to take offense to his behavior, but she had no power over how she felt, and frankly, she felt betrayed.

Not wanting to risk saying something she’d regret, she stormed out of the room and into the bathroom, where she allowed herself to do what she’d wanted to do for days now: cry.

Chapter End Notes

I am desperately trying to learn the art of being brief, but I have a feeling that a decade of trying to correct this has proven that it’s just not how I roll...Oh well.

I believe now is as good a time as any to thank you all for all the wonderful support you’ve given me so far. I was so nervous posting anything to the common public, what with my dyslexia and crippling self criticism. But you have all helped me combat that fear with your wonderful comments and compliments. <3
Devout Listener

Chapter Summary

Last time, on the Butterfly Effect:
Percy isn’t feeling well and it concerns Vex greatly. After days of trying to ignore his poor physical condition and sour mood, she decides to confront him, only to find him callous and uncooperative.

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings for this chapter are in end notes.

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Brace yourself. Stealth and Insight checks are coming...

Some artwork is mentioned in this piece. Here is a link in case you are unfamiliar with it when you get to the part where it’s mentioned.

Wikipedia link

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Vex huffed in frustration as she swiped through her phone that night. There were enough Percy Robinsons in her search engine to fill an entire phone book, but none that matched her Percy. She had hunted everywhere: social media sites, Wikipedia, even YouTube, but all she managed to find were a couple of actors, a few musicians, and a fuck ton of random people. Nothing seemed to lead toward the mystery man that was screwing up her life. Not that finding any information on him would improve her current mood anyway. It had been spoiled far beyond repair after her nerve-wracking interaction with him that morning.

She had spent most of that afternoon crying on and off in the company of Trinket and the naked fountain statues at the park. Her melancholy promenade was followed by a standardly irritating day at work, where she was met with more than her fair share of rude customers who thought it was clearly her fault that the food was too salty or that the bread was stale. She would have done anything to spit in their food, but the diner had practically no safe location where she could get away with the deed, what with the half dozen managers staring her down like she’d already done something wrong. She was relatively accustomed to it though; she and Vax could never quite shake the fact that they looked like they were always up to no good, which she found unfair because they were actually up to no good only about half of the time. Nevertheless, she couldn’t afford to do anything stupid like that anyway. It was a miracle that her boss had given her the days off she needed to go to Emon the following week, and she wasn’t about to blow that opportunity away after everything she’d been through.

When she arrived home, she was relieved to find that Percy was in the bathroom, allowing her to thus sneak into her bedroom without having to set eyes on his despicable face. That is, unless she
managed to find his myspace or something… Then she’d shamelessly stalk the hell out of him. Nevertheless, after almost an hour of internet browsing with no promising results, she figured it was time to call it a night. Besides, Vax was already in dreamland sprawled out like a diva in a photo shoot, and just looking at him was making her sleepy.

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Vex woke up at dawn feeling thirsty. In her rush to end her dreadful day, she had forgotten to grab herself a glass of water before going to bed, and nothing bothered her more than trying to fall asleep with a dry mouth. Rolling over with a groan, she found that Vax had already gone to work, though a mug was still beside his bed. Hoping it was her lucky day, she wandered over and examined the mug; however, to her disappointment, she only found a dried up tea bag stuck to the bottom of it, and she glanced up at the ceiling, cursing the air. She could already tell this was going to be another one of those days.

As Vex snuck out of the bedroom, Trinket perked his ears up and thumped his tail against the mattress, but she shushed him promptly.

“I’ll be back,” she whispered. “Stay good and keep my bed warm.”

Trinket slouched back onto the bed with a huff, looking at her with big patient brown eyes. She made a kissy face at him and very quietly closed the door behind her. There was a rather easy fix to her water problem that didn’t involve having to go into the kitchen. She’d refill the conveniently left mug in the bathroom, thus avoiding any sort of unwarranted human interaction involving a very grumpy Percy, unless of course, she ran into him in the hallway, which was always a possibility given her unfortunate track record.

Moseying her way toward the bathroom, she couldn’t help but catch a glimpse of the living room, now dusted in delicate dawn sunlight. Struck with the stubborn curiosity of a middle schooler who was trying to keep tabs on an ex-best friend, she craned her head to get a better look at the couch, where she could clearly see Percy’s white hair rested against his pillow.

Feeling content by his stillness, she continued forward. However, just as she was about to place her hand on the bathroom doorknob, she froze in place and held her breath when she watched Percy’s arm slide off the couch; his bare arm.

Oh, how the universe could be cruel.

She could already see his dark tattoos contrasting starkly against his pale complexion, and she knew that if she could just get a little closer, she’d finally be able to see what they depicted.

After muttering a few silent swears to herself, she carefully left the mug on the carpet by the bathroom and snuck her way into the living room, already regretting her decision. After all of her time living with Percy, she still hadn’t figured out whether he snored or not, so knowing whether he was actually sleeping was a bit of a challenge.

She knew it was best to err on the side of caution, and decided to take a position behind the couch, figuring that if he woke up, she could play it off as if she were getting something across the kitchen counter. As she looked at him from over the back of the couch, she felt an unfamiliar sense of unease in her gut. It was an odd combination of both excitement and discomfort; a dark giddiness tainted by the fact that he looked in such horrible shape.

The long sleeved shirt that he usually wore was stripped off and strewn across the floor as if he had
thrown it, leaving him only with his sweatpants and the same dark blue tank top she’d seen weeks ago. It looked as though he had kicked off his blankets as well. The pale morning light that filtered through the closed sheer blinds trailed across his skin, revealing droplets of sweat on his forehead. Vex assumed he was probably feeling too hot, which was worrisome considering their house was freezing in the morning. His sharp dark brows seemed ever so slightly furrowed, and there was a subtle tension in his jaw that only furthered the look of pain in his slumber. Without his glasses on, she could see how his long dark lashes rested against his pale, slightly reddened skin. One of his hands was resting on his quickly rising and falling chest, almost as if he had been grasping at his shirt when he fell asleep, while the other hand barely brushed against the floor as his arm hung off the couch.

There was an odd beauty in his distressed, sprawled out state. It vaguely reminded her of a statue in the Vatican she had seen on the internet; the one carved by Michelangelo depicting Mary holding her deceased son. Only in this case, Mary was her green dumpster couch and Percy was Jesus, which she immediately acknowledged as somewhat of an awkward connection. Did that make her a tourist? A worshiper? It was far too early in the morning to have such internal monologues. She never really had an eye for the fine arts anyway; that was more of a Scanlan thing.

One thing she did have an eye for though, was tattoos. She herself had a couple of tattoos that she was relatively proud of, though one was still incomplete. Her larger, more recent tattoo was of a bear paw on the back of her left shoulder, though very few ever saw it unless she went out of her way to point it out to them. The second tattoo -- which was actually her favorite even though it was incomplete -- was an outline of a pair of feathers behind her left ear that hung down her neck like a long earring. Though harder to conceal, she could still do so with relative ease if she put her hair down.

She believed it was a far more remarkable feat to hide the amount of ink Percy had on his body, and she couldn't help but grow a little annoyed that he had been concealing such impeccable work for so long. She’d never seen anything like it, and found herself leaning in closer as she absorbed the majesty of the inkwork:

A dark, horned, avian skull placed on his shoulder rested with its beak open, releasing ribbons of smoke that traveled down his arms, curled around his wrists, snaked across his chest and down his shirt. Black glossy feathers drifted in those smokey streams of ethereal matter, so realistic and detailed that they almost seemed to dance across his skin. She couldn't even begin to imagine what other images he kept hidden, and every part of her wanted to lift up his shirt to see where the smoke led.

Surely the tattoos must have cost a small fortune. The guy who did her bear paw tattoo was fortunately willing to settle for payment that wasn’t cash given that she was dating him at the time, but he told her that had she paid, it would have gone for at least a hundred goldies. Not to mention her feather tattoos had been done for free by Vax when he brought home a gun he stole from her ex after she broke up with him. She would have wanted them colored in, but they only had black ink at the time and they never got around to completing them because she wanted Vax to do it for her.

Nevertheless, she knew that tattooing was expensive in general, and she had no idea what kind of deal Percy had made to afford that sort of artwork.

Vex shook her head slightly, and just as her eyes drifted toward the living room window, she gasped as she suddenly felt a hand grab hold of her braid. Her eyes widened as she watched Percy pull her down closer to him, his eyes still closed. His grip was tight around her hair, and as she grasped her fingers around his hand to pry it off, he spoke hoarsely, the quietness of his voice loud in the silence of the morning.
“Why do you do that?” he muttered.

A deep sense of panic rose in Vex’s chest. Her brother was at work, Trinket was closed in her room. The thought that she had potentially gotten herself in a horrible situation shook her to her core. But as she took a few quick breaths, her sense of reason took back a modicum of control. This was Percy. Just a very tired, possibly delirious Percy.

She braced her arm against the back of the couch, trying to find a more comfortable position given her current predicament. She didn’t even know where to start.

“I…” She swallowed hard, trying to smother the feeling of her racing heart. “W-what?”

He sounded aggravated, even under the softness of his tone of voice. “Why do you stare at me all the time like I’m some kind of freak?”

She closed her eyes, inhaling a shaking breath. He smelled of smoke, and he sounded like he was barely keeping it together. She could feel him pulling her a little lower toward him, but she held her position above him as he spoke once more.

“You don’t think I notice?” he hissed. “Do you really take me for that big of an idiot?”

Vex winced in pain, gritting her teeth. “Percy I-”

“Why?” he interrupted, tugging at her braid again.

Vex knew it was either now or never. She needed to be honest. She couldn't keep up the charade any longer. He’d caught her red handed.

She swallowed hard and licked her dried lips. Although she had no clue of what he wanted to hear, she hoped that if she just started talking, perhaps it would appease him.

Eyes closed, she shouted the first thing that came to mind. “Because you were a cool person, Percy!”

His brow quivered ever so slightly, so at least she knew he was listening.

She took a deep breath, her fingers grasping the top of the couch as she continued. “I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone as fascinating as you. You’re intelligent, knowledgeable, interesting, and…” She smiled nervously, opening her eyes to look at him. “Just kind of an all-around cool guy…”

He was still holding onto her, but the more she reflected on his behavior, the more she started to interpret his actions simply as a child grasping at a mother’s skirt, asking for help; maybe for forgiveness.

She took in a deep breath, trying to keep calm. “I want to understand you Percy. I want to know you. Surely you understand that sentiment…don’t you?”

With those final words, Percy’s lids slowly drifted open, revealing teary bloodshot eyes that were framed by dark circles, making his entire face seem pale and ghostly. Even his irises, that were usually of a bright blue color seemed to have grown pale in the morning light. As his gaze gradually settled on her, his grip laxed around her braid and she felt the tension release in her neck. His hand then slid back down onto his chest and he quickly turned his head away from her, his breathing growing more labored.

Vex closed her eyes and tried to fully relax with a few deep breaths, yet the sound of Percy’s
wheezing maintained a strain of worry in the back of her mind. As she opened her eyes once more, she studied Percy, who was now staring at the plant in the window, its wide green leaves slightly translucent against the rising sun. She could see a tear forming in the corner of his eye.

“I’m sorry…” Vex finally said, staring down at him with a deep sense of remorse.

Percy closed his eyes and sniffled a bit. “You shouldn't be the one apologizing. You really shouldn't.”

“I invaded your privacy.”

The song of birds outside filled the momentary silence between them. It looked like it was going to be a lovely day.

“I should know better than to demonize human curiosity,” Percy said, the smallest of smiles cracking across his lips, even if only for a moment. “It’s a beautiful thing.”

Vex smiled at him as he continued.

“Besides…” He groaned as he shifted his position, rubbing his eyes and adjusting himself so he could get a better look at her. “I haven’t really been myself lately.”

Feeling like she was inconveniencing him, given the fact as she was currently looming over him, she walked around the couch and knelt on the floor beside him. She couldn't care less that he was sick. He could have had the plague for all she cared, but it didn’t change the way she felt about him.

Percy huffed out something that was probably supposed to be a laugh. “I could actually see you better when you were standing farther away.”

Vex chuckled. “I don’t think I really care.”

Percy smiled, instantly raising her spirits.

As she studied him up close, she could see just how broken he looked. She could have sworn he had lost weight from when she first met him, which was worrisome considering that he was already very thin back then; his hands looked emaciated, his lips were cracked, his skin was taut over his bones. Yet as she shifted her position to get a little more light on his face, she noticed something further; a detail she hadn’t caught from her previous angle. It looked like he had some dry blood around one of his nostrils.

“Did you get a nosebleed?” she asked.

Percy furrowed his brow and raised his hand to his face, feeling the dried blood under his nose. His confusion turned to a little embarrassment. “I- It’s... I’m sorry, it’s the dry air.”

“It’s fine darling, I was just curious.” Almost subconsciously, she delicately brushed back one of his stray strands of hair. Yet as her fingers felt the heat emanating off his skin, she promptly pressed her hand against his forehead and her eyes widened. “You’re burning up.”

“I know,” he groaned.

“Percy!” she squeaked.

“I’m fine...”

“Like hell you are.”
She immediately stood up and rushed to the kitchen where she got a rag and some cold water in a mixing bowl. It was what her mother used to do when they had a fever. Maybe it wasn’t the best treatment in the world, but she had to do something to put her own heart at ease.

As she knelt back down beside him and placed the damp cloth on his forehead, Percy rested his hand on her wrist.

“You don’t have to-”

“I want to help you,” she promptly interrupted.

Percy closed his eyes and sighed in resignation, staying quiet for a few moments as she flipped the rag over. “You’re already helping me Vex. More than you know.”

Vex laughed nervously as she dipped the rag in the cold water and wrung it before resting it on his forehead again. “You see, when you say that sort of stuff I can’t help but think you’re hiding something from me. But I know you do it on purpose just to get a rise out of me.”

Percy smiled, though even then, there was something behind it that revealed uncertainty. “Maybe so.”

Vex’s thoughts drifted back to when she first met Percy. How he seemed so unwilling to talk about himself and how he still didn’t. He was a devout listener; a man who enjoyed the company of those who were most talkative. She wondered if this was by choice or by discipline, and realized that perhaps he needed the reassurance that he truly was among friends.

“You know…” She softly ran her fingers through his hair to move it out of the way of the rag. “I understand that you don’t know me or the others very well yet. But I hope you know you can tell me anything, okay?”

Percy’s eyes drifted away from her for a moment, staring up at the ceiling.

“Know that if you ever need help…” she continued. “...you can ask for it. Always.”

He looked back at her and narrowed his eyes a little. “I know.”

“Good.” She forced a little smile, though she couldn't help but suspect that perhaps he still didn’t understand what she was trying to convey. “So, if there is anything you need to tell me, anything that you’ve been holding back, you can tell me, even now.”

Percy looked away from her once more, his gaze now focused on the couch he was leaning against. “There is nothing I need to say that I haven’t already told you. Don’t worry.”

Vex sighed. He seemed earnest enough, though he was incredibly hard to read behind his exhausted facade and hoarse voice.

“Do you promise?” she asked.

Percy’s gaze drifted back toward her, his icy eyes darting across her face as if he were trying to gauge her intent. Her lips curled into a delicate smile in response, hoping to reassure him.

He swallowed once, and as his head turned back up toward the ceiling, he closed his eyes. “I promise.”

Vex smiled more brightly, holding his hand and squeezing it gently. He took in a deep breath,
exhaling slowly as he caressed her hand with his thumb in return, his breath slowing and gradually becoming more steady.

She didn’t end up going back to bed. After releasing Trinket from her bedroom, she spent the rest of her morning lying beside Percy and making sure he was taken care of. It put her at ease knowing that he was finally accepting her help, even if it had taken a few tears and a touch of bad luck.

***

The next few days lead to Percy’s health improving significantly, though it wasn’t exactly an easy process. He continued to refuse seeing Pike, even though Vex assured him that she could help him diagnose his condition. Frankly, it was a miracle that he’d even agreed to have her take care of him. Fortunately, though, she managed to convince Percy to -- at the very least -- have Keyleth help him out, mostly because he barely had a choice in the matter given the fact that Keyleth would not leave him alone after she learned how bad his condition was.

Keyleth was an absolute lifesaver in these types of circumstances because she was incredibly pushy and rather knowledgeable when it came to dealing with stubborn mystery illnesses. Her care techniques where holistic and relatively noninvasive, relying more on the concept of rest and good nourishment rather than tests and medication. Moreover, it was important to note that Keyleth wasn’t the type who was afraid of potentially contagious diseases, and since she was in between jobs and not going to school, she had plenty of free time to put her healing techniques into practice.

Needless to say, Vex was happy Keyleth was there to act as Percy’s personal caretaker when she wasn’t around.

Vex was indisputably reassured Percy was in good hands the day she walked in on Keyleth trying to spoon feed Percy like a child, making airplane noises while Percy insisted he wasn’t hungry, pushing her away with his foot, albeit with a little smile on his face. At least she was giving him some form of joy to his otherwise shitty week.

***

Eventually, as that week came to a close, Percy seemed to recover just enough to where Vex felt confident that he could make the trip to Emon with them.

The night before their trip, Percy and her spent their evening outside their apartment, enjoying each other's company as they stared at the city from their third-floor view. The winter weather was cold and humid, but the air was clear and the view was stunning.

Vex glanced down at her hands and rubbed them together. “I don’t think I ever told you this formally…”

“Hm?” Percy cocked his head inquisitively as he lowered his cigarette.

She smirked, her eyes focused on her hands. “I’m really happy you decided to stay with us.”

Percy chuckled quietly to himself.

Vex crinkled her nose and lightly punched him. “Hey, I’m being serious.”

“Oh I know,” he said, adjusting some hair sticking out from under his beanie. “I just found it funny because I was just thinking the exact same thing.”

Vex quickly looked away as she felt herself blushing. She knew he was just saying that to get a
reaction out of her, and she would not allow him to see that he’d succeeded. After taking a deep
breath of cold winter air, she turned toward him, revealing a smile. “Then I guess we are in
agreement then.”

Percy smirked. He took a long drag from his cigarette, allowing the ember to glow brightly before
exhaling a stream of smoke that lead both their eyes toward the clear moonlit sky. “I suppose we
are.”

Vex sighed as she watched the smoke disappear into the night. She was immensely relieved that
Percy had recovered and that they were speaking to each other again, somehow even more so than
before. In the subtest of ways, it felt as though he had become a different person, though she figured
it might have simply been a symptom of him finally getting comfortable around her. Nevertheless,
there was no doubt in her mind that he had improved for the best, and that he had certainly made up
all the points he had lost on her human decency meter. Now that he was no longer on her internal list
of current problems, she could begin focusing on the new, more pressing task at hand:

Packing for Emon.

Chapter End Notes

CW: Mild domestic aggression. (Hair pulling.)

“Boy you know I’m all about that angst, bout that angst, more trouble
I’m all about that angst, bout that angst, more trouble.”

Sorry, I’ll stop...

Anyway, I enjoyed writing this chapter, as I do with all scenes that involve angst and
tension. I’m more partial to a darker Percy, so I hope this doesn’t throw people off too
much. If you like organizing narrative the same way I do, I suppose you may call this
the end of the first “arc” of this story.

For now, I leave you all with the song “Demons” by Imagine Dragons. I feel that the
lyrics fit this chapter rather well, and are a good way to end this arc. Love you all <3

[YouTube link]
Keep the Cows Out

Chapter Summary

Last time, on the Butterfly Effect:
During the early hours of the morning, Vex sneaks up on Percy while he’s sleeping to check out his tattoos, but is caught. They have a heated discussion with each other, but all is eventually forgiven. Vex takes care of Percy’s fever that morning, and throughout the week, with Keyleth’s help, his physical condition improves drastically. Vex is confident that he will make the road trip with them.

Chapter Notes

No Content Warnings this chapter
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I apologize for taking so long to publish this chapter. My recent job has vastly reduced the amount of time I have to write which means I probably won’t be able to deliver content as often as I used to. Nevertheless, I will do my best to publish at least once a week. I am determined!

So, without further ado, time for some road trip music! Here is one from Keyleth’s playlist [YouTube Link], gracefully suggested by one of my readers:

The Jimi Hendrix Experience - All Along The Watchtower (Official Audio)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TLV4_xaYynY

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To claim that road trips were what Vox Machina’s gang lived for was a gross understatement. In fact, one could argue that it’s what they died for. Indeed, it was their love for travel that prompted them to pool their savings into a buying Vox Machina in the first place; that multicolored van was their body and soul, a chariot of heroes, their rainbow Trojan horse, the crust for their pie, the tortilla to their burrito. In all honesty, there were no perfect words to describe just how much they cared about the van (no matter how many times Scanlan tried), for it was far more than just a direct connection to an inanimate object; it was what the van represented that was important to them: Friendship, Fearlessness, Freedom.

Their love for travel and the unknown was their driving force, and one of the major personality traits they all had in common. Each day experienced in Vox Machina was a new and daring adventure to them; a way of spreading their wings and trying to make a name for themselves in their otherwise dull existence. Yet their insatiable wanderlust could still be matched by one other thing: their sense of family.

It was why it was so important for them to follow Scanlan to Emon to watch his performance that week. Even though he was disputably their most abrasive of the bunch, he still meant more to them...
than plenty of other people in their lives who claimed to be family simply by virtue of blood. Nearly all of the group had a good reason to know that a mere genealogical relation meant nothing in terms of defining family. Family was defined by trust, friendship and a mutual understanding and respect for one another, and if that meant following a family member to the edges of the world to support them, then, by the Gods, they would do it. This was going to be their longest trip together on record, and if they could pull it off, they knew it would be a life-changing one.

***

The day had finally come for them to depart, which in turn meant that Vax had to comfort his sister while she endured her standard dose of pre-road trip trauma.

Vex wept ugly tears as she smothered Trinket in kisses. “I’ll miss you so so so so much.”

Meanwhile, her increasingly anxious looking twin glanced up to the sky as he tapped his food impatiently. “Vex...it’s time to go.”

“You be good buddy,” she said in baby talk as she nuzzled his snout. "Get plenty of sleep and eat all the food.”

“Do not encourage him!” Eskil barked, holding his rickety back as he squinted at the bright midday sun.

“Oh please,” Vex groaned as she glared at him. “We’ve given you enough money to feed a lion.”

Eskil narrowed his eyes at her. “What about a bear?”

Vex huffed with an eye roll, standing up before begrudgingly shaking hands with him. “Thank you Mr Ryndarian... We won’t be gone very long.”

“You better not!” He grumbled. “Now, off with you. It’s high noon! And daylight is burning... Kids these days don’t know how to travel properly anymore... Can’t expect to get anywhere when you leave this late...unless you plan on driving in the dark, which can bring on all sorts of dangers like wild animals jumping in front of your car and-”

“Goodbye Eskil!” Vax said as he grabbed his sister by the wrist.

“Mr. Ryndarian!” He shook an angry fist.

“Mr. Ryndarian...” Vax groaned as he continued to tug on Vex.

Trinket barked once, and Vex dug her heels into the ground as she waved goodbye one last time, blowing kisses at him with teary eyes. “Goodbye Trinket...I love you.”

Eskil pat Trinket on the side and nudged him into the apartment, and Vex sniffled as she was dragged by Vax toward the van.

“I don’t think I can do it,” she muttered.

“C’mon...” Vax droned. "We need to get out asses moving.”

The drama of leaving Trinket was never easy for Vex, but she knew that she’d recover once she was on the road. Keyleth had already prepared a lovely collection of joints for the party to chose from, along with plenty of snacks and beverages she’d been hoarding for the impending journey.

“...And I have some nuts, and fresh cherry tomatoes, and some really good berries!” Keyleth said as
she carried a massive cooler into the back of the van.

Percy hummed with casual approval as he helped Keyleth load the last of the supplies.

“Ready to go?” Vax asked as he delivered a still sniffling Vex to the others.

“Most certainly,” Tiberius said, pulling out his phone. “I have sent a personal message to Scanlan, Grog, and Pike and they have all replied with the confirmation that they are ready to depart!”

“Who’s driving?” Percy asked.

A devilish smirk spread across Vax’s lips. “You?”

Percy adjusted his glasses. “I beg your pardon?”

“Might give you a better feel for the work you’ve done.”

Percy looked a little bashful and coolly glanced away. “I already gave it a test run around the block.”

Vax shrugged, acting as if he were heading over to adjust a piece of luggage in the car. But as he brushed passed Percy, like a reverse pickpocket, he finagled the keys into his hand and whispered, “Don’t be a party pooper, you earned it.”

Percy blinked at the keys in his hand and then stared up at Vax, who simply bumped him with his shoulder and gave him a wink.

“I call shotgun!” Keyleth shouted as she waved her hand in the air.

“Great then,” Vax said as he rubbed his hands together, glancing at Vex who was longingly staring at Mr. Ryndarian’s door. “Let’s get going before Vex decides to crawl under our landlords door…”

The five of them hopped into the car, with Keyleth and Percy taking the front seats while the others took the three spots directly behind them.

As Percy settled into the driver’s seat, he let out a long drawn out sigh as he caressed the steering wheel. He turned to Keyleth momentarily, who gave him a thumbs up, and he nodded back at her. He then adjusted the rear view mirror and glanced at the people in the back. “Ready?”

“Oh, just one second!” Vex said as she leaned forward, daintily hanging up her tiny glass bear on the mirror along the already dangling beaded feathers. “There. Much better.”

Percy huffed out a little laugh, “Of course…”

With that, he turned the keys and the van hummed to life.

***

The most direct road to Emon was a two day trek, and comfortably so, if they were willing to drive late into the night and wake up early, which they had of course already screwed up by leaving at noon. Out in the Midlands, unclaimed territories between individual city-states, the landscape of their journey was defined by open planes and untouched wilderness, often devoid of civilization save for the occasional Podunk town or rest stop. The team had never traveled to the city-state of Emon together before, so it was incredibly exciting to witness it first hand as a group.

Once they’d settled into the slow lane of the open highway, Keyleth lit her first joint and turned on some of her typical tunes. Vex spent the first few hours of the journey browsing at a magazine she’d
been specifically saving for that trip that featured an article about Emon. As she puffed out a few streams of smoke, she flipped through the pages before settling on one section that caught her interest.

“Hey, listen to this,” Vex said as she cleared her throat. “Thrift shops are a lucrative option in a city where most of its boutiques have out priced its original tenants. Be sure to take a tour of the local stores for everything from pans to tap dancing shoes. You may just stumble on that perfect vintage dress you've been dreaming of to get you into one of Emon’s high end clubs. For a our review of the top locales, visit our article on page twenty-seven.”

Pike laughed. “It’s like they know.”

“Tis a sign of a good editor,” Tiberius said, looking up from his school book.

“Well I for one think it’s an excellent idea.” Vex smiled as she passed the joint to Grog. “If we make it to Emon in a timely manner I plan on doing some shopping to see if I can buy something sexy to wear.”

“I already packed my nicest outfit,” Vax muttered, looking rather bored as he stared out the window.

“Ugh, I saw it Vax,” Vex whined. “You call those black jeans and that black hawaiian shirt nice?”

He side glanced at Vex and rolled his eyes. “It’s literally the only button up shirt I own.”

“Could have asked me to get you something.” Scanlan laughed.

“As if I could fit into something of yours.”

“I also brought some extra shirts!” Tiberius exclaimed.

Vax rubbed his temples. “You’re almost a foot taller than me Tibsy.”

“In all honesty,” Percy said, “I regret to admit that I currently own nothing formal. I might just have to take Vex up on that offer and go shopping for something decent to wear as well.”

“See brother?” Vex scoffed, “At least Percy has a sense of taste…Almost like a true gentleman.”

Vax huffed. “Because he clearly has no issue looking like a rich asshole.”

“You’re going to be surrounded by rich assholes,” Percy said bluntly, looking at Vax through the rear view mirror. “Might as well blend in and look like one.”

Vax crossed his arms and slouched down into the seat. “Whatever...”

“I ‘ave nothin nice either,” Grog said, raising his hand while he held the joint in the other. "But I bet I could pull the look off. What'chu think Pike?"

“I think you'd make an excellent gentleman, Grog,” Pike said with a smile as she rubbed his arm.

“Yeh, one of them high falootin' types,” Grog said, lifting his chin to the air and snorting out little puffs of smoke from his nose.

Percy raised a brow as he spotted Grog smoking through the rearview mirror. “I thought they drug tested you at your work.”

“Not me,” Grog said with a grin. “I’m a veteran there, unlike Vaxy boy ’ere whose a bit of a nooby.”
He reached over and pat Vax on the head. 

Vax sunk even deeper into his chair. “Feels like a roast day...”

Vex smiled as she poked her brother in the shoulder. “Every day is a roast day for you, brother dearest. Thought you already knew that?”

With a sneakiness that could only be achieved through years of experience, Vax pinched Vex’s arm before she could dodge out of the way. Matching his quickness, she slapped him back in retaliation, and then he kicked her in the shin, and then she pulled his ponytail, and he elbowed her in the ribs. Soon enough, the twins were clobbering each other like two hermit crabs fighting over a new shell, hashing out colorful insults that sounded like they’d been created when they were in elementary school.

“Children, behave,” Percy said firmly. “Don’t make me turn this van around.”

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There wasn’t much to go off of in terms of places to eat in the vast Midland planes that divided Westruun from Emon, so the group went for what was most convenient, that being fast food joints. They changed drivers more often than they usually did because the trip was so dreadfully boring that there was a risk they’d drive themselves off a canyon in the desperate need to find some excitement.

The group first stopped at a fast food restaurant to eat lunch around one o’clock, followed by dinner at another fast food restaurant at four, which was then followed by dinner around seven at, surprise, another fast food restaurant... By nightfall, the van smelled of weed and french fries, and Keyleth decided it was a brilliant idea to introduce yet another sent into the cocktail by lighting some lavender incense, which didn’t bode well for Vex’s car sickness in the slightest. On the bright side though, they managed to witness the beautiful view of the setting sun as it vanished behind the craggy layered mountains while they waited for Vex to get some fresh air on a cliffside scenic stop.

As the last traces of sunlight faded from the stony landscape and the night stained the sky, the group eventually found their way into a little town hidden away in a mountain pass named Silvercut Crossroads, made up by small collections of mobile homes, trailer parks, cow ranches, and enough motels to house half its population over again, including the cows. They figured the businesses thrived off of travelers given the community was located where two major highways intersected with each other. There was likely never a shortage of travelers who needed a safe place to stay, meaning that rooms were likely in high demand...

Pike drove through the town, glancing at each and every motel with a little more suspicioin than the last. “Well, this is...” She wrinkled her nose at the scene "cute."

“I know right?” Keyleth said, speaking far more genuinely than Pike.

Pike hummed to herself as she continued to look around. “We can either stop now or just keep going, but it’s going to be another two hours before we run into any other towns.”

Tiberius glanced down at his phone. “We could also head south to the city of Kymal, which probably has more places to stay, although I shall point out that it will add another three hours to our total journey.”

Vax yawned. “I rather just stop here. We can get to bed early and take off first thing in the morning. We might even be able to make it to Emon by midnight tomorrow.”

Vex’s eyes fluttered open as she rested her head on Vax’s shoulder. She peeked her head out the
window and flipped off a sign that read “Exit South to Syngorn.”

Vax watched his sister and flipped the double birds, given that he had to one-up her even in her insults.

Percy raised a brow as he watched the twins. “Oddly antagonistic toward that sign... Dare I assume you two dislike Syngorn?”

“He’s clever, brother,” Vex said.

“Very,” Vax added, side glancing at him.

Percy sighed, staring down at his phone. “I’m sure there is a story there, but perhaps we should figure out where to sleep first?”

“Oh! How about there?” Keyleth asked as she pointed at a seedy little motel supposedly named “Sunny Crossroads.” The neon sign underneath it flickered the word “vacancy”

“I have an idea,” Scanlan said, leaning back in his chair with his hands behind his head. “How about we choose a place that won’t get us shanked in our sleep?” He turned to look at Keyleth and wiggled his brows at her.

“I...second that sentiment,” Percy said, raising a hand.

Grog shrugged. “Looks fine t’me.”

“Oh fine...” Keyleth frowned, crossing her arms with a pout, before almost instantly perking up again. “Oooh, what about that one?”

They passed a second motel that looked worst than the first, its paint chipping off of the sign that read “Shining Silver Motel.”

Vex scanned the place with a grimace on her face, “Darling, I don’t think-”

“Oh, Wanderlust Inn!” Keyleth exclaimed again. “C’mon guys... that one sounds cool.”

“I agree with Keyleth on that specific observation. It indeed sounds rather cool,” Tiberius said, making air quotes.

And surely it did, what with the rotting roof and the rusted cars parked in the parking lot that looked like they had been there for maybe a couple of decades.

Percy rested his head against the window. “Gotta at least give these places a point or two for name creativity.”

“I’m personally not opposed to staying there,” Scanlan said, pointing his pinky at an entirely pink painted motel with red lights called “The Rebellious Lady.”

“I’m a rebellious lady!” Keyleth said.

The whole van groaned and grimaced.

Percy tried his best not to laugh his glasses off as he pat Keyleth on the arm.

“No Keyleth...” Vax said as rested his face in his hand.
“What?” Keyleth said with wide eyes. “I’m so confused.”

“And we love you for it,” Percy said, wiping a tear from his eye.

“Focus guys. I feel like I’m driving in circles here,” Pike said.

“I really don’t feel like it’s a good sign when every single one of these buildings has metal bars on their windows,” Vex muttered.

“Perhaps it’s to keep the cows out,” Tiberius said with a big excited grin on his face, looking around as if he were actually looking for wandering livestock.

Scanlan turned toward him with an expression that revealed disbelief and perhaps just a touch of disappointment. Too be fair, it was sometimes hard to tell whether Tiberius was joking or truly serious about the things that came out of his mouth.

“Maybe we’re just in the bad part of town,” Pike said. “Let’s see what’s down this street.”

However, almost half an hour of browsing later, with about three people on their phones looking at hotel websites, they soon realized there wasn’t much in terms of variety.

“Look, let’s just settle with this one,” Vax said as he read off his phone. “Country Cattle Inn; it’s a two star motel with a three star rating so that’s saying something, right?”

Vex leaned in to read the review and her jaw dropped. “How the hell do they justify that price?”

Vax shrugged, “They’re all expensive as fuck. Guess they think they can get away with it given all the traffic coming through here.”

Percy sighed, looking rather drained. “I honestly could not care any less than I do in this very moment... I’d be fine with any of these places. I can’t remember the last time I slept in a real bed, assuming these places have real beds…”

“Perseus’ got a point,” Scanlan said. “Beggars can’t be choosers and I’m pretty sure we’re the beggars here.”

Percy turned to look at Scanlan with a very furrowed brow.

“What?” Scanlan asked innocently. “I’m assuming Percy is either short for Perseus or Percival, so I just went for the one I thought sounded cooler.”

Percy’s expression went flat and his jaw tensed a little before closing his eyes and sighing patiently. “It’s just Percy.”

Scanlan shrugged, leaning back into his chair. “Suit yourself. Really missing out on a great name.”

“Sorry to interrupt your riveting conversation guys,” Pike said a little sarcastically. “But you said it was called the “Crossroads Cattle Inn” right?”

“Yeah,” Vax said, perking up to look out the window.

“Pretty sure I found it.”

And sure enough, as Vox Machina crunched onto the gravel parking lot, they were met with a rather mediocre sight of a two story motel with a sign in the shape of a cow skewered by four arrows pointing in the four main directions the highways lead.
“That’s...grim,” Vex muttered.

“Ha! I love it!” Grog laughed as he slapped his hand on his kneed.

“Well there you have it folks.” Scanlan grinned. “That pretty much sums up why it has a three star rating...”

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“You cannot seriously expect to charge fifty GP per room,” Vex sneered, baring down on the mousy looking concierge and causing the little cow bobble head on her desk to quiver.

“M’am, that’s just what we charge around here,” she said, adjusting her glasses. “You can take it or leave it.”

“You expect us to-”

Vax yanked his sister by the arm, smiling innocently at the little woman. “Pardon us for just a moment.”

As he dragged her outside, Vex crossed her arms and stared Vax down. “I almost had her.”

“Aha, I’m sure you did.” He glanced behind him before continuing. "Look... Let’s not cause any more fucking problems than we already have? Just ask how many people we can fit per room and we’ll huddle, alright? Percy looks like he’s going to pass out.”

He nodded toward Percy who was indeed in mid yawn, rubbing his eye under his glasses as he got his ear talked off by Keyleth and Tiberius simultaneously. After all this time, they were still on him as if he’d shown up yesterday. Surely they should have run out of things to talk about given the volume of words they were capable of delivering per minute?

Vex scrunched up her nose. “But this feels like robbery, and the place smells of cow.”

“The whole town smells of cow.”

“Alright alright...” Vex stormed back into the lobby, grumbling profanities to herself.

After nearly fifteen minutes of price clarifications and debit card transactions, she walked back outside looking a little worse for ware.

“And no smoking in the rooms!” the concierge shouted.

“Yeah yeah,” Vex shouted back with a eyeroll as the door swung shut. With the others staring at her expectantly, she lifted two sets of room keys and showed the group. “I got us two bedrooms with two queen sized beds each. Hope you all don’t mind sharing because I’m not going back in there.”

“Oh, I certainly don’t mind,” Scanlan said with a grin. “Pik-”

“No Scanlan,” Pike droned as she hoisted her duffel bag out of the van.

“Alright. Guys in one room and girls in the other,” Vex ordered. “Except for you Vax. Sorry...Gonna have to bunk with the girls.”

Vax sighed, glancing back at the guys one last time before he followed the girls down the hall, leaving the others to their own devices with blank expressions on their faces.
The rooms were not as bad as they appeared to be from the outside, nor did they smell nearly as rank. The decor reminded Vex of a mountain cabin, with wood furniture, forest green sheets and curtains, and a pleasant painting of milk cows grazing in a high mountain meadow.

Vex mosied out of the dark tiled bathroom and leaned against the door frame. “I only found one hair in the bathroom, and they offer little shampoo bottles and conditioner. Not too shabby...”

Keyleth hopped onto the bed and bounced her butt on the mattress a few times, “I think this is super nice.”

Vex smirked, though even in her moment of admiration toward Keyleth’s childlike bliss, the corner of her eyes revealed a slight a hint of remorse. She'd almost forgot that her and Tiberius slept in the van, and soon began to feel incredibly guilty for having been so picky about choosing a motel. Her thoughts drifted toward Percy as well, who was probably just as overjoyed, or at least internally… She couldn't even begin to fathom Percy bouncing up and down on the bed, and the mere shadow of the immage made her giggle to herself. Nevertheless, he seemed to be hanging in there just fine, though she couldn't quite shake the worry that followed her around ever since she’d seen him in such pitiful conditions just a few days prior to the trip.

Vax’s arms were crossed as he too watched Keyleth bounce up at down as if in a bit of a daze, when Vex wandered up to him and pat him on the shoulder.

“Well isn’t this fun for you?” she asked. “You get to participate in ladies night! Where us girls spend all night chatting about boys and their dicks.”

“Yeah,” Pike smirked with a naughty grin.

Vex snorted, “You know I could talk about dicks all night.”

Vex’s expression grew mischievous. “You sure you want to listen to me talk about them?”

Realizing the dreadful implications of her threat, his expression morphed from smug to disgusted in a matter of seconds, and he gradually backed toward the door. “I think... I’m going to go see how the guys are doing. You know, give you ladies some time to get changed and talk about dicks and whatever else you need to take care of. Grog mentioned something about a sports thing on TV anyway...”

“Thank you brother!” Vex sing-songed as he flew through the door. “Text us when you’re on your way back...”

The moment they heard the door shut, the three girls all started to laugh.

“Good job Vex,” Pike said. “I was worried we’d never get rid of him...”

“Why?” Keyleth asked, looking genuinely confused.

With a toothy grin, Pike wiggled her brows at Vex and Keyleth as she pulled out a bottle of tequila from her duffle bag.

Vex’s jaw dropped. “No way...”

“Yes way...” Pike said as she started to pull out a few shot glasses, a couple of limes, and a fistful of salt packets she’d jacked from the various fast food restaurants.
For a few moments, Keyleth and Vex simply stared at Pike awestruck, at which point she stopped what she was doing and her expression grew playfully serious. “Now turn on the TV! Grog said the football game is on.”

Chapter End Notes

I swore to myself that I would make this road trip only two chapters. But the more I wrote, the more I realized that this chapter was getting far too long. These characters talk A LOT, so I was forced to once again, split one of these chapters into two parts.

Oh well.
More to the Puzzle

Chapter Summary

Last time, on The Butterfly Effect:
The Vox Machina crew hit the road to Emon, traveling across vast empty expanses until their reach their first rest stop for the evening, a little town that smells of cow called Silvercut Crossroads. Pike, Keyleth, and Vex decide to make the best of it and pull out a bottle of Tequila in the hotel room.

Chapter Notes

No Content Warnings this chapter.

I did some quick character sketches. I want to do some nice artwork for this fic but I currently don't have a powerful enough computer to support my drawing tablet, so this will have to do for now:

DeviantART link

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It had been a while since Vex had gotten a chance to share some exclusive quality time with her female friends. It wasn’t that they did much girl talk anyway, but it was nice to have an excuse to hang out with Pike and Keyleth in tandem. It was an opportunity that happened so rarely -- given Pike’s busy schedule -- that she assumed Vax knew better than to intrude.

With no sign of her brother returning, Vex imagined he’d opted to stay with the other guys to watch the game, which she had absolutely no issue with. She was having far too much fun with Pike and Keyleth to deal with the Edge Lord anyway.

As the TV played in the background, the three of them sat in a circle on one of the beds, with Pike strategically placed so she could watch the game. They’d already had a couple of shots of tequila each, which warmed their souls just enough to ignore the cold that was gradually creeping into their room despite them having already cranked the heat to the max.

“So Scanlan…” Vex said, raising her brow suggestively at Pike as she held her precariously filled shot glass.

Pike split her attention between prepping tequila shots and watching the game. “What about him?”

Vex half smirked. “He’s growing pretty bold, don’t you think?

Pike simply shrugged as she ripped open a new packet of salt with her teeth, but didn’t say anything.

“Doesn’t that bother you?” Vex asked.
“Nah…” Pike said. She glanced up at Vex and looked at her with big, slightly guilty blue eyes. “Is it weird that I don’t take him seriously?”

“Oh, I think he’s being pretty serious,” Keyleth cautioned as she waited patiently for the other two to prep for their shot, glancing back and forth between the two.

Pike sprinkled some salt onto Keyleth’s hand. “But nobody in their right mind thinks that type of flirting actually works.”

“That’s your first mistake,” Vex said. “Assuming that he’s in his right mind…”

“I think that’s just his artsy side shining through,” Keyleth said. “He seems pretty enamored with you Pike…”

Pike groaned, “Great… In that case, I feel like a complete asshole.” She reached to sprinkle some salt on Vex’s hand before putting the rest on her own hand.

Keyleth lifted her chin to the air and spoke proudly. “Don’t ever feel like you owe a suitor anything.”

“Yeah,” Vex said, her expression growing a little bit serious. “I’ve dealt with that sort of bullshit far too many times and it’s not fun…”

“Oh no. It’s not that…” Pike glanced up at the ceiling as she tried to think, but quickly shook her head. “Look, let’s take this other shot first. What should we cheer to?”

“To not getting hungover?” Keyleth proposed.

“That’s always a good one,” Vex smirked.

All three of them nodded at each other, exhaled deeply, and in an almost perfectly synchronized fashion, licked the salt off their hands, downed the shot, and bit into their slice of lime.

Vex scrunched up her face and puckered her lips, looking rather displeased with what she’d just subjected her mouth to. “God, every fucking time. I can’t tell if the lime is bad or the tequila.”

Pike smacked her lips together as she tasted the leftovers. “Honestly, probably both.”

Keyleth wiped her mouth with her wrist and laughed. “That’s how tequila works. We just haven’t had enough yet.”

“Then let’s take another shot!” Pike said quickly. However, as she reached to open the bottle, Vex grabbed her wrist.

“Ah, not so fast,” Vex cautioned, raising a brow. “You were saying about Scanlan…”

Pike sighed, tucking a purple strand of hair behind her ear. “Oh dear…”

Vex grinned. “C’mon. You know it will stay between us.”

Pike closed her eyes as she re-crossed her legs. “Oh, I highly doubt that… But that’s alright.” She straightened her back a little and her eyes darted across the room as she reflected, before finally settling on the painting with the milk cows. “So… You know how… when you think of someone, you have one image of them, but then when you actually hang out with them, you get this other image, and sometimes you wonder what it would be like if they acted just a little more like the way you picture them in your head and a little less like…what they actually act like?”
Vex and Keyleth both looked at Pike wide-eyed.

Pike’s shoulders slouched a little. “You know what I mean?”

“No,” Vex said.

“Yes,” Keyleth said almost simultaneously.

Pike stared down at the empty salt packet. “Look. I just don’t know how I feel about it. And honestly, I don’t know how he’d react if I actually accepted his advances. He strikes me as the type of guy who’s more into the chase than the actual conquest, you know?”

“Yes,” Vex said.

“No,” Keyleth said, now looking confused.

Pike quirked a brow at the two of them.

“I mean, isn’t he like, ten years older than you or something?” Vex asked.

Pike smirked, “And that’s supposed to be a bad thing?”

Vex’s jaw dropped as Pike’s smile grew wide and mischievous.

“But enough about me,” Pike said. “What about you two?”

There was a little groan shared between Vex and Keyleth as they looked at each other.

“I don’t feel like I have much to contribute to this conversation…” Keyleth glanced down. “I just listen to you two to figure out how all of this works…”

Vex sighed at Keyleth’s endearing naivete. Another oddity about the gloriousness that was Keyleth was the fact that she had never been in a formal relationship before. It was rather unclear why, given that she was absolutely stunning and relatively pleasant to hang out with, if not a little loud. She was certainly interested in dating, but there was something about her social idiosyncrasies that seemed to create an obstacle between her and her fellow suitors. It was why Vex had originally assumed that she and Percy would hit it off. They were both certainly awkward, and they were both pretty physically attractive, which was a nice bonus, albeit a superficial one. Perhaps it was still too early to say, but Vex had a creeping feeling that perhaps he was just too weird, even for her…

Vex stared into the distance, looking a little disgusted with herself. “I haven’t gotten laid in six months. Life has been ridiculously busy lately.”

Pike hummed knowingly. “I wonder why…”

Vex knew exactly what Pike was hinting at, but she tried her best to warn her that she was treading into dangerous territory. She traded a poisonous look with her. “What are you implying?”

Of course, nothing intimidated Pike. “Oh, I don’t know…” She looked to the ceiling with an air of innocence. “I imagine having to deal with an unusually attractive hitchhiker in your living room for a month can be pretty distracting.”

Vex turned red but tried to mask it as frustration. “It’s not like that at all!”

Pike turned to look at Keyleth for confirmation.
“She’s telling the truth,” Keyleth said, nodding with formal authority.

“So what about you?” Pike asked. “You seem to really enjoy talking to him...”

“As a friend.” Keyleth laughed loudly.

Pike’s jaw dropped. “I can’t believe you two. I mean have you looked at him?”

Vex let out an exasperated sigh. This wasn’t a can of worms she felt like opening, but with the tequila coursing through their veins, it was only a matter of time before the subject matter was brought up.

Keyleth crossed her arms, staring Pike down. “You know, if you lived with him, I think you’d understand.”

Vex leaned in, lowering her voice as if she were sharing the beginning of some conspiracy. “You know, I feel like this is a good time to bring up a valid point on the matter...”

Pike scooted in a little closer, her curiosity rather transparent. “Shoot.”

Vex glanced at the door before speaking, keeping her voice at a near whisper. “Can we please take a moment to talk about how unusual this whole Percy situation is?”

Pike raised a brow. “I feel like we’ve talked about this over text. I thought you were over it.”

“Well I am...sort of. But...” Vex cleared her throat, fidgeting with her braid. “Well, it’s hard to explain. It’s as if the more time I spend with him, the less the pieces I’ve collected seem to fit together...”

Pike and Keyleth briefly glanced at each other, and then Keyleth spoke up. “I don’t feel like we’ve ever talked about this. Is something wrong?”

Vex groaned, tossing her head back and staring at the ceiling. “Nothing’s wrong. It’s just been on my mind for some time now.” Vex sighed. She needed to find a better way to explain herself; perhaps a metaphor. “Look, It’s kind of like when you get a puzzle and start to build it thinking it’s a certain size, but then you end up making one of the sides a lot longer, and you realize that there is a lot more to the puzzle than you initially expected.”

“I love it when that happens,” Keyleth said with a grin. “It extends the fun.”

Pike furrowed her brow at Vex, “Mind sharing an example of what you mean?”

Vex dropped her shoulders and huffed. “I’ve discussed this with Vax so many times I’ve lost count.” She assumed sharing her thoughts with Pike and Keyleth would make her think more clearly on the matter, but for some reason, she felt as though her thoughts were stunted. Perhaps the tequila was taking hold of her mental faculties. “Like, let’s just look at the big picture here for a second.” She lifted her hand and started to count off with her fingers. “Oddly attractive hitchhiker shows up...”

That already sounds like irrelevant information to me,” Keyleth said.

“I’m getting there,” Vex said, narrowing her eyes at Keyleth and clearing the throat before starting over. “Oddly attractive hitchhiker shows up with an unusually proper speech pattern and a vast vocabulary. Knows a shit ton about philosophy, history, and mechanical engineering, super good with computers, however, has said nothing about getting a college education. He has no apparent connections on social media, has made no specific mention of where he came from, and seems to
have little to no connection with his family either.”

Pike raised a brow at Vex. “If I’m not mistaken, Vax is actually pretty good with computers, and he doesn’t have a college education…” Pike smirked. “Remember that time he got rid of that virus on my computer?”

“Yes, but that’s not the point!”

“What are you suggesting?” Pike asked.

Vex stared up at the ceiling and groaned. She was not going to bring up her “secret writer” or “android” theories. She was actually trying to be taken seriously for once. “I don’t know. Keyleth seems to think it’s totally normal.”

“There is no such thing as “normal” Vex,” Keyleth droned with an eye-roll and air quotes.

Pike sighed, her face softening into a delicate smirk. Vex got the feeling Pike already had a pretty good idea of what she wanted to say. It was the face she made when she was about to share some serious insight.

“Look…” Pike started. “Sometimes people just…” She paused, reflecting on her words, “…come from nowhere. You know what I mean?”

Vex glanced down at a lime she had unconsciously been rolling around between her fingers. “Perhaps…” She was aware she sounded less than convinced, though she somewhat understood what Pike was trying to get at.

Pike smiled softly at Vex. “I’m saying that sometimes people come from such bad families that they really had nothing going for them. They felt like they were nobody.”

Those words struck strongly with Vex. Once again, she was reminded of her own life, and it seemed as though Pike was aware of the connection as well.

“Percy might have just been…” Pike furrowed her brow, “too ambitious to live that kind of lifestyle. Perhaps he decided to make himself somebody, and we just happened to meet him during that process. Sometimes people who come from that sort of life don’t feel comfortable sharing their past with someone else.”

She couldn’t be sure about Vax, but it occurred to her that she hadn’t actually spoken about her past with Percy anymore than he had with her, and in that moment, she felt like a bit of a hypocrite.

Vex smiled back at Pike, feeling a little guilty. “You’re right...again.”

Pike reached over and rubbed Vex’s leg with a smile. “I work in the medical field hon. I’ve seen a lot of people come through clinic doors… The more folks you meet in life, the more you realize that those you thought were unusual really aren’t that unusual at all...”

“I suppose,” Vex said, glancing down at her empty shot glass.

“Besides...remember that I live with Grog.”

Vex laughed, though her thoughts drifted farther down the rabbit hole. With only Pike and Keyleth sitting in the room, it occurred to her the perhaps now was a good time to bring up Percy’s illness, and how he didn’t want Pike to see him. She hadn’t texted Pike about it out of respect toward Percy, feeling concerned that she would have shown up uninvited even if she had cautioned her to keep it a
secret. She’d even told Keyleth to keep quiet about it, and given that Pike hadn’t brought it up yet, she figured Keyleth had kept up her half of the bargain as well. But now, in the privacy of their motel room, with Percy feeling much better, she figured it would be safe to disclose that information. And yet, as she tried to run the conversation through her head, she couldn't help but feel uncomfortable. Any way she framed it, the confession still felt like a breach of his privacy; a betrayal of his trust. It just didn’t feel right.

She opted to keep her mouth shut about that particular subject. “To be fair though, I suppose Percy’s just an interesting kind of guy. Smart, handsome, mysterious. There is just way too much going on in that package of his...”

Pike raised her brows at Vex. “You’ve seen it?”

Vex blinked for a moment, her mind slowly processing the madness. “What? No! You know that’s not what I meant.”

Pike laughed loudly, slapping Vex on the knee. “I’m just messing with you. I know what you mean, especially with the whole mysterious aspect of it. But like I said, being unusual isn’t that... unusual.”

“So you do admit that he’s a little weird.”

“Depends.” Pike reached to refill Keyleth and Vex’s shot glasses. “Name something he does that you think is “weird” ..”

Vex sighed, glancing out the window. Did random bouts of manic productivity followed by near life-threatening crashes count as weird? What about his irrational sleep schedule or the fact that he liked giving away his life savings to strangers?

“Define weird...” Vex said, looking at Pike with a raised brow.

“Like sleep naked.”

Vex nearly spilled her drink.

“I thought you slept naked?” Keyleth said.

“Yeah, but not on someone’s couch!”

“He doesn’t sleep on my couch naked...” Vex said, resting her face in her palm, though the image already haunted her, like a greek god sprawled out on silken sheets.

“That’s too bad,” Pike said. “I’m so damn curious to know if he’s all muscular or as scrawny as he looks.”

Vex shrugged. “Yup, a real shame.”

To be fair, Vex had technically seen him in his tank top, and he was indeed rather scrawny, even if he seemed to retain some strength in his arms. Of course, this also meant that she’d seen his incredibly intricate and expensive tattoos, yet another weird thing to slap onto the list of weird things that defined Percy. However, once again, it all felt like information that he could disclose on his own time. She didn't feel like causing any more drama between him and her.

Feeling her phone vibrate, she glanced down and was pleased to discover that Vax actually held up his part of the bargain and warn them of his return.
Vex snorted, “Vax is on his way back. Guess it’s time to finish these shots. Pass me a slice of lime.”

“Aw man, we should have talked about him while we had the chance,” Keyleth whined with a little pout.

Vex narrowed her eyes at Keyleth. “What’s there to say about Vax?”

“I don’t know.” Keyleth shrugged innocently. “Thought that’s what we were doing. Talking about guys behind their backs.”

Vex closed her eyes and sighed. “Just pass me the lime Keyleth…”

***

As Vax walked into the room, he was immediately greeted by an all too eager group of women who tried their best to hide the fact that they had downed nearly an entire bottle of tequila between the three of them.

Keyleth hopped up from her bed and wrapped her arms around him. “Welcome back!”

He glanced at Keyleth, casually patting her on her back before wriggling out of her grasp and staring at the TV. “Oh, you ended up watching the game as well?”

“Yep,” all three of them said in chorus.

Vax narrowed his eyes at them. “Great…”

“What about you? Did you have fun?” Pike asked.

“Oh yeah, sure. Just hung around, talked a bit.”

“What did you talk about?” Keyleth asked, casually leaning her cheek against his shoulder.

Vax half smirked at her and whispered, “Dicks.”

Clearly startled, Keyleth flinched back in response, lost her balance, and toppled onto the bed.

Vax laughed, his cheeks looking a little rosier than usual. “Yeah, good idea. I think I’ll get into bed too.”

***

Vex was frustrated to discover later in the night that the heater didn’t get very hot, or at least not hot enough to make up for the motel’s lackluster insulation.

As she shivered in bed, Vax rolled over, sniffing the air in Vex’s general direction. “Why do you smell like tequila?” he whispered.

Vex groaned, rolling over to look at him. Her eyes narrowed and she turned her nose up at him. “Why do you smell like vodka?”

Vax mirrored her expression. “Because we had the good sense to not drink tequila in the dead of winter.”
Vex huffed, rolling back over. “I hope you get a hangover.”

He groaned in response, rolling over as well. “Love you too sister.”

She smiled, staring at the darkened painting on the wall and remembering a time when things were simpler. “Good night Vax…”

The twins both sighed in unison, and as the rising moon shined through the curtain cracks, they both did their best to get some good sleep, for the journey ahead of them was still long and grueling.

As Vex tried to distract herself from the cold nipping at her feet, her eyes caught a glimpse of her phone lighting up. As she lazily clawed for it and squinted at the bright light of the screen, she was surprised to see it was a text from Percy. With a photo attachment...

She furrowed her brow. Given it was past midnight, she knew the possibility of a dick pick was rather high, especially under the assumption that he had also been drinking. She braced her mind for the worst as she fearlessly opened the picture, but instead almost laughed out loud as she set her eyes on a meme of a bear sitting at a picnic table that read “I built this with my bear hands.”

She answered promptly.

Vex: That’s adorable.

He answered almost immediately, implying that he was probably also on his phone.

Percy: Reminded me of you.

Vex felt herself smiling as she tried to think of what to reply. She didn’t want to be weird of course, so she figured she’d go for something relatively neutral.

Vex: Glad bears remind you of me.

Percy: I can see how that could be construed as offensive.

Vex: No. Bears are amazing. Always send bears.

This time, a few more moments passed before she received the emoji of a little bear.

Vex: Shouldn’t you be sleeping?

Percy: Grog snores like a freight train.

His text was punctuated by the same little bear emoji.

Vex smirked at his attention to detail, though she couldn't help but feel guilty about his situation. Percy got little sleep as it was, so she felt even more bad about cramming everyone into two rooms now. Perhaps she’d be more generous with their hotel in Emon.

Vex: I’m sorry. Have you tried nudging him?

Percy: He’s in the other bed with Scanlan. *bear emoji*

Vex: Throw something?

She waited patiently for Percy to reply, and when nearly two minutes passed, she worried that Grog had killed him during his attempt to stop his snoring. Eventually though, he answered.
Percy: Didn’t work. *bear emoji*

She furrowed her brow, trying to imagine what he could have possibly done in those couple of minutes. He couldn't have actually gone through with it...

Vex: What did you throw?

Percy: One of Tib’s shoes. Scanlan woke up though. He doesn’t know it was me. Currently hiding under blankets. *bear emoji*

Vex laughed out loud this time, causing Vax to stir a little and kick her.

“Sorry,” she hissed, biting her lower lip as she replied.

Vex: Damn, he’s a deep sleeper. Maybe you can sleep with us next time.

Before she could really reflect on what she was saying, she sent the text and immediately regretted it, realizing that perhaps it could be taken inappropriately. She waited impatiently for his reply, which was as prompt as usual.

Percy: That would feel more like home. *bear emoji*

Vex felt something in her chest. Perhaps it was just gas from the bad tequila, but she was pretty sure it was something more akin to an emotion. Percy had spent quite a few weeks sleeping in close proximity to them. She’d gotten pretty accustomed to running into him in the hallway, or trying to keep quiet as she got food while he napped, or watching TV shows with him on the couch. It almost felt uncomfortable being so far away, even if he was only a few doors down the hall. But more than anything, it was the fact that he used the word “home” that struck her most profoundly. Through all the sweat and tears, through all the dog hair and cigarette smoke, he genuinely seemed to consider their apartment home, and that made her feel a deep sense of quasi-tenderness that she had not felt toward someone in a long time.

She exhaled as quietly as she could, reflecting on her answer.

Vex: We’ll figure something out. For now, try to get some sleep.

A little longer pause created some suspense in Vex’s chest before he finally replied about a minute later.

Percy: Good night Vexy *bear emoji*

Vex narrowed her eyes at the nickname, yet even through her annoyance, she could feel a grin plastered on her face.

Vex: I’ll let it slide this time...Good night.

She waited a little longer to see if he would reply, but after five minutes, she decided to put her phone to charge and snuggle back under the covers.

Her mind continued to explore the various avenues that revisited her most recent troubles, including her work, her finances, and the mousy concierge. She did her best to try and shake the negative thoughts away and reflect on something more pleasant, like the sunset she’d seen that day, or the great time she’d had with Keyleth and Pike. Her thoughts replayed the conversations they had, and before she could really stop her mind from going there, she found herself imaging Percy sleeping naked on the couch again.
She rolled over rather aggressively and huffed in frustration. She’d need some sort of mental sponge to clean her mind of that image, and her thought immediately went to the tequila. However, the thought of having to get up and fish through Pike’s stuff was far too much of a hassle that late at night. So instead, she sucked it up and allowed her brain to do whatever it pleased.

As she felt herself losing consciousness, the last image in her head was indeed of her very naked comrade, smiling back at her as she stared wide-eyed. She had a distinct feeling she wouldn't be able to look at him the same the next day.

Chapter End Notes

A slightly more subdued chapter. Looking back, I feel like all of this could have been summarized with a few paragraphs, but perhaps I am being too critical. I suppose we did manage to get a little unexpected text conversation between Vex and Percy, which I suppose is a bonus.

If you are curious to know what meme Percy sent Vex, here it is:
Link to meme

EDIT: So I just learned in the most recent Talk’s Machina episode (4/18/2017) that Pike had BLACK HAIR with a purple streak in it pre-stream before she died. It turned white after her resurrection. So, since I am trying to keep things as close to the spirit of the canon as possible, I am making the change. Don’t be alarmed...Her tucking a purple strand of hair behind her ear wasn't a typo.
Chapter Summary

Last time, on The Butterfly Effect: After convincing Vax to give them some alone time, Vex, Pike and Keyleth get drunk on tequila and talk about boys. When Vax returns and they all go to bed, Vex has an odd drunken text conversation with Percy.

Chapter Notes

No Content Warnings this chapter.

BRACE YOURSELF. A point of view change is coming. I think somewhere a long time ago, I mentioned that there may occasionally be a point of view shift in this fic. If I didn’t, well...now you know!

I was truly on the fence on whether I wanted to do this now or not, but given the nature of these next couple of chapters, I felt as though now was as good a time as ever. It will happen later on in this fic as well, so I figured it would be wise to get my readers used to it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Vax woke up feeling like a goat had crawled up his nose and licked his brain. Alcohol never settled well with his body, but that certainly didn’t stop him. He blamed his poor constitution on his father, along with the majority of his physical and psychological ailments. The little time he’d spent with the dreadful excuse of a man, Vax had settled on the verdict that his father was nothing but a cloistered office troll, surviving only through to the virtue of money, abstinence of all things fun, and excessive hygiene.

Vax -- of course -- would never torture himself to such lengths. He barely had the luxury of a stable living situation, so he saw no purpose in denying himself of the little things. Besides, he was a hopeful soul that never lost sight of the possibility that he would one day wake up free of a hangover, just like all the other badasses he knew in his life. Alas, that morning was clearly not the day.

As he blinked into consciousness, he came to the realization that he was freezing his ass off. Vex had graciously stolen most of the comforter, and was currently sprawled out diagonally, forcing him to curl up like a frightened stray cat.

Accepting that sleep would likely not return to him, he checked his phone to realize that it was nearing eight o’clock, and he knew that if they were going to make it to Emon by a decent hour, they needed to get their asses out of bed. Nevertheless, he was also wise enough to know that if he was to have the shower to himself, he needed to refrain from waking the girls for just a little longer. They’d be appreciative of it anyway, or at least he hoped they would.

Sitting up, he pressed his thumb into the constantly tender spot in his lower back. He hoped that this
A little vacation from work would give him some much needed time to recover, though even he knew it was but a temporary fix to a persisting problem. He couldn’t remember a time when he didn’t live in constant back pain, an ailment that he once again blamed on the man that fucked his mother. Whether it was due to genetics or his shitty job didn’t concern him. Either way, it was his father’s fault, directly or indirectly.

After a quick stretch that helped him feel a little less like death had fucked him in his sleep, he rose out of bed, taking in the freezing morning air with a yawn he muffled with his hand. He spent a few moments blankly staring at Keyleth and Pike, sleeping soundly like two snoring angels. As he turned around to glance at a slightly drooling Vex, a thought came to him.

He was fucking outnumbered.

And by outnumbered, he meant outnumbered by people that were so much better than him in every single way. Somehow, through all the mind fuckery that his hangover was subjecting him to, it had occurred to him that he was currently in a room with three women that he not only admired, but fucking envied:

There was Pike, with all her goodness and all her wisdom and all her damn common sense that made her this blaring beacon of hope that nobody could put out; she was the type of person you pointed out to children and said “You see that woman? Yeah, copy that shit if you ever wanna become anything of worth in this world.”

Then there was Keyleth. Fucking Keyleth...A splash of color in his otherwise dingy, monochromatic existence. It was like the universe had sent her to him to remind him that sometimes you just had to live a little: Jump on a bed. Roll down a hill. Dance around in the moonlight to the sound of that song you don’t know. Take the cards as they were fucking dealt. No bitching.

And then, of course, there was his better half; brave, determined, smart as fuck. Sometimes lazy as all hell and way too obsessed with getting her way... But stubbornness suited her; stubbornness made Vex’halia. And for the most part, she was stubborn for all the right reasons anyway. Saved their asses more than a couple of times, that was for sure.

He ran a hand through his hair and smirked at the whole situation. Each moment he spent with these ladies was a moment never wasted, though they would never fucking believe him even if he told them. Not that they were ungrateful or anything. They just weren’t big fans of him getting all sappy on their asses. He’d been drunk around them just one too many times and they’d grown tired of the compliments. Not that he gave a shit.

He let out a sigh and cracked his neck. He was getting far too fucking philosophical given the fact that he’d been awake for maybe two minutes. The mere notion that he was thinking about all of this shit so soon after waking was a possible sign that something was bugging him subconsciously, though whether he could figure that out was a completely different story. The only thing he was certain of was that he’d likely feel a lot better if he took a dump and showered, and what better place to do so than in a cold, slightly dilapidated, unfamiliar bathroom. Fucking fantastic.

***

With his backpack already packed and ready, he stepped outside into the newly snow-covered parking lot, where the cold air threatened to freeze his wet hair to his clothes. Feeling a shiver crawl all the way down his spine, he quickly headed toward the van only to stop dead in his tracks as he spotted a familiar figure through the windows. The cigarette smoke rising from behind the van into the pale morning sky and silvery mane was a dead giveaway.
Feeling mischievous, Vax lowered his profile and carefully crept around the van so he could get a better look at Percy in his natural element. In that aspect, Vax was very much like his sister; curious to a fault and always suspicious of the behavior of others. He was also privately hoping he could startle Percy to see if he was a flincher or a squeaker.

As he peeked his head around the corner, Percy seemed to be entirely oblivious of his presence, seemingly lost in thought as he stared at the distant mountains lining the horizon. Dark circles under his eyes indicated that he was probably quite tired, which was no surprise given the fact that he had done his fair share of drinking the night before. He almost looked a little sad, though his general resting face always had that subtle tint of melancholy. A good scare would probably snap him out of it.

Vax licked his lips as he cooked up a quick plan to get the drop on him. He gingerly set his backpack on the ground and scuttled under the van, which was fortunately free of snow and still rather dry. Crawling as quietly as he could, he crept his way up to where he could see Percy’s boots and he grinned devilishly. With the swiftness of a snake, he grabbed hold of Percy’s calf and made a growling sound, which caused Percy to leap about two feet in the air with a sound resembling a startled school girl swearing like a sailor who’d never seen land.

Definitely a squeaker, that was for sure.

Vax couldn’t help but laugh uncontrollably as he watched Percy hold his hand on his chest for a few seconds as he composed himself. Then, after a quick shiver from head to toe, Percy bent over to look under the van, holding his glasses and staring Vax straight in the face.

“You made me drop my cigarette you know…” he said, narrowing his eyes at him.

Vax slowly crawled out from under the van. “Typical me; helping people quit bad habits one scare at a time.”

Percy helped Vax stand. “I’m really not in the mood for a smoking intervention this early in the morning and this deep into my hangover.”

Vax brushed himself off. “You too? Man, that stuff Grog brought was fucking harsh.”

Percy reached into his pocket for his cigarettes and popped a new one into his mouth. “Better than nothing I suppose.”

“Did you know the girls were drinking tequila?”

Percy smirked a little as he reached for his lighter. “Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

They laughed a little, and as Percy lit his new cigarette, they both stared into the distance. If you looked just past the gas station and beyond the trailer park, a keen eye could spot cows grazing in the distant open fields right before the rise of the sheer snowy mountains. Idyllic, really, if you could see past all that sketchy human shit.

“Fucking gorgeous view, all things considered,” Vax said.

Percy exhaled a thick plume of smoke into the air, reflecting for a moment. “Rather idyllic. And you get used to the smell remarkably quickly.”

Vax smiled softly. “Kind of reminds me of where Vex and I grew up.”

“You grew up in the country?”
Vax nodded. “For the first decade of our lives, yes. Frolicking through the fields, braiding flowers in our hair, beating each other senseless with tree branches...”

Percy sighed, seemingly lost in thought as his eyes followed the occasional car drive past. “Can’t say I had that experience growing up. It sounds fun.”

“Ah, that’s right...” Vax muttered in realization. “Vex told me how you didn't have any siblings.”

Percy cleared his throat, glancing down at his feet as he adjusted his glasses. “Well, I was...more of an indoor child anyway.”

“Is that why you’re so good with computers?”

“Partially yes.” He exhaled a thin ribbon of smoke. “Though I don’t feel as though those are necessarily linked.”

Vax shrugged. “Hey, I got good with computers during middle school when I didn’t feel like socializing with shitheds.” He stared up at the sky with a little nostalgia and a subtle grin on his lips. “There was just something about hacking rich kids’ Myspace accounts that really made me feel alive. Fucking shame no one uses that shit anymore. When Myspace died, so did a little bit of my ego...”

Percy turned to look at Vax with an amused and slightly incredulous look on his face. “How did I not know this?”

“About Myspace being dead?”

“No, about you hacking.”

“But I never fucking talk,” Vax said, chuckling. “Why do you think Vex’s computer is in such good shape? You know how many bullshit torrenting sites she goes on? That computer would be toast without my virus disarming skills. I’m like fucking Geordi La Forge.”

Percy looked at Vax with a face of mocking endearment, “I don’t think I’ve ever heard someone use the word “disarming” in regards to computer viruses. Not exactly technical...”

Vax bashfully stared down at his feet. “I also used to play a lot of RPGs as a teen...”

Percy had a grin stretching from ear to ear, eyes toward the sky. “I honestly cannot tell if you and I would have gotten along as teenagers or not.”

“Hard to say.” Vax smiled. “Too bad we’ll never know...”

Percy hummed. “A real shame.”

“Yeah...”

The two stood staring into the distance for a little longer, till Percy spoke up again. “So what happened afterward?” he asked, before taking another drag from his cigarette.

“Hm?”

Percy exhaled into the sky. “You said you lived in the country for your first decade. When did you move?”

Vax licked his lips and crossed his arms. He had assumed Vex had given Percy a least the basic summary of their lives, considering all the fucking time she spent with him. But then again, maybe he
had simply overestimated his sister’s. For a hot minute, he debated whether it was even worth sharing life stories with Percy, given all the other wonderful bullshit they could talk about that lovely morning. But as his eyes settled on Percy’s serious yet curious expression, he figured now was as good of a time as any, especially since they were alone.

He glanced at Percy and forced a smile. “You familiar with Byroden?”

Percy’s eyes narrowed in reflection, before shaking his head slowly. “No. I don’t believe so.”

Vax closed his eyes and concealed a bitter smirk behind his hand as he scratched the side of his nose. Percy knew of Byroden. He simply didn’t know he knew. Not a lot of people were familiar with the fabled town by name, but it was nothing a little history refresher wouldn't help.

“You know…” Vax sing-songed, lifting his fingers to make air quotes. “The town where the water caught fire.”

Percy’s eyes went wide, clearly struck by some form of realization, and Vax clicked his tongue as he crossed his arms with a smirk. “See? You are familiar with it.”

“Of course but... my Gods…” Percy adjusted his glasses. “You lived there?”

The way he said “there” was such a typical snob thing to say. He sounded just like one of those Syngornian “elite” bastards. Granted, Percy couldn’t really be described as part of the “elite”, but honest to god he sure did have the face of one, especially when his pretty little mouth went of saying bullshit like that.

Still, Vax tried to give him the benefit of the doubt. Lots of people didn’t even know Byroden existed before the tragedy. So it was probably hard to imagine a time before it was burnt to the ground.

Vax turned to look at Percy intently, forcing a smile in an attempt to not reveal his slight irritation. “Yep. We spent that first decade of our lives there, enjoying a perfectly peaceful existence with our single mother. Vex and I didn’t really think anything of it. The notion of us living in a big city felt so foreign. We’d never known anything else but the Midlands.”

Percy hummed for a moment, as if what Vax was saying was somehow up for debate. “I mean, it's not unimaginable, I suppose.” Percy took a quick drag from his cigarette and exhaled before continuing. “In fact, I’d argue that most people find it quite enjoyable.”

Vax sighed as he looked out into the fields where the cows roamed free. “We did.”

The land unclaimed by city-states went by many names: “Deadman’s Land”, “The Frontier”, “The Neutral Zone”, “The Wild”. But whatever people wanted to call the fucking place, the Midlands were really nothing more than a lawless, unpredictable, war-ravaged free-for-all used by pretty much anyone who didn’t have the means or patience to deal with city-state bullshit. As one would imagine, some areas in the Midlands got pretty fucking wild. Out there, you either grouped together, or hoped to the gods no one fucking found you alone. So obviously, unless you were a crazy fuck and/or Vex’ahlia, most people in the Midlands traveled in groups or stayed in the various communities that speckled the countryside.

Drama aside, it wasn’t like the fucking Purge out here. Clearly, if Vox Machina was parked right in front of a motel in the Midlands as they spoke, it couldn’t be all that bad. Silvercut Crossroads was a commune that made its goldies with its motels; Stilben provided cheap medical care and drugs; Byroden used to grow rice and produce cheese... They were all communities that had their own
government, their own police, and their own cultures -- some older than others. Even in travel, so long as you stayed moving and only stopped in towns and communes, you were fine. There were enough military and law enforcement patrols on the main roadways to deal with most of the bullshit and keep the “peace” within the international space. It was only when the big shots got involved that things got complicated…

Every once in a while a city-state would stretch out an arm and absorb a commune or town... sometimes nicely, sometimes by force. Other times, corporate entities would be the culprits, taking land with their hired goons, or dumping their shit where they probably shouldn’t...Sometimes city-states or other organizations gave a fuck, and sometimes they didn’t. It mostly depended on what they could get out of it, or whether they considered the Midlands conflicts a “A great threat to human life ”...as the lawyer types liked to call it. Turns out, what happened to Byroden was just such a case, but by the time those fucks in Emon and Syngorn figured it out, it was a bit late.

“So you were there when it happened?” Percy asked.

Vax figured he was referring to the firestorm: the one that burned half the fucking town in the middle of the night when the toxic gasses that had built up in the water reservoirs ignited into a fireball the size of a soccer field, spewing out of gutters, showers, sinks, toilets... Most people didn’t even make it out of their beds...Then the rest of the fire spread across the rest of the town, outrunning the elderly and infirm and sparing only those with the good sense to leave everything behind.

“Well...” Vax corrected. “We left about a year before then. The water started to get real toxic well before Thordak Enterprises was ever asked to take any sort of real responsibility.”

Percy excused himself from the conversation for a brief moment to take another drag from his cigarette, taking his sweet time to respond. “Right...”

“Yeah...” Vax’s cracked his knuckles as he tried to look more casual, though he could still sense his face getting all bitter. No wonder Percy was acting a little off. “It was during that time that our father came into the picture.”

Percy cleared his throat before taking another drag from his cigarette, taking his sweet time to respond. “I’m starting to sense it wasn’t a pleasant experience.”

“No really no,” Vax snorted as resentment filled his chest. “Mind you, we had never even met the motherfucker before then. He just showed up out of nowhere and spirited us away to Syngorn. A week later, the Syngornian government released an official report stating the dangerous levels of toxicity in the water of Byroden to the world. Not that it did much...”

There was a lull in the conversation as they waited for a loud red semi-truck to roll by.

“And your mother?” Percy asked.

Vax glanced up at the sky, shoving his hands in his pockets. “Didn’t come with us,” he said, rather matter-of-factly.

“Why not?”

Vax glanced down at the thin layer of snow on the gravel, kicking it a little. “Bureaucratic bullshit. Syngorn was incredibly secluded at the time and refused entry to any foreigner who didn’t have a job already lined up for them. Father swears he did everything in his power to get mother a job and an apartment, but in time, we started to get a better concept of his character...” He let out a deep sigh
before continuing. “More likely than not, he feared there would be custody disputes if she lived in Syngorn, so he used her political state of limbo as a convenient deterrent.”

“That’s…” Percy muttered, blinking at the distant mountains. “Quite cruel…”

“Oh yes,” Vax laughed, more out of nervousness than anything else. “He never believed she was a fit parent. Always said she was too free-spirited and never strict enough. As you can imagine, they really didn’t like each other very much at this point in their lives. Though I still wonder if he would have acted differently had he known what was going to happen…”

“It’s dangerous to think that way…”

Vax smirked. “Yes, it is.”

Percy simply stood in silence as he smoked, seemingly keen on not contributing to the conversation any longer. But Vax didn’t want to stop talking about it; not while he had Percy on lockdown. He was going to learn about the hard realities of the world whether he wanted to hear it or not.

“The morning the firestorm showed up on TV, father was particularly quiet, and we already knew something was not right. Sure didn’t make him any less suspect when he explicitly told us he didn’t want any questions and said to not talk to any of the kids at school about it. Of course, it’s not like we really had a fucking choice on the matter. They knew where we were from, and you know how middle schoolers are…”

Percy released a heavy exhale of smoke as he spoke. “Savage.”

Vax sort of shrugged to himself as the memories came flooding in. He could still remember the chanting: 

“Your mom is toast, your mom is toast…”

Yeah,” Vax huffed, running his hands through his hair. “I guess you could say that…”

_Your mom is toast, your mom is toast…_

In that moment, Percy looked away with this very sorry-I-asked look on his face. Not that Vax gave a fuck. He wasn’t going to sugarcoat the story any more than he already had. He had no patience for people who couldn’t keep things real. If he was going to be all friendly with Vex the least he could do was listen to their fucking backstories.

“So yeah…” Vax continued with a shrug, looking away. “You know the rest. Thordak Enterprises got scolded by the international community and had a hissy fit. Tal’Dorei went to shit for like six months, and then everything just sort of settled back to normal like it always does.”

Of course, Whitey was still frozen stiff, staring down at the ember on his cigarette before muttering this very low “I’m sorry,” that Vax only really understood because he was looking at Percy’s chapped lips.

Vax let out a deep sigh and shoved his hands back into his pockets, forcing a smile to lighten the air.
“Nothing to be sorry about.” A real smirk broke through the fake one. “Be angry. That’s all I really ask of people.”

Percy stood quietly for a little longer, eyes glazed over like a dead fish as he raised the cigarette to his mouth, only to realize that the ember had gone cold. Lighting his cigarette again, he glanced up at the cloud that escaped his lips before speaking. “So then...when did you leave Syngorn?”

Vax tossed his hair to the side that wasn’t on Percy’s. “Straight after high school. By then we’d gotten the good sense to save up some money and get the fuck out of there.”

Percy’s brows jumped a little. “Had to grow up fast.”

Vax sighed, crossing his arms and staring into the distance. “Yep.” He turned to Percy and half smirked. “It’s alright though. It’s been a long time now. It doesn’t hurt much anymore.”

Percy simply stared at the ground, speaking lowly. "Well, that's good...at least."

Vax stretched out like a cat, curling his back leaning against Vox Machina again. “Besides, the city had an okay school, so when I wasn’t busy ditching I learned quite a bit.”

Percy quirked a brow, “Like learning how to hack?”

“No.” Vax chuckled. “That I learned on my own…”

Percy huffed out a little laugh for the first time in what felt like days, though there was something behind his expression that hinted at... disbelief maybe?

“I’m surprised Vex didn’t tell you any of this, with you two being so buddy buddy and all...”

Percy took a final drag of his cigarette before stomping it into the ground. “Our conversations don’t really get too personal.”

As if Vax believed that bullshit; but he’d let it slide. This time. He showed off a sly smirk. “Well sorry for getting all “personal” on you.”

“No no.” Percy blinked, not making eye contact with Vax "It's fine. It’s good to know. Keeps me from accidentally saying something I shouldn’t.”

“That’s a good practice to have.” Vax raised a brow at him. “Guess you’re a people person after all.”

Percy quirked a brow right back at him. “You doubted?”

Vax grinned. “For a while.”

Percy simply chuckled before glancing down at his phone. “Think we should round up the others?”

Vax took the cue to look at his phone as well, and he nodded. “Yeah.” He sighed, staring up into the clouded sky. “Let’s get this shit show on the road.”

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As per usual, rallying everyone up was a feat that took a lot longer than was anticipated, which was remarkable given the fact that everyone was far too tired or hungover to excessively talk to each other anyway.

That being said, Vax did catch Vex and Percy exchanging some funny looks with each other,
followed by Vex sticking her tongue out at him. Vax was so dreadfully tempted to ask what they were on about, but he knew he’d get jack shit out of her. Of course, he suspected his sister of flirting; that was what she fucking did, and there was nothing wrong with that -- or at least that’s what he tried to tell himself over and over and over again.

Then again, there was something about the thought of Vex and Percy having any sort of physical relationship with each other that felt awfully uncomfortable. He’d mused about it for a couple of weeks and had come up with only one conclusion: He seemed to have no issue seeing his sister flirt with strangers she’d likely never see again, but the thought of her fucking someone he had to be around every day sickened him to no end. The only thing that kept him mildly sane was the possibility that Percy was gay, though his friendliness with Keyleth didn’t exactly prove or disprove this possibility. Both his sister and Keyleth certainly enjoyed cuddling with him, and for all he knew, they could be screwing while he was at work and he’d have no clue.

He felt himself nearly gag. The more he thought about it, the more it got on his nerves, so he tried to clear his mind of the subject, especially since he had already gotten on pretty good terms with Percy that morning...relatively speaking.

The team did their best to pack hastily, though they ended up being about as efficient as any hungover, ragtag group of college-aged people could be. Which meant they didn’t get on the road until about ten o’clock. Nevertheless, with a van full of gas and Vex at the wheel, they were ready to hit the road with the vigor of a true adventuring troupe.

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“I am so glad my boss let me miss work,” Vex said, proudly sporting Vax’s sunglasses as she drove.

“Grog and I had to use up almost all our vacation days and sick days,” Vax muttered, staring at the distant forest buttressed up against what were likely the Cliff Keep Mountains, if he remembered his geography correctly.

“You never used them anyway Vax.” Vex glanced at Percy in the rearview mirror. “I once saw Vax get into our car, then get out real quick, throw up in a bush, and then drive off to work.”

Vax sighed. It wasn’t a story he was particularly fond of, but Vex seemed to enjoy sharing it with people for gods know what reason. It was likely her way of proving to the world that he was hard-working, but surely there were better ways to go about it than recounting one of his shittier mornings.

Percy raised a brow at Vax, peeking over the seat to get a good stern look at him. “If I were your manager I wouldn’t have allowed you to get my other workers sick.”

Vax did his best to not roll his eyes into his skull. Talk about being fucking entitled. As if Percy of all people understood how managers ran a business. There was seldom any sense of empathy or reason in their minds. Only profit. Vax had listened in to enough of his father’s phone calls to know that.

Vax simply shrugged, choosing to keep his response simple. “My manager never found out anyway.”

“Well at least you get sick days,” Pike said with a sigh. “I’m pretty bummed about missing out on all my internship hours. I’m going to really have to buckle down once I get back.”

“That reminds me,” Percy said, nudging Tiberius with his shoulder. “What are you gonna do about your classes?”

Tiberius glanced up from his reading material. “I can afford to miss a few lectures. I have straight A’s
in all my current subjects! Besides, I find the undergraduate classes to be... rather boring…”

Percy smirked. “Sounds like me in high school.”

“Do not get me started on high school!”

Vax cringed at the realization that this was going to start some sort of long conversation, but by then, it was too late to do anything about it. With that, Percy and Tiberius began exchanging long convoluted stories and theories on the mundane nature of higher education, and this time Vax couldn’t help but raise his eyes to the heavens. Listening to Tiberius talk about missing classes so frivolously irritated Vax slightly, but only because he spoke of something he didn’t have. Frankly, he didn’t know if he would have liked college or not. He imagined it depended on whether he was actually doing something fun or whether someone was forcing him to do it. He could potentially see himself attending school if he delved into something artistic or philosophical, but academics wasn’t something he liked having shoved down his throat. He was more of a self-taught kind of guy. Besides, he would have much rather invested his earnings in his sister’s education, since she’d likely not waste it.

Alas, it wasn’t exactly something he needed to entertain. He had a better chance of killing a dragon than ever getting enough money to send his sister to fucking college.

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The second half of the journey seemed to go much slower than the day before. Rolling hills studded with boulders defined the landscape for the majority of the journey, with the occasional little shanty town interrupting the otherwise vast expanses. Vax found his brain going in weird places again. He wondered what it was like to live in the middle of nowhere: not in a commune, not even in a town. Living in Bumfuck nowhere and having no concept of organized civilization except through satellite TV and maybe the internet, that is... if they even had the internet. The poor bastards. Now he was the one sounding like a snob.

He mused on the possibility that he could have been one of those people, had they remained with their mother, but in the end, they were just random ass thoughts as he leaned his head against the window while Vex drove. He glanced behind him to see that Percy was coincidentally also longingly staring out the window, though his attention seemed to be fixated on the distant snowy mountains. It was weird. In a way, it seemed as though he were staring much farther than that, as if he were searching for something that he was never gonna fucking find. Frankly, it made him all the more mysterious and handsome in Vax’s eyes, albeit in a strange, grungy sort of way. It kind of weirded Vax out how attractive he found Percy despite his casual yet consistent mistrust toward him. Though to be fair, Vax harbored casual consistent mistrust toward a lot of people in his life, so it wasn’t super unusual.

Overall, Percy was a good guy; there was no denying it, especially when he reminded himself of the fact that he had essentially saved his and his sister’s asses with that generous donation of his. To this day, Vax still felt like he owed the handsome fuck…which was yet another thing that got under his skin.

Vax turned his head to face forward and he let out a sigh, crossing his arms and closing his eyes.

“What is it brother?” Vex asked.

Vax half smirked and nestled deeper into his seat. “Nothing.”
EDIT: 11/27/2018: This chapter went through another HUGE edit, where I expanded on what happened to Byroden, but I will be sure to notify people about all the changes.

Next chapter is where this AU starts to really entangle with canon events. We are still in pre-stream content so don’t worry if you don’t recognize much. It’s all still rather vague and I’ve jumbled timelines slightly, but we are gradually leading up toward more solid plot points that will become relevant later on.

If you are curious to know where I’m gathering most of this information, I’m currently working through the events that are described in this video, which is the Story of Vox Machina pre-stream:

[YouTube link]

I’ve also made use of references made by the cast to pre-stream events. (Such as when Taliesin pointed out that Percy gave Vex all of his money when he was freed from prison). Up until now, I’ve barely followed the narrative, but starting next chapter, things will begin to line up a little more clearly.
Small World

Chapter Summary

Last time, on The Butterfly Effect: Vax has a heartfelt conversation with Percy before getting back on the road.

Chapter Notes

No Content Warnings this chapter

Part two for Vax’s point of view. Special and sincere thanks to one of my readers for giving me some much-needed feedback on last chapter and this one. I wasn’t really “feeling” like I had gotten Vax’s voice right, but with some help, I managed to make some edits that I feel do his character more justice.

So, without further ado, here is a song dedicated to these chapters. I believe it matches Vax’s state general mind quite swimmingly: “We don’t know” by Strumbellas.

YouTube link

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Had Vax suddenly died and gone to limbo, he probably wouldn't have figured it out, given his current state of existence. Long road trips had a tendency to have this effect on him. They weren’t necessarily hell. He’d been in prison long enough to know that there was worse. But it certainly wasn’t a fucking spa either. His feet were cold, his stomach felt funny, his back threatened to have a structural failure at any moment, and he had managed to run out of music on his phone, and his sister’s phone, and Keyleth’s phone, and all of Scanlan’s CDs. Now... how he had managed to pull that off exactly? He had no fucking clue. It didn’t even seem scientifically plausible considering they collectively had like… at least four days worth of music or some shit. Fuck if he knew.

The group didn’t stop driving until late into the afternoon when they all realized that their hunger couldn't be avoided, despite having received their complimentary breakfast muffin back at the motel. Of course, they stopped at another fucking fast food restaurant, which was sadly the only place they could get food that wasn’t a questionable diner with far too many motorcycles parked in its proximity.

By nightfall, everyone was pretty quiet in the car, for reasons mostly circumstantial. While Vax drove, Vex was blankly staring out the window into the unlit landscape; Keyleth and Percy were both asleep on each other, likely stoned beyond repair; Tiberius was busy reading with a little headlamp, looking particularly focused because his brow was more furrowed than usual; Pike and Grog were quietly flipping through a digital comic book on Pike's phone, and Scanlan was sitting in the very back corner of the car curled up with earphones over his head, subtly tapping his foot and silently mouthing the words to an unknown song.

Suddenly, the quiet was interrupted by Grog’s stomach grumbling, which prompted Pike to laugh.
“It dinner time yet?” he asked, his voice loud in the relative silence. "Feel like I could eat a fukin’ cow."

Percy and Keyleth both flinched awake and stretched in tandem, pressing their elbows into each other's faces.

“Maybe…” Keyleth muttered, resting her head back on Percy’s shoulder and staring at the dangling clothesline of herbs.

“Now that you mention it, I am feeling kind of hungry,” Pike said.

Vax continued looking forward as he drove, trying to pay close attention to the darkened road. The last thing he needed was to accidentally run into some fucking wild animal like Eskil had ominously predicted. “Might be a good time to stop.”

Vex groaned. “Sure...but if I have fast food one more time I think I’m going to puke.”

He furrowed his brow. “I don’t really know what else there is in terms of variety out here Stubby.”

“I refuse to believe people out here live solely on chicken nuggets and fries!”

“How fundamentalist of you…” Scanlan smirked.

Vax sighed in resignation, “Tibsy, check to see if there are any places we can eat that won’t fuck with our cholesterol too terribly.”

Tiberius slapped his book shut and unlocked his phone. “Certainly. I will direct us to an adequate location promptly!”

“And maybe not too expensive…” Vex added.

Vax sighed, staying focused on his driving. He’d let Vex figure things out from there since she was the picky one. Frankly, he wasn’t even that hungry, but he knew that both her and Grog could get pretty hangry.

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After nearly twenty minutes of Vex negotiating a suitable dining location, and another thirty minutes of Tiberius directing them to said dining location, Vox Machina made its way into a little town that wasn’t too far off the highway to Emon.

There was nothing extraordinary about this particular collection of shacks and ranches, given it was just as small and rickety as the last dozen towns they had passed. Nevertheless, its diner seemed to have just enough decent reviews to merit a visit from the gang and consequently, a boost to their local economy.

Finding parking was a miniature nightmare, as they soon discovered that the block where the diner was located was the same one that housed a little retro movie theatre that was somehow still running, judging from the number of people flocked around it. After driving around in circles for almost ten minutes, they finally managed to find a spot that was a little less than five minutes away from the diner, in the former parking lot of what appeared to be a half-abandoned strip mall.

As the team strolled up to the diner, they found it to be just as pleasantly average as they expected, though this particular location seemed to have some sort of gift shop adjacent to it, which made it all the more exciting, at least in the eyes of those most easily wooed by baubles.
As they approached the diner and gift shop, Keyleth, Tiberius and Vex all seemed to gravitate toward the store as opposed to the location that was intended to be their source of nourishment.

The shop looked like a prop straight out of the eighties movie “Labyrinth”, with hanging knickknacks, baubles, and colorful lanterns decorating the hovel’s somewhat deteriorating exterior. Resting by the entrance was one of those old-school fortune telling machines where an animatronic hag foretold your future for fifty cents.

“Trysta’s Trading Post,” Keyleth muttered, glancing up at the hand-painted store sign with wide eyes.

“Curious that it’s still open,” Tiberius said, humming to himself as he pecked through the window.

Drawn by everyone else’s curiosity, Percy approached the storefront and adjusted his glasses as he examined the objects through the display window, “Is it unusual that I can’t discern whether this is a thrift store or a gift shop?”

Vex leaned in, her eyes growing wide. “I really hope it’s a thrift shop. Things are always cheaper at thrift shops.”

“Well, I’m going to take a look!” Tiberius said, slicking his auburn hair back. “It looks like they sell books inside!” He rushed into the store, a little bell indicating his invasion.

“Wait for me!” Keyleth squeaked as she followed suit, disappearing into the dingy little shop.

Percy looked at Vex, and they both nodded at each other before heading inside as well.

Vax simply stared mouth agape as he watched half of his group vanish into the unknown. “You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me… I thought you guys were hungry?”

“Time to look at some shiny things,” Grog shouted as he strode into the store with just a hint of childlike enthusiasm.

Vax rested his face in his hands, muttering incomprehensible swear words under his breath. Leave it to his party to get distracted by shiny things like fucking magpies. Kleptomaniacs, every last one of them.

Scanlan laughed his ass off as he watched Vax despair before moseying over to the diner to read the menu. At least someone had a sense of time, though it was somewhat disconcerting that it was Scanlan.

Pike, who was the only other person who hadn’t fallen down the rabbit hole, wandered up to Vax and rubbed his arm. “It’s okay Vax. Let’s go get a table. That way we’ll be ready to order when they come back.”

“Knowing my sister and Tiberius, they’ll probably take a while…”

“It’s fine. Worst comes to worst, we can order for them.”

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The diner was darkly lit with maroon carpet flooring, which Vax always found sort of nasty given the fact that it was likely much harder to clean. The whole place kind of reminded him of a seedy casino, but at least the food smelled good.
After being seated at a booth that was probably too small for the lot of them, Vax, Pike, and Scanlan studied their menus.

“Should we order some drinks while we wait on them?” Scanlan asked as he eyed the local cocktails.

“Only if we figure out who’s driving,” Vax muttered. “I know it’s not me. I’ve already driven today.”

“Me too,” Pike said.

Scanlan sighed, getting his phone out. “Not all of us are floored by one drink Vax. But...I’ll text them anyway, since you’re gonna be a grump about it.”

Vax subtly flipped the bird at Scanlan before turning to Pike with a sweet smile. “Wanna get some beers then Pickle?”

“Sounds good. This all looks like beer food anyway.”

Indeed, the place seemed to specialize in fried and salty shit. Vax questioned just how much better this place was than your average Burger Duke, but if it made his sister happy he wasn’t gonna bitch about it. He only hoped it wouldn't cost them too much.

When the server showed up, Pike informed him that their party would be a while, but that they were ready to order drinks.

“Can I see your IDs?” the server asked.

Vax furrowed his brow. “Wow, haven't had someone ask me that in forever. You flatter me.”

“Diner’s policy,” the server said with a little boredom in his voice. “We get raided pretty frequently.”

He didn’t look too happy to be at work. In fact, he kind of reminded Vax of his sister when she got home from her shift, so he wasn’t gonna fuck around with him too much. He was just doing his job after all. Vax gladly showed his ID, though he couldn't help but linger his train of thought on the words of the server. Police raids usually meant that the place was not a stranger to illicit activity, which wasn’t too surprising, but shitty nonetheless.

“Aw crap,” Pike grumbled, patting herself down. “Left my wallet in the van.” She glanced up at the server with big blue eyes and a toothy grin. “You can tell I’m old enough to drink, right?”

The barkeep scanned her from head to toe with a blank expression on his face before muttering a very monotone “No.”

“The barkeep scanned her from head to toe with a blank expression on his face before muttering a very monotone “No.”

“See Pikey, didn’t I always say you looked like an unaging angel?” Scanlan said with a grin.

“Aha…” Pike didn’t even bother looking at Scanlan, and instead focused on the server, giving him a slightly muted smile. “I’ll just get water then-”

“I’ll get it, don’t worry about it,” Vax said as he stood up.

“Aw, you don’t have to. We parked so far.”

“ Barely.” He smirked. “Besides, I wanna see what the others are up to anyway.”

Vax shimmied his way out of the booth and threw his leather jacket back on.
Pike stared Vax down, wrinkling her nose at him. “You’re really leaving me here with Scanlan?”

Scanlan furrowed his brow at Pike, looking almost genuinely hurt.

“You’ll be fine,” Vax said with a wink. “Be back in five.”

With that, he nodded to the server and left the diner.

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As he walked past the freaky little gift shop, he casually peeked through the crowded window where he got a glimpse of Vex speaking rather animatedly with the apparent owner of the shop, a tall lanky woman with stringy blonde hair and a hell of a lot of makeup. Tiberius seemed to be holding what looked like a big ass book, so he figured Vex was most probably trying to get a deal for him.

He shrugged his jacket collar up to shield himself from the wind. Vex knew where to go when she was finished anyway, so he saw no purpose in screwing up her grove. It was one of the few things that brought her joy anyway, so he knew better than to get between her and her prey.

Transitioning into a light jog, he made his way down the various streets that lead to where they had parked Vox Machina. It honestly wasn’t as far as Pike acted, though he did find it kind of shitty that he couldn’t actually see the van from where they were eating. He had no shame in admitting that he was paranoid as fuck -- and although he figured no one in their right mind would believe the piece of junk contained anything of value -- he was wise enough to also know that there were plenty of people who weren’t in their right mind, especially in a town like that.

Feeling sort of winded, he finally made it to the van and was relieved to find that it hadn’t been fucked with. The last thing he needed was more bad news, aside from the fact that apparently no amount of heavy lifting at the BigMart would improve his fucking lung capacity. “Do more cardio,” Grog said. “Eat more red meat,” Grog said. “Get your shit together,” Grog said. As if he had the time or money to do any of that crap.

He reached for his keys and worked on unlocking the side where he remembered Pike was sitting, which was always a little fussy. Probably another thing he’d have Percy work on if he was up for it.

As he fidgeted with the lock that was being more of a bitch than usual, his eyes were drawn to a bright light that suddenly turned on in the distance next to one of the abandoned buildings.

“The fuck…?” Vax muttered, furrowing his brow as he stopped what he was doing.

A second light turned on, followed by a third nearby. Immediately after, he heard the sound of numerous motors humming to life as the lights began to draw closer toward him, speeding up.

“Shit…” Vax hissed as he immediately reached for his pocket knife in his jacket.

A trail of three other lights sped down the road before screeching into the parking lot, joining the others and circling around him in what was quite clearly a heard of half a dozen motorcycles.

Teeth clenched, Vax drew his knife and held it close, eyes darting as the motorcycles came to a roaring stop, surrounding him from all directions.

In front of him, a large man dismounted from his motorcycle, which had the painting of a chimera on its side. The leather-clad man swavely took off his helmet and set it on his bike, revealing a head of long gray hair and a thin face, dark tattoos covering most of his neck.
“Small world we live in…” the man said in a smoke worn voice, walking up to Vax with heavy footfalls and his hands in his pockets.

“Too small,” Vax snarled, staring him down with a deep scowl.

The man let out a hearty chuckle. “No need to be like that Vax’ildan... We’re all friends here.”

“Friends don’t get other friends arrested Modeth.”

The man hummed, taking a relaxed stance in front of Vax, just out of arm's reach. He was very casually, albeit carefully, watching Vax’s knife. “We all did our time after that little incident. Not our fault you happened to do a little more.” His eyes darted to meet with Vax’s, equally dark and challenging. “But what’s done is done. You seem to be doing just fine to me. You’ve got a job, some new friends...”

“How long have you been following us?” Vax asked, trying to keep his cool as he watched the others calmly standing by their motorcycles.

“Not too long,” hummed Modeth. “But we’ve been keeping an eye on you lot ever since we caught wind of your little spark of fortune.”

Vax narrowed his eyes at him. “Not sure I follow.”

Modeth gave him a toothy, crooked yellow smile, glancing at the others momentarily before turning back toward Vax. “Rumor has it you’re headed to Emon. What business does a pup like you have in a city like that?”

“You and I both know you’ve got your answer,” Vax straightened his back a little. The tension that had developed in his muscles was painful. “Not quite sure why our little vacation is any of the Clasp’s fucking business.”

Modeth’s expression grew dark. “Anything regarding the Cloudtop is our fucking business.”

“It’s an innocent performance,” Vax said. “Nothing more than that.”

“Oh, but it’s so much more than that.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Vax scoffed. “A bunch of rich assholes who like to listen to poor people play.”

“You know just as well as I do that wherever there are rich assholes, there is business to be had.”

“Yeah. For you... Not for me.”

Modeth removed his hands from his pockets and rested one hand on his hip, revealing a switchblade he flaunted comfortably in the other. “But that’s why we went to all this trouble to say hi, Vax’ildan.”

Vax didn’t react to the reveal of the weapon. It was unsurprising to him; standard really. “How does it not get through your little heads that I don’t want anything to do with your bullshit anymore?”

Modeth clicked his tongue. “Real shame. Would be quite convenient having a man on the inside. Maybe get the ear of a few patrons there...”

“You’re fooling yourself if you think anyone there would give you the time of day.”

Modeth hummed entertained. “Naive as usual.”
Vax wasn’t being naïve. Playing dumb, sure, but not naïve. He was the first to know that rich assholes were the most easily corrupted. What Vax was actually trying to do was give Modeth the hint that it was time to hit the fucking road; that he had no interest in the bullshit he was pulling out of his asshole. Maybe if Vax acted like an idiot long enough he’d realize he was wasting his fucking time, and that it was best he go his way merry way so he could leave Vax to his already shitty existence. Besides, they’d all been to the same hellhole prison, and they were all pretty keen on not going back. Modeth would be an idiot to dare harm him. But then again, he couldn’t exactly guarantee that he wasn’t one.

“Just keep moving Modeth. You and I both don’t need any more trouble. We can’t afford it.”

“Maybe you can’t…” He said with a grin.

Vax’s teeth were clenched so tight he could feel a headache coming on. There were too many of them. They’d get what they wanted if he didn’t think of a way to shake them fast. He knew it would be fucking suicide to even attempt reaching for his phone. Each and every one of the men were trained on him like police dogs.

“Look,” Modeth spoke up again. “I know I’m coming at you a bit strong, but I guarantee I can make it worth your while. Think of it as... an apology for getting you locked up.”

Vax instinctively took a step back, now inches away from Vox Machina. His eyes darted toward each and every one of the Clasp members, their faces shrouded by helmets. His heavy breaths were visible in the frigid nighttime air. “I’ve served my time. I’m done with that lifestyle.”

Modeth furrowed his brow and gave Vax what was some poor fucking attempt at a fatherly smile. “We’re talking triple digits here Vax’ildan. Nothing too crazy...but nothing to laugh about either. Just a one-time thing.” He took a heavy step forward. “Very, very easy...”

Vax’s eyes met with Modeth’s, and his lip twitched.

For a brief moment, Vax felt something in his core. Something warm. Something electric. Like a subtle rush of adrenaline. Part of him felt... curious as to what Modeth had to offer. Part of him felt... drawn, tempted, fucking comforted by the prospect of an easy buck. Just a few weeks ago, he was but a phone call away from getting back in touch with the bastards; just a couple of clicks from quick, easy money. Enough money to feel comfortable, unaafraid; something to loosen the noose.

But he was more desperate then; under the influence of adrenaline and impulse. And now, more than ever, he was feeling that impulse once more. That electric high that made him wanna fuck shit up; show the world who was boss; prove to those rich assholes that they were his bitch.

No.

He couldn't cave. He couldn’t let them fuck with him. Because he knew that if he did, the only bitch around here would be him. This wouldn’t be a one time gig; he knew better than that. Mother had always taught him that if something was too good to be true than it probably was, and even then, it still took him two fucking years of prison to learn his lesson. This was no different. They’d draw him back into a hellhole he’d fought so hard to crawl out of.

Vax lifted his chin to Modeth and spit in his direction. “Money won’t seduce me this time asshole.”

Modeth scowled at Vax, though his darkened expression quickly morphed to a smirk as he sighed to the sky. “That’s a real shame.” He chuckled to himself for a few moments before glancing back at Vax, his focus sharpening. “But you know what else would be a real fucking shame?”
Vax could feel his heart in his throat. His eyes darted around but he saw nothing but blurred darkness at this point. The adrenaline was clouding his mind.

Modeth flipped his knife once in his hands. “Be a fucking shame if something were to happen to this van of yours. My guys tell me your friend’s show is tomorrow...I wonder how long it takes this town to fix a piece of junk like this.”

“Wait,” Vax snapped, his eyes closing shut at the tone of his own voice.

He didn’t even know what he wanted to say anymore. What he really wanted to do was stab him in the fucking eye, but he valued his life far more than that -- contrary to popular belief. As he took a few deep breaths, he allowed his racing mind to settle on the uncomfortable truth of the situation. He needed to accept the deal.

Like, what else could he do? Cry out for help? Fucking book it? Fight half a dozen Clasp members who he knew were armed to the teeth? There was nothing he could do.

His eyes focused on Modeth. There was no air of weakness to him; no willingness to back down without some form of victory. The pain of losing stung his core like a wound, but he had to take one for the team. There was no room for selfishness anymore.

He lowered his head and slouched his shoulders in resignation as he allowed his knife to slip from his fingers onto the frozen asphalt.

Modeth raised a brow at Vax and his smirk turned into a toothy yellowed grin. “I’m listening...”

Vex let out a shaking sigh, but just as he opened his mouth to speak, a distant female voice drew his attention, and he whipped his head toward the shouting, as did the others.

“Vax!” the strong voice roared once more, now much louder and desperate.

It was Pike, standing on the opposite side of the parking lot, her black hair blowing wildly in the frigid wind.

Vax’s eyes widened as he screamed back at her. “Pike, stay away!”

But she did not waver. There was an essence of pure determination in her posture that radiated from a mile away. Taking slow, deliberate steps forward, she raised her hand in her air with her phone clearly visible, like a glowing beacon in the deep darkness.

“I've got my thumb ready to dial for the cops,” she shouted. “Just one tap and they'll be on fucking speaker!”

The motorcyclists quickly turned to Modeth, whose eyes were now narrowly fixed on Pike, as if he were studying her; trying to read whether she was bluffing.

She continued to take a few more steps forward, her arm still raised high. It was now clear to Vax that her thumb was definitely lingering over the screen. She wasn’t bullshitting.

“Just keep moving,” she said firmly. “We don’t want any trouble.”

One of the motorcyclists turned toward Modeth and drew his blade. “Should we-”

“No...” Modeth muttered. “Not something we need to deal with right now.” He traded a poisonous stare with Vax. “Too much on the line.”
“Step away from him. Now!” She snarled.

“Come on men. We’re leaving!” Modeth shouted, clearly making sure Pike heard him.

A few muttered complaints and groans were exchanged as the gang mounted back on their bikes.

Modeth jumped onto his own motorcycle as well and glanced at Vax one last time before putting on his helmet. “We’ve got our eyes on you. And your sister... “ He glared at Pike. “And her.”

Vax simply stared him down with a look that could kill, eyes as black as coals.

With that, Modeth put on his helmet and revved the engine of his motorcycle, which prompted everyone else to do the same. In a matter of seconds, the gang stormed off, heading down the road and ultimately vanishing around the block in a flurry of red tail lights.

Silence overtook the parking lot.

For a brief moment, Vax and Pike simply stared at each other shell-shocked. However, with the premise seemingly clear, Pike sprinted toward Vax, still holding her phone, her breathing fast and heavy.

“Holy shit Vax.”

As she ran over, she practically tackled him as she wrapped her arms around his torso, and he embraced her in the tightest hug he could muster. He could feel her shaking, or perhaps he was the one shaking. He couldn't even tell anymore but he didn’t give a shit.

“That was fucking stupid,” she muttered into his jacket.

“So fucking stupid,” he agreed, giving her one last big squeeze.

She released herself from his grasp and studied him from head to toe before caressing his face. “You’re okay? You’re alright? They didn’t hurt you?”

“I’m fine...”

“Should I call the police?” She asked, eyes still wide and scanning the distance.

“Don’t,” Vax said quickly, resting a hand on her shoulder. “It’s...it’s not worth it. We don’t have time to deal with the cops right now...”

“What if-”

“Pike, it’s alright. Let’s just...” He sighed. “Where is Scanlan?”

“He’s still at the diner. I told him I was going to check up on the others but I came looking for you instead. You weren’t answering your phone and I wanted to tell you that I found my I.D....” She smiled bashfully and pulled it out of her pocket. “Didn’t want you hunting for it like a crazy person.”

Vax couldn't help but crack the smallest of smiles. “You shouldn't have come here alone. That was fucking stupid...”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Was it though?”

Vax’s expression softened. There was no denying it. Pike had saved his ass like his own personal guardian angel. “You’ve seen first hand what wandering alone does.”
Pike half smirked. “Guess we both learned our lesson then.”

The sound of a lone car driving through the street caught their attention, and for a few breathless moments, Vax grasped Pike’s arm as he followed the sound, which eventually trailed off into the distance. They both exhaled deep shaky sighs as they exchanged a few solemn looks with each other.

“We’re driving back and picking up the others,” Vax said blankly. “Fuck this town. Vex is just gonna have to stick with chicken nuggets.”

“Yeah…I didn’t like that diner anyway.” She forced a smile. “Carpet in a restaurant is so weird…”

The two wasted no more time and took shelter in Vox Machina, which was warm and inviting in comparison to the cold weather outside.

As they drove back toward the diner, against Vax’s wishes, Pike called Vex to inform her of what had occurred. He desperately wanted to keep it a secret, but realistically speaking, it was irresponsible of him to do so. Meeting Vax in the middle, Pike made sure to keep things vague, and took some artistic liberties in diffusing the severity of the situation with words like “little scuffle” and “rude acquaintances”. Pike was a fucking trooper for doing that.

Nevertheless, he certainly wasn’t looking forward to the inevitable conversation on the matter, especially after hearing his sister shout a very loud “what?! ” on the other side of the line.

Needless to say, he sensed a lot of ass chewing in his immediate future.

Chapter End Notes

No Content Warnings this chapter

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Intimidation checks up the wazoo...

This chapter is a good representation of how I am going to make “parallels” to canon events in the future, so just keep this in mind moving forward. (Vax and Pike escaped the Clasp in the canon, as they did here.) If it’s not your cup of tea I won’t hold it against you.

Hope you enjoyed these chapters from Vax’s point of view. <3 Thank you for sticking with me this far. Your kind comments make my day.
Chapter Summary

Last time, on The Butterfly Effect: When Vox Machina dives into a small town to eat, half of the team decides to visit a thrift store beforehand. Fed up, Vax decides to go to the diner with Pike and Scanlan while they wait for the others. Pike realizes she forgot her ID in the van and Vax goes to get it, but has a confrontation with the Clasp, who want to do business with him. Vax refuses and the Clasp threatens to vandalize the van, but Pike shows up just in time to save the day.

Chapter Notes

No Content Warnings this chapter.

We’re back to Vex’s point of view, so of course, brace yourselves...More persuasion checks are coming.

The delicate sound of a bell greeted the party as they entered Trysta’s Trading Post. Vex had never seen anything quite like it. The smell of cedar, old books, and incense flooded her senses, and for a moment, she lingered at the threshold to take in the wonders that were inside. Soft, colorful lighting derived from hooded lanterns, candles, and shaded lamps lit piles upon piles of goods stacked on top of antiques that nearly reached the ceiling, which in itself was covered with hanging trinkets, wind chimes, and other foreign-looking decorations. Most of the furniture seemed rather old, though in relatively good shape, and nearly every piece had what looked like some form of a drink coaster rested on it, for reasons unknown but likely eccentric.

“Wow…” Vex muttered, just as she was bumped into by a very eager Grog, who briefly apologized before making his way toward what looked like a collection of weapon replicas, just adjacent to a rather ragged collection of exotic taxidermied animals.

On the far end of the shop seemed to be a separate wing dedicated entirely to books, where Tiberius had already made himself at home, actively perusing through the selection like a child in a candy shop. Only, perhaps that wasn’t the best analogy. In all honesty, he seemed to be looking for something rather specific, like a very picky child in a candy shop.

Keyleth, on the other hand, seemed to have her eyes on a wall that had the vastest selection of incense Vex had ever seen in her life. Then again, she wasn’t exactly an expert on the stuff so whether it was a genuinely impressive amount was debatable.

With his hands in his pockets, Percy wandered over to a section that seemed to have old electronics on display. He looked visibly intrigued, particularly when he set eyes on what looked like an old record player.

As Vex made her way toward him, a woman’s voice chimed in from the far corner of a shop.
“Can I help you...?”

Vex whipped her head around, as did the others, and for the first time, they noticed a little kitchen area in the very corner of the shop. No one had really noticed the woman sitting in a chair that was quite clearly facing them. A small shiver ran down Vex’s spine. She hated the idea that she’d been staring at all of them so quietly.

Giving the entire group a warm smile, the woman rose up, revealing herself to be rather tall. Long wisps of ashy blonde hair crawled down her back and shoulders, decorated in beads and braids. Her makeup was heavy but elegant, with green eye shadow, inky eyeliner, and gray lipstick. Her clothes were woolen and baggy, containing mostly earth tones but decorated in trailing, gaudy, vintage jewelry. Her bony fingers, which sported green stiletto nails, were covered in fancy rings and wrapped around a tiny teacup which contained something steaming, through the smells in the rest of the store prevented Vex from figuring out what it was.

Vex smiled at the woman, trying to come off as friendly as she could. “We were just passing through,” she said. “We saw your shop and were very intrigued.”

The woman slowly approached them, tilting her head slightly, her smile lingering. “I am glad to see my decor worked on a few lucky travelers.”

“You don’t get much business?”

“It depends on the season really…”

Vex couldn't quite place how old the woman was. She didn’t look awfully old, but something in her voice and the worn nature of her hands seemed to reveal a lot more age than she presented in her visage.

Percy glanced at what looked like a phonograph. “Are these all antiques?”

The woman shrugged. “Some are old and some are new... Some even hand made. A lot of this is constructed or restored by myself and my sister Forthesia.”

“Is she here?” Keyleth asked.

“Not this season. She is off selling our goods in our mobile extension.” She pointed at a black and white picture of what looked like two nearly identical women standing next to a vending truck.

Keyleth hummed as she examined the picture. “So I take it you are Trysta.”

“That would be me, yes…”

Meanwhile, Tiberius was still browsing the books, muttering to himself in a language that did not sound like Common.

Trysta slowly approached him, still holding her beverage. There was a slight slink to her walk, and a curve to her back that was a possible indication of too much slouching. Even so, her height nearly surpassed Tiberius, which was remarkable, especially for a woman.

“I see you have taken interest in the books,” she said, peeking her head over his shoulder.

Tiberius flinched and looked at her with a nervous smile, bowing his head and dusting off his dress shirt. “Oh! Sorry...D-didn’t see you there.” He stumbled over his words a few times before straightening this back and stretching a smile on his lips. “Greetings! I am Tiberius Stormwind. A
pleasure to make your acquaintance.” He reached his hand out for a handshake. “You are correct in your observation.”

Trysta accepted his hand, wrapping her pale fingers around it and pressing her nails into his skin. “Stormwind...rings a bell.”

Tiberius chuckled, looking both proud and perhaps a little bashful. “My family owns a law firm back in Draconia. Rather expansive.”

Trysta did not break eye contact with him as she took a sip from her cup. “Fascinating…” she said, though whether her remark was genuine or not was questionable.

Tiberius blinked at her a few times and stood staring for an awkward couple of seconds before lifting his chin slightly and clearing his throat. “I am actually looking for something rather specific, but...you likely do not have it. Forgive our intrusion.”

“What is it you are looking for?” she asked, resting her teacup on a nearby chest of drawers that just happened to have a coaster on it.

“Oh, well, um...It’s...rather specific.” He cleared his throat once again. “It’s called ‘The Book of Mending’, an old piece of literature that recounts instances where the law was used to rectify mistakes in an ancient political system. I’ve been looking for it ever since I learned of its existence, but I have... yet to find an actual copy. It would be prime material for my personal thesis! But alas, very few of my professors even believe it to be useful. It’s rather elusive...or perhaps just not very sought after. Of that, I cannot be sure. You would think more people would find an interest in-”

As Tiberius babbled on, Trysta slowly but surely crept around his waving hands and knelt down, moving a few piles of books out of the way before lifting up a rather heavy tome.

She stood up, dusting it off with a delicate rag before placing it Tiberius's hands, which caused him to go mute.

“This is one of the earliest editions, before many of the amendments were made to censor the work. I’m sure you’ll find it... quite intriguing…”

Tiberius looked absolutely awestruck. His eyes scanned the book’s gold leaf title over and over again, and as he did, the rest of the party gravitated around him to get a better look at what had struck him so deeply.

“That looks old,” Keyleth said.

“And you wanna know how you can tell it’s old?” Grog asked, looking smug.

Keyleth raised a brow at him. “Enlightening me.”

“The shiny title.”

Tiberius could barely formulate full sentences. “I...this...it...Is this intact?” He asked as he flipped through the pages with the delicate touch of a scholar.

“It is.” Trysta picked her teacup back up and took a sip. “A rather rare specimen indeed, given it’s a first edition.”

His large dark eyes were as wide as Trinket’s when he saw bacon. “I...must have this.”
Vex bit the inside of her cheek. She had a bad feeling about this, and that feeling usually bubbled to the surface when she sensed something was going to be expensive.

“Now mind you,” Trysta said with a grin. “I wouldn't say this is awfully costly, given the demand for it is relatively low when compared to other antique works in the field, so...I feel comfortable parting with it for a mere…” she drummed her long fingernails on her teacup. “Two Hundred and eighty gold-prints?”

Vex’s jaw dropped, though a muted chuckle from Percy made her shut her mouth promptly and give him the evil eye, which in turn silenced him real good.

“That um…” Tiberius cleared his throat. “Well, I suppose some of my textbooks...come close to that...sort of.”

“Tiberius!” Vex squeaked, before covering her mouth.

Trysta turned to look at Vex with a quirked, drawn-on brow and an all too friendly grin, “Something the matter dear?”

Vex looked at the group nervously, and then looked back at Trysta with equal apprehension. She could already tell she had probably overstepped, but Tiberius wanted that book badly, and she knew better than anyone else that he couldn't afford what the woman was asking.

Feeling like she had no other choice, Vex forced the sweetest smile she could muster. “Surely, you can offer us a better deal than that?”

The look of disdain Vex received was a red flag indicating that the battle was already lost. Trysta raised her brows at her and lifted her nose, staring Vex down from her towering vantage point. “I can assure you, It's a very reasonable price. Again, I have listed the reasons why...”

For but a moment, Vex felt like calling it quits and getting the fuck out of there. But the more she looked at Tiberius, the more guilt filled her gut. She supposed she could at least give it a shot; for his sake. It wasn’t like Tiberius could afford it anyway, so there really wasn’t much to lose at this point. “But you said yourself that there is a low demand. What are the odds of someone coming around looking for another one of those?”

The woman chuckled lowly. “Rather improbable. But this doesn’t concern me. Worst comes to worst, it will remain in my personal collection...”

Tiberius glanced down at the book and sighed longingly before resting it on a nearby counter, which made Vex grow ever more fierce.

“Look at him,” she whined, pointing at Tiberius. “You have made him possibly the happiest man on earth right now. Are you really going to keep your dusty old book at the expense of his happiness?”

Trysta furrowed her sharp brows and gave Vex a look that she, for once, could not read. She couldn't tell if she was angry or upset or...

“You’re boldness intrigues me, young one.” She took a step closer, her tall form looming over her. “Tell me, what alternative offer do you propose...?”

Vex swallowed hard. She knew nothing about old books, much less of their value. In fact, she’d never even purchased books for college. Her mind desperately tried to scan her memory logs for anything that would vaguely give her an idea of what price to ask, but frankly, the last time she bought a book it cost her 2.99 on Amazon. Moreover, there was something about this woman that
made her a little bit uncomfortable, though she could not figure out what. One thing was for certain. She smelled of beef jerky.

“I…” She glanced at her friends, who were all looking at her intently. “I’m...not at liberty to say. It depends entirely on what Tiberius is willing to pay.”

She chickened out. Not only that but she chickened out and she put responsibility back on the guy she was trying to save. Thank the gods Vax wasn’t there to witness the tragedy.

Trysta rested her empty cup on the coaster once more, turned to face Tiberius, and rubbed her chin with a deep hum. “You do not strike as the type who is short on money...what with your family lineage and…” She glanced at his wristwatch and earrings. “Accessories.”

“Well erm…” He cleared his throat, scratching the back of his ear. “I am not actually...in touch with my family at the moment. That is sort of why I need the book. So I can do my research and write my entry thesis and send it into a Master’s program so I may graduate with a degree which will allow me to regain respect amongst those in my family and the firm.” He took a deep breath, having spilled out far too many words for a single pair of lungs.

Vex rested her face in her hands but heard Trysta chuckle, though it was almost akin to a cackle.

“Sweet child,” she said, taking his hands into hers and rubbing them gently. “How about we make a deal?”

Tiberius looked down at her hands, then at his friends, then at her. “A deal?”

Vex bit her lower lip. Her stomach was doing really poorly executed acrobatics, and probably out of some deep-seated instinct, she crept closer to Grog, whose towering form comforted her in this moment of high tension.

“Yes. A deal…” Trysta smiled. “A simple trade, one good for another.” She glanced down at Tiberius’ hands and sensually rubbed a gold ring he had on his index finger. “How about, for a direct trade, that book for this lovely ring of yours?”

Vex nearly gasped, and Tiberius furrowed his brow, pulling his hands away and examining the ring. It was a gold band with five very small dragon heads, each holding a different colored stone in its mouth, something that Vex had admired many a drunk evening.

“But this…” he said, clearing his throat. “This is my lucky ring. A family heirloom.”

“Not so lucky if you have no family to show for it.” Trysta tilted her head, side glancing at him with a pair of yellowish green eyes. “Perhaps it will bring you luck in other ways…”

Tiberius furrowed his brow, glancing at the book, then back at the ring, then at the book, and back at the ring.

Trysta smiled once more. “Your lucky ring for that tome. What say you?”

Vex couldn’t help but feel like they were being ripped off again, but she couldn’t interject at this point. She needed to let Tiberius handle this on his own, because in the end, he was the one who wanted that book. Still, it was driving her a little bonkers, and in an attempt to defuse some of the tension in her muscles, she absentmindedly started lightly punching Grog in the arm as she watched the drama unfold. He, of course, didn’t react to her kitten slaps.

With a heavy sigh, Tiberius looked at the ring one last time before removing it from his finger. “You
A collective gasp resonated in the room. Vex turned to look at Percy who’s eyes were just as wide as everyone else’s. Keyleth looked almost excited at the prospect of the deal, though Vex wasn’t quite sure whether she actually understood the value of things or not. Grog couldn’t care less and was honestly more interested in a taxidermy crow that was hanging off the ceiling and spinning slowly.

Trysta reached her hand out and practically wrapped her fingers around Tiberius’ hand as she clawed the ring from his grasp, giving it a quick lookover before chuckling and pocketing it in an unknown compartment in her clothing. “A deal it is. Now...would you like that book wrapped or in a bag?”

Tiberius half smiled at her, adjusting his glasses and nodding once. “Um, actually wrapped would be lovely, thank you. We have quite the journey ahead of us and I’d hate for it to get ruined.”

Trysta gave him what could have been interpreted as a motherly smile, if it wasn’t for her dreadfully unmotherly appearance. “I’ll get you some bubble wrap deary…” With that, she rested a hand on his shoulder as she lead him to the cash registry.

Vex felt the energy sucked out of her. She couldn't believe what she had just witnessed, and a deep sense of confusion haunted her very core because she honestly could not tell whether that constituted as a win or fail on their part. Nevertheless, Tiberius seemed happy enough, and as he waited patiently for his book to be wrapped, she watched Keyleth approach the front desk with a handful of incense, a baggy green knitted sweater, a couple of jars of god knows what, and a big smile on her face.

In the end, it couldn't be all that bad.

Judging by the number of goods Keyleth wanted to purchase, Vex figured she had some time. While she waited, she meandered over to a small section that sold clothing and casually looked through the shirts, which would have probably appealed to a ninety year-old woman trying to join the goth scene. In a weird sort of way, she almost liked some of the stuff.

“That might look good on you.”

Vex flinched and whipped her head around, almost smacking Percy in the face with her braid. “Shit... Don’t do that. Already drives me crazy when Vax does.”

“Sorry?” Percy chuckled at the close call. “I’ll be sure to wear my bell collar next time.”

Vex huffed, rolling her eyes. “Whatever…” She glanced back at the clothes. “So what were you referring to again darling?”

“This one,” he said, reaching over her shoulder for a black lace cardigan.

“Yeah,” Vex snorted. “If I were going to a goth club.”

“Nothing wrong with goth clubs.”

“Never said there was anything wrong with them.” Of course Percy would be the type who’d frequent those joints. He was two fangs away from being a vampire. And to be fair, she hadn’t seen him smile all that much... It would certainly explain quite a bit: the pale complexion, the lack of appetite, the bizarre sleep schedule, the instances of manic hyperactivity, the unexpected level of knowledge, the aristocratic yet brooding demeanor... It was yet another crazy theory she could slap onto the list of things Percy could possibly be.
“Either way,” she said with a smirk. “I sadly don’t have any lucky jewelry to trade anyway.”

Percy hummed. “I’m sure you could use your wits to get the price you want.”

“After that fiasco? Please…” She scoffed.

“Might be a chance to redeem yourself…” He wiggled his brows at her.

Vex smiled at him, but just as she was about to make some sort of clever comeback, she felt her phone vibrate. She drew her phone and groaned.

“It’s Pike. Bet they’re wondering why we’re taking so long.” She lifted a finger at him. “One second…”

Percy nodded, giving her some space as she pressed the phone to her ear.

“Hello?” she singsonged, an innocent smile plastered on her face. “Vex’ahlia speaking.”

Meanwhile, Percy casually started browsing through the clothing, though it was pretty clear he wasn’t actually paying much attention to what he was looking at. In fact, he was more likely listening in on her phone call, knowing him.

Vex didn’t really care. She kept her smile vibrant as she spoke, trying to keep her tone as cheerful as possible since she really didn’t need any more scolding from Pike and the others. Yet as she began to digest what was being told to her on the other side of the line, her grin morphed to a straight face, then to a frown, then to an expression of utter shock. Her eyes went wide, she grabbed her hair, and shouted out to the world.

“What?!”

***

Vex paced back and forth as she waited for Vax and Pike to return. Unpleasant theories ran through her mind like a runaway train. Her brother seriously could not walk two fucking steps without running into trouble. How could he have been so careless? Why were they so stupid as to trust a little town like this? And what the hell did these “acquaintances” want with him? Vax wasn’t the type who made enemies anymore, so the likelihood that they were old enemies was...uncomfortably high. The sheer thought made her shiver from head to toe.

“Don’t worry ’bout it Vex,” Grog said, standing in front of her and putting a halt to her incessant pacing. “Vax ain’t no pussy. And with Pike on ‘is side ain’t nobody messing with ‘im.”

She wanted to believe him. But knowing her brother, she couldn't help but worry that perhaps there was more to this little “scuffle” that Pike was trying to imply. She was pretty sure these weren’t just your average acquaintances.

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While Vex paced around practically ripping her hair out, Percy, Tiberius, and Keyleth spent their idle time gathered around the fortune telling machine like three curious children.

Keyleth clapped her hands excitedly as she watched the machine deliver her card. She quickly grabbed it and read it out loud.

“Your carelessness harms those around you. Pay more attention, lest you lose them.” She furrowed
her brow, her glee immediately morphing to confusion. “What?” Kayleth squeaked, appalled by the little card she had received. “What the hell?”

Laughing loudly, and almost a little cruelly, Percy pat Keyleth on the back as he inserted a coin into the machine. “Sounds like you need to pay more attention to your surroundings dear.”

Keyleth simply crossed her arms and pouted as she watched the animatronic hag lift her head once more, moving her hands around the dusty crystal ball as it flickered on. Her toothless jaw hinged open, and from the speakers located at the top of the box, a crackling recording of an old woman colored the air once again.

“Take a moment to patiently wait while Madame Mercer seals your fate…”

The machine hummed and clanked as the workings inside delivered another card. Percy smugly picked up the flimsy piece of paper, adjusting his glasses before reading it out loud. “Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.” His expression went from smirking to blank as he finished reading. “Know how to distinguish them…” He stared up at the hag and glared at her with a long exasperated sigh.

“I don’t think I like this machine,” Keyleth muttered.

For a moment, all three of them stared at the hag and nodded solemnly.

However, rather abruptly, Tiberius slapped his book in Keyleth’s hands and started to fish around in his pockets. “Oh poppycock! Let me try.”

Percy and Keyleth groaned as Tiberius fed another fifty cents to the machine. Once more, the hag repeated her routine, circling her hands around the crystal ball and delivering her little rhyme as the machine produced a new card.

Tiberius greedily took his card and tried to read it privately to himself; however, Percy and Keyleth peeked around his shoulders and read it with him, unable to hold back their curiosity.

“Misfortune corrupts you. Keep your eye on the horizon.”

“That’s creepy as fuck…” Keyleth said.

Percy hummed. “Ominous, to say the least.”

“You know what? I believe we are done here,” Tiberius said, grabbing the book from Keyleth and marching away from the hag with an offended look on his face.

***

It didn’t take much longer for Vax and Pike to show up. Vex of course, was already at the curb, ready to tap on the driver’s window until Vax rolled it down.

“What the fuck Vax?” she said, her voice pitching a little higher than she would have liked.

“Can we not talk about this right now?” Vax said, sounding rather monotone. “I just want everyone get in the van so we can get the fuck out of here, please.”

“But we didn’t eat yet,” Keyleth said, waving at him.

“We’ll eat at a drive-through. Let’s go. C’mon.”
Vex narrowed her eyes at Vax, angrily slapping the side of the van before sliding the door open. As much as she wanted to discuss the matter right then and there, his words sounded pretty final. With a few groans and sighs, everyone piled back into the van, and Vax stormed off, barely giving them time to get their seat belts on.

As they made their way through the town, Vax spoke up. “I just want to get to Emon as soon as possible. The sooner we can go to bed the sooner we can go talk to the people hosting Scanlan’s thing.”

Suddenly, Pike’s eyes shot wide open. She glanced through the rearview mirror, then behind her, and a look of exasperation stained her face. “Oh my god, we forgot Scanlan...”

***

After rectifying their little mistake and picking up a somewhat inebriated Scanlan Shorthalt, Grog volunteered to take the wheel, while Vex and Vax and Pike took the seats in the far back. After having a less than healthy meal of fries, chicken nuggets, and enough dressing to fill a jacuzzi, almost everyone in the car fell into a deep food coma, and those who didn’t succumb to the evils of overeating eventually dozed off by the blessing of one of Keyleth’s joints; she could tell a lot of them needed it, what with the unfortunate turn of events and the even more unfortunate set of fortune cards they had received from Madame Mercer.

Time seemed to drift by far slower in the darker hours of the night. After what felt like years, Vex’s eyes slowly drifted open and she glanced down at her phone. It was past midnight, but from the looks of it, they were nowhere near any form of civilization. She scanned her surroundings. Nearly everyone was still asleep, save for Grog who was at the wheel and Scanlan who was quietly listening to some music through his headphones.

She turned to look at Vax, who almost on cue, recrossed his arms and shifted his position to lean his head against the window, his eyes still closed.

Biting the inside of her cheek, she crept up closer to him, whispering softly so she didn’t disturb anyone else. “Do you want to talk about it?”

After a long moment of silence, there was no response or movement from Vax. She let out a frustrated sigh and shook him.

“No,” he snapped, though keeping his voice at a whisper.

Vex huffed. “Please...I just want to know who they were.”

He furrowed his brow and turned his head away from her, eyes still shut. “I don’t feel like talking about it right now.”

“Where they Clasp?” Vex insisted.

There was another long pause until Vex intervened by shaking him again.

He slapped her hand away and groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose. “If I give you an answer will you fucking leave me alone?”

Vex’s expression soured, but she figured it was a deal she would have to content herself with, at least for time being. “Yes...” she whispered.

For a moment, Vex thought Vax was going to go quiet on her again. But just as she contemplated
shaking him once more, Vax let out a very exasperated sigh, and finally answered her question.

He spoke so softly that she only understood him because she was looking at his lips, but she could tell he had muttered a very meek “yes.”

It wasn’t the answer she was hoping to hear, but at least it confirmed her assumptions. She wasn’t exactly sure what to do next. She had far too many questions still left unanswered, yet she also knew she wasn’t going to get any more information out of Vax that night. With little else to do, she pulled up the map to Emon on her phone and found that they still had about two hours to their destination, that being the hotel she’d picked, though she honestly doubted there would be any more rooms available at that hour.

She glanced at her brother one last time and exhaled a quiet sigh before settling into her own resting position. One day she’d learn how to deal with him.

Chapter End Notes

I’m gonna come clean and say that Hags are by far my favourite creatures in D&D. They are my spirit, my essence, my very soul. Trysta is pretty much what I aspire to be when I grow old. Perhaps this chapter was not needed, but given the fact that I wanted to give all of Vox Machina the attention they deserve, I couldn't pass up such an important moment in Tiberius’ story.

Besides, I have a feeling it will become important later on, so I have to cover my bases…
Chaos and Sharp Edges

Chapter Summary

Last time, on The Butterfly Effect: While Vax, Pike and Scanlan head to the diner, Vex, Percy, Tiberius, Keyleth and Grog all enter Trysta’s Trading Post. Tiberius finds a book he’s been searching for years and reluctantly decides to trade a lucky family heirloom for it. While browsing for goods, Vex gets a phone call from Pike and realizes what has happened to Vax. Fed up by the bad luck, they head back on the road once more. Vex has a small argument with Vax because he doesn’t want to tell her what happened.

Chapter Notes

No Content Warnings this chapter.

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Here is a quick song that was some inspiration for this chapter: “Airplane” by B.o.B. ft Haley Williams.

[YouTube link](#)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Vex’s eyes shot open when she felt someone shake her.

“Vex. Wake up.”

She whipped her head toward the voice and saw Vax staring at her with an apologetic smirk. How he had the figurative balls to wake her up after he’d been such an ass earlier, she did not know, but she was certainly ready to kick them right back into oblivion.

“What do you want?” she muttered, slurring her words ever so slightly.

Brushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear, he pointed out the window. “Look…”

Although she was experiencing a horrible combination of irritation, confusion, and subtle carsickness, Vex decided to follow Vax’s directions despite of it all. Even in her groggy state, her sense of curiosity was a force to be reckoned with. After a drawn out, exaggerated stretch, she rubbed her eyes and glanced out the window.

In an instant, her jaw dropped and she felt a warm chill crawl up her spine as her eyes lit up with the splendor of a million of lights glistening in the night.

It was a sight unlike anything she had ever seen in her life, far more vast and majestic than any picture she had come across. A glimmering mosaic of skyscrapers and roads overwhelmed her vision as their highway circuited around the metropolis, leading them toward its major point of entry. Car
lights twinkled as they came and fell out of view. Large commercial signs with bright neon colors decorated soaring skyscrapers that lost their glowing peaks in the low drifting clouds. The city was so brightly illuminated that she could clearly make out each and every building shape, from the short and stout to the sharp and towering; their silhouettes contributed to the metropolis’ signature skyline that was reminiscent of a single, jagged mountain, the greatest and grandest skyscrapers rising out of the city center toward the darkened heavens. In the far distance, a brightly lit port faced a dark, flat expanse dotted by hundreds of little floating lights, some drifting as far as the horizon.

Vex was so enthralled by the view that she didn’t realize she had crawled over Vax rather unceremoniously, her face plastered against the window like a child at an aquarium.

“Fucking gorgeous, isn’t it?”

“Yeah…” she agreed, still entranced by the view.

Vax lifted himself off his seat and looked out the window as well, his cheek next to hers. “Would you have ever imagined us being here?”

“Never in my life…”

Vax smiled, a layer of tenderness coating his expression. “Yet here we are.”

They both stared out the window, admiring the view in respectful silence. She couldn’t stay mad at Vax, not when he still harbored the kindness to wake her so she could witness such immense beauty. It was a constant struggle reminding herself that she needed to be patient with him. You’d think that after spending a lifetime with a person you’d know how to deal with them, and yet, more often than not, she pretended that their long term relationship justified her cruelty toward him.

She wouldn't beat herself up over it too much. They would eventually talk, but it was up to him to decide when that time would be, if ever.

As the others started to take note of the view, the van became more lively, some taking pictures and selfies, while others gushed over the beauty that was the City State of Emon. Alas, as they inched closer to the city's borders, an imposing wall that drifted into their line of sight reminded that there was still one more thing they needed to do before they could enter...

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The biggest downside of traveling to any new city-state was dealing with the local border patrol. There were only four checkpoints accepting visitors at that time of night, with the other eight shut down and on guard for the long winter darkness. Like many other city borders, it looked like something out of Jurassic Park: imposing concrete walls lined in electric fencing, with heavy gates and checkpoint stations lining the heavily guarded entrances. Emon had six of these entrances in total, though the party was now approaching the city from its most eastern gate. Scanlan directed Grog to drive toward the farthest checkpoint station on the right, labeled “C.C.” in neon blue letters. This was not a good time to fuck things up. The C.C. line was reserved for “Complex Cases”, a politically correct way of describing sketchy people that the city wanted to keep under close watch. Although demeaning, the C.C. line was almost always full, as many new arrivals still felt more comfortable going through the complex cases line, just in case...

It was simple, really: If you knew or thought you were sketchy, and wanted the city to know that you knew or thought you were sketchy, then you would go through the complex cases checkpoint. It was
basically the simplest way of saying: “Look, I know this looks bad, but we are fine folk and are willing to turn ourselves in as an act of good diplomacy.” Though the main incentive of using C.C. line was singular but quite compelling: If you were deemed a “complex case” by your border patrol officer but were caught in another line, you got a red stamp on your passport...which in turn lead to bad things happening to you. Therefore, even if you were just a little unsure as to whether you and your passengers classified as a Complex Cases, you still went in the C.C. line. Punishment was strict all across Tal’Dorei. In Westruun, a red stamp on your passport prompted a heavy fine and an immediate visit to the Court of Avadra. And according to Tiberius’ research, in Emon, a failure to file yourself as a Complex Case resulted in a much steeper fine, an escorted trip to a nearby military base for a thorough investigation, and a ban from entering the city-state for one week upon receiving a yellow stamp. Needless to say, it was a situation the Vox Machina team could neither afford nor had time for...

Of course, not everyone felt the need to go through the C.C. line. There were always plenty of people confident enough to assume that they would immediately get a green stamp on their passport upon review in the regular line -- and they generally did, so long as they had nothing to hide. But for people like Grog and Vax who had decorated criminal records, going through the C.C. line was a bit of a no-brainer. People like them -- and by relation, people who traveled with them -- required multiple reviews before they finally got their green stamp and were deemed “Allies of the State”, which was another cute term for visiting non-citizens who weren’t intent on murdering those within. It was a system adopted across the majority of city-states in Tal’Dorei, and it worked relatively well given that the continent was experiencing relative peace from rogue forces in the past few years. Though technically laxer than the systems in other places like Wildemount, Tal’Dorei’s popular security methods also saved city-states a lot of money, which was something even Vex could understand.

As they waited patiently for the four cars in front of them to get reviewed, the two ex-convicts mentally prepared. They knew the drill: The guards would look at their I.D.s and speak into their communicators. Then they’d wave them over to one of the pull-out areas where they would all be promptly frisked and searched for any dangerous contraband, which was mostly limited to weapons but also included hard drugs or other illegal tradable merchandise.

And of course, that is exactly how things went...

With big, innocent smiles on their faces, Vox Machina and its passengers were flagged down into the expanded “review zone” in a separate, gated-off section... complete with barbed wire and a guard tower. Vex knew her brother hated the process, as it reminded him of prison, though it no longer made him nervous like it used to. It was simply part of the process that they had grown accustomed to during their travels; a necessary evil to the otherwise pleasant experience that was exploring Tal’Dorei. Grog wasn’t a terrible fan of the process either, but listened to the advice of others for his own good. “Remember Grog,” Pike said, leaning in as she spoke, “Just don’t say anything unless you’re asked a question, and do what they say.” Vex absolutely hated that they had to take such precautions, but Grog more than Vax, often had to be more careful, as his intimidating size and the tattoos that marked his past associations always put guards on edge.

Though they weren’t the only ones. About midway through the review, Vex’s gaze caught a glimpse of some unusual nervousness in Percy’s demeanor. Those who did not know him well may have easily mistaken the behavior as coffee induced hyperactivity, but Vex could tell he was on edge: a rigid back, jaw tense, the tendons in his hands ready to flex his fingers into a tight fist. And then his eyes...wide and glossy, with a thousand-yard stare that seemed capable of transcending time and space.

In hindsight, perhaps it would have been wise to describe the process to him a little bit better. She
realized that being surrounded by armed foreign military personnel probably did cause at least some anxiety to most people.

And then a thought came to her…

“Shit,” she hissed under her breath.

What if he was hiding something bad and forgot to tell them? What if he was only now realizing his terrible mistake? Not that they could do anything about it now... They weren’t allowed to talk to each other during this process, so it was just a matter of time before—

“Okay, you’re good to go,” the guard said as he finished looking through Percy’s bag, before directing him back to the van.

Nevermind then.

Percy was probably just...overreacting. Though, to be entirely honest, Vex wasn’t all that comfortable herself. She didn’t remember first entering Stilben or Westruun being this intense, not to mention, they surely didn’t have to worry about it in present times. In Westruun, the guards knew the party well, and didn’t give them much trouble. Having lived there for many years, the party had built a solid reputation for themselves, and the city no longer saw Grog and Vax’s criminal records as red flags. As tedious as the process was, going through the pains of becoming a trusted citizen was worth the peace of mind that was gained living within city-state borders. In fact, one of the only few incentives of living in a city-state at all was just that: protection. Because the truth of the matter was simple: Out in the Midlands, life was wild and free. But also incredibly dangerous. Few communes lasted out there for longer than a few decades, with Byroden as a sad reminder... But living out in the Midlands completely alone was even less sustainable. Vex had learned this the hard way, but she knew she had also become stronger and wiser because of it. Of course, it certainly didn’t mean she’d scoff at the opportunity to live a slightly higher standard of living, albeit, at the expense of... most of her personal freedoms… Vex winced as the woman patted her down, squeezing her arms and thighs rather firmly. It was in moments like these, when they had hands all over them and guns trained on them, that she sometimes wished there were another.

As the review came to an end, they each received yellow stamps on their passports, signaling their “tentative alliance” with the city-state of Emon, before being escorted back to Vox Machina. Vex climbed into the driver’s seat this time, better equipped at navigating new cities than Grog (no offense to him).

Distracted by a fussy seatbelt, it took Vex a hot minute to realize that one of the guards was staring right at her, stone-faced behind heavy-duty goggles, his machine gun held by his side. Vex swallowed once before leaning out the window, utterly confused as to what he wanted her to do next. “Is that all officer?” The smallest of smirks spread across his face as he spoke lowly, as if he didn’t want the others to hear him. “Nice van...”

Vex smiled and sighed through her nostrils, preparing a “thanks” only to be interrupted by Scanlan in the passenger’s seat.

“Why thank you officer! I painted it myself, here is... um…” Scanlan stretched over Vex in the most unceremonious of fashions, trying to wiggle his business card out the window as he practically smothered her.

Vex rolled her eyes and snatched the card out of Scanlan’s hand before shoving him back in his seat. With a sigh of deep resignation, she turned back toward the guard and gave him the most seductive smirk she could muster, before handing him Scanlan’s card and giving him a quick wink. “He’ll be
performing at the Cloudtop Club on Friday night...Have a lovely evening officer.”

It was unclear whether the guard was impressed or not, but Vex didn’t have time to milk him any longer. They had arrived to Emon already way later than they had originally intended, and the chances of finding vacancies at the hotel they had originally picked were close to none, considering that the place had “rooms always available till around nine”, and it was currently… “Midnight…” Vex muttered to herself as she glanced at the clock.

This was going to be a long night.

***

As Vex feared, the hotel they had planned to stay at was completely full, which was rather disappointing since it was actually rather close to the venue. However, they ended up finding just enough space at a hotel closer to Emon’s airport, located near the water. To her dismay, it was far more expensive than she would have liked, but they settled with the option nonetheless, given they were tired out of their minds.

“I’m sorry guys,” she said, handing them their room keys. “I would have liked to get us more rooms but it ended up being more expensive than I planned. Same arrangements as usual, okay?”

She handed a key to Percy and exchanged a strange look with him. In a sudden moment of remembrance, her thoughts went back to the text conversation she had exchanged with Percy the night before, and how she’d promised that he could sleep in their room. Alas, she knew there was no way of convincing any of her current roommates to switch places with him, save for perhaps Vax, but she could already imagine how well that conversation would go: “Hey Vax? Can Percy sleep in my bed instead of you? We were drunkenly texting about it last night and I don’t want to go back on my word.”

Yeah, wasn’t going to happen...

“Try to sleep well Percy…” she said with a smile.

“I’ll try. Good night Vex.” He accompanied his answer with a subtle bow of the head that reminded her of a gentleman. A vampire. Definitely a vampire.

As she scurried toward the elevator that lead to their wing of the hotel, she met eyes with Vax who was staring her down with a look that definitely indicated he’d been snooping on her. She rolled her eyes and tried to ignore him as he stared her down most of the ride up the elevator.

***

Their hotel room was far nicer than pretty much anything she’d ever stayed at, though it wasn’t anything extravagant. The sheets were white, the walls were white, and the paintings were abstract and generic. Hurray...

Keyleth and Pike didn’t bother bathing or anything like that. They simply collapsed into bed and lazily stripped off their heavier clothes before falling into a deep, snoring slumber.

After getting ready for bed, Vex wandered up to the windows and stared out into the cityscape. At least the view was nice, and it somewhat made up for the money spent. The concierge had given them one room on the fourth floor and one on the sixth, and she of course, greedily took the obvious choice. She figured she deserved the better view since she was the one keeping tabs on everyone’s spending.
The hotel was located farther away from the city center, granting almost a full picture of the sprawling metropolis. Moreover, its proximity to the water presented a stunning visual of the skyline reflecting on the glossy black water. Close by, an industrial looking port seemed to be teeming with activity, even at such a late hour. In the distance, she could see airplanes taking off from the landing strip that stretched out onto the Ozmit Sea.

Vex let out a long exasperated sigh. She felt like she could fall in love with the place, if only she allowed herself to, even with all of its chaos and sharp edges.

“You coming to bed Stubby?” Vax asked, speaking softly so to not wake the others

Vex crossed her arms and took a deep breath, taking in the view. “In a bit.”

The twins spent a few quiet moments staring out the window, watching a few airplanes land and take off.

“You know...” Vax said, taking a step forward.

Vex turned to look at Vax, who was now staring down at his own bare feet.

“What?” she asked, a touch of annoyance tinting her tone perhaps a little more than she would have wanted.

There was a moment of hesitation in his face, his lips parting ever so slightly as he visibly reflected on his words. “They... seemed to be interested in the fact that we were going to the Cloudtop…”

Vex’s expression softened a little. “In what way?”

He shrugged. “Wanted me to talk to patrons there, put the good word in for them.”

“Is that...unusual? I mean, isn’t that something that they’d want to do. Expand their turf, that sort of thing?”

“Well that’s the thing.” He bit his lower lip. “I sort of got this weird feeling that there was more to it...but…”

“But what?”

“I don’t know. It’s just a feeling.” He sighed. “I just...it just seemed weird that the Clasp gave a shit. When I was with them we never aimed that high, you know?”

Deep worry coated Vex’s expression. She honestly didn’t know. She hadn’t the slightest clue of how any of it worked, especially since Vax never really spoke about it. The mere fact that he was opening up to her now either meant that he was tired and delirious, or perhaps sick and delirious, or maybe both...

She glanced out into the distance. “Well…” she said, thinking for a moment. “We’ll just keep our eyes open, like we always do.” She turned to look at him, though Vax didn’t seem as though his spirits had been lifted all that much. He was still staring down at the floor, his eyes lost in thought.

Feeling a sudden jolt of tenderness grow in her, she reached over and rubbed his back, giving him a sweet smile, “Alright?”

After a few moments, Vax finally looked up at her and returned weaker, though genuine smile. “Alright…”
She pulled him close and gave him a peck on the forehead. “Love you.”

His smile grew a little warmer and he rested his head against hers, staring at a new airplane take off. “I love you too.”

***

The next morning brought clouded skies but an otherwise lovely view of the Emon. It looked a tad grungier than it had appeared the night before, but Vex kind of liked it that way.

At a relatively early hour, the entire team headed down to the lobby and enjoyed a rather hearty continental breakfast. Vex had nearly forgotten the taste of normal food, but one bite into the fresh fruit and whole grain buttered toast made all the difference.

The T.V. in the lobby was currently playing the local news, reporting on some missing child incident. It wasn’t exactly something Vex wanted to listen to first thing in the morning, especially since she counted on preserving her positive image of Emon for just a little longer.

As they filled up on fresh fruit, boiled eggs and ham, and miniature toaster waffles, they spent some time figuring out what they wanted to do next.

Percy was currently sitting at the end of the table in a slightly slouched position, dark circles under his eyes, nursing on a jet black cup of coffee and staring blankly at the empty tablecloth in front of him.

“Percy... you’re eating this free food whether you like it or not,” Keyleth cautioned, sliding a plate of hard-boiled eggs in front of him.

Percy blinked at the plate for a few lingering moments before looking away. “I don’t like hard-boiled eggs.”

Keyleth huffed in exasperation and started spreading jam on a toaster waffle like a mother at the end of her rope.

After watching the scene unfold with a touch of amusement, Vax turned his attention toward the others. “So what’s the plan?”

Vex perked up and smiled, pulling out her notebook from her backpack. “I’m glad you asked!” She flipped it open and started to read off her notes. “We head downtown, check out the venue at ten, meet the people who are hosting the event, get any sort of final details we need to know for the show, and then go shopping!”

“May I opt out of the last part and nap?” Vax muttered.

“No you may not. We’ve already discussed this.”

“Um...” Grog muttered, his mouth half full. “I’m not all that great with time management and shit...” He finished chewing his ham and eggs and swallowed loudly. “But isn’t it already like...nine somethin’? Like, ‘ow long does it take to drive there?”

“I could look it up!” Tiberius exclaimed, pulling up his phone.

“Actually,” Scanlan said, finishing off his coffee. “The person at the front desk told me that it’s a lot more convenient to take the subway to the city center. They said that parking is not only hard to find in Emon but expensive too.”
“Well, I suppose that settles it then,” Vex said, slapping her notebook shut. She was an easy one to convince, that was for sure.

“Guess we’ll get tickets then,” Pike said. “You guys ready to go?”

Keyleth was in the middle of pressing a waffle against Percy’s lips, who looked half asleep as he leaned his face on his hand, his elbow nearly slipping off the table.

Scanlan gave a sly smile at the party as he stood up. “I’m going to call that a strong yes.”

***

The party strolled off the first of two subways they needed to take to reach the city center. This wasn’t the first time Vex had traveled this way. She had learned to use public transportation relatively early on in life to save her the grief of having to ask her father to drive her anywhere. However, no amount of subway travel in Syngorn and Westruun could prepare her for the wondrous chaos that was Emon’s underground system.

I was like a city beneath another city, with food vendors, kiosks and services lining tunnels leading to the various train stops. The whole place resonated with the voices and footsteps of hundreds of people, and the unfamiliar melody of the occasional street performer. Just as the music of one musician would fade out of earshot, a new one would fill the void. Some artists spread prints and sketches on large tarps depicting everything from stranger’s portraits to stylized cityscapes. The homeless clustered in corners, chatting away as passersby ignored their existence.

Pike wandered up to one woman sitting on the floor next to a dog and knelt beside her, exchanging a few quick words before offering her a couple of gold prints and hurrying after the rest of the group.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I just wanted to make sure her arm was okay. It looked like she was cradling it.”

“Aw man...:” Keyleth whimpered. “I wish I had brought my nature bars with me. I could have offered these people something.”

Vax glanced at Keyleth. “You could spend a lifetime trying to help all of these people.”

“And?” Keyleth challenged, staring him down.

“I just don’t want you feeling guilty.”

“Telling me to not feel guilty isn’t going to help me not feel guilty Vax...”

He sighed, speeding up to walk closer to his sister.

None of them really had the means to help these people as much as they would have liked to, and it was something that hurt Vex at a personal level. Out of all these assholes hurrying through the tunnels with their expensive shoes and designer bags, surely one of them had the means to offer one minute of their time to their fellow citizen. It made no sense to Vex, but then again, it was something she knew was a cruel reality of the world they lived in. No one had given her the time of day when she was homeless, so why should she have expected things to be any different now?

As the party got onto their second subway train, Vex and Pike held onto Grog who in turn held on to one of the overhead grips. He was the only one besides Tiberius capable of reaching over the crowds of people, who had packed into the car like a bunch of sardines wearing bulky winter coats. Through all the multilingual chatter, she could hear the sound of someone playing the saxophone, though she
couldn't make out where it was coming from. As she continued to scan, her eyes settled on Percy, who was a few feet away from her, standing close to Keyleth and Tiberius. To her dismay, she found herself observing Percy, even though she had sworn herself off of it ever since she’d had that little incident with him in their living room. She knew he was wise enough to know when he was being watched, but she hoped the crowded nature of the car would provide her with some cover.

He seemed nervous, more so than she had seen him in a while. There was something in his eyes that revealed almost a slight sense of paranoia. He never settled his gaze in one spot for more than a few seconds, scanning each and every individual, almost as if he were looking for someone in particular. Perhaps he wasn’t used to traveling in such large cities and it made him anxious, which wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. One of Vax’s favorite locations to pickpocket used to be crowded public transportation, so Percy was perfectly justified to be nervous about it.

Eventually, Percy’s darting eyes settled on her, and she immediately raised her and twiddled her fingers at him to not seem suspicious. He gave her a small half smirk before looking away, and she let out a relieved sigh, glancing down at her phone.

“Shit.”

It was already nine forty-five.

***

Two subway train rides and a lot of walking eventually lead them to was supposedly the city center.

According to the instructions on Vex’s digital map, they were only a few blocks away from the Cloudtop venue, yet as the party emerged from the underground system, they found themselves absolutely overwhelmed. A canyon of soaring buildings showed off their gargantuan advertisement boards to the valley of crisscrossing sidewalks and roads below. The signs showcased dozens of products, events, and locations: movie theaters, conventions, soft drinks, sports shoes, museums, the university, business centers, the Galleria mall... And yet, nothing seemed to give directions toward a club named the “Cloudtop.” To make matters worse, the city center seemed as though it were built on multiple levels, overpasses and bridges leading to higher portions of the city, while more shops and businesses lined the roads underneath. The club could have been underground for all she knew, but unfortunately, the map Vex had downloaded did not feature the city in three dimensions, so figuring out the most direct path to the little dot on her map would be a feat in itself.

After nearly twenty minutes of wandering up and down roads and their equivalent parallels on the higher levels, and circling the pin on her map dozens of times without actually reaching it, the party found themselves frazzled; the fact that they were already five minutes late aggravated the situation, and they soon realized they needed to change strategy.

“Excuse me,” Vax shouted, wandering up with Vex toward a well-dressed pair of gentlemen strolling down the sidewalk hand in hand, “My friends and I are looking for the Cloudtop club.”

The two men turned to look at the twins with raised brows, glancing at each other before one of them spoke up. “You’re new here, aren’t you?”

Vax quirked a brow at him, “Yes. Is it that obvious?”

The second man turned to his left and pointed skyward.

Both Vax and Vex followed his finger, and as they identified what he was guiding them to, their eyes went wider than two children staring up at fireworks for the first time. Frankly, Vex was rather
shocked she hadn't noticed it sooner.

Far above any other buildings, a gargantuan glass tower composed by various tapered skyscrapers loomed over the entire thoroughfare, it’s polished windows reflecting the cloud softened sunlight like a lighthouse. Each individual tower was unique in its own way, connected to each other by bridges. Via a tunnel in one of the larger central buildings, a monorail traveled directly through it at high speed before circling around it and going in a perpendicular direction.

“No fucking way...” Vax and Vex both said in tandem, their necks bending uncomfortably as they admired its majesty.

“Yes way,” The other said. “The club is on the sixtieth floor.”

“Sixty...eth?” Vax enunciated. “As in six - zero?”

“Yes.”

“Hoooly shit,” Vax muttered,

Vex smiled slightly. “Well, um... thank you...”

“No problem.” One of the men chuckled, glancing at the twins from head to toe. “Good luck getting inside...

As the couple walked away, Vax and Vex both looked at each other speechless before calling forth the others. From the looks of it, it seemed as though their lives were heading skyward...A prospect Vex was more than happy to entertain.

Chapter End Notes

It was very refreshing for me to write about a new landscape. I haven’t had an opportunity to describe a big city in a long time so this was fun, albeit a little difficult.
Chapter Summary

Last time, on The Butterfly Effect: Vox Machina makes it to Emon and they stay in a hotel near the airport. The next morning, they take the subway into the city center in search of the Cloudtop Club, only to discover that it’s on the 60th floor of an imposing skyscraper.

Chapter Notes

No Content Warnings this chapter

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It's definitely tricky venturing into new dangerous territory...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After successfully procuring solid directions from the couple, it took the team nearly ten more minutes to finally identify the correct entrance to the building that supposedly contained the fabled Cloudtop Club. Far too many of the doors either lead to the wrong tower or were reserved for “Cloudtop employees only”. In fact, with each new conversation, Vex started to get the notion that the club wasn’t the only thing present in this conglomerate of buildings.

However, four doors and five clarifications later, the party eventually stumbled through the reinforced glass doors to a grandiose looking lobby. Gold detailed columns held up the four-story-high vaulted ceilings. Crystal chandeliers refracted sunlight that came through tall windows, and three enormous flat screens TVs flashed promotional videos that featured soaring views of Emon with the word “Cloudtop” drifting in the foreground. Dozens upon dozens of people dressed in fine suits walked with purpose across the green and black marble flooring, carrying briefcases and having fast conversations with each other in multiple languages.

Needless to say, Vex felt like they stood out like a stain on a porcelain plate, or in this case, well...a marble floor.

“Wow,” Scanlan said, stuffing his hands in his pockets. “To think I’ve been to Emon dozens of times and I’ve never walked in here. Who knew...?”

“Opulent,” Keyleth muttered, her green eyes reflecting the glittering chandelier light.

“Huh... ‘ow you think they get the floors so fuckin' shiny?” Grog asked, staring down at it as he wandered.

“Unicorn tears,” Percy said, very matter-of-factly.

“Almost as majestic as our offices in Draconia!” Tiberius said, adjusting his dress shirt and slicking back his hair.
“This place reeks of asshole,” Vax muttered.

Vex punched Vax in the shoulder. “Try to contain yourself for one day.”

“I can’t help it…” he smirked, rubbing his arm.

“You know where we’re headed, Scanlan?” Pike asked.

“Front desk will probably help us out,” Scanlan said with a smile. “No biggy.”

The party strolled over to a greeting center that seemed to be right next to numerous elevators, each labeled with different gold roman numerals. Approaching the desk, the group found a single woman dressed in a dark blue suit in front of them, currently having what looked like a rather heated discussion with the secretary.

“Well try again,” the woman said, tossing her long blonde braids over her back and tapping her French-tipped fingernails in the granite desk.

“I’m sorry,” the young man said with a sigh. “Your name just isn’t coming up…”

“But you know who I am. Since when have you people ever cared so much about formalities?”

“New instructions from higher up Miss Vysoren, as per request by Security Official Krieg,” he said with a nervous smile. “Just...give me a minute. I’ll try again. Could I please have your ID number again?”

“Just take the card,” she said, slapping it on the counter. “I don’t have all day.” She turned to look at the party, blushing before looking back at the secretary. “Look at the line you’ve created.”

“I’m working as fast as I can. It’s just -- the computer portal isn’t processing your information.”

Vex smiled nervously at the woman before turning toward her friends and whispering. “Just what we needed, we’re already late…”

“It sounds like they’re having some technical difficulties,” Percy said, furrowing his brow.

“That’s hilarious,” Vax scoffed. “Place like this can’t even keep their shit together.”

“I know…” Percy hummed. “I find it a little strange to be perfectly honest with you.”

Minutes passed as the secretary scrambled to enter the woman’s information time and time again.

“Miss, it’s just not working…” he muttered, fast fingers typing away furiously.

“And is this the first time this has happened today?”

“No...There have been others. It’s been happening ever since our last security APS update.”

Vex’s attention was drawn to Percy as he muttered the words “APS” under his breath. He seemed to be paying attention to the woman’s conversation rather intently, his eyes darting back and forth as they spoke.

“And you still haven’t had someone look at it?” the woman asked.

“We have. It’s just more complicated than that. Look, if you have some time we can have you request for a new account. It might take a few hours—”
“This is ridiculous!” the woman said, staring up at the ceiling with a very frustrated look on her face.

Percy rubbed his stubbled chin as he watched the scene unfold, muttering to himself. “I have a thought…”

Vex blinked at Percy. “What?”

“I think I know what the problem is,” he said quickly, sounding more sure of himself as he walked toward the front desk with determination in his stride.

“Percy, wait -” Vex said, biting her lower lip before following after him.

With unusual confidence, Percy strolled up to the secretary and the woman, bowing his head and smiling cordially. “I’m very sorry to intrude, but I overhead that you’re having some technical difficulties?”

The secretary turned to look at Percy and sighed. “Sir, we’ll get to your party as soon as possible…”

“You wouldn't happen to be using the Alabaster Portal System?” He asked, not backing down.

The secretary’s gaze darted toward the screen for just a second. “Well-”

The blonde woman’s eyes lit up, “Yes. That’s exactly what we use. Are you familiar with it?”

“Actually, I’m rather familiar with it. I…” He paused a moment, reflecting on his words as he adjusted his glasses. “I dabbled in some minor projects using its system. I know it’s workings like the back of my hand.”

“That’s lovely,” the woman said, smiling. “Do you think you know what the problem is?”

“I’m almost certain.” Percy nodded. “The program has a tendency to hiccup when it has major updates and some files can become buried under the new code, including authentication information. If you gave me a couple of minutes I could probably take care of it... It’s a very easy fix.”

At this point, the secretary lifted a finger and spoke up. “I’m sorry sir, you’re not authori-”

The woman slapped her hand on the table. “Jeff, forgive my French but I think I’ve had it up to here with this formal bullshit. Have the kind sir look at the computer. Loom over his shoulder for all I care. The whole place has him on camera so it’s not like he’s a threat.”

“Miss-”

“Now,” she ordered, her expression stern. Then, like flipping a coin, her demeanor changed entirely as she turned to Percy, giving him a sweet smile. “Go right ahead. Jeff will assist you.”

With a deep sigh of resignation, the secretary allowed Percy around the desk and offered him his seat, but Percy shook his head. “This will only take a few minutes. I don’t need to sit, thank you.”

Vex watched the scene unfold with a bewildered look on her face. She didn’t understand the last thing about computers. Vax was usually the one who took care of her more complicated problems, though she’d always wanted to learn. As she watched Percy type away with incredible focus in his eyes, Vax wandered up to the scene.

“What’s up?”

Vex leaned in and whispered in his ear, “Percy’s fixing the computer…”
“Aha…” Vax said, crossing his arms with a smirk. “Fucking nerd.”

Vex took no time elbowing Vax in her favorite spot, just about a few inches above his hip. He seemed to refrain from dishing out any form of retribution, which likely meant he knew he deserved it. Percy was doing them a service and he knew it.

As she watched him work, Vex couldn't help but admire the electric intensity in his eyes. He seemed to change demeanor entirely, morphing from that tired, drained persona to a man filled with purpose and wit. Part of him almost seemed to enjoy what he was doing, the corner of his mouth curving slightly as the light blue computer screen reflected off his glasses.

Sure enough, before even two minutes had elapsed, Percy beckoned the secretary back over.

“There we go…” He said, backing away. “Try entering her ID now. Worst comes to worst, I can try something different but I’m fairly certain I fixed the problem.”

The secretary rolled his eyes as he took the woman’s card, entering the information halfheartedly. However, as he clicked the enter button, his brow furrowed and Percy’s face lit up.

“There you go!” Percy said, clapping his hands. “Access approved.”

“Remarkable…” the secretary muttered.

“See? That wasn't so hard,” he said, adjusting his glasses and giving the secretary a curious look. “Who did you have look at that computer?”

“A technician they sent down from the offices.”

Percy chuckled as he walked back around the desk. “Rather odd that they didn’t figure it out.” He brushed his hands together and turned to the woman. “I would be more careful with future updates. Code like that makes security systems like Alabaster more susceptible to hacking. I’d run an antivirus if I were you.”

“Noted,” she said, smiling warmly at Percy and reaching her hand out for a handshake. “Thank you so very much. You’ve saved me hours of precious time. I believe introductions are certainly in order.” She glanced at the others briefly before looking back at Percy intently. “I’m Allura Vysoren, one of the Senior Advisers here at the Cloudtop. And your name is?”

“Percy Robinson,” he said, returning a firm handshake.

“Are you a college student here?”

“No,” Percy said with a small smile. “The computer stuff is just a hobby, really.”

“A pity. I give lectures at the university. I’m always excited to see our students out and about being successful.”

“Of course,” he chuckled.

“Well either way, I am dreadfully impressed and thankful. What are you all doing here?” she asked, looking at the rest of the group who slowly but surely approached her. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you around…”

“Hi there,” Vex said, awkwardly raising a hand. “I’m Vex’ahlia…”

“And I’m Vax’ildan…” Vax nodded.
“I’m Pike,” she said, waving.

“Grog,” he said, stretching his neck.

“You’re quite the party.” Allura smiled at the group, looking genuinely interested. “A pleasure, really.”

Scanlan waltzed over and bowed theatrically. “Scanlan Shorthalt, at your service. I’ll be one of the performers at the Cloudtop tonight.”

Allura’s smile grew wide. “Ah yes! It’s a pleasure to meet you Mr. Shorthalt. I saw you on our list of performing guests. I’m so happy they went through with my idea.”

“What do you mean?” Vex said, raising a brow.

Allura clasped her hands together, looking rather eager to explain. “You see, I work in the Social Sector of the Cloudtop. I proposed an event to get new and upcoming musicians to perform a few nights as opposed to using our usual bands. It’s a little outreach project we designed to help out talented young artists.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Keyleth said. “A great way to promote the arts. I’m Keyleth by the way, a pleasure to meet you.”

Allura nodded, her smile soft but everlasting, “Welcome.”

“Wait…So what is this place?” Vax asked with a furrowed brow. “Forgive my ignorance but we assumed the Cloudtop was just a club.”

Allura chuckled warmly. “Oh, far from it. The Cloudtop Club -- of course -- is what outsiders are most familiar with; our PR department does an excellent job at advertising… But the Cloudtop Center is actually a Multifaceted Media Center that focuses on making connections with the political, social, and economic aspects of the city of Emon and the rest of the Taldorei region. The Cloudtop Club is simply where many come to do business. A simple necessity in a place where so many people wish to mingle…”

“We had no idea…” Vax said.

“That sounds super important,” Grog muttered.

“Absolutely remarkable!” Tiberius exclaimed, waltzing up to Allura with excitement in his mannerism. “Do you also do business in Draconia?”

“Indeed we do,” Allura said, raising a brow at the rather excited young man in front of her.

His eyes grew wide and he reached to shake Allura’s hand, his grin white and radiant. “It is an extreme pleasure to meet you Miss Vysoren. I am Tiberius Stormwind from Draconia. My family runs a law firm at the heart of the capital.”

“I’ve heard of your family,” Allura said, shaking his hand. “I believe we’ve actually done business with them on more than one occasion. A rather agreeable family, as I’m certain you are as well.”

Tiberius blushed, looking down at his feet and backing away slowly. “Well…yes, certainly…”

Allura smiled at Tiberius before turning to look at the group a little apologetically. “Now, I’d love to chat more but I really must be going. Far too much work awaits me today.”
“Of course,” Vax said. “Thank you for giving us a little lesson on the place.”

“Part of my job really.” She laughed, making her way toward one of the elevators. “Now, go ahead and enjoy the city. I’ll make sure to have the event organizers know that you have checked in. We’ll be expecting you at seven o’clock to set up. The event starts at nine.”

“Oh, um,” Vex uttered, nervously raising a finger to get her attention. “I’m so sorry to keep you, but one last question.”

Allura stopped midway to the elevator and turned back toward the party with a curious expression.

Vex smiled bashfully at Allura. “Is the event...formal by any chance?”

Allura looked at them from head to toe. “I’d say smart casual. Why do you ask?”

“I’m afraid we lack the attire if that’s the case…” Percy said, adjusting his glasses.

“And we’re a little bit on a budget…” Vex added, wincing slightly.

Allura rubbed her chin, humming. “That certainly is a dilemma isn’t it?” She thought for a moment. “Actually...I might have a suggestion. Would one of you please hand me your phone?”

Vex glanced at the others before surrendering hers.

“Thank you.” Allura nodded, briskly typing something into Vex’s notes. “I’m giving you an address to a place I know run by a good friend of mine. He has exquisite taste and might be able to help you out.” She returned the phone to Vex. “It’s not very far from here. Just a few subway stops away.”

Vex glanced down at her phone, reading off the name of the location. “Gilmore’s Glorious Goods…?”

“That’s the place,” she said, flipping her braids so they trailed down her front.

“Sounds lovely...” Vax muttered with a little sarcasm.

Allura laughed as she slid her I.D. card and pressed a button to call the elevator. “Now now, don’t judge a book by its cover. I have a feeling you’ll find the place quite agreeable.”

“We’ll definitely check it out,” Vex said with a smile, glaring at Vax with her signature evil eye.

“I’m counting on it,” Allura said with a wink as the elevator door opened. “Now, I’ll see you all this evening. Until then, have a lovely day....”

Everyone waved as Allura vanished behind the elevator doors, and once again, the party was left to their own devices in the lobby. They all stared at each other for a few moments, a little bit lost for words.

“Well she was lovely, wasn’t she?” Percy finally said, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

“Absolutely stunning…” Tiberius muttered, a little sigh escaping his lips.

“She was certainly helpful,” Vex said, staring down at her phone. “I guess the next order of business is to go to this Gilmore place. It says here that it’s a thrift store so that’s good.” She slowly started to wander toward the exit, entering the address into her map app so she could get directions. “Worst comes to worst we can try someplace else. We certainly have time to burn before tonight.”
Percy followed beside her. “The prospect of new clothes to wear sort of excites me.”

Vex chuckled slightly, staring up from her phone. “Me too-”

Like bumping into a sliding glass door, Vex suddenly froze dead in her tracks and her face lost all color.

Percy furrowed his brow. “Vex…?”

She looked as though she had seen a ghost, lips slightly parted as she tried to utter some form of response. Her eyes were fixed on a group of strangers in the distance.

Vax strode up to her with concern and rested a hand on her shoulder, but as his eyes followed hers, his expression fell into a similar state.

“Shit,” Vax hissed.

Percy looked rather confused but was soon approached and dragged away by Keyleth who clearly knew more than he did.

Vex covered her mouth, nervously glancing at Vax and letting out a little muffled whisper. “It’s dad…”

As Vex spoke, a slim man in a dark green suit with long black hair turned his head straight toward them. There was a brief instance of blank staring, followed by a moment of recognition. His eyes narrowed, he turned to the well-dressed woman and young girl he was speaking to, and gestured at them to wait a moment.

“Ah fuck…” Vax muttered.

“He saw us,” she said, feeling a knot form in her chest as she watched their father walk toward them, his eyes unmistakably trained on them. “I don’t want to talk to him.”

“Well he’s fucking walking toward us so you better think of something quick.”

Of course, it was already too late. There was little they could do but wait to see what their father could possibly want from them after close to half a decade of little to no contact. Really, the possibilities were endless...

Vex watched as her friends backed away slowly, whispering to each other as their father approached in quick yet composed strides. In that instance it occurred to her that nearly all of them except for Percy knew of their father and what he looked like, given that she and her brother had supposedly trash-talked pictures of him on his self-absorbed website while they were drunk one night, and then followed up their roast by anonymously spamming the messaging system with profanities. That is... if the stories were accurate.

She spotted Keyleth whispering in Percy’s ear just as their father made his way to them, raising his voice as he called for them.

“Vex’ahlia, Vax’ildan.”

“Shit fuck balls,” Vax muttered.

“Keep it together,” Vex grumbled behind her teeth, before speaking up with her chin high. “Syl Dor.”

“You shouldn’t be here,” Syldor said frankly, facing them with a confused expression on his face.
“Last time we checked we had full permission to be here,” Vax said. “Pricks at the door said so.”

Syldor’s brow flinched for but a moment before he calmly held his wrists behind his back. “I find that unlikely, but I won’t question it. However, what I find even more unlikely is that you are already out and about Vax’ildan… You on parole?”

Vex wanted to just grab Vax and leave right then and there, but she needed to keep cool, for her’s and Vax’s sake.

“No,” Vax said, his eyes narrowing.

“They let him out on good behavior a long time ago,” Vex interjected.

Syldor hummed. “Odd, seems as though they finally knocked some sense into you.” He let out a sigh and stared up at the crystalline chandelier on top of them. “Bless the prison system for doing something I couldn’t. Though I’ll give myself some credit and say that I’ve certainly done a better job with my daughter.”

Of course, Syldor wasn’t referring to Vex as his daughter. He’d never use such terms of endearment. In fact, if she had to take a wild guess, she had a pretty strong feeling that the young girl he was speaking to was indeed her. Even at a distance, she could recognize that Syldor Vassar nose from a mile away, a trait that both her and Vax had inherited from the man. And the woman? Well, Vex could only assume she was his new wife. She was tall, blonde, fair skinned, and young; essentially everything their mother never was. She could tell this new daughter was staring in their direction, studying them both with a curiosity that could only come from someone who had no idea who they were. Frankly, it was a little heartbreaking. She looked as though she was at least six, which meant she’d likely replaced them around the time they ran off.

Vex turned to look at Vax. She could tell he was getting frustrated, especially after Syldor’s remark on his prison time. However, there was a stubbornness to both the twins that held them rooted in place, especially since their father had explicitly told them they were not welcome there. They couldn't leave now; for their own sense of self-worth.

“And you Vex’ahlia?” Syldor asked before Vax could come up with a proper rebuttal. “Make any drastic improvements on your living situation? Or are you still living out of that car?”

Vex felt a knot form in her throat, but she contained the urge to cry, biting down on her own tongue and using the pain as a form of meditation.

There were some memories she wished she could cut out with a scalpel.

She remembered crying at a payphone that snowy night. She remembered pleading for Syldor to pay for Vax’s bail while everyone on the street watched her like a zoo animal in a tiny glass cage. She remembered telling him that she was cold, that she was hungry, that she was living out of their car, stuck in an abandoned parking lot with no gas, blocks away from the nearest working payphone and even farther away from where they’d locked away her twin. However, more than anything else, she remembered the moment when she screamed at him to be a father for once in his life, and how he hung up on her on the spot.

“I don’t think you’d care either way,” Vex said flatly, digging her long nails into her palms.

“What I do care about is why you’re here.” He glanced behind his shoulder toward the woman and child before glaring back at the twins. “Everyone is staring at you and I’d rather you not humiliate yourselves more than you already have.”
“It’s alright, you can admit that you’re the one who doesn’t want to be embarrassed,” Vax said.

“Funny, we didn’t think you told anyone we were your children for that very reason,” Vex added.

“You misread me.” He furrowed his brow. “I simply do not want you thinking this is a tourist location. This is a place of business. Something that you two will never understand.”

He was treating them like fucking teenagers again. He seemed to have lost all sense of time and space and neglected to remember that both of them were far closer to forty than they were to being newborns, but knowing him, he’d probably lost track of their ages anyway.

“I’ll have you know that we do have business here,” Vex sneered, “Our friend is performing and we are all invited to the show. Praised by Allura Vysoren herself.” She raised her chin to him and her expression grew harsh. As much as she hated to admit it, it was a move she’d inherited from him.

Syldor stared down at his silver wristwatch and raised his brows. “I highly doubt that...but good for you.” He adjusted his cufflink and looked up at the twins once more. “Just see to it that you don’t break any more laws, at least while here. I already have too much business on my plate.”

“Like?” Vax asked.

“Yeah, why are you here?”

“It doesn’t concern you, and would confuse you even if it did.” He motioned as if he were ready to walk away, before turning his head toward them one last time, “Now leave, before they call security. The big one with you is making people uncomfortable.”

“We just were,” Vex snapped. She was losing her cool, fast. “But we’ll be back to the party we were personally invited to.”

“I have no interest in your little garage band...” he said, not even bothering to turn around as he walked away, neglecting to grace them even with a simple goodbye.

Vex’s eyes scanned the woman and young girl one last time as she watched all three of them head toward the elevator. She spotted the girl look back at them, tugging on the woman’s hand slightly as she was guided out of sight behind a pair of gilded elevator doors.

Vex closed her eyes tightly and a few tears escaped her lids as she stormed off toward the exit, fully ignoring Percy and Keyleth who’d been politely waiting for them closer to the conversation.

Once outside the building, Vex threw her eyes to the sky and grabbed her hair, growling to the air as the others watched her with a little concern. Soon enough, Vax, Keyleth and Percy joined her as well.

“That was... like seeing a celebrity,” Keyleth said. “Like you know when you only know someone through pictures and then you see them in person? It’s really weird but kind of cool.”

“Nothing about my father is cool Keyleth,” Vex snapped.

“I’m sorry,” Keyleth blurted out, covering her mouth. “That’s not what I meant. It’s just, well, you know...I mean maybe you don’t know. I just-”

Vax rested a hand on Keyleth’s shoulder and rubbed it a little. “Just let it go. It’s fine.”

Percy approached Vex rather solemnly and waited patiently for Vex to finish off her series of curses
toward the sky before her gaze refocused on reality.

“What?” she barked, her voice a now strained.

“I had no idea your father was…”

“Rich?” Vex snapped. “Yeah, we don’t just hate things for shits and giggles.”

Percy quirked a brow at her. “I was going to say ‘an asshole’, but I acknowledge that those two words are synonymous in your vocabulary.”

“And now you know why…” Vax said.

“I mean, I’d figured as much from the stories, but I never imagined I’d witness it in person…”

“Fuck!” Vex shouted, causing Percy to flinch. She followed up her outburst by stomping out some poor invisible critter to death on the sidewalk. “I. Hate. Him. So. Fucking. Much.”

For a moment, Percy simply stood idle with his hands in his pockets as he watched Vex have her way with the concrete. However, after sharing a quick glance with the rest of the group, he sighed patiently, adjusted his beanie, and cleared his throat. Then, with unexpected speed and the bravery (and perhaps stupidity) of a lion tamer, Percy promptly grabbed Vex by the arm and tucked it under his. “C’mon now.”

“Wait, what-” Vex’s eyes widened as she stumbled toward him.

“We’re going thrift shopping.” He pulled her close. “It will make you feel a lot better.”

With that, he started leading her in the direction of the subway at a brisk pace, soon followed by the rest of the party.

“Woohoo! Thrift shopping!” Keyleth shouted, tucking her arm under Vax’s arm as well.

“Shopping just makes me wanna pop tags…” Vax muttered, following along.

“But I’ve only got twenty goldies in my pocket,” Tiberius muttered, glancing down at the contents of his wallet.

For but a moment, Vex felt like resisting Percy’s guidance, but as the lively walk and cold city air quickly cleansed her of her heated demeanor, a smile curled on her lips. She turned to look at Percy and he looked back at her, his nose reddened by the winter air but his smile still warm. Feeling rejuvenated, she squeezed Percy’s arm and picked up the pace, now taking the lead and dragging Percy through the crowds like a lioness on the hunt.

Chapter End Notes

Oh boy oh boy oh boy. Time to get on that Gilmore hype train. Here, a little music to get you in the mood.

“Thrift Shop” by Macklemore & Ryan Lewis feat Wanz

[YouTube link]
Looking Sharp

Chapter Summary

Last time, on The Butterfly Effect: The team enters the Cloudtop Center and meets woman having some technical issues at the front desk. Percy helps her out and she introduces herself as Allura Vysoren, a higher employee in the building. She suggest they go to Gilmore’s Glorious Goods to buy clothes for the show. On their way out, the twins run into Syldor, their father, and it is not pleasant.

Chapter Notes

No Content Warnings this chapter

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Brace yourself...you are not prepared.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Allura wasn’t bullshitting when she said the shop wasn’t far. In fact, even after getting on the wrong subway train and having to double back, Vex and the others still managed to make it to their destination after approximately fifteen minutes of travel.

However, as they approached the supposed storefront, they found their relief smothered by a sudden sense of apprehension.

“This can’t be it…” Vax muttered as he stared up at the sign, quirking a pierced eyebrow.

Percy shifted his weight as he exhaled a cloud of smoke to the sky, rubbing his chin with the same hand that held his cigarette. “I kind of like it,” he said, lacing his words with just a touch of irony.

“Color scheme is on point,” Scanlan added, kissing the air with a dramatic hand gesture.

“Looks like a unicorn puked all over it,” Grog grumbled.

Tiberius snorted cigarette smoke from his nose at Grog’s crass statement before resting his face in his palm.

“Exactly,” Scanlan said.

Sandwiched between what looked like a tattoo parlor and falafel restaurant, the shop couldn’t be much larger than a newsstand, though it certainly acted like it. Hanging above them was a flamboyant looking sign that was far too large for the establishment, gold trimmed letters spelling out the words “Gilmore’s Glorious Goods” on a rich purple backdrop. To make matters worse, (or better according to who was judging), the little store emanated what sounded like eighties pop music from an unknown source.

“Is that…” Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go”?” Pike muttered.
“Yep,” Keyleth confirmed, joy painting her lips as she subtly bobbed her head from side to side. Overall, she appeared to be rather unfasted by the whole presentation.

The decorations in the windows were shiny and creeping toward tacky, vaguely reminiscent of a jewelry shop trying to be festive for the holidays, though they weren’t even close to Winter’s Crest yet; long fine wires dangled crystals that glistened under the soft lighting like little prisms, which in turn refracted their rainbows on colorful pillows that showcased goods from artfully folded clothes, too ostentatious jewelry that looked like it belonged at a renaissance fair, to shoes so polished Vex could see her reflection in them.

In all honestly, it all looked awfully expensive. Worry crossed Vex’s mind as it occurred to her that perhaps this was Allura’s definition of “being on a budget”. Nevertheless, she would try her best to not hold it against her; Vex had grown used to people overestimating their financial stability, and besides, they’d already made the trip, so she figured it wouldn't hurt to take a look at the very least.

“Well, I’m going inside,” Vex said, glancing back at the others. “I don’t really care what you all think.”

“Alright, alright; just a moment,” Percy said, hastily putting out his cigarette.

“Just for the record I still think this is all super fucking weird and a waste of our time…” Vax said in a single breath, trailing off as he watched his sister reach for the door.

“Oh, poppycock Vax’ildan!” Tiberius said, patting him on the shoulder with a big smile on this face. “I wager you’ll find something in there that will catch your fancy.”

Vax stared down at his fully black attire, then at the colorful garments in the windows, then back at his clothing, “Aha...for sure.”

Opening the door, Vex found that the music was actually coming from inside, and as they entered -- some more reluctant than others -- she was immediately hit with the strong scent of perfume. It was a rather androgynous scent; not overtly a cologne but not incredibly feminine either. Frankly, she liked it quite a bit, though she couldn't exactly tell whether there was a centralized source of the scent like a perfume rack, or whether the whole place smelled of the stuff.

The main thing she immediately realized was that the store was far larger on the inside than was overtly evident on the outside, due to its odd and somewhat sneaky architecture. What appeared to be the entirety of the shop was really just an appetizer of the store, with nothing more than a few promotional posters and a big, gaudy, bejeweled sign that pointed toward a single flight of stairs heading underground. As she peeked below, Vex could see that they lead to a rather open, violet carpeted space, though she couldn't see far past that.

“I really do love this unusual urban architecture,” Keyleth said, clasping her hands together as she looked around, “Weird little hovels using all the space they can muster. It’s so cute!”

“I suppose,” Percy said, humming to himself as he craned his head over Vex’s shoulder. He turned to look at her and when she caught glimpse of him, he bowed. “After you.”

“Thanks…” Vex muttered, adjusting her sweater before commencing her descent.

Something about the whole set up made her a little uneasy, whether it was the cheerful eighties music in the otherwise silent shop, or the tacky decorations, or the fact that there was literally not one other person in sight besides them.

Making their way down the red brick stairs to the cheerful tune of “Karma Chameleon”, Vex
caught a glimpse of a security camera which ominously pivoted as it followed their movements, prompting her to mouth a silent “what the fuck ”. However, as she poked Vax to point out the camera, she found him rather distracted by the view below. Following his gaze, her jaw relaxed a little. There was officially no doubt in her mind that the bottom portion of the building was the real part of the store.

Reaching the landing, the entirety of the group stared at the basement in awe. Before them was a vast, labyrinthine expanse of colorful goods of all shapes and sizes.

Shelves upon shelves showcased a myriad of items, from glass centerpieces to scented candles, to model airplanes. The walls were painted a deep maroon color and covered in eccentric artwork depicting various abstract nude figures, with the occasional fully stocked bookshelf breaking up the pattern. The middle lanes -- which were lined with colorful comfortable looking couches -- showcased everything from antique furniture, to small appliances, to party supplies, and of course, racks upon racks of fine looking clothing. Yet there also seemed to be new items on sale as well. One corner of the area seemed dedicated to makeup and beauty supplies, while another more concealed area appeared to house a rather extensive collection of very provocative lingerie...that rapidly stole Scanlan and Grog’s attention.

Despite the crowded nature of the store, the organization was neat and quite pleasing to the eye. Moreover, from the looks of it, the quality of the items seemed almost perfect. It was nothing like any other thrift shop Vex had ever come across, which made her a tad uneasy, especially given the fact that the owner seemed to be absolutely nowhere in sight.

Shrugging off the doubt, she wandered up to the closest clothes rack and studied the price tags.

“Five goldies” she muttered to herself. “Not bad.”

Somehow, whoever had decorated the store had managed to make the whole place look far more opulent than what was presented on the price tags. Vex found herself feeling almost classy amongst all the fine wares, though she wondered if it was just a false impression on her part. Perhaps her opinion of the place was simply influenced by the perfume permeating the air, or maybe the slightly rosy mood lighting, or the hanging crystals, or the bedazzled pillows lining the couches, or the disco ball in the middle of the room... Surely no proper interior designer would think that was something to be proud of, and yet, it sort of tied the whole room together.

Studying her surroundings, a bout of boisterous laughter from Grog caught Vex’s ear. As she turned toward the commotion, she grimaced at the sight of Scanlan, gyrating his hips as he sang along with the music playing in the store.

“Oh god,” she groaned, covering her eyes.

“Karma, karma, karma, karma, karma, chameleon... You come and go, you come and goo0000,”

She stared up at the disco ball and groaned, begging Scanlan to spare them. It was but a troubling reminder that in just a few hours, he of all people would be performing in front of god knows how many sophisticated individuals.

Vax chuckled, grinning from ear to ear. “Yeah, you shake that tush Shorthalt.”

Scanlan took no heed of Vex’s complaints and just kept on dancing, singing along in his signature tenor timber. “Loving would be easy if your colors were like my dreams-”

Suddenly, from the far end of the shop, a deep, velvety, bass voice joined in from across the room,
"Red, gold, and green... Red, gold, and greeeeeeeen!"

Everyone in the room snapped their heads toward the voice just in time to witness a tall, robust looking man barge out from behind of a beaded curtain with his arms wide, singing his heart out.

Harmonizing with Scanlan, the man sauntered down the hall with a grand pearly grin, his thick black hair tied back in a loose ponytail, and a long braided goatee complementing his chiseled jaw. His complexion was dark and flawless, perfectly matched by his rich purple designer robes trimmed in gold and blue floral details. Long dangling earrings swayed to the rhythm of his swagger, and his hands were covered in gaudy rings and bracelets, while multiple gold chains rolled down his slightly exposed hairless chest all the way down to his waist. As he shimmied closer, Vex couldn’t help but notice the perfection of his thick eyebrows and the subtle hint of eyeliner around his deep brown eyes, all complemented by the glimmer of a single, diamond detailed nose ring.

Out of some sort of twin instinct, Vex turned to share her bewilderment with her brother, only to find that his eyes looked like they were about to bulge out of his own skull. It was an expression that she’d only seen a few other times, most notably, the time Vax almost fell off a two-story building, and the time he accidentally stumbled on some really steamy gay porn.

Coming to a dramatic stop, the man snapped his fingers and did a twirl before reaching his hand out to the closest person in front of him, that being Tiberius in this particular case. In this close proximity, Vex was almost certain she had finally identified where the perfume was coming from.

“Welcome…” the man said, accompanying his greeting with a deep chuckle, “to Gilmore’s Glorious Goods…”

“Hooooly shit-balls,” Vax muttered.

"Holy shit balls" was right. This man carried himself with such an air of self-importance that it somehow felt legitimate and entirely justified, confidence seeping out of every last one of this perfect little pores.

Vex leaned in toward Vax and whispered, “I’m going to bet two goldies that this is Gilmore.”

“No way in hell I’m taking that bet,” Vax hissed back, his eyes still wide and fixated on the man.

“My name is Shaun Gilmore,” he said with a small bow. “Humble owner of this humble hovel.” He turned to Vax and winked, “But you can call me Gilmore.”

Vex snorted and crossed her arms, yet as she turned to look at Vax to claim her figurative winnings, he was already in the process of trying to hide someplace among the animal print jackets.

“And I’m Tiberius Stormwind from Draconia!” he said, happily shaking the man’s hand.

The rest of the party introduced themselves in their standard chaotic fashion, gradually drifting closer like flies attracted to the irresistible shine of a spotlight.

“My my…” Gilmore said, resting his hand on his chest, “You’re quite the rugged looking bunch aren’t you? Please tell me you are here to purchase clothing.”

“We are,” Percy said plainly, glancing at Vex with a small nod and politely removing his hat.

“Oh!” He braided his fingers together, “You make me the happiest man in the world. All of you?”

“I’m actually quite alright thank you,” Tiberius said with a chuckle, “I packed a suit for the
occasion.”

“And what occasion might that be?”

“A rather illustrious performance by myself at the Cloudtop Clup,” Scanlan said with a grin, turning toward the rest of the party. “Therefore, my entourage here would like to make sure they are adequately clothed for the event. I myself already have everything I need.”

Vex wrinkled her nose at the notion of being called Scanlan’s entourage, before rolling her eyes and speaking up, “Your friend Allura sent us.”

“Oh, my dear Allura…” He hummed, glancing up at the ceiling. “A brilliant woman that one. Such excellent tastes. I can assure you that you’ve come to the right place.” He quickly twirled around and started walking in a very specific direction through the maze of clothing racks, clapping his hands. “Come now. Let’s not waste any time. Right this way.”

Like a line of obedient little schoolchildren following their favorite teacher, everyone vanished into the maze of clothes, save for Vex, who stayed behind at the sudden realization that her brother had conveniently vanished. She pursed her lips and her eyes darted around before they narrowed on a rack of animal print jackets. Striding up to it, she aggressively pulled the garments apart to find nothing but empty space. She scratched her head and looked around some more before her eyes settled on a rack of jet black dresses. A small smirk curled on her lips, and as she pulled the dresses apart, a crouching Vax glanced up at her like a frightened cat.

“Seriously brother.” She grabbed him by the ear and dragged him down the winding path of clothing. “You’re being ridiculous.”

“He intimidates me,” he squeaked, wincing in pain as he was dragged.

“I’m sure he does,” Vex said with a groan, eventually catching up with the others.

They were all sitting in a corner of the store that was lined with mirrors. A few ottomans were organized in a semicircle, while a couple of doors lead to some changing rooms. Gilmore was already in the middle of getting Grog’s measurements, forcing him to stand like a very confused mannequin as he measured everything from his height to his girth to his shoe size.

Taking a step back, Gilmore ran his manicured fingers down the length of his goatee before glancing at the others. “Now, who here needs suits besides Mr. Strongjaw?”

Percy raised a hand, and Vex grabbed Vax’s arm and raised it up for him as well. He of course, immediately shoved her away, giving her the stink-eye before finally accepting some responsibility and reluctantly raising up a single finger.

“And as a small note…” Vex spoke up, her voice a little higher than usual. “We’re… kind of sort of somewhat on a pretty tight budget, just so you know…”

Percy looked at her with a grin that was revving up for some mockery, “You forgot to mention ‘slightly’ and ‘to some extent’ to that list of yours…”

Vex narrowed her eyes at him, and he promptly stared up at the ceiling, looking dreadfully amused with himself.

“Not a problem my dear,” Gilmore said with a smile. “You’ve come to the right place. As I like to say…” He gazed into the distance with a longing sigh, tracing his hand across an imagined horizon. “I envision a world where everyone dresses in fine clothing, and what better way to do that than to
scour the lands for unwanted treasures and provide them at a cost that is reasonably affordable.”

“It’s like the best type of recycling,” Keyleth said with a big smile.

“Precisely!” Gilmore said, before rubbing his hands together. “Now. Let us get started, shall we?”

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While they waited for Gilmore, Vex took a seat next to the others in the semi-circle of ottomans. She was pleased to discover that they were far softer than they appeared, a rather welcome surprise for her lower back after she’d been walking all morning.

Fortunately, their patience was not over-strained, because after no more than five minutes, Gilmore reemerged from the jungle of clothing with quite the collection of suits, all prepared on a clothes rack and ready to be tried on.

“I’m so sorry for the wait. We’re a little low on staff given that I just fired my only other employee.” He chuckled. “Still working out the kinks of running a brand new business.”

Vex blinked at the oddity of it all. Despite her best efforts to make sense of her current predicament, Vex was still on the more confused side of things. Gilmore seemed to run his store like a high-end boutique, fully determined to provide services that she’d only ever seen in chick flics. Surely, he had some sort of plan in mind, but she for one knew nothing of how to run businesses, so whether his behavior was a result of brilliance or insanity was a mystery potentially worth investigating. That being said, she was by no means opposed to the polite treatment. He was a master at making his customers feel important and welcome, and honestly, it sort of made her feel like a Lady.

The first target on his list was Grog. With absolutely no hesitation, Gilmore promptly shoved him into a changing room with what looked like a dark maroon suit. Vex had her doubts on whether Grog’s muscular physique would even fit in the clothes, yet as he awkwardly wandered out of the changing room with his tail between his legs, he looked surprisingly dapper, granted he’d failed to button up the white shirt correctly and his black tie was tied in a literal knot.

“Oh dear,” Tiberius said, covering his mouth with a chuckle.

“You might want to go with a clip on,” Scanlan whispered to Gilmore with a sly wink.

“Noted,” Gilmore hummed, rubbing the back of his neck, “But overall, I think it’s a good look on him, don’t you think?”

“I think so,” Pike said, grinning from ear to ear. “Spin around for us Grog!”

Grog begrudgingly took a few small steps as he pivoted around, staring up at the ceiling like he was bored out of his mind.

“Looking good big man,” Vax said, arms crossed.

“You’re gonna be impressing all the ladies,” Pike said with a wink.

Frankly, Grog cleaned up quite nicely, all things considered. Vex couldn't recall ever seeing him wear anything even close to a button up shirt, much less a full suit. The chances that he’d ever need to wear it again were slim, but with Gilmore racking up the full set at around thirty gold-prints with shoes included, she felt comfortable admitting it was a bargain worth taking.

The next volunteer was Percy, given the fact that Vax explicitly took a step back when Gilmore
asked who wanted to go next.

Gilmore clasped his hands together as he approached Percy, overtly sizing him up with a cheeky grin. “Now, you sir... Allow me to be blunt and say that your hair is absolutely fabulous.”

“I know right?” Keyleth blurted out. “You should touch it, it’s so soft.”

“I, um...” Percy furrowed his brow. “Thank you?”

Gilmore chuckled but didn’t invade Percy’s personal hair space. Instead, he ran his fingers down his goatee a few times. “You strike me as...” he hummed, scanning him with quite a bit of scrutiny, “a navy blue gentleman. Perhaps an indigo.”

“If you say so.”

After a bit of mixing and matching, he handed Percy a pile of clothes and gallantly opened the changing room for him. Vex briefly caught Percy’s gaze as he nervously glanced back at the party before vanishing behind the door.

She chuckled at the thought of Percy wearing anything besides his worn out jeans, leather jacket and beanie. She couldn’t cleanse her mind of the image she’d painted in her mind: Percy waddling out of there looking like a clown, tripping over a suit that was far too baggy over his skinny limbs. Not that there was anything wrong with that; some people just weren’t born to be formal, and for some reason, Percy struck Vex as just a little too punk rock for the classy scene.

But she was wrong.

So very, very wrong...

Oh God, how could she have been so fucking wrong?

As Percy stepped out of the changing room, Vex eyes grew wide as she came to the face-reddening realization that she’d grossly underestimated Percy ability to be the thing that wet dreams were made of. The back flips her stomach was attempting could certainly testify to that.

A few whistles were exchanged as Percy wandered into the middle of the semicircle with his hand in his pockets, wearing a fine pair of dark indigo pants, a crisp white shirt, and a dark gray waistcoat that defined the slender shape of his torso. He adjusted his black tie and looked up at the group, clearing his throat.

“Holy guacamole,” Pike said.

“Percy looking flyyyyy,” Keyleth howled.

Gilmore walked up to him with a very pleased look on his face. “That color complements you perfectly. It really brings out the blue in your eyes.”

As Percy turned to look at himself in the mirror, it took all of Vex’s mental faculties to not stare at his perfect ass in those pants. Vax, on the other hand, had no shame, and made no effort to conceal his own gawking.

“Here, try it with this.” Gilmore handed him a suit jacket that matched the indigo color of the pants, and Percy put it on.

As he did, through the reflection, Vex could see his expression morph to one of sudden melancholy,
as if he’d realized something uncomfortable.

“You don’t like it?” Gilmore asked, apparently noticing his frown as well.

“Oh, I do,” Percy assured him, his voice reaching a slightly higher pitch. “You’re right. It’s a good color.”

There was something in Percy’s voice that felt off. He seemed bothered; almost upset by something. Maybe he was just touched by how good he looked. Everyone else seemed to think he was an angel fallen out of heaven.

“You know? I don’t think that tie works. One moment.” Gilmore wandered up to a nearby shelf and thumbed through a collection of ties before finally settling on a silver one and handing it to Percy, “I believe this will suit you much better than the black.”

Percy carefully loosened the tie he was wearing before accepting the new one from Gilmore. Vex’s eyes grew wide as she watched Percy’s fingers work their magic. She’d never seen someone put on a tie so fast in her entire life, granted she wasn’t the type of girl who hung out with a lot of tie wearing individuals anyway. He did so with a quickness that almost seemed second nature, his eyes barely paying attention to his own handiwork as he focused on his face instead. Tucking in the tie, he let out a deep sigh and ran a hand through his thick hair, adjusting a few stands and allowing it to part in such a way that it looked incredibly flattering.

Vex watched Percy lift his chin as he scanned himself in the mirror, as if he were looking down at himself with a detached level of judgment. His brow furrowed and the corner of his mouth twitched ever so slightly before he glanced down at the pair of black shoes he was wearing.

Vex could feel her heartbeat in her throat, and she nervously recrossed her legs, trying to quell the familiar sensation in her nether regions. He’d gone from full urban grunge to aristocrat in a matter of minutes, and Vex found herself so suddenly flustered that she glanced away in an attempt to cover up her blush behind her braid. It was a version of Percy that Vex wouldn't have imagined in her wildest dreams, and she’d had some pretty wild dreams involving him so far. It was all dreadfully confusing.

Suddenly, her breath hitched as she spotted a pair of black shoes come into her field of vision.

“Vex.”

She looked up at Percy and gave him a big nervous smile, desperately trying to contain the hot flash she was currently experiencing. “Yes dear?”

Percy gave her a long curious look before glancing down at his wardrobe, speaking softly so to not be heard by the others. “Do you think forty gold-prints is alright for all of this? I could probably get away without the waistcoat-”

“No! You’re perfect,” Vex squeaked, immediately biting down on her reactive tongue and hoping for some sort of world reset. “I mean...” She swallowed once. “Forty is fine.”

Percy didn’t look incredibly convinced but refrained from dwelling on the matter any further. “Alright... just checking. You’ll cover it, yes?”

“Of course darling.”

With a polite nod, he mouthed a silent “thank you”, and as he retreated toward the changing room, she followed his form and bit her lower lip. God, why did men look so damn good in suits?
Gilmore clasped his hands together and looked at the party. “Right, I believe there was one more gentleman who needed a suit before we started on the ladies, correct?”

Vex turned to Vax, who was currently leaning against a pillar looking like a deer in the headlights. Assuming he’d probably bitten his own tongue or something, she spoke on his behalf. “My brother, Vax.” She pointed at him, and he, in turn, gave her a look that could fling daggers.

“Oh yes! Of course. Come now. Don’t be shy,” Gilmore said, beckoning him over with a finger.

Swallowing hard, Vax wandered up to Gilmore, arms crossed, staring at the floor.

Gilmore circled him like a hungry tiger. “Black leather and piercings...” he purred, “You’ve got quite a bit of personality in your style.” He cocked his head. “I like it.”

Vax did not look up from the ground, though Vex could see a very subtle blush behind his olive complexion. “Thanks...”

Vex smirked, covering her mouth. She was starting to get the distinct feeling that her brother’s standoffishness was less of a reluctance to buy new clothes, and more akin to a middle schooler shying away from his prom date.

“You know, your complexion would certainly benefit from something green. Maybe some golds as well.”

“Hell no,” Vax said, looking up at him for the first time. “My father owns a green suit. Looking like him is bad enough.”

Gilmore rested a hand on his chest and gave out a hearty chuckle, before looking at Vax intently. “You know what? I think I have just the thing for you.” With a quick wink, he pat Vax on the shoulder before strutting away.

Vex noticed Vax immediately turn his head around to stare at Gilmore’s rear as he pranced toward the clothing rack, and she privately celebrated a little victory in her head. She knew her twin way too well.

When Gilmore returned, he delicately handed Vax some dark clothing before leading him toward the changing room. “I have a feeling this is more up your alley.”

Vax took his sweet time getting ready, so much so that Vex legitimately considered the possibility that he had crawled up some vent and scurried away. Thankfully though, he eventually emerged from the dressing room, pulling up his pants that were just a little bit on the loose side.

He had slipped into a very form fitting dark gray suit, a deep black shirt, and a thin, blood red tie to pull it all together. Although the look came off as a little vampy, it was so terribly Vaxeque that it suited him nonetheless. Gilmore was nothing less than genius.

Keyleth’s eyes went wide as she followed Vax’s drag his feet toward Gilmore. “Looking sharp Vax.”

“Like a blade,” Tiberius added.

“Careful not to cut anyone on that edge,” Scanlan smirked, before receiving the justice end of one of Pike’s elbows.

“Not bad,” Percy said with a hum, nudging Vex with his shoulder. “Your brother dresses up rather
well, don’t you think?”

“I know. He’s always looked good in suits,” Vex said. “But he can’t stand them.”

Rubbing his chin, Gilmore shifted his weight as he studied Vax from head to toe. “So, what do you think?”

Vax shrugged. “Pants are a little loose.”

“That snake belt you had on might fit the look. You can keep the piercings as well. You’d be surprised to find that the Cloudtop’s definition of classy is a little more on the loose end...”

A slight smirk spread on Vax’s lips. “Loose enough to wear a black Hawaiian shirt?” he asked sarcastically.

Gilmore raised a brow at him and grinned, leaning in to adjust his tie. “Only if they know you...”

Vax bit down on his lower lip as he nervously watched Gilmore’s hands at work, tugging him just a little closer as he finished up the job.

“There we go,” Gilmore said, patting him on the shoulder. “Very handsome indeed.”

Vax cleared his throat and looked away, unable to wipe the smile off his lips. “Thank you.”

Vex flashed a tender grin at the entire situation. There was no doubt in her mind that if they lived any closer to Emon, Gilmore’s phone number would already be in Vax’s pocket.

As Vax settled back down, Keyleth sprung up from her chair with excitement, arms in the air. “Our turn! Ah! I’m so excited.”

Gilmore spun toward them with a toothy grin and opened his arms wide. “Absolutely my dear! Come along, follow me. You’ll be rather pleased with the dress selection.”

***

Gilmore had an excellent sense of style even when it came to the more feminine spectrum of the fashion world. He immediately guided the girls to a section that had a wide selection of semi-formal dresses organized by size and then color. The women made a poignant point to not show off their dresses until that evening. Instead, they hid in the dressing rooms, showcasing their findings in private to each other and to Gilmore.

Being the tallest of the three, Keyleth was having the hardest time finding something that fit her physique, but with Gilmore’s assistance, she eventually settled on a flowy, medium length dress with a plunging neckline that lead down to multiple autumn colored layers. It was one of those dresses that really wouldn't work with a bra, but Keyleth never wore one anyway so it was a non-issue.

Pike was lucky and stumbled upon a dress rather quickly. It would have looked quite short on anyone else, but Pike’s stubby little legs turned it into something that was almost work-appropriate, granted it was form-fitting, strapless, and made her breasts look huge. The light sky blue color matched her eyes beautifully, especially with the subtle bejeweled pattern running down one of the sides. As an added bonus, the gold pendant she always wore worked wonderfully with the neckline.

“They keep the Cloudtop Club well heated, right?” Pike asked.

Gilmore chuckled. “Oh trust me. Things get rather steamy up there. Nevertheless, I definitely suggest
bringing a nice jacket with you for reasons I won’t specify.”

“How come?” Keyleth asked.

Gilmore smirked at them mischievously, “You’ll see. Wouldn't want to spoil the surprise...”

Vex quirked a brow at the conversation as she continued to thumb through the dresses, struggling to figure out what size she wanted to go for. Both her and her brother often had trouble finding clothes that looked right on them, especially since Vax was rather petite for a man, and she had some inconsistent proportions. Mediums were slightly too big for her, but smalls often fit too tightly around her thighs and the ass she’d inherited from her mother. On a normal shopping day, she usually went with a small top and medium bottoms, but given she was determined to find a single piece dress, things had become slightly more complicated.

Recognizing Vex’s struggle, Gilmore approached her. “What seems to be the problem dear?”

She huffed in exasperation. “Can’t find anything that would fit over my fat ass,” she muttered.

Gilmore laughed, rather amused by her bluntness. “My my... you and your brother certainly are the spunky pair. Alas, I’m sure we can figure something out. What color would you like?”

“Anything at this point. Though pink really clashes with my skin tone.”

Gilmore gave her a careful once-over before lightly taking her hand. He studied her chipped turquoise nails, and his curious look morphed to one of sudden inspiration. “I can work with this.”

In a matter of minutes, Gilmore reappeared from a different section of the store holding a rather simple, yet long looking turquoise dress with a deep halter strap neckline.

“Had to get this from the bride’s maids section. You’ll find that this particular fabric falls quite comfortably in all the right places.”

Retreating into the changing room, Vex slipped on the dress and checked herself out in the mirror. A foxy grin spread across her lips at the discovery that the dress had a rather dramatic slit up the right leg. It definitely gave her plenty of room to move around, which was something she valued in formal clothing but rarely got; not to mention the sexy bonus was always appreciated. She’d probably have to pay close attention to what panties she wore, but she could deal with that. Growing curious, she leaned her back against the changing room wall and lifted up one of her legs, revealing her semi-transparent black panties. She purred at the possibilities as she cupped one of her breasts, closing her eyes. She imagined it would be dangerously easy to fuck in this dress, and before she could put a halt to it, her thoughts began to wander in dark, risky places...

For but a brief moment, an image flashed in her mind: Percy ... in his suit, inches away from her, biting his lower lip as he unbuttoned his pants. Her breath hitched and she nearly lost her balance as her mind snapped back to reality, feeling a hot chill crawl all the way down from her neck to where the sun didn’t shine. Resting her hand against her chest, she found her heart was racing, and she came to the realization that this needed to stop, now. Shaking away the unholy thoughts as best she could, she looked at herself in the mirror once more, releasing a quivering sigh and running a hand through her hair. At least the skirt portion of the dress fit comfortably around the lower half of her body, so she almost felt ready to buy it.

She patted herself down, eventually finding the location of the price tag.

“Ten GP,” she hummed, lingering her gaze on the number for a few moments before shrugging. “Sure, why not.” She already owned a pair of shoes she wanted to wear so it was a single expense
she was willing to accept.

***

Having found everything they needed, the party followed Gilmore to the cash registry, Vex taking the lead and standing in front of the counter as he scanned the various items.

“You all paying together?” he asked.

“We’ll just put it all on one card for now, thank you,” Vex answered. “Will save you some time.”

“I’ve got all the time in the world darling…” He grinned. “But anyway, that will add up to a hundred and thirty-eight GP total.”

Reaching for her wallet, her eyes narrowed as a sneaky smirk formed on her lips. She looked up at Gilmore and leaned in. “So…” Vex said, batting her eyelashes with her debit card in hand. “You wouldn’t happen to give discounts for bulk purchases…would you?”

Gilmore quirked a brow at Vex, crossing his arms and staring her down with a look she didn’t know how to respond to, save for perhaps cower.

Suddenly, she felt a hand rest on her shoulder as Vax interjected. “Don’t mind my sister. You’ve done so much for us already. You’d be going far beyond anything we deserve…”

Vex was a hair away from strangling Vax in front of everyone when she heard a soft chuckle escape Gilmore’s lips. He leaned in, giving Vax a shameless once-over, his eyes lingering on his mouth.

“Uh…” Vex muttered.

Gilmore raised a finger and gestured her to wait a minute. “Tell you what…” he said with a hum, glancing over the crew behind her and Vax. A foxy grin spread across his lips and he played around with his gold chains. “You’re going to be going to a rather dashing event, correct?”

“Yes,” Vex and Vax said in tandem.

“How about this.” He stood straight, crossing his arms. “I grant you a ten percent discount on all these wares, and in exchange... you mention where you got your lovely outfits. What do you say?”

Vex stared at him in disbelief. “That’s all you want us to do?”

“Darling, word of mouth is crucial when starting off a business. Think of “Gilmore’s Glorious Good’s” as...” He smirked devilishly, “your sponsors.”

“I like the sound of that!” Tiberius shouted from the very back.

“Well…” Gilmore hummed in approval. “Do we have a deal then?”

“Of course,” Vax said a far too eagerly, quickly reaching for a handshake.

Gilmore gladly took Vax’s hand into his, and in the corner of her eye, Vex saw Gilmore lightly brush Vax’s hand with his thumb. “But I’m warning you... Allura and I are like this.” He crossed his fingers with his free hand. “I’ll know whether you mention me or not.”

“I swear on the honor of this good shop of yours,” Vax said, resting his second hand on top of their handshake, “that we will most certainly mention you. In fact...” he said, turning to look at the others. “I promise you that Scanlan here will be sure to mention you before his performance.”
Scanlan’s mouth dropped to say something, but after a brief pause, he shrugged. “Yeah sure, why not?”

Vax eagerly turned back toward Gilmore and looked at him intently, giving him a quick wink. “We have a deal then?”

In the background, the song “You Spin me Round (Like a Record)” played softly as Gilmore squeezed Vax’s had, sneaking one last wink in before flashing a toothy grin. “A deal it is…”

Chapter End Notes

...Man, I wrote Vax as such a Tsundere this chapter. Alas, it’s just kind of how it worked out, but I feel comfortable that he eventually warmed up to Gilmore… Let’s just say Vax spins Gilmore’s head right round like a record baby right round round round... And look, if you’ve never seen the original video of “You Spin me Round (Like a Record)” by Dead or Alive”, I am linking it right now. You’ll thank me later.

YouTube link

Jokes aside, this chapter was incredibly hard to write. I swear, Vox Machina has far too many members. I was “this” close to splitting this monster into two parts, but I couldn't do that to you people. It’s alright though. Gilmore deserves all this attention if not more.
Vex’s mood had drastically improved after her unusually successful shopping day, having gotten a deal on a haul of clothes so impressive that even she felt like a bit of a rich asshole. With lunch on their to-do list, they ended up eating a rather delicious meal at the falafel restaurant right next to Gilmore’s (suggested by the man himself), which saved them quite a bit of time. After that, they stopped by a supermarket to get supplies for sandwiches that they planned on having for dinner. All this added to the fact that they were already ahead of schedule made Vex one happy camper.

Nevertheless, she couldn't shake the creeping sensation that things were going to start degenerating at any moment; it was, after all, how her life story usually panned out: Good, weird, bad, worse, good, weird, bad, worse...and so on. On one hand, having such a predictable fate pattern was probably something to be thankful of, but alas, she failed to find comfort in her apparent loss of control.

The most stressful part about being on this wild roller coaster was probably trying to discern which point in the cycle she was entering. She definitely knew that meeting her father probably constituted as a “worse” part in her life journey, but she was still trying to find her bearings on her most recent events. Did “Gilmore’s Glorious Goods” constitute as things going “good” or going “weird”? Because frankly, she wasn’t at all ready to deal with any sort of “bad” right now; or at least not in her current state of blissful confusion. She desperately wanted to maintain the positive momentum she had gained so far, especially since she couldn't wait to doll up and show off her beauty to the others -- for the most part. Alas, part of her couldn’t shake the fluttering feeling she’d acquired ever since her little... moment.
During their entire trek back to the hotel, Vex couldn't even look at Percy. Certainly not after she’d practically fondled herself in the changing room with his image in mind. Nevertheless, she took her temporary inability to look him in the eye as a blessing in disguise. Staring was rude anyway, and at least now she had a compelling reason to really not do it, as if him scolding her a few weeks back wasn’t a worthy incentive. The last thing she wanted to do was lose all control and make things... complicated. She’d outgrown that period in her life rather graciously and she wasn’t about to relapse for just any old pretty boy.

***

When the group returned to the hotel, the party split into two groups: Those who wanted to nap and those who needed to get ready; and thus commenced preparations for what would probably be the classiest night of their lives.

The girls took turns taking showers, leaving the door unlocked so they had the freedom to wander and do their makeup as they pleased. Vex, Pike, and Keyleth had known each other long enough to where nudity was a non-issue. In all honesty, Vex didn’t mind being naked around virtually anyone, but she respected the squeamishness of others enough to combat her subtle nudist tendencies.

Getting ready to the rhythms of some generic dance music they had found on YouTube, they sipped on a bottle of white wine Scanlan had graciously brought them before heading off to get ready himself.

“Vex, top me off,” Pike said as she reached her glass out of the shower.

“Try to not get shampoo in it,” Keyleth muttered in her underwear as she applied layers of blues and golds to her eyes.

Meanwhile -- currently shirtless and braless -- Vex finished applying her red lipstick before pouring Pike some wine. She was the type of person who preferred putting on her makeup naked to avoid getting stupid fallout all over her clothes.

“That’s why I usually just drink it straight out of the bottle,” Pike said, sipping her drink as she allowed the water to wash the shampoo off her back.

They heard a knock at the door.

“Still naked,” The girls said in chorus.

“Well hurry the fuck up,” Vax groaned. “I gotta shower too.”

There was something oddly nostalgic about getting ready like this. It wasn't that they were old crones or anything, but dancing in the bathroom and putting on makeup together reminded Vex of those high school experiences she’d heard of but never experienced.

As a teen, she was rather selective when it came to social interactions, finding herself rather repulsed by the majority of the entitled rich suburbanites who attended her private high school. With few exceptions, she expended most of her social energy on one-on-one meetings with her girlfriends or boyfriends. In fact, she could probably count the times she went out for a simple coffee with “friends” on a single foot. Looking back, her behavior probably didn't help quell the general dislike toward her, courtesy of the entire fucking school. It was one thing to be unpopular, but it was another to be explicitly disliked...

She could never quite pinpoint when it all started, but she suspected it was around the time she dumped her first boyfriend, because that was when she first started hearing the term “heart breaker”
get thrown around in her presence. At first, she thought it was a friendly joke, something empowering and to be proud of, but as the slurs spread and multiplied, the term started to get flung around with other, less flattering terms. By junior year, she’d heard the word “slut” muttered in the hallways just enough times to where she no longer trusted anyone she wasn’t fucking, and even then, she always had the creeping impression that they too were talking behind her back.

But she didn’t care; at least not after she got used to it. She wasn’t the type who liked being mistreated or trapped in a corner, and if breaking up with an emotionally abusive asshole resulted in being called a slut, then she just had to accept it and move on. She learned to burn bridges early on in life, and with the help of her brother beating up the more stubborn of bullies (and oftentimes getting suspended for it), she survived high school with only a handful of incidents of self-harm. Sure, she was probably oversimplifying it in her head. To this day, she still had trouble fully digesting the entirety of the facts surrounding those painful memories. She found it far easier to pretend to forgive, and forget the worse chapters while retaining the lesson.

For the most part, she was content with her current situation. In hindsight, she was thankful of all the humiliation she’d experienced back in the day. It had made her tougher, wiser, and a sharp observer above anything else. She bore enough self-awareness to acknowledge that she wasn’t the easiest person to get along with, and she was also compassionate enough to know better than to subject anyone to her personality for long periods of time. It was essentially the catalyst that prompted her to swear off the formal dating scene for good. Frankly, being single had reduced her anxiety significantly, and she found that having a solid network of close friends and the occasional one night stand was all she really needed in life.

Most importantly, her past experiences warded her against screwing anybody she was likely to run into more than once. In fact, it was probably the main factor that ultimately influenced her to not mess around with Grog. Back when they first met -- when her more primal side found his tall, tattooed muscular form and crass demeanor absolutely irresistible -- there was a brief period of time where they were terribly flirtatious with each other. Nevertheless, she eventually wised up and opted against pursuing him any further, especially since she found no real interest in dating him. Moreover, she certainly didn’t want to make things weird between her and Pike if things went south, which given her track record, was a near certainty. Sure, there were some days when she still wondered whether she’d overthought it; Grog wasn’t a bad guy, and didn’t seem to hold that many grudges, but he did have a sensitive side, and she wasn’t willing to risk it. Overall, she felt comfortable in her decision and found that things were far less awkward between her and the rest of the Vox Machina gang because of it.

Needless to say, she intended to take the same route with Percy...

Vex slapped her hand on her phone as she watched it nearly vibrate off the counter into the toilet. The gang had been blowing up her phone with group texts for almost an hour now, probably because they needed to leave soon.

Taking a sip from her wine, she unlocked it, and a familiar tingle traveled down her spine.

Of course it was Percy... How ironically fitting. He’d sent her two messages, one with an image attached.

Taking a deep breath, she opened the picture and immediately snorted loudly in response to what she’d been subjected to.

It was a photo of a bear, lounging in a pond and lifting its leg up. In bold white text, the meme read “Nope, don’t need to shave yet. My leg hair is bearly noticeable.”
His following text elaborated on his thought process.

Percy: Be more like this bear. Don’t care about body hair. Hurry up so you can pregame with us. *bear emoji*

Vex smirked at the rhyme, and at the fact that he still remembered to “always send bears” (as she had drunkenly told him a few nights ago), and at the obvious boldness of his request. She gathered they were probably already drinking.

God... how she wanted to reveal to him that there was actually nothing to shave because she’d already waxed it all off before the trip. However, she of all people knew that sharing such information was just asking for trouble; granted the best kind of trouble, but a danger zone nonetheless. To make matters even more tempting, she realized it would be hilarious to confess to him that she was currently wearing nothing but her teal panties and some red lipstick, but sadly, that too was ammo she didn’t dare use, though in any other circumstance, it would have been perfect...

Vex: You already drinking?

Percy: Maybe. I know Scanlan gave you a bottle of wine so does it really matter? *bear emoji*

Vex: Just want to make sure we’re on your level.

Percy: On a scale from “sober” to “sloppy” I’d say I’m at a nice “jovial”. *bear emoji*

Vex: Noted.

Percy: Good. Hurry up. *bear emoji*

Vex: Bossy.

No more texts immediately followed, so Vex used that time to finish off her cat-eye makeup. For a bit, Vex worried that perhaps she’d killed the conversation, but after about five minutes she eventually got an answer.

Percy: I know. *bear emoji*

“Wow,” Vex scoffed out loud, looking up to see that both Pike and Keyleth were staring at her curiously.

“Wow what?” They both asked in tandem.

“Nothing,” Vex said, casually tucking her phone behind her back at the realization that she had nowhere to hide it in her current semi-nudity, save for perhaps down her crack, but she knew better.

“Who you texting?” Pike said with a small smirk.

Another loud knock made them all flinch, and Vex shouted toward the door. “One second. Almost done.” She looked at the girls. “Vax is gonna kill us if we don’t move our asses.”

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As soon as Vex, Vax, Pike, and Keyleth knocked on the room where the others were staying, they heard what sounded like quite a bit of commotion from the other side, followed by boisterous laughter and some heavy footfalls.

After what felt like a damn hour, Vex nearly knocked on the door again when Tiberius finally
answered, looking rather dapper in a full green suit and a golden striped tie, his auburn hair slicked back, and gleaming earrings marching his gold-rimmed glasses.

“Ah! There you are. My, you all look absolutely dashing,” he said, bowing his head as he greeted them inside.

“Thank you Tiberius, as do you,” Keyleth said, returning his kindness with a curtsy.

Entering the room, Vex immediately found herself questioning her life choices. Had she not known any better, she would have assumed they’d accidentally walked in on a miniature frat party; though, in all honesty, she didn’t know why she expected anything less from the guys...

Grog currently had his tie tied around his forehead like Rambo, chuckling cruelly as he ran around the room with a bottle of vodka held high over his head. He skipped and squirmed as Scanlan ran after him with what looked like a leather whip, jumping from bed to bed and desperately trying to grab the bottle from Grog to no avail. At least they were both clothed, sort of. Scanlan’s purple satin shirt was completely unbuttoned and not tucked into his black pants, showing off copious amounts of chest hair, while Grog looked like he’d once again failed to button up his own shirt correctly. The only one who looked adequately dressed was Percy, who was currently in the middle of a wheezing laughing fit as he held a filled shot glass in his hand, looking red as a turnip as he tried to catch his breath.

Vex crossed her arms as she watched the scene, “Wow... we’re gonna make such a good impression, I can already tell...”

Percy wiped a tear from his eye and downed his shot before turning to face the others, his eyes going wide as if he’d just noticed them. With a big smile stretching across his face, he lifted his empty glass, “Oh look, the pretty ones are finally here.”

Vax snorted at the compliment, yet as he turned to look at Vex, she was far too busy pretending to be preoccupied with her dress, making futile adjustments and lowering her head to hide the redness in her cheeks.

Whipping his head around, Scanlan’s eyes went wide at the sight of Pike, and he immediately stopped what he was doing, tossing the leather whip and missing the trash can in some poor attempt to hide it. In the process of hopping off the bed, he nearly ate shit, but tried to save face by stumbling into a kneeling position at Pike’s feet. He spread his arms wide, cheeks rosy and teeth as white as pearls.

“How sweet,” Pike interrupted a little sarcastically, patting him on the head before wandering up to Grog and giving him a solid fist bump.

Scanlan let out a dejected sigh, standing back up on his feet and tightening his ponytail.

Keyleth ran up to Percy and plopped down next to him, “I want what you’re having.”

Scanlan spoke up as he buttoned up his shirt. “I can’t believe I’m the one saying this but let’s not get sloppy drunk just yet, alright?”

Vax quirked a brow at him, “Seems to me as though it’s a little late for that...”

“What? Naaaah. We’ve had like...what?” He turned to look at Grog, “Like three shots each?”
Grog, who was currently in the middle of lifting another shot to his lips with Pike, gave Scanlan a little shrug before downing it as if it were water.

Vax chuckled with a little skepticism as he wandered toward the trash can and picked up the whip. “I really don’t know what this says about your sanity if you guys are pulling this shit sober…”

“Sanity is relative,” Percy interjected.

“As is maturity,” Tiberius added, crossing his arms.

“Anyway…” Scanlan said, “As I was saying. No getting shit faced till after we’re in the club. I got an email from the Cloudtop letting me know that they’ve reserved parking for us so I can take my equipment up. I’m gonna need your help so no puking over the mixer, please.”

“Oh c’mooon…” Keyleth droned, leaning her head against Percy, “Just one shot. All we’ve had is wine…”

Percy raised a brow at her with a smirk. “Yes, I can smell it rather clearly on you. Is that a Pinot Gris?”

Keyleth gasped, covering her mouth, “How did you do that?

He simply laughed, wrapping an arm around her and looking awfully amused with himself.

Vex wandered up to their conversation and narrowed her eyes. “Don’t fall for it Keyleth. Pretty sure he saw the bottle before Scanlan brought it up to us.”

Percy looked at Vex with a disappointed expression on his face, “You sure do love taking the fun out of things don’t you?”

“Ooohhh snap,” Keyleth howled, gawking at them as if she had witnessed a dramatic scene in a telenovela.

“Shots fired,” Vax whispered, nudging Vex with his shoulder.

Vex groaned, and without even looking at Vax, she shoved him onto the bed and wandered up toward Grog. “Alcohol please.”

“Yeh, one sec. We roundin’ up the glasses.”

Keyleth immediately whipped her head toward Percy and narrowed her eyes at him, “What did you do?”

He lifted his hands, eyes wide. “I’m innocent, I swear!”

Vex huffed as she plopped down on a separate bed, staring outside the open window that showcased all the wondrous lights of Emon.

As much as she felt like she deserved Percy’s jab, she couldn’t believe he actually had it in him to be a dick in front of everyone, and it made her feel kind of shitty. Not to mention there was a pompousness to his demeanor that she wasn’t used to, throwing her off in the most unpleasant of ways. To be fair, he’d probably caught onto the hostility she was harboring toward him and was just defending himself, but that instinctual rivalry she’d developed from being a twin really made her want to rip him a new one. Nevertheless, she was more than aware that her anger toward him was both unwarranted and an immature method of dealing with her current state of being.
She knew she needed to get over herself, but she just couldn't help it. It wasn't her fault she had a habit of getting snappy when she was sexually frustrated, and Percy’s cocky attitude wasn’t helping. He had a tendency to get slightly irritating when drunk, his smugness reaching levels that she could barely tolerate. The most disgusting part about it was that she kind of liked, which didn’t bode well for her current mind funk. A little bit more alcohol would probably help her get her mind off things, or perhaps make it worse. Nevertheless, it was a gamble she was willing to take.

With the girls now present, the energy in the room eventually calmed down. Grog and Pike took some time gathering up what odd shot glasses and cups they could find and started distributing them among the others.

“C’mere big man,” Vax said, beckoning him over and fixing the buttons on his shirt as Scanlan spoke up.

“So, my equipment is already in the van. The parking lot is under the Cloudtop Center but there is a service elevator that goes all the way up. They’ve given me a temporary code we can use so we’re pretty much being considered staff. Just so you know, I told them you guys are my team behind the scenes so at least pretend you’re helping me carry stuff up.”

“Don’t worry man, we got you,” Vax assured him.

“Yeh, not a problem,” Grog said. “I can carry ‘eavy shit like it’s my job.”

“It is your job Grog…” Vax muttered.

“Well, it’s already six fifteen,” Tiberius said, glancing down at his wristwatch. “Allura specifically said she wanted us there by seven to set up so I suggest we get moving pretty soon. I don’t want to risk being stuck in traffic. That would be rather disastrous, and we certainly don’t want to disappoint her.”

Keyleth leaned against Percy and whispered rather loudly, “Tibsy got the hots for Allura.”

“I do not!” Tiberius protested too quickly, clearing his throat “I simply… find her an individual that deserves our utmost respect and gratitude. That’s all…”

“Well I do agree with Tiberius though,” Vex said. “We should probably get going. Knowing us we’ll get lost in the parking lot or some shit.”

“I’m ready when you guys are,” Vax said with a shrug.

“So should we take another shot before we get moving?” Pike asked.

“That sounds like an excellent idea,” Percy said, immediately standing up with Keyleth under his arm.

Vex tried her best to not roll her eyes at the sound of Percy’s voice. She was so mad at herself for being mad at him, but she had no power over her emotional responses to things.

Everyone gathered in a circle and held their glasses out as Grog quite masterfully filled them to their rims. If he was skilled at doing anything, it was pouring alcohol. He wouldn't dare waste any on the floor, because the floor never did bullish for him.

Tiberius stumbled to the bathroom and filled his glass with tap water before joining the others, raising his glass high. “To Scanlan’s performance. May he woo the entire crowd with his awkward parodies.”
“Hey,” Scanlan furrowed his brow.

“He’s gonna do fine,” Vax said, patting him on the shoulder with a grin.

Vex sighed. Vax seemed to have a lot more faith in Scanlan than she did. With his most recent performance history, she still struggled to imagine how his style of music would be perceived. She really hoped the people there at least had a sense of humor, but if they were anything like their father, they probably didn’t.

“Guys guys, please…” Scanlan interjected with a sly smile. “Let’s give credit where credit is due. And that is to the amazing fucking paint job I gave to our van that -- may I add -- I suggested we buy.”

“That I own,” Vex said.

“That Percy fixed,” Keyleth added.

“With the part we bought,” everyone chimed in.

Everyone looked at each other for a few awkward moments, and Vax spoke up again. “Well cheers to that fucking van then! For grabbing that dude’s attention at the gas station with its sexy colors and it’s sexy people and getting Scanlan this sweet gig.”

“To Vox Machina,” Tiberius shouted, lifting his glass high.

Everyone else joined in chorus, clinking their glasses together and spilling booze all over themselves. “Vox Machina!”

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Riding up the elevator was an awkward affair, given they had all decided it would be a great idea to try and squeeze everyone inside at once, each one of them holding some semblance of equipment or musical instrument. The amount of stuff Scanlan owned still baffled Vex to no end.

“Thanks guys,” Scanlan said, his voice buried somewhere in the middle of the group. “You never know what you’re gonna need so might as well bring it all, right?”

A communal groan resonated in the tight quarters of the elevator.

The fact that Vex was shoulder to shoulder with Percy certainly didn’t make things any better. She could feel his body heat through the rough fabric of his jacket as it rubbed up against her bare skin. She found herself cursing to the universe for making her feel weird about him today of all days.

Glancing up at the glowing yellow numbers that signified at what floor they were on, she couldn't believe the speed at which they changed. It made her a little queasy just thinking about it, but then again, that might have just been the alcohol not settling well with her empty stomach.

After what felt like an eternity, the elevator finally dinged, and the pleasant yet mildly synthetic voice of a woman let them know they’d arrived at the 60th floor.

The elevator doors opened to what looked like a rather dark hallway, lit only by a few service lights. There was no indication that they were getting any closer to the club, save for the fact that they could feel the heavy bass of some unidentifiable song reverberating in the floor. It was a rhythm that was just right for dancing, though Vex couldn’t imagine a bunch of classy rich people having any sort of fun.
“Kind of crazy how this place has a club like this,” Pike said, holding a heavy roll of cables over her shoulder.

“Honestly, I’m not surprised,” Vax said, carrying what looked like speakers. “Nothing corporate swine love doing more than chilling with other corporate swine. I just hope they don’t try talking to us since we look like them. I’m just gonna hide in a corner and hope the evil doesn’t corrupt me.”

Vex watched Percy stare up at the ceiling and roll his eyes before speeding up his pace so he was walking right next to Vax.

“You know Vax...” he said, holding large box. “Not all corporations are evil…”

Vax turned to look at Percy with a little confusion, though there was the subtlest hint of challenge in his eyes. “Not in my experience.”

Percy laughed a little cruelly. “What experience?”

Vex couldn't believe Percy was bringing this up now. Surely he had the good sense to not press the topic on Vax, especially after their dicey encounter with their father. And yet, as she glared at Percy, he seemed fully engaged in his argument, as if he had some stake in the matter. Granted he always seemed to grow a little frustrated when Vax went on his rich-asshole rants, but this time, he was actually vocalizing his frustration. It could have just been the fact that they’d been drinking, but it occurred to her that Percy had indeed been acting a little odd ever since he’d purchased his new clothes. At first, she thought it was just her biased impression given her own internal struggles, but now that she reflected on it, she was quite certain there was something off about him. She couldn't discern whether he was nervous or excited, but there was definitely an irritability to him that made her worry.

Vax gave Percy a poisonous stare, sarcasm seeping out of every pore and orifice. “This may come as a surprise to you, but my sister and I grew up in a rather rich household run by a corporate tool for a good chunk of our adolescence so I think I know a thing or two about how it all works.”

Percy scrunched up his face as he reflected on the string of words thrown in his direction. “Yes. I know. As I’ve been reminded time and time again.”

They reached a sturdy double door with the words “Cloudtop Club” painted in golden cursive font.

“So maybe you should keep your mouth shut about things you know nothing about,” Vax said, staring him down. “I’ve lived with it. I know my shit.”

Percy expression flashed more frustration than Vex had ever seen him carry. Had his arms not been occupied with Scanlan’s equipment, she would have sworn he was ready to throw some punches.

Muttering a few curses to himself, Percy leaned his shoulder against the door. “All I think that indicates is an irreparable bias toward the rich…”

Vax lifted his chin to Percy. “Not quite sure why you feel the need to be so fucking apologetic toward them, but I think I’ll stick to my opinion on the matter…”

“Guys... C’mon, let’s not argue now,” Keyleth butted in, nudging them both with her shoulders while she carefully carried a crate full of sandwiches. “Let’s just head on in and leave all our worldly problems outside this door. We’re going to go inside and we’re gonna have an amazing time. This is going to be a good night!”

Vax and Percy both stared each other down for a few tense moments, but as their gazes both drifted
on a disappointed looking Keyleth, their expressions softened.

Vax stared down at the floor, muttering a very small “alright.”

Percy gave her a half-hearted smirk and let out a deep sigh, before pushing the door open with his shoulder.

Like breaking the seal to another dimension, a wave of lively music poured into the hallway, the rhythm of the base waking everyone up from any possible daydream they’d been drifting in. Through the gap, Vex could see colorful lighting pulse from inside, dancing off Percy’s shoulder. And as his melancholy eyes met hers, the realization of where they actually were finally hit her.

They were really there. They were really at the Cloudtop Club.

Chapter End Notes

Content warnings:

Mention of past slut shaming, Mention of past self-harm.

Tough chapter to write. This being said, I’m sort of glad I eventually delved into Vex’s thought process. I feel that in this fic, her past experiences really dictate the nature of her insecurities and her behavior toward relationships. Having a fear of commitment really fucking sucks.

Here is the bear Meme Percy sent Vex: Link to meme

Also, I made a little playlist with the type of music the Cloudtop Club plays. It’s the trashiest pop music you’ll ever hear in your life, but hey, that’s just how they roll.

Youtube playlist
Swarovski Chandeliers

Chapter Summary

Last time, on The Butterfly Effect: The Vox Machina gang gets ready to go to the Cloudtop Club. Tension rises, as everyone seems to be a little irritable around each other.

Chapter Notes

No Content Warnings this chapter.

Fun fact. The Cloudtop Club is loosely inspired by the only “high end” club I ever went to named “Cafe Opera” in Stockholm. Club website

The story on how we got in is not something I’m going to get into, but the place was crammed with people way over their thirties dressed in suits, and a simple vodka redbull cost forty dollars. Honestly, it wasn’t even that impressive and it did nothing to change my life except for allowing me to draw some inspiration from it years later.

So anyway, for this chapter, I actually found a guy who does covers of songs that I felt had a voice that matched Scanlan’s timber. I’ve posted links in the endnotes if you’d like to listen to the songs live as you read the chapter to get an idea of what Scanlan is singing.

Meanwhile, if you are genuinely curious about what the Cloudtop is playing, you may listen to this playlist: YouTube playlist

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Cloudtop Club was an intricate fusion of modern and classic decor, melding into a landscape that was almost surreal. As Vex and the others carefully made their way through the side entrance, some tried their best to hide their awe, while others blatantly gasped and gawked at the presentation.

Black chandeliers that resembled collections of translucent obsidian shards hung from high, elegantly decorated ceilings. Dark purple and gold wallpaper lined the walls, while abstract artwork radiated in a purple neon glow. Colorful fleeting lights drifted across polished surfaces and unfamiliar bodies like delicate fairy fire. Room dividers that were made of what looked like glass showcased artwork that morphed and shifted every few seconds. The entire room was quite spacious and sectioned off according to purpose, though it did appear as though the club extended down hallways into more private areas as well. A very long, dark wood bar lined one end of the room, with bottles of alcohol organized in an artistic fashion behind a flashy, purple-haired bartender with expensive looking tattoos and a waistcoat. Velvety booths lined one wall, while another section seemed dedicated to lounging, while another area still had multiple circular tables in front of a very large stage framed by deep maroon curtains. Above this stage, an enormous flat screen TV showcased abstract artwork that shifted to the rhythm of the music being played by a DJ who seemed to be perched on an indoor
balcony. As expected, no one seemed to be dancing, even though there was a very clear dance floor in the middle of the room. Then again, it was still only seven in the evening, so Vex was willing to give these rich snobs some time to warm up. They all looked about middle-aged anyway, so she was more than willing to give them the benefit of the doubt.

The team did their best to not cause a scene as they carried Scanlan’s stuff backstage. With the help of a few of the event organizers, they set up rather quickly, leaving them just enough time to munch on some sandwich before heading out to brave their surroundings. It goes without saying that Vex felt immediately energized when they were each offered a free drink coupon, though they all agreed to spend them once they actually had a table for the show. Meanwhile, she figured it would probably be a grand idea to scout out her surroundings with the girls to get her bearings. It was certainly a good excuse to get the hell away from Percy, who was still emanating dark energy as he stood leaning against the wall with a somber expression on his face.

Part way during their exploration, Vex grabbed hold of Pike’s arm and pointed with her pinkie. “Wait, what’s that?”

Pike followed Vex’s gaze toward one end of the room that seemed to have a series of glass doors leading to somewhere unknown.

They both stood staring for a few seconds like a couple of meerkats, trying to discern where they lead. However, as they noticed a woman button up her coat and vanish behind the doors, their eyes both went wide and they grabbed Keyleth, who was busy scratching her head at the unusual shifting artwork.

“Holy shit...no way,” Pike said as they all briskly walked toward the doors. Pulling the rather heavy things open with all their might, they realized that they lead to a second row of doors, divided by a chamber that was rather chilly in temperature. They looked at each other with an expression of realization, and as they swung the second row of doors open, they gasped at the discovery of an expansive outdoor patio; a patio that was sixty fucking stories above the ground.

Vex bundled up in the leather jacket she had jacked from Vax, while Pike and Keyleth wrapped themselves in their warm woolen shawls. Nevertheless, it was still incredibly cold, though, perhaps not as cold as it could have been thanks to the clever architecture. Tall curved walls framed part of the deck, acting as wind barriers and keeping the area tolerable. Meanwhile, one corner of the deck had a series of outdoor heaters surrounded by tall tables where numerous people stood and smoked, while others sat bundled up on low, minimalist couches with drinks in hand.

The girls carefully wandered toward the edge, which was thankfully protected by a relatively tall glass barrier, a design that was both disconcerting but incredibly convenient for those who wished to relish in the majesty of the city below.

“Wow…” Vex said, her eyes widening as she peeked over the edge. She could feel her heart flutter with adrenaline, akin to falling in love.

“You think this is what Gilmore was talking about?” Keyleth asked, holding her shawl tightly around herself.

“Probably…” Pike answered, her black and purple hair fluttering in the wind.

The girls stood admiring the daunting beauty of Emon from their bird’s eye view. To their left, they could see one of the many Skyscrapers of the Cloudtop center rising up into the heavens, far above where they currently stood. Vex tipped her head and noticed that their own tower stretched much higher than where they currently stood, realizing that the expansive deck they were on was nothing
more than a small lip in comparison to the towering structure of glass looming over them. As she glanced down the length of the tower, she could see one of the numerous sky bridges connecting the skyscrapers. Lower still, she noticed a monorail glowing in the night as it made its way through the building.

Vex felt like her mind could get lost up there. She was surprised there weren’t more people admiring the view. To be fair, they probably looked like noobs, enjoying the elevated perspective like the children they were. Those rich snobs had likely seen the view hundreds of times and didn’t find it all that interesting anymore, which saddened Vex to no end. She never wanted to lose that feeling; that feeling of deep admiration and wonder; a feeling that made her want to stare for hours on end...

And she probably would have, had a voice from a speaker not caught their attention.

“Ladies and gentlemen, grab your drinks and find your seats. The Cloudtop’s “Hidden Sounds” show will begin in ten minutes.”

That was the cue to make their way back inside. In hindsight, Vex was a tad bit relieved, having realized that -- as amazing as the view was -- it didn’t exactly make up for the fact that she was losing sensitivity in her fingertips.

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After ordering their complimentary drinks, they headed over to where the rest of their team had snagged a semi-circular booth, gaining a private yet strategic view of the stage.

“We were worried you got lost,” Vax said, looking up at the girls from his seat as he stirred what looked like a Bloody Mary. “Scanlan’s already gone backstage?”

“Indeed. He was rather upset that he did not get a ‘good luck kiss’ from you Pike,” Tiberius said, making air quotes.

“Tragic…” Pike said with an eye roll.

Vax leaned back in his chair, raising a pair of innocent hands. “Look, I told him he could get one from me but he said it wouldn't be the same.” He shrugged. “His loss. My lips bring all kinds of good luck.”

Vex cringed at the implications of Vax’s comment, taking a quick sip of her drink and finding that the Cloudtop Club was not greedy with their liquor, which was a fucking relief because after looking at the menu and learning that drinks were about thirty goldies each, she was more than a little thankful that the club was generous enough to give them a strong one on the house. Thank God Grog had brought his flask.

Percy was rather quiet during the conversation, sipping on a low glass of some dark, iced beverage and lounging in a spot that was about as far away from Vax as was physically possible.

Vex sighed at the realization that he and Vax were probably not on speaking terms yet, which didn’t exactly bode well for the energy at the table. Nevertheless, she wasn’t going to let it wreck her night, especially since she was going to need all the positivity she could get if she were to survive Scanlan’s performance.

After a lot of awkward shifting and trading of places, Vex eventually managed finagled a spot next to her brother, figuring that keeping her distance from Percy was a wise decision. In her experience, when people were in bad moods it was best to give them space so they could stew.
Keyleth however, was of a differing philosophy. Still a little chilled after going outside, she decided to snuggle next to Percy for warmth, but found his cold demeanor a tad unsettling.

“Percy, are you okay?”

“Yeah.” He twirled the ice in his glass. “I’m just tired.”

“You want some of my Vodka Redbull?”

He stared up at the ceiling and sighed as Keyleth carefully poked his lips with her straw. After a near miss with his nostril, he eventually gave in to her offer and took a very small sip. He grimaced as he studied the beverage. “Tastes like straight vodka to me.”

“Oh, I thought that was just me. What’s yours?”

“Straight whiskey.”

She furrowed her brow at him. “Then what are you complaining about?”

Suddenly, Tiberius, who was sitting on the other side of Keyleth, straightened his back and immediately started slicking his hair back, his demeanor growing more flustered. Of course, as Vex would have imagined, the explanation to his panic was rather predictable.

Through the crowd, the group caught glimpse of Allura, who was making her way to their table. She was accompanied by what looked like a very handsome middle-aged man. His brown hair, parted like an actor from the forties, matched his cleanly shaved angular jawline, and his gray suit seemed to almost glisten with an underling blue scale pattern, which paired with his electric blue tie perfectly. Allura was even more put together than she had been before, her blonde braids tied in an elegant updo, and wearing a long navy dress that trailed down in layers to the floor.

“I barely recognized you lot,” she said with excitement in her eyes. “You look absolutely wonderful.”

“As do you, Miss Vysoren,” Tiberius said with a nod.

“Gilmore treated us rather well,” Vax said with a small smirk.

“I can tell”, she said, looking genuinely pleased as she eyed each and every one of them before clasping her hand together. “So, I was just speaking about you to my colleague here.” She turned to the man beside her and smiled, nodding toward Percy. “This is the young man I was telling you about Jeremy.”

The man leaned in for a handshake, and Percy immediately stood up to meet him, introducing himself.

“A pleasure,” the gentleman said with a photo perfect grin. “Allura was telling me about your help with our security system this morning. I’m Jeremy Krieg. Cyber Security Manager of the Cloudtop.”

Vex had never seen such a pearly white smile in her life. Sure, the man was probably old enough to be their father, but he sure as hell kept himself together. It was remarkable what money could do to your physical appearance.

“The pleasure is mine,” Percy said with a nod. “It was a simple fix, really.”

“A little embarrassing that my people couldn't catch such a benign problem,” Kreig said with a smile.
"Alas, I took things into my own hands and took care of it. Everything should be safe and running fine now."

"Has this been a problem in the past?"

Krieg shrugged. "The Cloudtop Center has had its standard set of problems given the status of the people working here. Allura tells me you aren’t locals but a few weeks ago there was actually a cyber attack on the Prime Minister’s very own office. It was all over the news and it was awful for publicity. But with the help of my team, we thwarted the attempt rather quickly."

"You must get swamped with work," Percy said.

"It’s manageable. I guarantee that we have the best security system out there, and when my team can’t handle it, I find no issue in taking things into my own hands, especially if it’s in the interest of our community’s safety."

Allura smiled, resting a hand on Krieg’s shoulder. "Krieg has been with us for many years. He’s incredibly talented and works closely with his workers."

"And we could certainly use new blood in the workforce," he said with a wink that even made Vex blush. "You should definitely consider enrolling to Emon’s University. In a few years time, you could find yourself working for me one day."

"I’ll think about it," Percy said, giving Krieg a half smile that Vex recognized as a little insincere.

The group’s attention was drawn by a change in lighting, and as they all turned their heads, they noticed the large flat screen above the stage light up as a voice on some speakers made an announcement to the crowd.

"If we could have your attention, the Prime Minister has a quick recorded message he’d like to deliver before the show. So sit back, relax and enjoy your drinks."

Allura whispered to the group, "We’re going to find a seat. Enjoy your stay here. It was wonderful to speak with you again."

The group lifted their drinks to Allura and Krieg as they retreated closer to the stage. As they did, the face of a well-dressed man with salt and pepper hair and a well-trimmed beard appeared on screen. His voice came through clearly and crisply.

"Thank you all for coming to this event. Our trustworthy organizers have brought you an excellent selection of independent artists that I hope you will enjoy. As your Prime Minister, I cannot stress the importance of the arts in our community, and encourage you all to find time to enjoy the simple pleasures of life. I am saddened that I could not make it to the event, but I am happy to inform you all that I will be watching the stream from my current location with Salda. As always, have a wonderful evening. My name is Uriel Tal’Dorei, and I approve this message."

The screen switched back to its usual abstract patterns and everyone in the club applauded.

Vax whispered into Vex’s ear, “Hooooly shit…”

"I know...” Vex said, covering her mouth. “This is way more high stakes than I thought.”

“I really hope Scanlan doesn’t get nervous,” Keyleth said.

“I don’t think Scanlan can get nervous,” Pike muttered, taking a sip from her mojito with some
skepticism in her brows.

The lighting in the club shifted once more, creating a relaxing lounge type atmosphere as the first performer appeared on stage, accompanied by the sound of some formal applause.

Vex leaned back in her chair and dug her shoulders into the soft fabric, and as she sipped her rum and coke, her eyes casually drifted to notice that Percy was staring down at his phone with a furrowed brow. Truly, his rudeness had no bounds.

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The show had been nothing short of brilliant. The Cloudtop’s selection of artists was superb, with each performance having something new to deliver. Some artists performed creative covers to new songs, while others delved into the realm of original poetry and performance art. Yet the one thing that each performance had in common was their genuine nature. There was no autotune, no lip syncing, no flashy lights or distracting effects; just pure, unadulterated music. Vex could hear every nuance, every note, every stutter the sounds produced, and she found herself rekindling her appreciation for live music.

Surely, Scanlan could live up to his reputation and make a dent in the audience’s already high standards, but at this point, she could only hope, for as the curtains reopened and the crowd cheered, there stood a smiling and proud purple-clad man, sitting in front of the mic with a guitar in hand.

“Woo! Scanlan!” Keyleth cheered!

“Yeh! C’mon buddy!” Grog shouted.

The instance Grog made their location known, Scanlan seemed to make brief eye contact with them, flashing a quick smile before tapping his finger on the mic.

“Is this thing on?” he asked, looking around wide-eyed.

The crowd went awkwardly silent as he started to fiddle with the microphone, staring at it like he’d never seen anything like it in his entire life. He tapped it a few more times and muttered. “One, two, three, testing...”

Vex bit her lower lip, looking at the others, “What the hell is he doing?"

Scanlan’s confused face suddenly morphed to a cheeky grin. “Just kidding.”

Vex pressed her face into her palms, though the sound of her groan was muffled by the laughter of the audience. Scanlan was lucky enough to have been placed in a time slot where everyone likely already had a few drinks in their system.

“Right,” Scanlan said, strumming his guitar once to get everyone’s attention. “So this song is a little ditty dedicated to all you lucky people in the crowd who are perhaps a little low on cash....” He paused a moment for effect. “Which... I’m guessing isn’t many of you...”

Some warm laughter bubbled from the crowd once more.

Scanlan glanced up at the ceiling with a raised brow “...Considering you’ve got what looks like Swarovski chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, and the fact that this guy sitting here in the front seems to be wearing what looks to be a diamond studded Rolex.”

A few people in the crowd clapped while the man in question raised his wrist, showcasing the watch
with an entertained grin.

“Excellent taste sir, excellent taste. But anyway, before we get started, you people mind doing me a quick favor?”

A few people in the crowd said yes, nodding their heads.

“Great!” Scanlan said, reaching his mike out to the crowd. “Lemme hear you say Irish Wristwatch real quick.”

His request was immediately followed by an awkward dissonant chorus of people trying to say the sentence as best they could. Even Percy had succumbed to Scanlan’s crowd seducing, attempting to mutter the words to little effect, save for perhaps causing Keyleth to snort some of her drink up her nose.

“Woah now,” Scanlan chuckled. “Easy on the liquor. I know the Cloudtop treats you well but keep yourselves together people!” He furrowed his brow and feigned disappointment. He was certainly drawing a lot of laughter from the audience at this point. “I better get started on this poor choice of a song before you’re all too blacked out to enjoy it.”

“Here goes,” Pike said, looking nervous.

Vex covered her mouth, “Oh god...”

Scanlan rested the mike on the stand and settled more comfortably in his seat with the guitar snugly rested against him. Vex noticed him swallow once before he softly spoke into the mic. “This is a cover of “Cheap Thrills,” dedicated to a brave few. You know who you are...” He glanced back at their table and winked.

“What…?” Vex muttered, wide-eyed.

Scanlan had always given her shit for liking that song, telling her it was a silly pop hit that was only popular among spoiled rich suburbanites who weren’t getting their allowance from their parents anymore. Vex had always found the jab a little offensive, considering her and Vax were, in rather simplified terms, rich suburbanites (not by choice) who technically weren’t getting their allowance from their father anymore (by choice).

Thus, it was no surprise that Vex was absolutely shocked in hearing the jaw-dropping sounds that fluttered off of Scanlan’s quick fingers. And things only become more unbelievable when he opened his mouth to sing, a warm chill crawling down Vex’s spine. It was nothing like anything she’d ever heard come out of the man’s mouth: there was no squeakiness, no sarcasm, no snarky humor or comical tones to satirize the piece; just pure, tenor notes rolling off his tongue like the song had been written for him. His guitar work was so simple yet so enjoyable, not overpowering his vocals, that were occasionally accompanied by some pre-recorded vocal pieces he would harmonize with.

Their entire table, along with everyone else she could see from her vantage point seemed absolutely inspired by the performance, and before she could even consciously acknowledge that it was Scanlan actually singing up there, the song came to an end, immediately followed by loud cheering and clapping.

She felt Pike grab her shoulder and squeezed it tightly, and Vex turned to meet her look of utter bewilderment as her blue eyes fixated on Scanlan, who was busy calming down the crowd with a gentle hand gesture.

“Now here’s the thing…” he said, taking a sip of water and clearing his throat. “You may be looking
at me now, thinking ‘damn...that Scanlan Shorthalt is one good looking fella… ’” He leaned in, staring at the crowd intently. “But here’s the catch. There is an even better looking group of individuals right in that corner over there,” he said, pointing at his friends with a coy little grin. As if on cue, a spotlight shined on all of them, causing them all to wince and groan like goth teenagers having their curtains pulled open by their parent to give them some much-needed vitamin D. “Yes indeed!” Scanlan said, shouting like the star of an infomercial “Those fellas are some of the finest looking people in this club! And you wanna know why? Because they went shopping at Gilmore’s Glorious Goods , a place to fulfill all your fashion and furnishing needs…”

Like a well-timed wave, everyone in the club turned to look at the group at the table, who had all gone into a synchronized facepalm, save for Vax, who like a champ, stood up, showing off all his curves and shapes like the good little advertiser he was. It was remarkable what a pretty face could do to him...

“Thank you Vax,” Scanlan said with a grin, before looking back at the audience, “But these people are far more than sexy people in sexy clothing. In fact, this next cover is explicitly dedicated to this very group of friends who had the patience to follow me here this lovely evening…” His eyes drifted toward their table, and he gave them one of his signature shit-eating grins. “Trust me, they didn’t wanna come, but I told them we were gonna go grab pizza back in Westruun and now here we are.”

The crowd roared in laughter, with a few particularly boisterous howls coming from some unidentified individuals.

“Anyway,” Scanlan said, adjusting his tie. “Here is to Vox Machina, a cover of ‘Rather Be’...”

With that, he pressed a button on a device on the floor with his foot, and as the steady rhythm of maracas began to fill the air, he started playing his guitar again.

The entire table found themselves charmed by his voice, which once again drifted off his lips in smooth and gentle words that danced through the air like a lullaby.

“We’re a thousand miles from comfort, we have traveled land and sea, but as long as you are with me, there’s no place I rather be...”

Vex smushed her face between her hands and stared at Scanlan with enamored puppy eyes, “Aww, Scanlan…” she squeaked.

She couldn't believe how sweet he was being. Not only was his music beautiful, but he’d handpicked songs that actually had relevant meaning; something that they could all relate to as a family at an intimate level; something that the people in this crowd could never appreciate in full.

Scanlan smiled, his eyes closing as he injected every note with sincere emotion. “It’s easy being with you, sacred simplicity, as long as we’re together...there’s no place that I’d rather be…”

Vex felt Pike grab hold of her hand and squeeze it tightly, as if she needed some sort of adult to digest what she was witnessing. Frankly, Vex felt like she needed an adult too, and she quickly wrapped her arms around Pike as they both listened to Scanlan finish his song with a flourish.

The crowds stood up and cheered, and this time, Scanlan didn’t even wait for them to settle down. Instead, he rested his guitar on the stand and stood up, picking up what looked like a violin. Like a well-trained magician, he gave the crowd a commanding glance and they all immediately went silent, which he responded to with a nod of approval. Satisfied with the atmosphere, he hovered his lips over the mic and whispered.
“One last one. “Don’t Wanna Know”... Enjoy.”

Pressing a button on the device with his foot, he began to play the violin, recording a few bars before resting the instrument back on its stand. Releasing his foot from the device, the sound of the violin continued to play as he took the microphone into both his hands, and with the delicate melody he had just recorded accompanying him, he began to sign once more.

It was a performance that must have taken a lot of practice and real-time coordination, constantly switching between live vocals and pre-recorded content to create something that sounded like it had been fine-tuned in a studio.

The crowd immediately started to join into the performance, standing up and clapping as Scanlan swayed his hips to the rhythm of the music. No other performer had sparked this sort of participation from the audience, and soon, even Vox Machina’s table had risen from their seats, filtering into the crowd and clapping and whistling as Scanlan brought new found energy to the once sedated club.

Vex was saddened as his performance came to the end, though she had little time to embrace her sorrow as the entire Cloudtop roared and cheered at Scanlan’s overwhelming success. Vex’s friends scrambled to give each other hugs and high fives, jumping around and squealing like middle schoolers at a concert. Vex gasped for air as Grog lifted her a few inches off the ground into a massive hug before settling her back down and running over to give Vax the same treatment. Tiberius and Keyleth were busy hopping up and down as if they were trying to spot him over the hoards of people currently blocking their view of the stage. Even Percy seemed happy, craning his head over the crowds of people with a smile on his lips.

Vex found Pike and braided fingers with her, excitement seeping from every pore. “He’s been planning this for weeks!”

“I know! The violin! That fucking violin!”

The party’s joy had seemingly reached immeasurable levels, though those levels went through the roof as Scanlan found them in the crowd, dodging eager fans left and right as he eventually made his way to them.

“C’mere Shorthalt!” Vax said as he grabbed him and kissed him on both his cheeks.

“You the fuckin’ man!” Grog said, giving him a double high five.

“I believe your success warrants my complimentary drink coupon!” Tiberius said, slapping the coupon into Scanlan’s hand with a big smile on his face.

Vex and Pike both wandered up to him and leaned in, each giving him a big hug.

“Scanlan, that was amazing,” Pike said, her smile stretching from ear to ear.

“I...” Vex though she was going to cry. "I can’t believe you decided to go for those songs... I…”

Vex couldn’t express how incredibly proud she was. She felt dreadfully guilty for doubting him all this time and found herself blurring out confusing apologies that he took little note of.

Scanlan pat her on the shoulder and shook his head with an air of artificial humility, “You’re admiration and worship is both noted and expected.”

Pike playfully punched him on the arm. “C’mon, let’s sit down and watch the rest of those suckers, and then I think you and I are gonna dance.”
Like a devotee coming face to face with their patron of worship for the first time after years of prayer, Scanlan’s eyes lost all focus as they drifted into planes of existence that were remote and probably filled with rose-colored clouds. Vex and Pike looked at each other with a knowing expression and sighed before dragging him over to the table to watch (with all due respect) a severely less interesting conclusion to the show.

***

Just when Vex believed her night had reached its peak, she was one-upped by yet another blessing from the universe; a universe that was being suspiciously generous as of late...

The show had just concluded with a flourish, the Cloudtop guests swarming to quench their thirst at the bar or burn their newly found energy on the dancefloor. Vex and the others felt compelled to do the same, but were almost immediately halted by a surprise visit from Allura, who looked relieved to have found them.

“Mr Shorthalt,” she said, clasping her hands with rosy cheeks. “That performance was wonderful. I am so grateful my event manager decided to invite you. That is the first time in years that I’ve seen people at the Cloudtop become so involved in a performance.”

“Thank you,” he said with a grin. “I am both humbled and honored.”

“Now, I know you will be paid a commission, as will all the others that performed, but...” She glanced around and leaned in, lowering her voice slightly which prompted Vex and the others to lean in as well. “But...between you and me, I believe you, in particular, deserve a little something extra.”

Scanlan chuckled humbly. “I really don’t feel as though I deserve any special treatment.”

Vex snorted. She found it funny how Scanlan’s demeanor could change so suddenly in the face of authority.

“I absolutely insist,” Allura continued. “You and your friends have been nothing but exceptional individuals. With Percy helping me out this morning, and your friends being so cordial and kind to myself and the staff here, not to mention your wonderful performance, I believe it’s only fair to offer you all some complimentary drinks,” she said, reaching for her hand purse and handing them coupons, “as well as a complimentary stay at our Cloudtop Suites...”

Everyone’s expression went blank as they received the coupons, like computers failing to compute the information that had so suddenly reached their mindspace.

“Suites?” Keyleth muttered.

“Complimentary?” Vex squeaked.

“I beg your pardon?” Percy furrowed his brow.

Allura chuckled at the team's reaction. “I would like to offer you a night at our hotel. All of you, free of charge.”

The shock in everyone’s faces was palpable.

Briefly glancing at his comrades, Scanlan gave them one of his signature smiles before turning to Allura with blistering confidence, “Judging from my entourage’s reaction, I think we’ll pass.”

“Scanlan!” Everyone screamed in chorus, baring down on him like demons from hell.
“I’m kidding I’m kidding I’m kidding!” He squealed, covering his head. He peeked at Allura from a guarded position, trying to fend off the energy behind him. “Thank you Allura, thank you very much.”

“Excellent,” she said, adjusting her bag over her shoulder. “You’ll be able to get your room keys from the staff here when you decide to leave. I myself find the need for sleep creeping up on me, but if you need anything, anything at all, feel free to call.” She reached into her handbag and handed Scanlan a small pile of business cards to distribute out before bowing her head. “Until then, I bid you all a wonderful evening, and hope to hear from you all before you leave Emon. It’s been a pleasure meeting you.”

Vex was hard pressed to find anything that could wreck her evening at this point. Even as the team thanked Allura with copious amounts of praise and gratitude, Vex couldn’t shake the creeping sensation that there was some sort of a catch. The range of emotions she had experienced that day would have been enough to fill a small novel, and frankly, it was almost too much to handle.

But it was something she wasn’t going to humor now. The night was young, the music was popping, and there was nothing she wanted to do more in this moment but dance her body to oblivion.

Chapter End Notes

No joke, I actually looked up “Black Swarovski Chandelier” and those things can cost up to 15,000 dollars. The Cloudtop ain’t skimping on their chandelier game...

Scanlan’s Performance:

Cheap Thrills: 
YouTube link

Rather Be: 
YouTube link

Don’t Wanna Know: 
YouTube link
Chapter Summary

Last time, on The Butterfly Effect: The group explores the wonders of the Cloudtop Club and are introduced to Jeremy Krieg, the cyber security manager at the Cloudtop Center. Scanlan’s performance is a huge success, so much so that Pike wants to dance with him, and Allura offers the group some free drinks and a free stay at the Cloudtop Hotel suites.

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings for this chapter are in end notes.

Brace yourselves: a super long, dialogue heavy chapter is coming.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After consuming the highly alcoholic drinks Allura had graciously gifted them, followed by the consumption of even more alcohol Grog and Pike had smuggled inside along with Scanlan’s supplies, the group scattered.

Some of them, namely Grog and Percy, vanished in directions uncertain, while the others opted for the dance floor beneath a glittering chandelier, now illuminated in multicolored disco lights. Meanwhile, Tiberius valiantly volunteered to transfer their stuff from their original hotel to their new rooms at the Cloudtop, and being the only true sober one, no one bothered stopping him, even though Vex was more than comfortable sleeping in her underwear and using Grog’s vodka as a mouthwash.

As everyone split off in their respective directions, Pike was the first to honor her promise to Scanlan by immediately dragging him to the center of the floor and rocking out to some particularly bassy house music. Like a match made in purgatory, her black and purple hair shimmered in the darkness, as did his satin shirt. If Vex hadn’t known any better, she would have assumed they were an item, looking like a wild couple from the eighties having the time of their lives. In fact, it didn’t take much spectating for her, Vax and Keyleth to eventually join in on the fun.

As with most of Scanlan’s hidden talents, he was a surprisingly skilled dancer, perhaps a little clumsy at times, but gifted with enough rhythm and flair to make for a great dance partner. One could argue he was even better than Vax, which was saying a lot. Her twin’s quick feet and smooth moves made him for one of the best dancer’s Vex knew, leaving most of the surrounding patrons in the dust and attracting attention that he accepted with open arms (They may have been rich assholes in the office, but on the dance floor, Vax did not discriminate).

Song after song, dance partner after dance partner, Vex felt the hours fly away like the worries off her shoulders and the sweat off her brow. She allowed herself to get lost in the alcohol haze, hands running through her hair as the bass guided her heartbeat, swaying her hips against Keyleth, and
Pike, and possibly a few strangers; she couldn’t tell in the darkness. People came and went, the
dynamic of the dance floor evolving with each new song. At one point, she noticed Tiberius join in a
few times, indicating that he’d clearly already made his way back; she spotted Grog and Pike
headbanging and dancing like they’d practiced the moves for years; she caught a glimpse of Vax
grinding with two women that looked like a couple ready to take him as their third. Her eyes would
drift over the jungle of darkened silhouettes that swayed like waves, searching for her next possible
dance partner. A corner of her mind knew who she really wanted to dance with, but she knew
better...

By the time she started to feel tired, she didn’t know how much time had elapsed, though she sensed
the physical activity had taken a serious toll on her bodily fluids. Getting water would certainly be
the next order of business.

She broke off from the others and gradually weaved her way through the waves of people,
eventually finding purchase on the dark wood of bar, still being run by the same bartender as always;
a tall individual with short, slicked back purple hair, elegant tattoos covering their arms, and a black
waistcoat with silver details completing the look. Vex managed to snag one of the only free stools,
and as the bartender eyed her up and down, she mouthed the word “water”, to which she was
immediately given a tall glass with a straw.

As she hydrated in small sips, she found herself absentmindedly looking out for Krieg in the crowd.
He had been so dreadfully polite and charming that she figured she wouldn’t mind the possibility of
having a drink with him. Alas, she assumed he had probably left with Allura since he didn’t seem
like the type who had much time for the late-night scene. And besides, Vax didn’t seem to like the
way he carried himself, so perhaps it was for the best.

Turning her head to look down the length of the bar, her eyes immediately met with those of a man
who had found a seat right beside her, staring at her as if he’d been waiting for her to notice him.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you here,” he said, his voice coming off as a little raspy.

Vex furrowed her brow as she studied him from head to toe. He was certainly well dressed, a dark
brown suit detailed with gold cuff links and a very expensive looking watch. His hair was blonde
and slicked to one side indicating an obvious comb over, and his face was pulled taught as if he’d
gotten some sort of face-lift, and it looked like he had a fake tan. She suspected he was much older
than he presented himself, judging from his small, wrinkled hands.

“We’re new to the city,” she finally said, sipping her water.

“I figured as much.” He smiled, the creases in his face stretching unevenly. “I would have noticed
dancing like that by now. I come here almost every weekend.”

“Oh?” she muttered, feigning interest. She didn’t feel like getting up from her seat just yet, as it was
rather comfortable in her physically exhausted and somewhat inebriated state.

“I fly to Emon every week for business. I’m actually from Wildmount.”

She scratched behind her ear. “Wildmount? Never been.” That part was true. She’d never actually
left the continent, though if she had the time and money, she would have loved to travel.

“You should consider visiting sometime. It’s very nice,” the man said.

“I might,” she said, smiling awkwardly. She didn’t exactly feel like speaking to this man and
imagined that perhaps it wasn’t the best idea to lead him on.
As she noticed him turn toward the bartender and order a drink, she took the opportunity to sneak away, though squeezing past all the people who were pressed up against the bar was somewhat of an ordeal. Nevertheless, she eventually made it to the opposite end of the bar that was buttressed up against the wall, a location that granted her a little more privacy, at least on one side.

Sipping her water in relative peace, she found her mind meander, fueled by the last few days of drama and enough alcohol in her system to kill a small human. She felt as though her life had changed significantly in the past few days. A month ago she never would have imagined being in such a place, sitting at a bar like this, drinking fancy water out of a fancy straw in a fancy dress. Then again, she figured this was but a small hiccup in her life; nothing permanent. In a few days, she’d be back in her ratty apartment, doing her ratty job, and making ratty money. At least she’d have Trinket. Oh... how she missed Trinket. She wondered how he was doing, all cooped up in her landlord's apartment, probably reading boring old history books because the old fool was a retired history professor who had nothing better to do than tell young people how things needed to change lest history repeat itself, or some other end of the world nonsense...

“It’s a lot easier to talk here.”

Vex flinched back to reality, and turned to see that the man she’d just escaped from was now sitting next to her once more, holding two very tall, dark blue drinks. She smiled, trying to conceal a grimace that blossomed at the realization that he’d followed her.

“Here you go,” he said, sliding one of the drinks in front of her. “That’s the most expensive drink here. They call it the “Cloudtop”. Kind of like “Sex on the Beach” but with Blue Curacao.”

“Thank you,” she said with yet another forced smile, trying to conceal the fact that she didn’t trust him in the slightest. She regretfully hadn’t kept her eyes on the drink the entire time, and even drunk Vex knew better than that. And yet... part of her really wanted to taste it. It was so blue and so pretty, staring up at her like the forty dollar drink it probably was.

“Try it. It’s great.”

Vex stared down the glass like the barrel of a loaded gun, and as she felt his eyes study her expectantly, she realized that she needed to at least fake it. Keeping a smile on her lips, she leaned in and sipped on the straw, pretending to drink, but keeping most of the liquid from actually entering her mouth.

“What do you think?” he asked rather quickly.

She pretended to swallow and cleared her throat. “It’s good. Very nice,” she said, her eyes scanning for her friends, but to no avail.

“So how long have you been here?” he asked, leaning in a little closer.

She leaned away from him in response, trying her best to keep her balance in her drunken stupor. “At the Club?”

“In Emon.”

“Oh...” She rubbed the back of her neck. “Just a couple of days.”

“Have you managed to see much?”

“Not really...”
She glanced around nervously, looking for any form of escape. The alcohol in her system was clouding her vision and she felt a little dizzy. The people around her had crammed so tightly that she realized she’d likely have to wiggle by the creep anyway, which she didn’t want to do if at all possible. With her options narrowed significantly, she imagined cleverness would have to come into play if she were to keep things polite and safe. He’d already gotten her a drink, and frankly, she felt like an asshole for ever accepting it in the first place, especially after being aware of the price. Not that she’d asked for it, nor had he even checked with her to see if she wanted it... He just gave it to her, and now she felt like she owed him in the most convoluted of ways. Perhaps she was being stupid, and maybe even a little weak of character, but she honestly felt like she’d be fucking blackmailed if she didn’t end up drinking it, and the last thing she needed that day was for some rich asshole to call her an ungrateful slut; she didn’t think she could take it, not in her current inebriated state.

“You know, I come here for business pretty often. I know the city well. I could give you a tour.”

Her eyes continued to dart behind him, finding the wall of people almost impenetrable. Even if she did get up and leave, there was no guarantee he wouldn't follow her. He’d already done it before. If anything, she almost felt safer where she currently sat, at the very least remaining in the view of the bartender... who was far too busy serving others.

She leaned her face against her knuckles, trying to look disappointed as she concealed the fact that she was typing something on her phone. “We actually have a pretty busy schedule.” She wanted to see if anyone could save her from her awkward situation, but given that everyone and their mother seemed to be dancing right now, there was a good chance she’d be on her own. Perhaps he’d get the hint that she wasn’t interested with her body language, that is...if the universe had any more generosity left.

“I’m sure you could find some time off.” He was insistent, creeping a little closer to her. “I could help you out. I rent a Lamborghini whenever I’m in the city so I could drive you wherever you like.”

“That’s very kind of you,” she said, sending the message.

*Vex: someone save me from this creep. At bar*

“Did you get a chance to see the theater? What about the museum downtown?”

She quickly glanced up from her phone and smiled. “Ugh, nope. None of that.”

“How long do you plan on staying in town?”

“Oh, we’re leaving early tomorrow morning.”

“Sounds like you only have tonight then…” He shifted his weight, leaning in so close that she could smell the alcohol on him. “Did you have any destinations in mind that you wanted to see?”

“Uh…” She leaned back further. “Not really, no.”

“Go ahead, finish your drink and I can get us out of here.” He crept a little closer, and she found herself cornered into the wall, hot sweaty bodies pressing up against her back.

“I- well... I’ll have to see. I think my friends had plans to leave pretty soon. And I was probably just gonna rest up after this.”

“You’re gonna leave soon?”
“Probably…” she squeaked.

“Where are you staying? I know quite a few hotels in the area.”

“I um…” she glanced down at her phone, furrowing her brow at the realization that no one had responded.

“What’s your number?” he asked suddenly, clearly noticing her phone.

“I…” she pulled her phone away, biting her lower lip.

He scooted closer to her still, his hand creeping ever so slightly toward hers. She could see the sweat on his brow, dark beady eyes staring her down. “Here, let me give you my number.”

“Ah. There you are.”

“Fuck!” she shouted, flinching as she felt a hand grab her waist. She nearly elbowed the perpetrator in the ribs before she realized who it actually was, glancing up at him with wide eyes and the heart rate of a hummingbird. She never would have imagined she’d be so relieved to see Percy in her life… and as he gave her a very subtle wink, she knew she was in good hands.

With his arm tightly wrapped around her, Percy pulled her close, creating somewhat of a shield between her and the creep. “Didn’t mean to scare you,” he said with a smile. “Who you talking to dear?”

She returned a coy grin. “Oh, no one darling. Just a kind gentleman telling me about his work.”

Percy gave a slow nod, turning to look at the man and reaching out his hand with a very insincere smile. “Pleasure to meet you. Percy Robinson.”

The man looked confused as he accepted Percy’s handshake, prompting a little smirk to spread across Vex’s lips.

“Thank you for buying my girlfriend a drink,” Percy continued. “Quite the gentleman.”

So much for being cousins…

Though to be fair, at the mention of the word “girlfriend”, the man’s expression morphed to one of deep displeasure, which was made even more evident when he did not grace Percy with his own name.

Vex closed her eyes and sighed out quite a bit of tension, leaning against Percy’s chest. She figured she might as well embrace the charade by making things realistic with some inebriated public displays of affection. Of course, what she didn’t expect was for Percy to step up his acting game as well by giving her a quick kiss on the head in response, which caused an uncomfortably pleasant chill to run all the way down her spine. It was a sudden feeling she didn’t expect, but she tried her best to not squirm. Things were going too well to mess up now.

Percy simply continued smiling, turning toward Vex and giving her a knowing look. “Mind joining me outside for a smoke?”

“Of course, not a problem,” Vex said, her joy coming off as genuine because it truly was. She turned to look at the man and gave him a nod and a wink, just to keep things classy. “It was a pleasure to meet you, sir.”
The man’s lips seemed to part for some sort of response, but by then they were already long gone.

Vex held a tight grip on Percy’s rough hand as they weaved through the crowds, feeling her body jostled and shaken by the jungle of bodies dividing them from their destination. They did not stop to speak to each other until they made it outside, finding relief from the chaos and heat that was slowly transforming the late night Cloudtop scene into a steaming, hellish landscape.

Stopping by the ledge, Vex stared up at the sky and let out a loud groan. “God, thank you so much. I’m so sorry you had to deal with that...”

Percy chuckled, scratching his head. “It’s quite alright. Was just out here smoking anyway. When I noticed no one was answering your text I figured you were going to need some assistance. Thankfully you weren’t hard to find.”

“Tell me about it... That guy was a fucking creep.”

A nervous smile cracked on Percy’s lips and he cleared his throat, adjusting his sleeves. “Agreed.”

Vex quirked a brow as she watched his complexion redden slightly, but whether it was a result of alcohol, the cold, or something else, she could not tell.

“Well you left him fucking speechless,” she said. “Good job.”

He continued to fidget with his shirt, and there was a long pause before he finally spoke up. “Sorry about that by the way...” he said, a little apologetically. “I feel as though I overstepped.”

Vex furrowed her brow. “What?”

He looked a little flustered as he ran a hand through his hair. “I got nervous. It was all improvisation. I didn’t really know what else to say that would get him to back off...”

It dawned on Vex that he was probably referring to the whole “girlfriend” thing. Frankly, she found it kind of sweet that it was something that bugged him.

“Don’t worry about it. You did good.”

“Maybe the kiss was a little much...”

“Percy,” she laughed, resting a hand on his arm. “You did wonderfully. I owe you one...”

Percy’s gaze lingered on her hand for a few moments, before turning to face the view of Emon. “It’s fine. You don’t owe me anything.” His eyes darted toward her momentarily. “If anything, I still owe you. Our debt still hasn’t been repaid.”

“What debt?”

He quirked a brow at her and smirked. “I thought you were good with money...”

“Wha-”

“When I gave you that money, we agreed that you were doing me a favor by keeping it safe for me. And I never repaid you. And then of course...you also helped me when I wasn’t feeling well...”

“But-”

He lifted a finger at her, “So one debt is repaid.”
That wasn’t how Vex remembered it, but who was she to argue a deal that was leaning in her favor? She scrunched up her face at him and crossed her arms in indignation, rubbing her bare skin and realizing that the warmth she’d accumulated dancing was leaving her faster than she would have hoped.

Percy let out a sigh and removed his jacket, resting it on her shoulders and patting her twice on the back. “And I’d also like to apologize for before.”

He was being awfully apologetic as of late, but Vex wouldn’t be the one to complain, finding the residual body heat from his jacket rather welcoming as she slipped it on. It was already starting to smell like him too, though there was the faintest hint of Gilmore’s aroma still lingering in the fabric.

He adjusted his glasses as he continued. “In hindsight, I realized that maybe that bear meme didn’t amuse you as much as I thought it would. You seemed kind of mad at me and I think I didn’t quite hit the mark.”

Vex covered her mouth as she tried to contain a sudden burst of laughter. “Oh darling...don’t be ridiculous. That was hilarious. You don’t need to apologize for anything.”

“You sure?”

“Of course...” She stared out into the distant cityscape, wiping a tear from her eye and looking a little guilty. “I was just in a weird mood, that’s all...”

“Are you okay?”

She turned to face him and let out a nervous laugh, resting her hand on her chest. “Me? Of course I’m okay.”

He looked skeptical to say the least.

She cleared her throat, not breaking eye contact with him to drive her point home. “Are you okay? I know you hate it when I snoop on you, but...you seem to be a little bit on edge as of late.”

Percy let out a small laugh that came off as a somewhat forced, reaching for his pocket and pulling out his box of cigarettes. He popped one into his mouth and started to feel around for his lighter, taking enough time to have Vex catch on to the fact that he was pretty bad at keeping it in one place. Still, he didn’t seem to answer.

“What’s the matter?” she asked again.

With the cigarette still pressed between his lips, he hummed as his search proved unsuccessful until a realization dawned on him.

“Pardon,” he muttered, reaching around her waist and pulling the lighter out of the jacket he had lent her.

Vex furrowed her brow, drumming her nails against the railing as she waited for any sort of response.

It took him a few tries to light his cigarette in the wind, but he eventually succeeded, pocketing the lighter in his waistcoat and exhaling a heavy stream of smoke that immediately got dragged away out into the city.

She furrowed her brow at his persistent silence. “Percy?”
“I’m fine.” His voice went a little squeakier than was honest.

“Percy…” She stared him down with a scolding expression.

Another one of his signature, long drawn out sighs was followed by a deep inhale of smoke. He leaned against the railing and exhaled slowly, following the fast-moving cloud with his icy blue eyes before finally speaking up. “Do you ever think about things that could have gone differently in your life?”

Vex was somewhat taken aback by the sudden profoundness of his question, but at least she’d finally succeeded in getting something out of him. Following his gaze, she looked out into the distance where the city met the sea. “Every day…”

He tapped the cigarette on the railing, the ashes getting lost in the wind. “I’ve been thinking about it a lot lately.”

She tipped her head like a curious puppy. “How so?”

“I don’t know,” he said, speaking softly. “The past few days, weeks really, I guess not being on the road and running around all the time has given me... time to think. A moment of clarity I suppose. And a lot of thoughts have started to resurface; thoughts that I haven’t had time to mull over.”

“Like what?”

He shrugged. “Past decisions. Past occurrences. Things that could have gone differently and whether it would have changed anything in the long run.”

“Why so philosophical all of a sudden? Have you and Keyleth been smoking without me again?”

“No.” He smirked. “It’s just that, being here, at the Cloudtop, looking out onto Emon…” He paused, reluctance blooming in his face as his words came out a little stunted. “...know this is going to sound kind of crazy, but I had this insane thought. A thought that -- maybe -- had things gone differently in my life, I would have ended up here anyway... no matter what I did.”

Vex’s brows pinched together, trying to make sense of his words. “Like you were destined?”

“Sort of.” He half smirked. “It’s a very strange thought. Rooted in no form of truth.” He took another drag from his cigarette.

“You need to be a little less cryptic with me Percy. We don’t think on the same wavelengths. I feel like you’re leaving me out of the loop.”

Smoke escaped his lips as he spoke. “Do you remember when we were talking about Chaos Theory when we were high with Keyleth?”

She snorted. “Vaguely…”

“Well…” He took another drag from his cigarette and lifted his chin as he exhaled. “There is another concept linked to Chaos Theory called “the Butterfly Effect”. The notion that a little change can have a large impact on the world at large. Like a hurricane in Draconia being caused by a butterfly flapping its wings in Westruun.”

“I’ve heard of it,” Vex said, rubbing her arms a little. “And honestly, I think it makes perfect sense.”

“Well... I suppose I’m having a lapse in faith in the Butterfly Effect as of late.” He stared up at an
airplane flying high in the night sky. “I think I’m struggling to wrap my head around it because part of me…” He laughed at himself. “Well the insane part of me, which mind you is probably most of me, thinks that I probably would have ended up here anyway, even if things gone differently in my life.”

“Gone differently in what way? Like not leaving home? Like not coming with us? What do you mean? She sighed. “This would make a lot more sense if you gave me some context Percy. I was never good at this theoretical nonsense.”

“Let me give you an example,” he said, turning to face her and engaging her like a passionate professor. “Now bear with me. This is going to get personal.”

Vex quirked a brow and crossed her arms, “I’m listening.”

“Okay...Let’s pretend you and Vax never left Syngorn; that your father had treated you a little better and compelled you to stay.” He held the cigarette between his fingers as he spoke with his hands. “Fast forward to now and your father makes a business trip to Emon. He takes you along and you are brought to this wondrous building called the Cloudtop Center. One evening you hear word of a show going on in its world-famous club and you decided to go... And before you know it, here you are, hanging out on a balcony on a cold winter’s evening staring at the Osmit Sea.”

Vex narrowed her eyes at him, trying to wrap her mind around how any of this related to his own experience. “But I wouldn't be talking to you...”

“Who's to say I wouldn't be here too?”

Vex closed her eyes and rubbed her temples. “So you’re saying you believe that even if you had done things differently in your life, that you would have ended up here anyway?”

Percy’s shoulders slouched slightly, staring up at the sky once more. “Honestly, I’ve come to the comforting realization that there is probably nothing I personally could have done differently in my life to change the outcome of certain events. Nothing better, that’s for sure. Overall, I think given the knowledge I had at the time, I made the best possible decisions I could have made…” He paused, clearing his throat. “For the most part.”

“You don’t sound very sure of yourself…”

“Well…” He said, taking another drag from his cigarette and looking at her with a little guilt.

“Percy...”

He coughed, smoke escaping his mouth. “Well I may have made a small mistake here or there.”

Vex waved her hand at him. “Look, it doesn't matter. I still don’t understand what you're talking about and how this adds up. Wasn’t the whole point of this conversation sparked by you wondering whether changing your past behavior could have an effect on your destiny or some shit?”

He wasn’t making much sense, and frankly, she couldn't tell if it was because she was drunk, or he was drunk, or if the universe was drunk.

“I suppose I was speaking less in terms of what I could have done differently, and more in terms of the things that happened around me.”

“But you have no control over that...”
“I know. But my point is, the *entire* point of my current existential dilemma, is that part of me still believes that even if things had gone differently in my life, I still would have ended up here,” He pointed at the ground. “Right here, in this suit, drinking whiskey in a club and staring out into the night sky.”

Vex was starting to catch on to the fact that this theory was creeping into the realm conspiracy. Maybe he was drunker that he was leading on to be.

“But what happened Percy? What could have gone differently? What did you want to change? I get the creeping sense that you’re talking about something specific that you’re not telling me. I may be a little tipsy but I’m not an airhead.”

Percy sighed out yet another stream of smoke, closing his eyes. “It’s not something I’m going to get into right now.”

She stared at him with an appalled look on her face. “How is that even fair?

He wandered off toward a nearby ashtray to put out his cigarette. “Life isn’t fair.”

Vex followed after him, groaning like a disappointed child. “You can’t just leave me hanging.”

“Of course I can.”

“Well?”

He brushed his hands clean as he looked at her. “It’s not relevant to this conversation.”

“Percy,” she clicked her tongue. “We’ve known each other for…” She pursed her lips. “Well, an alright amount of time. You know so much about my past. I understand if it’s something that makes you uncomfortable but-”

“It is something that makes me extremely uncomfortable.” He snapped, staring her down with a scolding expression. “I’ve managed to go this far without thinking about it and I rather keep it that way.” His tense expression softened as he watched Vex’s gaze take refuge at her feet, and he corrected his tone. “For the time being…at least.”

Vex continued to stare at her toes, wiggling them slightly. “I...understand.” She sighed. “I suppose there are aspects of my life that I feel the same about...”

As if praying for strength, Percy stared up at the sky and closed his eyes for a moment, basking in the darkness. He eventually looked back down at Vex, and with a stunted smile, he pat her on the shoulder. “Perhaps one day I’ll tell you.”

She looked up at him with a sweet smile.

“Just...not now,” he continued, turning back toward the city. “Whether I share my life story doesn’t really change my current thoughts on the universe; how I both feel consumed and comforted by the possibility that my life is destined to go a certain way regardless of what happens around me or what I do.”

Vex stared him down, desperately trying to glean anything off of him, anything at all. Alas, there was simply too much complex energy being exchanged between them at the moment. Frankly, she could barely make sense of her own emotions.

She crossed her arms on the railing and stared out at the city once more. “Well, either way, I think
it’s bull.”

Percy glanced at her with a quirked brow as she continued.

“I think we have full control. In fact, I think it’s one of the only things we can do in life. Change things and hope those little changes shape our future for the best in the long run.”

He scooted a little closer to her, crossing his arms on the railing as well and admiring the view with her. “Unless destiny keeps on dragging us in the same direction no matter what happens.”

She rested her chin on her hands. “I don’t want to think of things that way. You can’t even imagine how many times I look back on the decisions I’ve made and wonder what I could have different, and how that could have changed things. It’s both maddening and consoling. It just depends on how you look at it I suppose. When I look back on a poor decision and dwell on it then of course I feel miserable. But more recently, I’ve been trying to force myself to think back on all the good decisions I’ve made, and how things could have gone much worse. When I see the world in that light, things seem a lot brighter.” Her eyes drifted in his direction. “Either way, I think I like believing that my decisions are actually leading toward something better. That they do make a difference.” She laughed. “I suppose believing in the Butterfly Effect makes life seem a little less pointless, don’t you think?”

Percy turned to look at her and smiled. “One can only hope that’s the case.”

Her eyes narrowed in scrutiny. “You know, I feel like we just had this conversation a few weeks ago, but back then I was the one being the nihilist. I feel like we’ve switched roles.”

“Guess I’m the one going through the existential crisis today…” He laid his cheek on his hands and stared at her. “Yes, you’re right. I’m being a hypocrite. It’s pretty typical of me.”

“It’s fine.” She placed her cheek on her hands as well, mirroring his position. “I forgive you.”

“That’s a horrible idea, but thank you.”

They both rested on the railing like two lazy cats, staring at each other for quite some time; not awkwardly, nor romantically; just silently observing each other and embracing the other's existence.

A few moments passed until Vex finally spoke up. “Percy. Let’s make a promise to each other okay?”

“Depends on the promise. Experience had taught me that the fine print is important.”

She straightened from her lounging position and braced her hands on her hips. “I want us to promise to each other that we will always strive to make the best decision in our power.”

Percy stood straight as well, crossing his arms with a curious look on his face. “Okay...?”

“So you promise?”

“I guess so.”

She pointed at him with newfound energy in her eyes. “Say you promise.”

He huffed, rolling his eyes. “Okay, I promise.”

Vex grabbed him by the hand and raised it high in the air. “Take our destiny by the reins and ride it toward the best outcome possible.”
Percy furrowed his brow but couldn't help but crack the slightest of smiles. “Or have a lot of fun trying...”

“So long as we try.”

He chuckled slightly. “So long as we try…”

Driven by her own inhibitions, Vex tackled Percy into the tightest of hugs, and thus came to the realization that he was absolutely freezing. As she maintained the hug for a few more seconds, he remained about as stiff and awkward as was standard for Percy, and after a little bit of rubbing to warm him up, she looked up at him and smiled. “Should we go back inside?”

He adjusted his glasses with a hint of relief in his expression. “Yet another fantastic idea…”

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As they waited for the others to trickle their way toward them, Vex, Vax, Grog, and Percy sat in four separate spots at a booth, staring down at their phones like a couple of asocial teens at a slumber party.

Vex was rather thankful she decided to return Percy’s jacket before finding Vax, as she soon discovered that they still weren’t super best friends yet. God, her brother could be petty, but then again, she was the same way, as was their father… In fact, holding grudges was pretty much a family tradition.

Nevertheless, after a long period of music accompanied silence, Percy glance up from his phone to make the first attempt at communication. “Vax…”

Vax looked up at Percy from his spot at the table, a subtle hint of why-the-fuck-are-talking-to-me coating his expression.

“Have you tried connecting to the wifi yet?”

“No…” Vax said lowly. “I’m using data.”

Percy drummed his fingers on the table once, adjusting his glasses and sighing patiently. “Mind if I do it for you?”

A deep look of suspicion stained Vax’s face. “Why…”

Percy closed his eyes and beckoned him over with his hand. “Come here. I want you to look at this.”

Without so much as an acknowledgement, Vax stared back down at his phone with the obvious intention of staying put. However, after receiving a quick slap on the arm from his all too fed up twin, he stared up at the ceiling and let out a groan before begrudgingly sliding next to Percy and looking at his phone. “What…”

Percy showed Vax his screen. “So my phone automatically connected to the Cloudtop wifi, which I found unusual since I have mine specifically set to avoid public wifi networks. I also noticed that it was going a little slower than usual so I troubleshooted its performance. Turns out, it’s acting as though there is another program running in the background…but when I look through my apps I can’t find anything.” There was a very subtle nervousness in Percy's tone as he spoke, enough to grab Vex’s attention.

Vax’s initial apprehension shifted to concern as his eyes narrowed, “Let me see that.”
“Ah…” Percy pulled his phone away and kept it at an arm's length, staring at Vax. “Give me your phone first.”

Vax wrinkled his nose at him before snorting. “Fine…here.”

Percy accepted Vax’s phone with a touch of smugness, and after a few seconds of studying the phone, his brow furrowed. “Look, your phone automatically connected too.”

“What? But I was using data just now.”

“Yeah, you were. But it’s also connected to the wifi in the background. See?” He showed Vax his phone.

“I’ve never seen a phone do that before…” Vax muttered, leaning over. “Wait, let me check something.” He took his phone back and swiped through it a few times.

Vex had no clue of what the hell they were talking about, but she honestly couldn’t care less. She was having far too much fun sending pictures to Pike and Keyleth while they were in the bathroom.

“The fuck…” Vax muttered. "Looks like my phone is running some sort of ghost program in the background too.”

“What about my phone?” Grog asked, rather suddenly.

Vax and Percy both glanced up at Grog with quirked brows, before looking at each other with an expression of patronizing tenderness.

“Your phone is a relic Grog…” Percy said.

“It doesn’t even connect to the internet,” Vax added.

Grog furrowed his brow at both of them. “And your point is?”

“Nevermind Grog…” they both said in tandem.

Vax turned to look at Percy, and for the first time, gave him a bit of a smirk, patting him on the shoulder. “Good catch Percy. I think I wanna mess around with this some more. Maybe run some more apps to see what’s going on.”

“I’d love to join you,” Percy said.

Vax quirked a brow at him.

“What? I’m curious.” Percy grinned. “I’d offer you a drink while we nerd out but this place charges an arm and a leg. And I don’t think I dislike you enough to offer you a cigarette.”

Vax hummed. “How kind of you…”

They both stared each other down with a look that Vex couldn’t quite place. It was an awkward combination of challenge, and what she could only interpret as...sexual tension maybe?

Eventually, Percy spoke up. “Wanna go to the hotel room and order some pizzas?”

Vax gave him a toothy grin and poked him on the nose. “You’re speaking the language of love Percy…”
Percy winked at Vax. “I know.”

With that, they both stood up with great haste and head in the direction of the reception, looking far too buddy-buddy than was expected out of two guys who had spent an entire evening avoiding each other.

As Vex stared at the scene with a mild sense of bewilderment, it occurred to her for the first time that -- maybe -- Percy was actually gay. It would certainly explain a lot, not to mention finally put her heart at ease. She blinked at them as they scurried away, before quickly grabbing hold of Grog and dragging him with her. She was gonna follow those two whether they wanted privacy or not. She would not tolerate them fucking in the suite before she got a chance to look at it.

Chapter End Notes

Content Warnings: Mild harassment and coercion (following, buying drinks without asking)

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Aw man. Writing this chapter was an ordeal. Once again, I was very tempted to cut it into two parts, but I couldn't find a good cut off point. Better for you people I suppose…?

Kudos to those who are down to chill with me for the long run. I probably would have stopped writing a long time ago had it not been for all your kind input and help.
Shine a Blacklight

Chapter Summary

Last time, on The Butterfly Effect: Vex texts for help when a creeper won't get the hint that she's not interested, and Percy saves the day. They have a heartfelt conversation on the balcony where they discuss the nature of the universe. Percy makes amends with Vax by exchanging some geek talk and pointing out some oddities he's noticed in the Cloudtop's wifi, and they both run off to the suites to order some pizza and investigate further.

Chapter Notes

No Content Warnings this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

With Vax and Percy fleeing from the Club faster than Vex could catch up, she scrambled to gather the others so she could admire the rumored majesty of the Cloudtop Hotel suites. She'd only ever heard mention of them, though it still required all of Vex's mental faculties to keep her expectations of the suites as low as possible. She'd even mustered the self-control to refrain from asking Tiberius what the rooms looked like, given he'd already had the luxury to get a good look at them while transferring their belongings. Still, with each passing moment, she found the anticipation doing horrible things to her innards and she couldn't wait to get up there so she could swine dive onto the best bed in the room.

After learning the hotel was located on the top floors of a different tower of the Cloudtop Center, Vex was more than willing to make use of one of the many ornate sky bridges to facilitate the trip. Nevertheless, it still ended up taking them about ten minutes to reach their destination, and that didn't include the other twenty minutes required to round up the rest of the party off the damn dance floor.

Allura had allegedly given them access to two identical suites, each containing two queen sized beds and a king. That was about the extent of what Vex knew, and Vex hated not knowing things. How close were the rooms to each other? How were they going to distribute everyone? Where were the beds located? Were Vax and Percy already screwing on one of them? Alas, they were all questions that would be answered very, very soon.

***

Entering the suite was like walking into a dream.

The whole interior had that wonderful clean smell with just a hint of peppermint. Slick, black modern furniture detailed in gold lined the walls, with beige curtains framing a breathtaking view. The larger of the two bedrooms rooms within the suite contained two queen-sized beds, while the other room
sported a much larger, king-sized bed with champagne colored sheets and enough pillows to build an adult-sized pillow fort. Each room was connected to two enormous bathrooms, with one of them containing a bath big enough to fit three adults (or probably two Grog sized people), complete with massage jets.

Vex scrambled to examine the other suite just across the hall and discovered that it was indeed identical to the other one, save for the presence of two very familiar individuals, currently chilling on the king-sized bed. Their shoes were scattered across the room as if they’d pulled them off all too eagerly, and their ties and jackets had both been haphazardly flung over an armchair. Staring at her laptop intently, they seemed too preoccupied to take note of her arrival.

“Don’t mind me,” Vex said, leaning against the wall with her arms crossed. “By all means, continue your little sexual escapade. You know I won’t judge.”

Vax and Percy both glanced up at her, entirely unfazed by her mockery.

“Oh yeah, you just missed it,” Vax said, giving her a playful wink and resting his head on Percy’s shoulder.

“Don’t shine a blacklight in here,” Percy said flatly. “Now that we’ve quelled our sexual appetite it’s time to take care of the other. We’re in the middle of ordering pizza. You want one?”

The level of dryness in Percy’s could delivery was uncanny, but she tried to not fall prey to their trolling. “It’s past midnight…”

“Oh shut up,” Vax said with an eye roll. “I’ve heard you rustling through our fridge at like three in fucking the morning.”

“Whatever,” Vex scoffed. “I don’t know about you two but I think I’m going to take a bath in that swimming pool they have in the bathroom. I feel like I’m covered in the sweat of five hundred peop-”

“I want a pizza!” Keyleth shouted from around the corner.

“Holy shit! Vex gasped, holding her chest as she glared at Keyleth who had suddenly appeared from around the corner. “Indoor voices Keyleth.”

Keyleth covered her mouth, trying to whisper. “Sorry…”

“It’s fine,” Vex groaned, running a hand through her hair. “You guys work out where you wanna sleep. I think I’m done being an adult for the night…”

Now, it was debatable whether her recent club activities constituted as “being an adult”, but nevertheless, it didn’t change the fact that she was so ready for some peace and quiet. After grabbing her nightwear and toothbrush, Vex vanished into the glorious marble chamber that was the bathroom. With gold fixtures, soft fluffy towels, and a multicolored heat lamp, it was all she could have ever hoped for. The only real drawback was that the bath was taking centuries to fill, but Vex found the silver lining and used the wait-time as an opportunity to steal one of her brother’s slices of pizza the moment she smelled the cheesy goodness.

There was something heavenly about the first few seconds of dipping into a steaming hot bath after a long day, and there was no doubt in her mind that it had indeed been one of the longest days of her life. In fact, she was pretty damn confident that she could probably fill a small book with all the drama that had ensued in the past few days.
With the feeling of the alcohol slowly wearing off, she couldn't wait to get clean and go to bed so she could sleep through the worst part of her inevitable hangover. With the relaxing sounds of a forest playing on her phone, she took the good part of half an hour intermittently submerging her entire body under the surface of the water. With her heart rate slowed and her muscles relaxed, she enjoyed testing just how long she could hold her breath. She’d never been the best swimmer on the planet, but on a good day, she could usually hold her breath for about a minute, and even longer if she calmed her senses. A small part of her felt as though it was something she needed to improve on, but the rational side of her brain had no issue butting in to remind her that it was a stupid skill that would never come in handy, unless she decided to become some magician’s assistant, or one of those professional mermaids. God, she’d make a hot mermaid... and she'd be surrounded by other hot mermaids, not to mention it would certainly make more money than her current job...

Feeling a new rush of motivation, she took a deep breath and submerged her body once more. It was best she start training like now.

***

When Vex walked into the hallway with her hair wrapped up in a towel and sporting her Mama Bear t-shirt, she noticed that Keyleth and Pike had taken ownership of the room with the king sized bed, and were currently cuddled next to each other watching something on Pike’s tablet in the dark. Heading toward the second bedroom, she furrowed her brow at the sound of the boys talking up a storm.

"Wait, scroll back," Vax muttered. “What the hell is that?”

“Looks long,” Percy replied, sounding a little perturbed.

“Hoooooly shit that’s long...”

“What in the Nine Hells—” Vex muttered under her breath...

She turned the corner and crossed her arms at the sight of Percy and Vax, now laying prone on one of the queen beds, nearly cheek to cheek as they both stared at her computer. She didn’t find it all that surprising that they were still dressed in some of their formal-wear, granted Percy had removed his waistcoat and tie, while Vax flaunted his tank top underneath his unbuttoned dress shirt. It was as if they were performing the slowest striptease on the planet, constantly interrupted by her arrival, or perhaps by their own susceptibility to distraction.

She quirked a brow at them. “You two watching porn on my computer?”

“Yeah for sure, that’s exactly what we’re doing,” Vax said a little sarcastically, not taking his eyes off the screen as Percy typed something into the computer.

Vex rolled her eyes and wandered around them, plopping on the bed to get a better look. They certainly weren’t watching porn, that’s for sure, but what they were actually doing, she could hardly tell. All she could see on her screen were walls and walls of white text on a black background in a language that she could only discern as “super nerdy geeky code lingo.”

“That,” Vax said, pointing at a specific line of code on the screen. “What’s that?”

“I don’t know,” Percy hummed.

“Let me try something,” Vax said, taking control of the keyboard and typing more things that Vex did not understand.
“What are you two doing?”

Percy turned his attention to her as Vax typed away. “How much do you know about computers?”

Vex laughed in lieu of admitting her own ignorance on the matter. “I think I wrote that I know how to use Word, Excel, and PowerPoint on my resume a few years back…”

“Right…” Percy said, adjusting his glasses and finding a spot closer to her. “So remember how Vax and I were discussing some weird things that were happening to our phones earlier tonight?”

“Yeah, something about it connecting to the wifi by itself or some shit?”

Percy nodded. “And how it was running something in the background that we couldn't identify.”

“Yeah.”

“Well turns out it’s happening to Keyleth’s phone, and to Pike's phone, and her tablet as well. Vax decided to check your computer and lo and behold…it connected to the internet all by itself.”

“I guess that’s kind of weird.”

“Not only weird, but potentially bad.”

Vex’s expression went a little pale. “Should we be worried?”

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out. It might just be the byproduct of the security system here. Rather invasive, but unsurprising in a place like this. I don’t want to jump to any dramatic conclusions just yet.”

“So what are you doing?”

“Well, we’ve been sifting through to see if we can find any solid traces of that program running in the background to figure out what it is, and we think we’re getting close...But whatever it is, someone has gone to a very big effort to keep it hidden.”

“That sounds kind of sketchy.”

Percy simply shrugged. “Like I said, it might just be part of the security system but...it doesn’t make a lot of sense. Having a system that automatically connects to every device that comes in range is really unusual, not to mention incredibly risky because it puts the entire system in jeopardy. Honestly, I can’t help but find it a little bit suspicious, especially after all the technical problems this place seemed to be having.”

“Any luck?”

“The fact that we’ve managed to get this deep into the code is great.” He smirked, at himself, as if almost annoyed by what he was about to admit. "Your brother is really good at cracking systems open.” He leaned in and lowered his voice to a whisper. “Did you know he carries around a USB with personally coded password cracking software?”

Vex let out a nervous chuckle. “Yeah,” she glared at Vax. “Not exactly the proudest of his achievements.”

Percy looked both amused and a little intimidated. “I beg to differ. I think it’s terrifyingly brilliant, and I pride myself as someone who knows how to keep a system pretty safe. Your brother missed his calling.”
“Oh trust me, he’s had plenty of opportunities to use his skills…” She craned her head over to get a better look at what Vax was doing. “So you guys aren’t doing anything illegal are you?”

Percy chuckled, “All we’re doing is looking at whatever is already on your computer…”

“No promises Stubby,” Vax said, still typing.

“Vax, I swear to god-”

“Percy, get your pretty little ass back here,” Vax said. “I need your help.”

Percy looked at Vex apologetically. “Right, I need to…”

“Go right ahead,” She rolled her eyes. “Don’t let me drag you away from your fun. I’m gonna go dry my hair.”

***

Vex’s eyes fluttered open to the sound of Vax and Percy whispering to each other, still typing away in the darkness. She groaned as she rolled over, spotting their concerned faces in the glare of her computer screen.

“What the hell are you guys still doing up…?” Her voice came out as horribly raspy, and she pawed for the glass of water by her bed. Her mouth tasted like she’d licked the bottom of Grog’s shoe.

“Busy,” Vax said, a touch of intensity coating his words.

She sat up, rubbing her eyes, “Something wrong?”

“We don’t know yet.” Percy rubbed his chin, his eyes darting across the screen as Vax typed away. Vex checked her phone and found that it was close to three in the morning. She got up to take a piss and chugged an entire glass of water before wandering back to the bedroom. However, just as she was about to crawl back under the covers, Vax spoke up, concern tainting his words.

“Percy…” Vax muttered, his eyes wide. “I found something.”

Percy adjusted his glasses and narrowed his eyes as he studied the screen, “What the fuck…?”

“I don’t know. I broke into something weird. It almost feels like an external account.”

Vex had to see what the hell was going on. She turned on one of the desk lamps and sat behind Vax and Percy, rubbing her eyes as she stared at the screen. At first, it just looked like more walls of meaningless text, but as she paid more attention, she started to notice a pattern.

Vax pointed at the line of text at the top of the screen, which was a string of numbers followed by the word “brymscythe.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Percy said.

“I don’t know either, but I’m saving a few screenshots. This is some insane shit.”

“Indeed.” Percy hummed, adjusting his glasses as he squinted at the screen.

Vax ran his finger across the vertical list of text and muttered the letters he saw under his breath. “CTCLobCam 1, CTCLobCam 2, CTCLobCam 3, CTCEICam1…” It was a column of what looked
like hundreds of individual elements, but what they were, she still didn’t know.

“Try that first one,” Percy said, pointing at one of the lines of code.

Vax opened a separate window and typed in a few lines of god knows what, and after a few seconds of processing, her computer screen flashed and showed the visual of...a video? But the location looked familiar.

“Is that...?” Vex furrowed her brow.

“That looks like the lobby,” Vax said.

All three of them leaned in simultaneously, narrowing their eyes at the screen as they observed what looked like a janitor mopping the otherwise empty floor.

Vex quirked a brow. “Ok...?”

“Try another one,” Percy urged.

Going through the same process as before, Vax typed in a few commands and the computer screen flashed once more, this time showing what looked like an empty elevator.

“Did you guys just access the fucking cam system?” Vex squeaked.

“That wasn’t what we were trying to do...” Vax hissed back.

“Yeah, we were just following the traces of the ghost program.” Percy scratched the side of his jaw, looking somewhat perplexed. “This information is being fed through your computer. We’ve done nothing... super wrong.”

“But you’re taking fucking screenshots! Guys, this feels sketchy...”

“Oh Vex...Don’t you know I need them for that blog I run on the dark web?” Vax said semi-ironically.

Vex closed her eyes and rubbed her temples, “I’m too tired for this shit.”

“Wait, Vax, try that one,” Percy said. “The one that’s just a list of numbers.”

Once again, after some quick typing, the computer screen flickered to what looked like, well... they couldn't exactly tell what it was.

Percy adjusted his glasses. “What is that?”

“It kind of just looks like the corner to a ceiling,” Vax said.

Vex tilted her head. “Yeah, but that would have to mean that camera is on the floor or something.”

“Yeah, that’s weird,” Vax said.

They all stared at the image a few moments longer before Percy spoke up. “Try another one.”

As Vax tried the process once more, Vex noticed Keyleth wander into the bedroom, rubbing her eyes with the worst case of bedhead on the planet. “What the hell are you guys doing...” She groaned. “It’s like three-thirty...”
“Not now Keyleth,” They all said in a chorus, staring at the screen intently.

Keyleth blinked in confusion before making her way behind the others, scratching her head as she stared at the screen, which flashed to yet a new image. They all flinched as they suddenly heard what sounded like a female voice come through the laptop’s speakers rather loudly.

“ -ucking insane. You should have seen it. The guy was amazing. ”

The image seemed to be moving around as if the camera were in motion.

“What the…” Vex muttered.

The video initially showed what looked like a dark purple wall, then a row of alcohol bottles, then the image of a purple-haired individual cleaning a counter, then the bottles again.

“Wait... I recognize that purple hair...” Keyleth croaked.

“Pretty sure that was the club's bartender...” Vex confirmed.

The voice continued to speak. “Yeah. ” There was a pause. “Yeah I will. ” Another pause. “I'll call you back when I'm on the road. Bryn and I are still cleaning up. ” Another pause. “Kay, love you, bye. ”

The image swung around aggressively and hovered over what looked like the wooden bar for a few seconds. Then it swung around again, a few fingers coming into view before the image went dark, the sound of fabric rubbing against a microphone and muffling the voices of people talking.

Grim silence struck the room, only broken by Vax’s rather appropriate commentary.

“What...the actual...fuck…”

Percy grabbed the side of his hair, his eyes wide. “I can’t believe it.”

“Can’t believe what…?” Pike suddenly spoke up, peeking her head from around the corner.

Vax aggressively beckoned her over, and she dragged her feet toward them, plopping down next to Vex. “What the hell is going on-”

“Just…” Vax winced, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose. “One second Pike…” He seemed to be processing something very upsetting.

“What’s wrong?” Pike asked, her brow furrowing.

Vex tried her best to brief Keyleth and Pike on the situation as Vax and Percy continued to investigate.

“This can’t be legal…” Pike finally said, staring at the others with a serious expression on her face.

Vex rubbed her arms as she shook her head slowly. “We’re too deep now. We need to figure out what this is…” She turned to Vax. “Try another one.”

“No wait,” Percy urged, grabbing Vax’s shoulder. He quickly picked up his own phone, studying it carefully as he slid his thumb across the screen. “I have a horrible thought.”

“What?” Vax asked.
“Here,” Percy said, pointing at his phone. “Type this in the search to see if it comes up in that list.”

Vax followed Percy’s instructions promptly, typing in a string of numbers. Sure enough, as he pressed enter, the list automatically scrolled down to a very specific row of digits among the thousands currently listed.

“Access it,” Percy said, his voice tense, as if he were holding his breath.

Vax nodded slowly, his fingers now moving at a speed that could only be achieved by years of practice. As the screen flickered to life, a communal gasp filled the room as the image of a familiar head of black hair staring at a laptop appeared on the screen. Percy swung his phone around, as did the image, showing the beds, the TV, Pike, Keyleth, Vex... He turned the camera toward himself and sure enough, on Vex’s computer, the living breathing image of Percy was now staring right back at them.

“Holy fuck!” Pike gasped, the sound of her own voice resonating out of Vex’s computer.

“Shit,” Percy hissed, slapping his phone on the bed and allowing the image to go dark.

Vex covered her mouth, her eyes darting between the others who were equally perplexed.

Vax shook his head incessantly, typing faster than ever before. “I have to fucking figure out where this account is located.”

Suddenly, the screen flashed once more, and Vax flinched, clearly not expecting the computer’s behavior. His jaw dropped and he leaned away from the screen.

To the absolute horror of everyone in the room, they sat in paralyzed silence, staring at what was quite clearly the image of all four of them... staring at themselves, their eyes wide and their faces pale as if they’d seen a ghost.

“Oh my gosh…” Keyleth covered her mouth, as did the Keyleth on screen.

Just as suddenly as they had appeared, their images vanished as the screen went completely black, the columns of text gone, save for the smallest of dialogue boxes. Vax instinctively removed the USB from the computer, and just as he did, one simple word appeared on screen in quick, deliberate letters.

“stop”

Vax’s eyes went wide as he raised his hands high in the air. “I didn’t type that.”

Vex whipped her head toward him, the stress in her eyes apparent. “What?”

“I swear to fucking god I didn’t type that.” His voice was nearly a growl at this point.

More words appeared in the dialogue box, and the group went silent.

“you have crossed us”

“See,” Vax hissed. “What did I fucking tell you-”

“he is a fool”

There was a moment of pause among them, and the phantom typing continued.
Vex grabbed hold of Percy’s arm, her eyes still fixated on the screen. “I don’t have to be a computer genius to know that it’s fucking talking to us.”

“But why…” Keyleth whispered, her voice barely audible at this point.

“We know your face now.”

Everyone instinctively took a step back, and as soon as they did, the screen went completely black before automatically closing off the window and taking it back to Vex’s standard desktop screen of a bear.

“Shit,” Percy hissed as he scrambled to type something in the computer, biting his lower lip. Time and time again, he made numerous attempts at something that was clearly not succeeding, her computer expressing its refusal to cooperate with numerous error sounds.

“God dammit,” Percy muttered, throwing his head back. “Lost the connection.” His shoulders laxed as he allowed his hands to drop on his lap. “They’ve cut us off.”

Silence reclaimed the room once more, though it was by no means a peaceful silence. It was uneasy; tense; contemplative; the silence of those trying to hide from something that was stalking them. Seconds felt like hours, the paranoia in the room palpable under the sound of their breathing.

“This…” Vex suddenly uttered, her voice strained as she pointed at the screen with a clenched jaw. “This is some demon possession level shit…”

“Now, let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Percy said, rubbing his eyes behind his glasses. “My computer fucking talked to us!” she shouted.

With little warning, Vax promptly slapped the computer screen shut, gesturing aggressively and silently mouthing the words “shut up”.

Everyone went deathly quiet once again, staring at Vax with confused looks on their faces. Vax met each of their gazes, making sure he had all of their attention before winking at them. “You saw what it said,” Vax exclaimed, now speaking intentionally loud. “We should probably leave first thing in the morning. Let’s just pretend we saw nothing. I don’t want to deal with this bullshit.”

Pike looked at the others with wide eyes as she silently mouthed. “Ooohhh…”

Percy nodded slowly, clearly catching on. “Yeah, this is really weird. Fuck this shit.” Percy shouted, equally loud.

Vax wandered up to Percy and pat him on the shoulder with a smile. “Well, I guess if we’re leaving first thing in the morning we’re gonna need a nightcap.” He turned toward the others. “Hey Keyleth, you wanna smoke some bud in the bathroom?”

Keyleth’s brows dropped and she tilted her head. “What?”

“Yeah,” Percy agreed, grabbing Keyleth by the arm. “Let’s all smoke some bud in the bathroom. This shit stressed me out.”

“Guy’s we can’t…”
“Keyleth, c’mon…” Vax said, tossing an exaggerated wink at her.

Vex bit down on her lower lip and ushered everyone into the bathroom, where they all huddled in a circle before she locked the door behind them.

She whipped around and braced her body against the door, staring at them wide-eyed. “What the fuck was that just now?” She kept her voice at a whisper, though she found it very hard to keep her volume contained given the level of adrenaline pumping in her system.

“I don’t fucking know!” Vax hissed.

Percy removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. “What the hell have we gotten ourselves into…”

Pike rested her hands on her hips. “That’s a good question.”

Keyleth, blinked looking at the others. “So I’m assuming we aren’t actually smoking…”

“No Keyleth, we aren’t actually smoking.” Vax sighed.

“No but seriously,” Vex said, grabbing hold of Percy’s arm and squeezing it. “Someone please explain what just happened out there. Please…”

Percy glanced at her with an expression that could only indicate that something was very wrong. “Well…” He started off, cleaning his glasses on his shirt before putting them back on. “Seems as though we just stumbled on someone’s spying network.”

“Fuck,” Pike muttered.

Percy closed his eyes. “I know.”

“This is really bad…” Vex said.

“I know…”

“What do we do?” Keyleth asked.

“I don’t know but we need to keep it down,” Vax insisted, lowering his voice even more and gesturing for them to do the same. “We have no fucking idea who can hear us but we can’t have them knowing we know.”

“What plans?” Keyleth’s eyes went wide. “What the hell do you do in a situation like this?”

“This is fucking insane,” Vex grabbed her own hair. “This shit doesn’t happen in real life.”

“That’s what I thought too until two fucking minutes ago,” Pike said.

“You’d be surprised what kind of fucked-up shit happens in the world,” Percy muttered, staring holes into marble tiles.

“This feels out of our league,” Vax said, blank expression making eye contact with Vex in the mirror as he crossed his arms.

Vex’s eyes darted from person to person. “We need to contact someone. The IT team... the City Guard...someone…”
“We can’t contact the cops” Vax said too quickly.

“Oh no…” Pike muttered, giving him a serious look.

Vax broke eye contact with Vex and stare down at the floor, but Vex wouldn’t let him mentally check out now.

“This was fucking illegal wasn’t it?” Vex asked eyes narrowed.

“It’s...foggy at best...” Percy muttered.

“Vax!” Vex nearly shouted, before being shushed at by everyone in the room. She bit down on her lower lip and corrected her volume. “Vax, you can’t fucking do this shit...”

“Too late now…” Vax said.

Keyleth rubbed her arms, glancing at everyone a little nervously. “Well... why don’t we like...warn the IT team then?”

“We can’t contact the IT team either,” Percy said, leaning against the counter. “Vax and I found this in a matter of hours. This is something they should have caught long ago. In fact, I’ll bet money Kreig is in on this.”

Vex’s jaw dropped. “You can’t be serious…”

“Oh, I’m dead serious,” Percy said. “And if I’m right, that means that this entire place is compromised. It would explain a lot. The inconsistency in his story, how he preached that they had the best security out there, his exaggerated confidence…”

“But why would he do it?” Vex asked. “What’s in it for him?”

Percy simply shrugged.

“And besides,” Vex continued. “The computer was all like ‘he is a fool’ and ‘we know your face now,’” she said in air quotes. “Like, who the fuck is ‘we’?”

Keyleth raised a finger like a kid in elementary school. “Maybe it was the royal we…?”

Everyone went quiet and glared at Keyleth, to which she smiled nervously.

“So Allura then?” Pike asked.

They all looked at each other, seemingly intrigued by the suggestion.

“Or we could just not say anything,” Vax muttered. “Pretend we saw nothing.”

“We can’t just pretend we saw nothing,” Keyleth furrowed her brow.

Vex nodded. “Keyleth’s right. They’re onto us. We need to have someone in power on our side. And honestly, I think Allura is our only option at this point.”

“And you did take screenshots.” Percy raised a brow at Vax. “Might be what we need as proof.”

“Yeah, proof to incriminate us...” Vax scoffed.

“Either way it’s almost four in the morning,” Pike said. “We can’t do anything now...”
“And we shouldn’t,” Percy interjected. “Not while we’re in the Cloudtop’s premises. In fact, I wouldn’t trust any of our phones to text or call...We say anything indicating that we want to warn her and whoever is on the other end may hear. I think our safest bet is to speak to her in person tomorrow morning.”

“So we meet up with her pretending we just want to say goodbye,” Keyleth suggested. ”Maybe say we’re bringing a gift?”

“But we still need to call or e-mail her to let her know we want to arrange a visit…” Vex muttered.

“And who is to say that they can’t spy on everything we do now that they’ve tapped our devices?” Pike added. "Is that like a thing now?’”

Percy bit the inside of his cheek as he rubbed his chin, his brow furrowed in thought.

“Well if these people are even half as smart as they appear to be they'll catch on to our “innocent” meeting…” Vax said.

“Well there is always Grog…” Percy muttered.

Everyone looked at him curiously.

He looked up at the others as he continued. “His phone doesn’t connect to the internet. Doesn’t have a camera either. It might at the very least give us some cover on our end. We call from our old hotel or someplace far away from here, on his phone, arrange the meeting, and then tell everything to Allura in person.”

“But if we meet up in person isn’t there a chance that they'll be listening since her office is in the Cloudtop Center?” Vex added.

“We can try to persuade her to meet with us someplace else…” Pike said.

“Like a cafe?” Keyleth asked.

Vex hummed. “Maybe, I don’t know the city at all…”

Suddenly, Vax’s eyes went wide. “What about Gilmore’s?

Everyone looked at Vax with an expression of sudden inspiration, and Keyleth covered her mouth. “That’s right….Because they’re like friends, yeah?”

“Exactly,” Vax said. “We meet up with both of them, thank them for all their help, maybe grab some falafel, and conveniently drop the bomb that the entire Cloudtop is being spied on. What could go wrong?”

“Well,” Vex closed her eyes, dreading her next few words. “Allura might be in on it too…”

“Oh yeah…” Keyleth said.

Everyone went quiet once again, sighing, or groaning, or rubbing their eyes.

“I don’t think she is,” Percy said.

Vex crossed her arms. “You sound awfully sure of yourself.”

“She was having a lot of trouble with the security system the other day and was more than willing to
have a complete stranger take a look at it. She sounded rather fed up and desperate for help. Anyone who was even vaguely aware of illicit activity happening in their security system would not have been so careless. She didn’t know whether I was a secret agent or undercover law enforcement, and even then, she behaved as if there was nothing to hide.”

“That’s circumstantial evidence of her innocence at best Percy…” Vax cautioned.

“I just gave my opinion on the matter. But I think we need to make a decision.”

Vex leaned against the door, taking a few moments to reflect before ultimately nodding. “I agree. I mean, do we really have a choice on the matter? Just imagine what power these people could have with their eyes and ears in Prime Minister Uriel’s office.”

“It does feel like the right thing to do,” Keyleth agreed.

“Yeah…” Pike said.

Vex glanced up with a sigh. “All in favor of informing Allura?”

Vex, Percy, Pike, and Keyleth all raised their hands.

They all looked at Vax, who eventually sighed and raised his hand as well. “Worst comes to worst, I go to prison again. Big deal.”

“Vax!” Vex whined. “Don’t even joke about that.”

“It’s going to be okay,” Percy said. “We’re going to figure this out.”

Everyone nodded solemnly.

“See, what did I tell you guys?” Vax said. “Rich people can’t be trusted.”

Percy groaned. “That is a conversation we can table until next time. For now, I think we need to get some rest and just hope no shady assassins come around trying to murder us in the middle of the night.”

“Should we inform the others?” Pike asked.

“We’ll tell them tomorrow once we’re out of the Cloudtop’s wifi range,” Percy said. “For now, let’s genuinely pretend that nothing happened, and maybe let’s try not to think of the fact that they’re listening to us.”

“I really want to turn off my phone…” Vex muttered.

“No. Have them listen,” Percy said. “Might as well have them hear that we aren’t saying anything suspect rather than keep them guessing.”

“I don’t like this at all,” Vex said, crossing her arms.

Percy smirked for the first time since the entire conversation. “Or we could all make inappropriate moaning noises to make them feel uncomfortable. Maybe shake the beds a little…”

Vax and Pike couldn't help but chuckle at the idea, though Vex’s reaction was quite a bit different. Turning a shade of pink, she clapped loudly, “Right! Well that was a wonderful joint! I think I’m going to go to bed now. I’m super tired.”
With that, she promptly unlocked the door and stormed back to the bedroom where she took refuge under the covers. She’d had it up to here with the weirdness for the day, and the last thing she needed was Percy putting inappropriate thoughts into her mind again. Tomorrow was going to be complicated enough...

Chapter End Notes

Welp, shit is getting real...

I actually wanted to write this chapter from Vax’s point of view, but I soon realized that it would have come off as horribly awkward, considering that my knowledge of computers is maybe a little more than Vex’s. I did some minor research to make the scenarios depicted in this chapter vaguely plausible, but do keep in mind that this is still well within the realm of fiction. I mean... I guess Emon and Draconia don’t exist either so I should probably be less hard on myself.

We’re really delving into canon material now… Demon Cloudtop possessions and ominous threats up the wazoo.
Chapter Summary

Last time, on The Butterfly Effect:

Vex and the others go to check out the two suites they were gifted by Allura and find them to be wonderful. Vax and Percy decide to do some minor snooping on Vex’s computer to investigate their phones odd behaviour. Late in the night, they come to the disturbing discovery that all their device’s cameras and microphones have been hacked, as have all the others in the Cloudtop center. They are caught by a mysterious entity during their investigation and are seemingly threatened before being blocked from doing any further research. After much discussion, they decide to tell Allura under the guise of telling her goodbye and thanking her for her kindness.

Chapter Notes

No Content Warnings this chapter.

I’m so sorry for turning this chapter in so late. The past few weeks, I’ve found myself somewhat stuck and nervous to move forward, mostly because I want to be certain that I don’t make any mistakes in these next few chapters, especially in terms of messing with the continuity of the story later on. The last thing I would want to do is be forced to make major plot changes once I realize that the direction I took does not work later along the road. Alas, my desire to stick to the canon while maintaining a modicum of realism makes it for a tiresome balancing act. But hey, as they say, “measure twice, cut once”.

This, coupled with a sudden spike in my depression has made it very hard to write. Real life has piled on my shoulders and it makes it hard to find the will to even do the things I genuinely enjoy. I sat more than a week not even opening my document and sitting in bed all day, and another week slowly getting myself into writing again. I suppose seeing the sun at some point is probably a good idea...and is on the to do list, I swear.

Your positive comments, support and concern have definitely helped, and I can’t thank you enough for all the encouragement. Overall, I do think taking a step back has allowed me to stew and improve my writing quality, and I hope to get fully back into it soon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The beds in the Cloudtop Suites were so soft that Vex would have probably had the most comfortable sleep in her life, had it not been for the minor discomfort caused by the awareness that someone was likely listening in on their every breath...

The fact that she was sleeping in the same room as Percy probably didn’t help either, as it was in
itself a nerve-wracking endeavor, what with his shifting, and stirring, and occasional coughing in the night. She’d learned rather quickly that he was quite the restless sleeper, though she imagined anyone would be restless when placed in their predicament. Part of her wanted to see if he was awake so she could perhaps speak to him, but she knew that they all needed their sleep, and that talking probably wouldn’t help their situation in the short run. She’d leave him to his inner demons and she’d deal with her own, independently, like the responsible adults she knew they were...

Still, even the mere visual of him sleeping a few feet from her had her feeling more hot and bothered than a panicked raccoon in heat hiding from coyotes. She found his general presence shake her awake from her slumber rather frequently, prompting her to roll over so that he wasn’t in her field of vision, only to find that Vax too was struggling with his own nightmares, tossing and turning like he had fleas.

Nevertheless, she must have eventually found sleep, for when she opened her eyes once more, light was now trickling through the room from a small crack behind the blackout curtains, shining a strip of sunlight across their torsos. She rolled over to see that Percy had covered his head with a pillow and was now sprawled out with one of his feet hanging off the bed. It occurred to her that this was likely the first time he’d ever had that much room to sleep in a very long time, and she figured he’d earned it, all things considered.

She was rather surprised that she had awoken without much of a hangover. It wasn’t something that happened all that frequently anymore, but she figured her consistent hydrating throughout the night and their midnight pizza helped quell the nasty side effects of over drinking. She couldn’t say the same about the others. By the time she returned from the bathroom, already dressed and ready to go, she found the boys only now rising from their unrest like the undead, groaning into their hands and rubbing their eyes, but otherwise refraining from any sort of real conversation.

“C’mon, up and Adam boys. I know from experience you are both quite used to getting no sleep.” She clapped her hands. “Chop chop!”

She didn’t get much of a reply from them, save for a few indiscernible groans and complaints, and a slight increase in their general mobility.

After letting out an unnecessarily loud yawn, Vax sat up and checked his phone. Sliding a pair of lazy fingers across the screen, his tired expression soon morphed to one of curiosity, and then concern, which Vex caught rather deftly.

As his eyes darted, she settled down beside him. “What’s up?”

Vax turned to look at Vex and wore a quick smile, “I ran out of time on this mobile game I’m playing, no biggy.”

Vex quirked a brow, entirely unaware that Vax had stooped so low as to get into any sort of phone game, especially since he’d given her a lot of shit way back in the day when she played one herself; just a stupid little game where you raised dragons on an island.

She watched him reach for his backpack and pulled out a notebook and pen as he continued. “I was ‘this’ close to winning a prize. I had it all planned out here.” He opened the book beside her.

Vex glanced down to see an empty page and narrowed her eyes, and Vax very lightly nudged her with his elbow as he wrote.

“I got a text from someone I don’t know. ” He looked at her and forced a smile, “See?”
Of course. She was ashamed for ever doubting her brother’s level of cunning.

“Oh...” She smiled. “Here, let me take a look. Maybe I can help you out for the next one?” She took the pen from him and wrote on the notebook. “Can I see?”

Vax nodded. “Here, I’ll show you the next collection the game wants me to complete.” He handed her the phone.

Vex could already feel the sense of nervousness she had smothered during her sleep rise in her stomach once more as she read. The fact that the text had its number concealed was rather disconcerting, but what was more disconcerting was its contents:

“You have stumbled onto an investigation that does not concern you. The system you found is part of a large cyberwar that has been taking place for some time and your interference may put the Cloudtop in jeopardy. We are an anonymous group and would prefer to keep it that way, as our methods are unorthodox as a means of fighting an unorthodox foe. We will take it from here. Answer us with a promise that you will leave Emon today, and you will be sent compensation. -Juurezel”

Vex bit her lower lip, reflecting on the words of the text and the curious name the anonymous texter had chosen. It almost reminded her of the angel names she’d read in a theology book her father owned, such as Uriel, or Michael, or Azrael.

“Hey Percy,” she said, turning to look at Percy who was currently in the process of peeking his head behind the curtain to look out the window. “Come check out this game.”

“What game?” Percy asked as he approached, though it was clear he’d soon caught onto what was actually going on. He spent some time reading over the text a couple of times, his eyes darting over the words, then rising as he reflected, then scanning the text once more.

“What do you think?” Vax asked, looking at Percy intently. “You think it’s a game worth investing time into?”

Percy turned to Vax and slapped a hand on his shoulder with a smile. “You now what? I think now would be a great time to wake and bake. Might help me get in the right state of mind...”

“Great idea,” Vax said, before leaving his phone on the bed and casually covering it with the blanket.

Vex sighed. It was time for another one of their smoke sessions, clearly. What she would give for some actual weed.


With the standard amount of groans and complaints, everyone shuffled back into the bathroom and Vax closed the door behind him. Keyleth had, of course, actually bought her little knitted hemp baggy where she kept all her paraphernalia just in case, though they were soon ready to burst her bubble.

“No Keyleth, once again, we aren’t actually smoking,” Vex said.

She dropped her shoulders and sighed at the realization of the situation, leaning against the counter and crossing her arms. “What happened now...?”

“A wrinkle has developed in the situation,” Percy said, keeping his voice low.
“As if this situation could get any more wrinkly,” Pike said, rubbing a tired eye rather unceremoniously.

“I got a text from someone telling us to call off our snooping,” Vax said. “Apparently they are part of some...underground cyberwar?”

“And that we shouldn't get involved,” Vex added.

“In exchange, they will give us ‘compensation’,” Vax said in air quotes.

“That’s sketchy and you know it,” Pike said.

“I know,” Vax said. “I just wanted to put it out on the table as an option before I did anything final.”

“You could just not respond,” Vex said, taking a seat on the edge of the bathtub. “I honestly feel like they are just trying to confuse us.”

“Is there a small chance it’s legitimate?” Keyleth asked. “Like they are some sort of secret organization?”

“No way in hell,” Percy said. “We would have gotten a knock on the door with a bunch of men in black suits and badges. Trust me.”

“Yeah,” Vex nodded. “This sounds more like a bunch of hackers getting in a cyber war with a bunch of other hackers.”

“I mean…” Vax shrugged. “It’s not...unheard of.”

“What do you think Percy?” Pike asked.

“If I had to make a wild guess I’d say they are part of whoever is running this whole scandal, trying to get us to back off,” Percy said.

“But what if they’re really who they say they are?” Pike asked.

Percy smirked. “Even if that were the case, I have very little faith in a bunch of teenage assholes in an attic. No offense to teenage assholes in attics...We should still warn Allura.”

“Yeah.” Vex nodded. “And anyway, these are intelligent people at the very least. Nothing is keeping them from being good at bullshitting...”

“But let me play Devil’s advocate for a second here,” Vax interjected. “What if we just... agreed? I mean...in the end, what does it matter? Maybe they’re right. Maybe we shouldn't get involved. Maybe we should count our lucky stars and accept whatever they are offering and leave this heaping pile of bullshit behind us. What is the worse that could happen?”

“They hack into the Prime Minister's’ office and steal sensitive information? Vex said.

“They steal all of the Tal’Dorei’s money?” Pike added.

“Both?” Keyleth said.

Vax rolled his eyes and sighed.

Percy sat on the edge of the bath next to Vex and glanced up at Vax with a look that revealed a hint of experience. “Nothing good ever comes from making deals with devils when you haven’t been
shown the fine print…” Percy said.

“I get it, I really do,” Vax insisted. “But I also get this weird feeling that something bad will happen if we simply ignore it.”

“Which is why you will answer,” Percy said, rubbing his chin as he reflected.

Everyone turned to look at Percy with a touch of confusion.

“You can’t be serious,” Keyleth said.

“I say keep in contact,” Percy said. “Just enough to keep them calm and let them think that we are agreeing to the terms.”

“I think that’s fair.” Pike nodded. “We make them think we’re leaving and then warn Allura anyway. Then we can leave first thing tomorrow morning, right?”

“Right,” Vex agreed.

“So what should I say?” Vax asked.

Percy shrugged. “Something straightforward, like ‘what sort of compensation?’ and see if they reply. Regardless of what they answer, let them know that we are leaving today.”

Vax stared up at the ceiling and sighed loudly, “Alright...just keep up the charade and pretend we are talking about a mobile game, alright?”

“Only because I don’t have any better ideas,” Vex groaned, unlocking the door. “Let’s just get moving. I want this day to be over so badly...”

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Vex and the others deemed it wise to bring the rest of the party as far away from the Cloudtop as possible before explaining the situation in full. They used the simple excuse of wanting to explore Emon’s parks as a means of getting everyone out of their rooms, while the promise of good food was used as a final push for those who were still finding their bed a little too comfortable, namely Scanlan.

Despite the near maddening circumstances, Vex still couldn’t help but consciously note Percy’s attire as they walked through the subway station. He was “back to normal”, as she had always known him, with his ripped jeans, and leather jacket and worn beanie, strolling with his hands in his pockets and his eyes on the crowds. Part of her missed his dapper look, especially since she knew that the chances of her seeing him like that again were disagreeable to say the least. Alas, she figured it was probably for the best. The sooner she could forget that side of him, the sooner she could strengthen her ward against his regrettable charm.

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The mysterious contact did eventually answer Vax’s follow up text, though Vex had privately hoped they wouldn’t have.

“*Your compensation will be a moderate monetary sum of 10,000 GP. Once we see your van leave the city, we will ask you to send us a mailing address where your compensation will be delivered in an inconspicuous form -Juurezel*”
“You have to be fucking kidding me,” Vax muttered, staring at the text wide-eyed while they rode the subway to Emon’s central park.

Vex glanced at the text and she closed her eyes, sighing deeply.

God. Having that amount of money at their disposal would be a wish come true. It would be enough money to pay their rent for almost a year.

“You know what mother always said,” he whispered.

“If it’s too good to be true…”

“It probably is,” Vax continued with a weak smile.

They both stared at each other longingly. The situation wasn’t good and they knew it. Whoever this was, they knew a lot more than they did. They clearly knew what their van looked like, and had the confidence to text them rather boldly, implying that they probably had a way of covering up their tracks on their end. Vex only hoped that they’d have enough time to warn Allura and find some form of protection...though that was the best case scenario.

“You know what to do,” she whispered.

Vax closed his eyes, staring down at the text longingly before typing in his response.

"Deal. We will be leaving the city by the afternoon."

***

The location the party ultimately chose as their temporary headquarters was one of the larger parks in Abadar’s Promenade, the district farthest from the Osmot Sea and closest to Gilmore’s Glorious Goods. Located on a slight hill, it provided a rather pleasant view of the city, surrounded by historic brick buildings that now functioned as boutiques and restaurants. Century-old sycamores, now bare of leaves, flaunted their majestic tangle of pale branches that reached high into the sky. Brick paths snaked around the trees in an organic fashion, showcasing the oldest specimens much like a museum, and dividing up wide patches of grass where squirrels frolicked freely. The air was cold but tolerable in their warmer attire, and the lack of people in the park made it for quite the pleasant experience.

Trinket would have loved to run around in a place like this, which saddened Vex to no end. She missed him dearly, but knew that Eskil didn’t take kindly to random phone calls to check up on him, as he’d very adamantly cautioned. Nevertheless, she still managed to find some joy surrounded in the natural sanctuary nestled in the sprawling metropolis. She’d do anything to have a job outdoors. Hell, she’d even take a job as bush trimmer if it meant she could spend her time outside, rather than being cooped up and a dingy old diner that smelled of moldy cheese and burnt toast.

Choosing a pleasant location in the grass under a stout old tree, the party settled down while Keyleth went around handing everyone little bags of dried berries to snack on as an offering to soften them up for the disconcerting news they were about to receive, well aware that explaining the situation would not be a simple task. Needless to say, the chaos of questions that followed the reveal was headache worthy, though Vex was awfully thankful that Percy was cool and collected enough to brief the rest of the team.

“Well that changes everything,” Scanlan said, leaning back into the grass and staring up into the naked canopy.

“Changes what?” Vex asked.
“Well this morning I got an email saying that they were probably gonna contact me later in the year to play again, but no way in hell I’m gonna perform in a place that knows what porn I like.”

Everyone groaned collectively.

“Since when does it bother you to have others know what brand of pornography suits your fancy?” Tiberius asked, his brow curiously furrowed.

“Always,” Scanlan said with a grin. “I’m quite the modest man.”

“Ha!” Keyleth blurted out, before covering her mouth.

“So you sain’ my phone ain’t getting no cool spooky messages?” Grog asked, turning toward Percy. Percy shrugged, adjusting a few silvery hairs under his beany. “Hopefully not. That’s why I’d like to call with it.”

Grog gave him a long hard glare, which was returned with Percy’s equally unwavering stare and a palm that uncurled open and beckoned for Grog’s cooperation.

Grog stared down at Percy’s hand before glancing back up at him. “Got anything to trade?”

Vex let out a short burst of laughter before covering her mouth.

Percy’s confident expression morphed to one of confusion, “I’m giving it back as soon as I’m done.”

“Yeh, I know.” Grog rolled his eyes. “It’s like when you give your I.D. at a bowling alley, I know how this shit works.”

Percy exchanged one of the slowest blinks in history with Grog before letting out a very exasperated sigh and reaching for his pocket.

Grog wiggled his fingers expectantly as Percy slapped his lighter into Grog’s hand. “Here. But you’re gonna give it back once I’m done with your phone.”

“Of course,” Grog said, raising his nose high and handing him his phone. “I’m a man of my word.”

“Thank you,” Percy said, taking the phone with a look of relief.

“Just don’t go peeking in my messages.”

“Of course. I respect a man’s privacy just as much as Scanlan respects his,” Percy said, giving Scanlan a quick eyebrow wiggle.

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Meanwhile, Vax took the opportunity to go with Pike to buy a new USB from a nearby electronic store so he could transfer the screenshots of their findings from his sketchy USB with all his very illegal hacking programs onto something a little less incriminating. At this point, it was really just a matter of reducing the list of things he could be held accountable for.

By the time they joined the others, everyone had thankfully boiled down from their initial state of confusion to one of patient waiting. The only thing left to do was contact Allura in the finger-crossing hope that she’d agree to meet them. Vax took a seat on the grass next to Grog and borrowed Vex’s computer to transfer the screenshots, while Percy volunteered to make the phone call, armed with Grog’s phone and the most confident of smiles on his face.
He covered the mouthpiece as it rang. “If you smile you sound like you’re smiling.”

“Of course,” Vex smirked, rolling her eyes.

Suddenly, Percy perked up, and his entire demeanor changed. “Hello, this is Percy Robinson.”

Everyone went silent as Percy leaned back a little, lounging against the tree next to Keyleth and exchanging a quick wink with the others. “Yes, thank you, good morning to you too.”

Vex turned to look at Grog who was busy flicking Percy’s lighter on and off before turning back to listen in on Percy’s conversation.

“My friends and I were wondering if you’d be interested in having coffee with us, and perhaps Gilmore as well. We wanted to formally thank you and him for all of your help and figured we could make it a quick outing.”

He sounded so damn proper on the phone, much more so than he already did around them. He spoke with a confidence and quickness that implied either a lot of practice, or a lot of intelligence, though Vex couldn’t imagine him having many opportunities to speak to that many snooty rich folk. Nevertheless, he certainly sounded like one of them, and would have had her fooled had she met him wearing last night’s clothes in the club.

“Yes, we’re leaving tomorrow,” he said, pausing for a moment. “Excellent. So you’ll inform him for us? Afraid we don’t have his number…” He paused again. “Perfect, thank you.”

Things sounded as though they were going well at the very least.

He glanced at Vex as he continued. “Two o’clock at Gilmore’s then?”

Vex nodded and mouthed a “yes” in his direction.

“Alright. Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with us on such short notice.” He paused. “Alright. If you need to get a hold of us you can save this number. See you then.”

He waited a few seconds before lowering the phone, closing the call with a dramatic button press, and looking up at the others. “Well that was remarkably simple.”

“And lucky,” Vax said.

“I’m not complaining,” Vex added.

“Thank you Grog,” Percy said, almost handing him back his phone before hesitating. He then reached out his free hand and cleared his throat, quirking a brow at him.

Grog rolled his eyes and handed Percy back his lighter, who simultaneously gave back his phone.

“So you really don’t think I’ll get cool messages?” Grog asked.

“ Probably not,” Percy said, shaking his lighter and sighing at what was probably a nearly empty vessel. “But if you do, be sure to warn us, alright?”

Grog shrugged, “Yeah sure, whatever.”

Pike looked at Grog with a furrowed brow, “This is serious Grog.”

“But I never get cool messages with offers from secret people!”
“Thank god…” Percy whispered to Keyleth.

“You don’t want that Grog,” Pike said, staring up at him with a very serious look on her face.

There was a long pause before Grog’s head slowly lowered as he stared down at his crossed legs as if he’d been scolded. “Okay…” he muttered.

Vex turned toward the others, giving them a small smile. “So I guess now we wait and plan what to say…”

“And hope I don’t get arrested,” Vax said with a smirk. “But if I do be sure to visit me, okay guys?”

“Oh my gosh Vax…” Vex said, slapping him on the shoulder. “No more prison talk.”

“Alright…alright,” Vax said, covering his arm and giving her a half-smile that concealed just a touch of concern.

He wasn’t fooling her. Behind that carefree attitude, she knew he was scared. Such a huge part of her simply wanted to take that deal and get the hell out of there, but they knew they needed to do the right thing. It was something that would likely weigh on all their consciences if they simply let it go, and they weren’t the type of people to get bribed into doing the wrong thing. They’d walked away from money before, and they could do it again.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for your patience once again. We’re slowly getting back into the swing of things, and hopefully, I’ll get back in the habit of writing.

I’ve noticed that AO3 doesn’t really have a separate messaging system from its comment sections, so if you’d like to get in touch with me, or if you’d like to see possible updates or fanart, be sure to visit my Twitter and Tumblr listed in my profile.
On Hugging Terms

Chapter Summary

Last time, on The Butterfly Effect:
Vax gets a suspicious text from “Juurezel” encouraging them to abandon their investigation of the hacking in the Cloudtop Center, and to leave Emon immediately. After discussing a plan, Vax and the others decide to lie to the mysterious texter and promise they’ll leave, though the offer of 10,000 GP to keep their silence is tempting. Nevertheless, the team meets up in a park and updates the rest of the gang, before calling Allura and successfully booking a lunch date with her and Gilmore.

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings for this chapter are in end notes.
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New family kitten just discovered those springy door stops and likes to play with them at 3am. Haven’t gotten much sleep. Chapter may be insane. You’ve been warned...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a little before two o’clock when the party eventually arrived at Gilmore’s Glorious Goods. As they made their approach, they immediately spotted a familiar, purple-clad man jog out of the store, as if he’d been keeping a lookout for them. It was hard to discern who looked happier to see the other, Gilmore, or Vax, but one thing was certain: They were absolutely smitten.

Vax was the first to give him a hearty handshake, which immediately transitioned into a quick hug that Gilmore initiated.

“My dear Vax’ildan! We’re on hugging terms by this point,” he said, giving him a few pats on the back before releasing him. “Allura told me how Mr. Shorthalt vouched for me last night, and I couldn’t be more pleased.”

“Well,” Scanlan said with a low chuckle. “Pleasing is what I do best.” He gave the others a wink, which prompted a groan from the rest of the party as per usual.

Vax gave Gilmore a wide smile. “It was the least we could do. You were very kind to us.”

Gilmore rested his hand on his chest. “Oh, how you flatter me so.” He then glanced at the rest of the group, humming slightly. “Now I must say, I was quite surprised when Allura told me about this little outing. She must really like you folk given she went out of her way to grab lunch.”

“I hope so,” Vex said, glancing at Percy with a subtle air of nervousness.

As Gilmore started giving everyone handshakes, he perked up as his attention drifted behind them. “Ah! Speak of the angel,” he said, lifting his arm high and waving at a fast approaching Allura. “Punctual as usual.”
Looking somewhat flustered, Allura reached the group with a bright smile and rosy, frost-kissed cheeks. “I’m so sorry,” she said, strolling up to Gilmore who met her part way to give her a quick kiss on both cheeks. “I hope I’m not late.”

“A wizard is never late!” Tiberius said, approaching Allura and giving her a friendly handshake. “Nor is she early. She arrives precisely when she means to.”

Grog crossed his arms, side-glancing at Pike. “What’s ‘e on about?”

Pike adjusted her blue scarf as she looked up at him. “It’s a quote from that movie you say is boring.”

Grog groaned as he stared up at the sky. “Aw shit...The one ‘bout walking?”

“Yeah, that one.”

He shifted his weight, his muscles flexing ever so slightly. “I fucking hate documentaries...”

“Allow me to translate,” Scanlan smirked, butting into the conversation. “That’s Tiberius’ way of saying that we were the ones who were early.”

Grog furrowed his brow, turning toward Pike once more.

“Don’t think about it too hard Grog,” Pike said with a sigh, patting him on the arm.

Tiberius gave Scanlan a decent dose of stinkeye, though Allura didn’t seem to give the squabble any mind.

“Well I sure hope I didn’t keep you all waiting for too long,” she said, giving them a warm smile and rubbing her gloved hands together. “Shall we then? We can catch up inside where it’s a little less nippy.”

Gilmore mosied over to his shop door and turned a bejeweled sign to “Closed for Lunch” before rewrapping his gold detailed shawl around his neck. Both him and Allura seemed awfully eager to join them for lunch, and it made Vex feel a twinge of guilt for not being more upfront about the real reason they had dragged Allura away from her office.

Grog turned to Scanlan with an air of anticipation in his voice. “Been dreamin’ of this falafel all day. It was fuckin’ bomb yesterday.”

“Oh, you’ve already been here?” Allura smiled. “Have you had their signature drinks yet? Ever since Gilmore introduced me to Marquesian coffee I can’t seem to get enough of it.”

“It really that good?” Vax asked.

Gilmore grinned, sauntering past Vax with a sly wink before looping his arm around Allura’s. “Once you’ve tried Marquesian you can’t go back...”

Vex let out a sigh and followed the rest of the group inside. Her twin’s expression could really only be described as hungry, which was unsurprising, to say the least. Vax had been awfully flirtatious as of late, a rather predictable pattern of behavior that matched the current state of their lives. Living a lifetime with him had allowed her to learn that they were actually quite different from that particular aspect. Vax tended to throw himself at people in the most trying of times, when he felt like he had nothing to lose. She, on the other hand, was more prone to withdrawing herself from flings and relationships when she felt like the universe was against her. Frankly, she couldn't quite figure out which behavior was more harmful, but what she did know was that she needed Vax to have his wits
about him. The last thing she needed was for Gilmore to turn him into a blushing buffoon today of all
days.

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The restaurant, unoriginally named “Falafel House”, was a small, narrow establishment with a
warm, wood detailed interior. Colorful semi-translucent curtains provided privacy while letting in as
much light as possible from the single row of windows at the front of the hovel. Numerous circular
tables dotted the central part of the restaurant, while green booths lined both sides. At the very back
of the restaurant, a curved arch showed glimpses of the busy collection of staff working inside,
shouting over the sound of food being fried. The smell of spiced meats, coffee, falafel, and other
Marquesian foods welcomed them as they entered, bringing back the recent memory of the food they
had enjoyed just the day before.

The large group settled at a rather long table at one side of the establishment where they were
immediately served mint-infused water and flatbread while they ordered their food. Vex hadn’t had
Marquesian cuisine very often, so she didn’t believe she was experienced enough to judge whether
the food at Falafel House was actually good or not. However, judging from the patrons in the
restaurant, she gathered there was a high chance the food was of legitimate quality.

Most of the patrons seemed to actually be from Marquet, or at least, that’s what Vex presumed,
judging from the language they spoke. She’d always heard the rumor that people from Marquet were
some of the most physically attractive people in the world, though she’d never really given the claim
any sort of support, namely because she of all people knew that looks were incredibly subjective, not
to mention she despised stereotyping. And yet, as her eyes scanned across the room, examining the
faces of the people enjoying their meals, she couldn’t help but feel that there was some truth to the
stories.

As the server approached them, Gilmore followed up his order with a quick conversation in
Marquesian, seemingly knowing the woman quite well. Vex had suspected Gilmore was from
Marquet, but she didn’t want to be one to assume. It made sense, all things considered.

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As they enjoyed their meal, their conversations ranged from the history of Emon, to some of
Gilmore’s and Allura’s personal histories.

Allura had lived in Emon for most of her young adult life, studying at the University before gaining a
paid internship at the Cloudtop right after graduation. She’d worked at the Cloudtop for many years,
occasionally taking large chunks of time off to take part in activist campaigns or to do volunteer work
with other organizations, namely in Vasselheim. Apparently, there was a time when she’d been quite
good friends with Prime Minister Uriel before he was appointed, though their busy schedules had
caused them to drift apart.

Gilmore, on the other hand, had moved from Marquet to Emon straight out of high school with
nothing but a hiking backpack and a suitcase full of handmade scarves, opening his first “clothing”
stand just a few days after moving into his apartment. He told stories about how he worked long,
restless days and nights making a living before finally saving enough money to buy the property that
now housed Gilmore’s Glorious Goods. Vex couldn’t help but find his story a little familiar in the
weirdest of ways, and she could tell that Vax was thinking the same thing, judging from how he
gazed at Gilmore with such admiration.

Allura and Gilmore had apparently met at a social gathering, and seemed to share similar interests in
terms of spearheading social movements and promoting fledgling artists. Both their stories were
incredibly compelling, and for a brief moment, Vex nearly forgot why they had met there in the first place.

Seemingly feeling the conversation had grown a little one-sided, Allura and Gilmore both urged the party to tell their own personal stories. They wanted to know everything about them, from their academic careers to the history of their friendships. Although they were all willing to indulge Allura and Gilmore to an extent, most of the party kept their personal stories simple and to the point, save for Tiberius, who managed to recount his entire life story in the time it took most of them to tell their tales collectively.

Melancholy struck Vex as she noticed just how guarded everyone was being, despite Gilmore and Allura having been so open about their own lives. By all means, she didn’t expect them to pour their hearts out on their first outing, but somehow, their collected reservedness reminded her of just how damaged they all truly were. As an outsider looking in, her friends’ behavior probably didn’t come off as that unusual. However, having known everyone so personally for so long, Vex knew most of them were barely scraping the surface.

Keyleth didn’t bother going into detail as to why she left home, save for the fact that she needed to gain “life” experience before taking leadership of her father’s organization. She -- of course -- made no mention of the social hardships she’d experienced being homeschooled, or the time she spent wandering and unemployed, or the fact that her mother had gone missing when she was only a child. She did, however, seem to bond with Allura over all the time they’d both spent volunteering. Allura had heard of her father’s organization and knew the story of how it had bloomed from a very small Ashari commune.

Scanlan managed to leave most of his young adult life out of his narrative, which was unsurprising, considering it was nothing but flings, gambling, drinking, and street performing. Nevertheless, he did mention the band he used to be in, which rung familiar with both Gilmore and Allura. He certainly made no mention of the fact that he’d actually left home after his single mother died in the crossfire of a drive-by shooting back when he still lived in the Midlands, though Vex didn’t really expect him to ever tell that story ever again. The only reason any of them knew it was because they overheard him talking about it to some girl while he was drunk, and when they confronted him to learn whether it was true, he very solemnly confirmed their concerns.

Grog didn’t do much talking at all, letting Pike recount most of their lives together. They did, however, leave out the “best” parts of their friendship history, at least in Vex’s opinion. These were namely the parts where Grog and his gang tried to rob Pike’s grandfather of all his belongings, and how Grog had a sudden change of heart and stood up to his own posse, and how he pinned down his own cousin while Wilhand called the patrol, and how Grog sustained brain damage while fighting the others, and how Pike cared for his injuries before he was arrested, and how she visited him for months in prison before he was finally released for good behavior... Frankly, it was one of the best stories Vex had ever heard in her life, though it probably wasn’t the ideal story to recount over lunch.

Pike seemed to be rather straight forward about her own medical career, and how she lived with Grog and her grandfather, but conveniently left out the part where she was actually adopted by Wilhand when she was six to get her away from her drug-addicted Midlander parents. It was indeed the main reason why she’d decided to become an Addiction Medicine Physician in the first place; she had a soft spot for people who needed help fighting their inner demons, a likely coping mechanism for not being able to help her parents.

Vex and Vax of course refrained from telling any of their stories, because Allura didn’t need to know about their deceased mother, or their messy love lives, or their rich-asshole father, or how they had a
little half-sister they’d never heard of until yesterday, or that they were runaways, or how Vax had been arrested for a whole laundry list of crimes, about half of which he didn’t commit. They certainly didn’t bring up all the shady shit Vex had to do in order to survive half a year in the Midlands. They did, however, explain that they had left home because they wanted to find a better independent life, mostly to appeal to Gilmore. She could read off of Vax’s face that he likely wanted to tell all sorts of sad stories to him, because Vax had a tendency to really open his heart to people he admired. Who knew? Maybe he’d get the chance when all of this was all over.

Tiberius’ story was by far the longest and most honest of them all, leaving no questions unanswered. He made sure to mention everything, from when he graduated high school with honors a year early, to how his family disowned him for wanting to study abroad and pursue research that was not considered legitimate in their firm. He explained how he’d been doing research for years to try and write a thesis that would make him worthy of being accepted by his family once again, and how he had found one of the many sources he needed to make his dream a reality in the most unexpected of locations. All things considered, it was actually a pretty touching story, though Tiberius was never good at brevity.

However, the person Vex truly wanted to listen to was Percy. She was hoping that in this more formal setting, he would finally take the opportunity to open up and perhaps reveal a few more hints to his rather enigmatic past. Alas, she was soon disappointed to find that he expressed no more than what he’d already told them the very first day they had met: How he’d left home because he didn’t like the situation there, and how he’d traveled around looking for odd jobs. In fact, Vex had the itching sensation that Percy had actually managed to repeat his backstory word for word, exactly as he had recounted it a month ago, almost as if it were a response he’d rehearsed. Perhaps it was just her imagination, but she knew he’d repeated at least part of it because the sentences and vocabulary he used were so precise and so peculiar that she wouldn’t soon forget a monologue like that. She imagined he’d probably been asked to recount the tale many times during his travels, though it still troubled her for reasons she could not place. The only detail he seemed to add was how he met them, which was flattering, to say the least, but still irritating overall.

Gilmore and Allura however, seemed absolutely enthralled with Percy’s story, finding that they could somehow relate to his plight. They barraged him with suggestions, encouraging him to possibly invest in a workshop to become a mechanic, or urging him to save up money and go to the university. Percy of course, nodded politely and assured them that he’d think about it, though Vex could recognize his bullshit from a mile away by this point.

As time went by, conversations became more scattered and compartmentalized as they finished their food. Allura made it a point of insisting she pay for the lot of them, a deed that Vex wouldn't dare oppose.

Finishing off her drink, Vex quirked a brow as she felt her phone vibrate. She glanced down, noticing she’d gotten a text from Vax.

**Vax: Now?**

She glanced up at her brother, who was already staring at her. He gave her a keen look of urgency, to which she responded with a slow nod before glancing at Allura, who was currently speaking to the server.

Vax was right. It was getting late, and Vex knew they needed to complete what they had set out to do. Her eyes drifted toward Vax’s once more, who gave her a knowing nod. The others caught on to the twins’ body language and grew silent, and Percy gave her a forced half-smile.

Vex swallowed once. Despite receiving the green light from her comrades, she still found her mouth
grow dry, her heart begin to race, and her stomach curl as she came to the realization that the plan felt a lot sounder in the Cloudtop Suites bathroom than on the playing field. Bringing up the subject would not be easy, but she’d try, because talking was one of the things Vex did best.

She cleared her throat and clenched her fists for a moment, before turning toward Allura with a confident smile.

“Miss Vysoren?”

Allura glanced up, her brows raising slightly as she signed her name on the receipt. “Yes?”

Vex leaned in, taking on a relaxed pose. “We... actually wanted to speak to you about something rather important before you left.”

“Oh?” Allura adjusted her position in her seat to get more comfortable. “Of course.”

“In...private,” Vax interjected, trading another look with his sister. “Preferably.”

Allura’s expression morphed from curiosity to confusion as he eyes scanned the others. “Surely anything you need to say to me you can say in front of Gilmore.” She rested a hand on his shoulder. “We’ve known each other for years.”

“Maybe even a decade,” Gilmore added with a chuckle.

“Of course,” Percy interjected. “If you trust him we trust him too.”

“However,” Vex continued. “It’s these other strangers we're a little more concerned about.”

Allura’s brow furrowed as her chin raised slightly, clearly trying to glean the intentions of the party. “Forgive me for coming off as rude, but I can’t imagine a topic that is so dreadfully important as to not be appropriate for public ears.”

Vex closed her eyes and took in a deep breath. She could already feel some eyes in the restaurant resting on them, and it wasn’t something they could keep up for long.

“Please,” Vex said, lowering her voice so to ensure that she didn’t draw any more attention from the other tables. “This is...something that we actually considered bringing to the authorities, but we thought it appropriate to tell you first, given the...nature of it.”

Allura looked somewhat taken aback at the mention of “authorities”, the intensity in her face shifting to one of subtle defensiveness.

“We trust you intrinsically,” Percy elaborated. “You have been kind and understanding and strike us as a woman who has their moral compass pointing in the right direction. We simply ask for a moment of your time so to not spread any sort of panic.” He glanced at Vex and shrugged slightly, seeming as though he’d exhausted his contribution.

Allura glanced at them with a furrowed brow. “Do understand my point of view on the matter. I just find this all a little suspect...”

Gilmore seemed to be rather quiet at this point, clearly listening into the conversation as he sipped his coffee with shifting dark eyes.

“And we understand completely and apologize,” Vex said. “But we wouldn’t be so insistent if we didn’t think what we had to say was valuable.”
“We promise that what we have to say is important,” Keyleth added. “From one philanthropist to another, this isn’t something we can ignore.”

Tiberius joined in. “I swear on a Stormwind’s honor that we’d never waste your time.”

Allura’s eyes flashed with a subtle hint of trepidation, which prompted Scanlan to speak.

He leaned in slightly, showing off his picture-perfect smile. “I believe what my friends are trying to say here is that we trust you more than anyone in the city at this point.” There was an intensity in his dark brown eyes that showed nothing but unwavering confidence and a look of honesty that brought comfort even to Vex’s uneasy state. He rested his chin on his knuckles and twirled the ice at the bottom of his empty glass before glancing up at Allura once more. “Besides, if you think we’re full of shit you can just call the City Guard on us.”

Everyone shifted rather uncomfortably at Scanlan’s bluntness, but he did not waver.

“You know who we are and you know how to track us down; your people have our contact information and everything. Frankly, you’ve got nothing to lose but a moment of your time.”

Allura quirked a brow at Scanlan, though it was unclear whether she was appalled or amused.

“Think of it this way,” he said, leaning back with a perennial pearly smile decorating his face. “We probably would have spent just as much time ordering dessert anyway.”

Allura turned to Gilmore, trading an expression that clearly indicated that she was at a lost for words.

“We know we’re asking a lot, and we know you don’t know us all that well, but we’re asking you to trust us just this once…” Vex pleaded.

The sound of the restaurant seemed to become muffled and drowned out by the anxiety clouding Vex’s senses. The tension in her muscles would give her knots if she didn’t get some sort of relief soon. All she could think of was the worst case scenario: the possibility that Allura was in on all the drama that was happening in the Cloudtop, and that they had made a horrible mistake. But they were too deep now; too late to turn back.

“I say we humor them,” Gilmore finally said, shrugging. “They held up their side of the bargain when I sponsored them so I don’t see why they shouldn’t be given the benefit of the doubt just this once.”

Everyone's eyes went wide as they glanced at Allura, who let out a long drawn out sigh.

“I suppose you’re right. I’m just a little concerned, that’s all…”

Gilmore pat Allura on the shoulder once before turning to the others and standing up. “If you truly need someplace private, we can speak in my shop.”

Vex’s eyes grew wide as she stared at Scanlan, who simply stood up and brushed himself off, looking more smug than a cat who’d eaten not one canary, but maybe half a dozen. In hindsight, they probably should have lead with the professional.
Content Warnings: Mention of violent death, mention of drug addiction.

I was struggling with the dialogue of this chapter at first, but things eventually fell into place toward the end. Quite a few persuasion checks this chapter. Allura was a tough cookie to crack, but I figure her trepidation is justified. I wouldn't trust those guys if I were her.

Now, I do feel as though in this AU, Allura and Gilmore know each other a little better than they did in the canon. I found that it worked out better for the narrative and made things a little easier on my end. I have this very small idea for a mini fic about Allura, Gilmore, and their past in this world, but I will approach such side projects in due time...

Totally unrelated, but here is a video that pretty much explains Grog’s point of view of what the Lord of the Rings is like:

YouTube link

I legitimately once listened to one of my old college buddies rant for ten minutes about how the LotRs was nothing but a movie about a bunch of people walking, and frankly, the more I thought about it, the more I realized he was kind of right...
Chapter Summary

Last time, on The Butterfly Effect:
The party has a pleasant lunch with Allura and Gilmore, sharing some superficial aspects of their life stories as conversation pieces. However, as Vex brings up the fact that they need to speak to Allura about something important in private, she immediately grows suspicious and hesitant of their request. They ultimately agree to speak in Gilmore’s shop.

Chapter Notes

No Content Warnings this chapter.

Fair warning; there’ll be a point of view shift halfway through this chapter. I know it’s writing taboo, but this is fanfiction, where chaos reigns supreme.

Anyway, before we get started, I would love to share some fanart one of my readers did! I am so honored and flattered to see someone took time out of their day to draw something from this fic. <3 Be sure to give the artist some love.

http://irregularinertia.tumblr.com/post/161662098169/a-bunch-of-critical-role-doodles-fanart-for-a --> or Link

Also, I would like to give very special thanks to all of my readers who go to that extra effort to point out typos for me. I cannot express how thankful I am for the help. My slight dyslexia makes it nearly impossible for me to catch certain mistakes, so having a small army of people helping me out is a real blessing from Sarenrae. So thank you. If you ever happen to find a typo and don’t feel like going to the trouble of messaging me here, you can send me a quick message on Twitter or Tumblr.

To everyone else, thank you so much for being return readers and joining me on this crazy journey. Your support is forever appreciated. This fic is a major source of happiness in my life.

The tension was palpable as the group made the extremely short trek to Gilmore’s shop, which conveniently shared a wall with “Falafel House”. Vex tried her best to envision a version of the narrative where this conversation went well; a reality where Allura gladly appreciated the effort they’d made to warn her about the hacking and left them on their merry way. But she of all people knew the world was never and would never be that simple. Then again...considering that her life seemed to be following its usual “Good, Weird, Bad, Worse” pattern, perhaps now was a good time for the “Worse” to become “Good” for a change.

To ensure privacy, Gilmore kept the sign on his storefront door flipped to “Closed for Lunch” as
Allura and the rest of the party entered the shop. They eventually settled in a small lounge meant to showcase some of the furniture, though Allura refrained from sitting down.

“So?” She asked, “What is this about?”

The group glanced at each other for a few breathless moments, as if trying to figure out who needed to step up to the podium.

“I think Percy should probably take this one,” Keyleth said, turning towards him. “You sort of...understand this sort of thing.”

Vex nodded, giving Percy a quick look before her eyes gradually drifted toward Vax as well. Her brother was visibly tense, his eyes focused on the floor as he often did when he was reflecting intently.

“Alright,” Allura said, braiding her fingers as she stood tall. “I’m all ears.”

“Well…” Percy said, clearing his throat before standing so he was at eye level with Allura. He gave the party a quick scan before continuing. “I’d like to preface this by saying that curiosity often kills the cat…” He paused once more, closing his eyes and adjusting his glasses on his slightly frost reddened nose. “Therefore I am more than willing to take responsibility for what we did if you find this to be in any shape or form unlawful.”

Vex’s breath hitched and she perked up, glancing about like an alert chipmunk and trying to glean whether the rest of the party had actually heard the words that had so rapidly poured out of Percy’s mouth. There was no way in hell he was going to take the fall for this, and as her gaze met her brother’s, she could tell he too looked just as appalled, now staring Percy down with intensity.

“What happened?” Allura asked, looking at Percy with concern.

“It’s... somewhat complicated.”

That was an understatement if Vex had ever heard one. She could come up with a whole slew of adjectives that could have fit better than “somewhat”, including but not limited to “absurdly”, “grotesquely”, and her personal favorite, “fucking complicated”. Nevertheless, she respected Percy’s valiant attempt to downplay the severity of the situation, though she didn’t necessarily agree with the decision.

Percy began to recount the events beat by beat, starting off slow with the unusual behavior he’d noticed on his phone, and gradually building up a tale that sounded progressively more absurd by the minute. He was picking all the right words, using a pleasant tone, telling all the honest facts, yet Vex could tell the story was not settling well with Allura. Gilmore, who sat in a wide stance beside her, rubbed the length of his goatee with a glazed over expression as he listened, clearly taking in the information but sporting a scowl that Vex could not interpret.

As Percy reached the climax of his tale, Allura interrupted him, raising a hand. “That’s…” Her gaze was fixed on him. “That’s impossible...”

Seemingly thrown off by Allura’s remark, Percy sealed his lips and instinctively glanced at Keyleth, who spoke up.

“We were with him when it happened,” she said, staring up at Allura with an intense pair of green eyes. “Everything he said is true.”

“All five of us saw it,” Vex added.
Percy turned back toward Allura, finding his bearings again. “There was no doubt in our minds, they’d hacked into my phone just as they had with the rest.”

Allura crossed her arms, staring them down. “Understand that these are very serious accusations…”

“Which is why we wanted to tell you as soon as possible,” Vex interjected, perhaps a little too quickly. “Now you understand the urgency of why we needed to speak to you in private about this.”

“And why we didn’t want to inform you by e-mail or phone while you were in your office,” Percy added.

Allura raised a hand and gestured them to all stop talking for a moment, shutting her eyes as she rubbed her temples with her thumb and middle finger. Everyone went deathly quiet as they watched her process for a few seconds before she spoke up once more, her voice quivering ever so slightly. “Do you have proof of any of this?”

“I do,” Vax said rather abruptly, immediately reaching for his pocket and pulling out a very simple, silver USB.

Vex clenched her teeth behind a closed mouth. She wished Vax hadn’t dealt that card just yet. For all they knew, Allura wanted proof so she could destroy it, and they had no indication that she was willing to collaborate with them. Alas, it’s not like they had many other choices. The fact that she wanted to know whether there was proof was at the very least a sign that she understood the gravity of the situation. Besides, Vex knew Vax had copies of the screenshots, so worse came to worse, they’d use the info in court…

Allura narrowed her eyes as she focused on the USB, and Vax made sure to elaborate.

“I took screenshots as we witnessed the events unfold. We weren’t going to just let this go undocumented. We figured we’d need proof and now we have it, ready for you. So please, look at them and understand that we would never lie to you about something so important.” His voice was slow and somewhat horse. It was clear to Vex that he was struggling to keep his tone civil. It was the tone his voice took on when he was right on the edge of yelling; the tone he used with their father in public.

For a moment, no other words were exchanged as they waited for Allura’s response. Gilmore, whose eyes had settled on Vax’s intensity, turned to look at Allura just as she too turned toward him. Gilmore stood up slowly, adjusting his clothing before speaking up. “If you’d like to look at the pictures we can load them up on my computer right now if need be…”

Allura’s hard expression morphed to one of reflection, and finally resignation. She let out a deep sigh, walking up to Vax and reaching out her hand, still gloved but delicate in her gesture. “I’d like to see them, thank you.”

For but the most fleeting of instances, Vax flashed a quick look at Vex before handing over the USB, indicating that he too had his own doubts. Time would tell whether they’d made a dire mistake or not.

As his eyes settled back on Allura, he spoke up again. “I’d like to add that I too was involved in the discovery of this incident.” He gave Percy a quick glare. “And I too take responsibility for these findings and am more than comfortable accepting the consequences of my actions.”

Vex felt her heart drop and she shifted uncomfortably in her seat, covering her mouth with her hand to try and conceal her immediate dread. Why the fuck would Vax say that? He knew perfectly damn
well that with a criminal record like his, he risked serving years and years if this all went south. She wanted to march up to him and scream his ear off, but she knew better...it was too late now.

“We are not jumping to any such conclusions until I understand what the hell is going on,” Allura said, not so much in a scolding manner, rather expressing a high level of determination.

As she followed Gilmore to his office, Vax approached a rather grim looking Percy and pat him on the shoulder. “I really don’t care what you think,” Vax said with a forced grin. “No way you’re taking the credit for this. If we’re gonna be locked up might as well get locked up at the same time.”

Percy simply stared back at him and mirrored his grin, “You’re disgustingly charming, you know that right?”

“Yes,” Vax said, bumping his shoulder with Percy’s before heading over to his spot across from his sister, refraining from making eye contact.

Oh. He knew he was in trouble.

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Vax wasn’t a stranger to making decisions that were dumb as fuck. He remembered the time he’d skateboarded off their middle school’s roof and rolled himself into a broken ankle, just so he could distract security enough to allow Vex to sneak back onto campus without getting in trouble. He remembered the time in high school when he broke into their teacher’s office and hacked the grade books so he could give Vex that little extra 0.02 points she needed to get an A in biology. And he definitely remembered the time he got suspended for beating up some asshole into oblivion for calling her a slut.

Needless to say, he had a solid resume to prove his potential for idiocy, and that wasn’t including any Clasp activities, which in his mind, were frankly a lot more thought out, despite his eventual arrest. And yet, despite his extensive experience on the matter, something about this most recent act of stupidity bothered him. It wasn’t a matter of being mad at the fact that he’d been an idiot, so much that he couldn't figure out why he had been an idiot.

Justifying his actions in the past was easy: he needed to protect Vex; socially, academically, financially. It was simpler back then. It made sense. It was rational...in relative terms.

But this? Admitting to hacking into the Cloudtop Center was borderline insane. Maybe he thought the gods would reward him for doing the right thing for once in his miserable fucking life. Or maybe he just really really wanted to impress his friends. All he really knew was that he sure as hell wasn’t going to impress Gilmore if he got arrested, unless he was the type of guy who was into bad boys. If he had any luck left maybe he’d visit him in prison...

Vax’s eyes drifted toward the beaded curtain where both Gilmore and Allura had vanished. The eighties music that was playing in the background drowned out any possibility of him hearing in on their conversation, so it was pointless to even try. His gaze drifted toward his friends and settled on Percy, who was leaning his head against Keyleth’s shoulder and speaking too softly for him to overhear what he was saying. His posture indicated melancholy but his expression was smug as fuck. He had this weird smirk on his face that was definitely the look of someone who thought he was some sort of badass. Then again, maybe he was just tired, or too busy processing the fact that he too was going insane.

In a twisted sort of way, Percy’s smug expression seemed to enlighten Vax to one of the reasons why he probably decided to take responsibility: It really was a principle thing. He wasn’t kidding
when he said he didn’t want Percy to take all the fucking credit. Sure, he could be charming, but he was also kind of an asshole, but kind of cool at the same time. If there was any chance he could take the blame off of Percy he would, because in the end, he was the one who already had a criminal record. Maybe he was being presumptuous for assuming Percy didn’t have one, but he liked working with certainties, and he was pretty damn certain he’d done more to deserve punishment.

And yet... there was more to it than that. This wasn’t a situation where he was just being petty. No. This was a situation where he was being the fucking king of petty, the emperor of petty -- no he was the fucking god of petty.

Not only did he want to do good and put a bunch of bratty nerds to justice, but he wanted to do it so he could have the peace of mind that every last rich asshole in the Cloudtop Center owed him one. He could already see it on the news headline: “Master Hacker Vigilante Sentenced 10 Years for Unmasking Nefarious Cloudtop Spies”. No way in hell he’d let Percy become the hero of his fantasy.

However, as his gaze met with Vex’s, he saw a look that could really only indicate one thing: disappointment. And god, did he deserve it. If anything was betraying her trust, it was this. He’d managed to break the only real promise he’d ever made to her: that he wouldn’t leave her again. He could never forgive himself for the horrors she’d experienced while he was gone, and he had a feeling she hadn’t quite forgiven him either.

Still, things were better now; So much fucking better. She had friends, she had roommates, she had people she could trust and lean on when he was gone, which reassured him to the point where he felt comfortable being selfish for a change, even if it probably wasn’t for the right reasons.

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Nearly ten minutes passed before Allura reemerged from behind the beaded curtain.

Vax swallowed once as he stood up promptly, as did the others. From the way Allura carried herself, he sensed something had changed in her demeanor, though the ever-present tension in her expression made her hard to read. In a way, she seemed more composed, as if a weight had been lifted off of her shoulders, though what that meant for them, he could not say.

Allura’s eyes scanned the party for a few brief moments before she let out a sigh and lifted the USB stick. “Is this everything you have?”

Vax gave a fleeting look at the rest of the group, who stared right back at him, some shrugging. As his eyes met with Vex, she mouthed the word “texts”, and nodded toward Allura.

“Actually…” Vax said, drawing his phone from his pocket. “There is one last thing.” He approached Allura and showed her the text messages. “We received these from an anonymous number that we could not trace. We didn’t trust them and decided to contact you anyway.”

“May I?” Allura asked kindly as she gestured toward the phone.

Vax allowed her to take it from her hands, finding her warm tone of voice an unexpected change from their most recent conversations.

He allowed her to quietly read for a few moments before he spoke once more. “This is another reason why we thought it was important to warn you. We had a bad feeling whoever this was wanted to cover up their tracks. We lied to give us more time so we could warn you…”

Allura’s expression grew softer, and as she glanced at Vax, she handed him back his phone and
rested a small hand on his shoulder. Her eyes closed for a moment, taking in a deep breath before speaking up. “I’m so sorry for doubting you.”

A wave of relief bordering on disbelief washed over Vax to the point where he felt like he was going to pass out. However, as he noticed Gilmore flash a half smile in his direction, he immediately knew that he was being taken off the chopping block.

Allura turned towards the others. “In fact, I’m sorry for doubting all of you.”

A communal sigh of relief nearly drowned out the music playing the background, which upon closer listening, was actually “Total Eclipse of the Heart” by Bonnie Tyler.

“It’s alright…” Vex said, her face clearly revealing a new level of serenity.

“Indeed,” Tiberius added. “You were more than justified to experience trepidation on the matter.”

Allura simply nodded as she continued. “And I appreciate your forgiveness. Know that I have been on edge for some time. The press has not been kind to the Cloudtop Center, and this isn’t the first time I have been approached by people with tales of conspiracy. The security in the Cloudtop has been a sore subject for many months, and I knew something was amiss, though I couldn't identify any glaring problems with my limited knowledge on the matter. The IT department promised me that everything was in working order, and I begrudgingly accepted their verdict.” She glanced down at the USB that she held tightly in her hand and her eyes narrowed. “But now I see that either their incompetence rivals my own, or that I have been lied to.”

“We’re so sorry we had to be the bearers of bad news,” Percy said.

Allura chuckled slightly. “I have no intention of punishing the messengers. You did well to contact me. Gods only know what would have happened had this gone into the wrong hands.”

“So you're going to take action?” Keyleth asked.

“Of course. Immediately as a matter of fact.”

Vax glanced at Vex as she spoke up. “Will we be needed? Do you need someone to vouch for you?”

Allura half smiled, though there was a hint of something else in her expression, almost akin to delicate scolding. “As much as I appreciate the offer, I suppose we should address the elephant in the room...”

Gilmore snickered to himself, crossing his arms and eyeing Vax with wiggling brows.

“What you two did,” Allura said, pointing at Percy and Vax, “Was indeed illegal. Had you brought this to the authorities you likely would have been arrested on the spot.”

Vax and Percy traded a look with each other that revealed both embarrassment, and perhaps a little pride.

“However,” she continued. “In my years, I’ve learned that sometimes acting lawfully isn’t always an indication that one is acting for the greater good. You all brought this information to my attention fully aware of the consequences and I appreciate it. For this reason, the conversation we had will remain in this shop, and I will not share your identity with those whom I plant to contact to investigate this.”
Vax smirked at Allura’s words. He never thought he’d ever reach a point in his life where he could admit that -- for once -- a rich asshole was actually pretty fucking cool for a change.

“Are they people you trust?” Pike asked. “People you know aren’t involved in this mess?”

“I have someone in mind who I believe might be able to round up an investigation party rather quickly.”

Scanlan spoke up. “Should we stay for some sort of interview? Does this contact need to speak with us?”

“No. I don’t want any of you involved. We will treat this as though this information was given to us anonymously. Like I said before, doubt the authorities would be as understanding as I am. That being said, perhaps stay in town until tomorrow morning if at all possible, since I know that was your intention anyway, correct? I don’t believe my contact will need to speak to you but be sure to be available tonight just in case.”

“Of course,” Scanlan spoke up. “We’ll probably have brunch tomorrow and head out.”

Allura gave one long, profound look at the party before clasping her hand together, “Very well then…”

“Thank you Allura…” Vex said, smiling kindly.

The rest of the party thanked her in chorus.

“You’ve been exceptional…” Tiberius added.

“No. Thank you. The good you’ve done for the Cloudtop Center and the Prime Minister will not go forgotten.” She then nodded toward the stairs heading out. “But it’s truly best you be off now. I need to make some calls immediately.”

The party obliged and quickly made their way out of the store, being sent off with the accompaniment of the glorious climax of Bonnie Tyler’s 80’s hit.

“Turnaround briiiight eyes, every now and then I fall apart….Turnaround briiiight eyes, every now and then I fall apart…”

Right before reaching the stairs, Vax turned around to see that Allura was already on the phone, being lead by Gilmore through the beaded curtain. He was saddened that he hadn’t had a chance to give him a proper goodbye, but perhaps it was for the best.

And yet... Maybe...just maybe...

As if on cue, by the magic of some deeper intuition, (or more likely because the song was suggesting it), Gilmore paused right before entering his office and turned around. Noticing Vax waiting at the stairs, he pat Allura on the shoulder and strode over like the majestic beautiful man he was, stopping but a few feet in front of Vax.

“Hey,” Vax said, giving Gilmore a soft smile. “Thank you.”

“And if you only hold me tiiiight...We’ll be holding on forever...”

Gilmore simply bowed his head with a smile. “If you ever find yourself in the city again, just call.” He reached for a piece of paper and wrote down a few digits before handing the paper back to Vax.
“For you, know that my store is always open…”

Vax glanced up at Gilmore with a look of genuine admiration, and Gilmore let out a dramatic sigh, his shoulders heaving up and down before cocking his head to the side.

“I...should probably go,” Vax said, giving him a smile that revealed just a touch of heartbreak.

Gilmore perked up slightly. “Oh... But of course, best you scurry off before the authorities come searching for the dark knight...” He winked.

As Vax chuckled at the remark, he was surprised by a sudden hug, which felt tighter than the embrace they’d shared earlier that day. This one was tighter, closer, more intimate... There was something about his warmth, the strength in his arms, the smell of his perfume over his masculine scent made Vax’s mind go in all sorts of R rated directions.

But Gilmore pulled away soon enough, looking at Vax with a touch of tenderness, his dark eyes glistening ever so slightly. “Till we meet again?”

Vax’s smile grew warm under a pair of reddened cheeks, finding that it was best he be off before the feeling in his pants fucked with his words. “Till we meet again…”

As Vax ambled his way up the stairs, he was almost immediately snuck up on by a rather familiar tenor voice singing along to the end of the song.

“Once upon a time there was light in my life, but now there’s only love in the daaark...And there's nothing I can say...A total eclipse of the heaaaaart…”

Vax rolled his eyes, grabbing Scanlan by the ear and dragging him along. “C’mon Shorthalt.”

Chapter End Notes

For any of you who would like to listen to the 80s hit that warms broken hearts, here it is:

YouTube link

Also, totally unrelated, but I did post another very short Critical Role Fic (It’s barely 900 words). It takes place in the original Critical Role canon universe, during Percy’s Backstory. So if you need something else to read while you wait for the next chapter of this one, feel free to check out Echoes of His Own Damnation. It’s kind of a different style than this fic, so let me know what you all think. I might write more of it if you like it.
Chapter Summary

Last time, on The Butterfly Effect:
After valiantly taking responsibility for their actions and explaining their findings, the party's conversation with Allura goes well, and they are left pardoned of any illegal activity. They are advised to head back to their old hotel as the investigation begins.

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings for this chapter are in end notes.

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I really do enjoy writing from Vax’s point of view. I’m sorry if you had to wait a little longer for this chapter. You’ll find out why.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Overall, Vax felt like the team had been pretty fucking productive that day, all things considered. They had managed to get lunch, be vigilantes, and not get arrested, all in the span of maybe a couple of hours tops; it was official: they were fucking professionals.

In fact, had a good half of the party not been plagued with the sudden symptoms of sleep deprivation, they probably would have continued exploring Emon. But shit had gotten too real that day, and those who had stayed up most of the night being demi-heroes needed rest, despite the insistence from the others.

Tiberius ultimately decided to go check out the University Library, which he imagined had a different selection than that of the Cobalt University Reserve back in Westrun. Scanlan, on the other hand, asked Pike if she wanted to check out the art quarter with him, to which she politely replied with a simple “I’m too fucking tired Scanlan.”

Scanlan, of course, had no issue dragging Grog along instead. From Vax’s experience, that simply meant that there would be a lot more drinking involved. In fact -- sure enough -- as Scanlan returned tipsier than a bride’s maid at the wedding of her secret crush, he was more than happy to flaunt the portrait he had commissioned of himself by one of the street artists, along with a rather lovely portrait of Pike to match, which she found somewhat endearing, but...mostly creepy.

“But look at how well he’s captured the sheen in your raven hair!” Scanlan said. “How he allowed the purple streak to fall so perfectly. And the lighting really brings out your eyes. To think he pulled this off with just a picture Pikey.”

“Yeah, that’s great Scanlan,” Pike said, rolling her eyes as she watched the news on the muted TV.

“Alright,” he said a little dejectedly. “But I really do think you’d enjoy the promenade. We should definitely try to find a place to have brunch there so you can see it tomorrow before we leave.”
“That will work I guess,” Pike shrugged.

“Bugger off Scanlan...” Vax said as he opened one eye from his pseudo-slumber. “It’s naptime.”

With an eye roll and lift of his middle finger, Scanlan promptly left the others to their “naptime”, which Vax was rather thankful of, given that Scanlan’s voice could be rather abrasive when sleep was in order.

Of course, naptime ultimately turned into just an extension of their regular sleep time. Vax felt so fucking drained from the madness that was now their lives that he didn't even understand how the fuck Vex had managed to sneak out of the room unnoticed. One second, she was napping beside him, the next thing he knew, she was fucking gone. He couldn't believe how good she was getting at pulling that shit, but he figured his gross lack of sleep had certainly contributed to her success. Nevertheless, before he could give her a call to figure out where she had wandered off to, she returned and promptly settled back into bed, making no mention of where she’d gone or why. He wouldn't pry, even though he had his guesses. It really wasn't his business no matter how much he believed it was.

As night found Emon once more, the party fully settled into their respective rooms, which was quite the downgrade from their stay at the Cloudtop Suites. In all honesty, Vax felt more at ease in that hotel, not so much because he preferred the simpler decor, but because he felt like he actually belonged. He wasn’t going to deny that being in those fancy-ass Suites was a fun experience, but he sort of felt like a stain on the place; like trash misplaced in the recycling bin.

He could tell Vex didn’t share his opinion on the matter, what with all the sighing and groaning as she stuffed herself under the starched sheets. She’d always been one to appreciate the finer things in life. He knew money didn’t bring happiness in theory, but for some reason, he could never quite deliver that wisdom to his sister no matter how much he tried. At least she didn’t love money enough to stay with their father, which proved to him that there was perhaps still hope for her.

“Hey,” he said, lightly nudging Vex with his elbow.

“What,” Vex groaned, turning over to look at him.

He gave her a long look, just to keep her guessing for a moment before finally speaking up. “At least we’re not being spied on anymore.”

Vex snorted, rolling her eyes.

“Agreed,” Pike sounded out from the other bed.

Keyleth raised a lazy thumbs-up, her head currently under a pillow.

For a moment, Vex’s mouth lingered open, as if she wanted to tell him something. However, after a long drawn out sigh, she simply smiled, before turning over and nuzzling the blankets.

Vax smiled back, reaching over to turn off the lamp. “Night girls.”

“Night Vax,” they all responded in chorus.

Darkness enveloped the room, and Vax found sleep for maybe a solid five minutes before he was rather rudely stirred back to consciousness by his stupid fucking phone vibrating beside him. With a low huff, he deftly reached over his sister to grab for his phone that was charging, making sure to not wake her. Squinting at the near blinding screen, he felt his heart jump into his throat as he came to the realization that he had indeed received a text from the last person he needed to hear from in the
dead of night.

“You didn’t leave. -Juuzezel”

Vax swore under his breath and promptly locked his phone. Sleep deprived him had hoped it had been Gilmore, but then he remembered that his dumb ass hadn’t sent him his number yet, because he wanted to play “hard to get.” He was leaving the next fucking day. Of course he was hard to get.

He let out a sigh as he got out of bed to take a piss, leaving his phone to charge. It was something he’d have to try to ignore. In fact, it was probably best if he just spared the others of the news. They’d leave Emon soon enough anyway.

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Vax was startled awake by the sound of his phone vibrating incessantly. He scrambled to unplug it and checked the caller ID, relieved to read that it was only Scanlan. The fucker.

He lazily rested the phone against his ear as he rubbed his eyes. “What is it Shorthalt?”

“Oi, turn on the news. Now.”

“What?” Vax muttered, running a hand through his messy morning hair which he’d forgotten to braid the night before.

“Now.”

With that, Scanlan hung up.

Vax groaned his way into an upright position and reached for the remote control, turning on the TV and shaking Vex awake.

The TV was already set to a loud enough volume to where it stirred Pike awake from her deep, snoring slumber. Keyleth, who had apparently just finished her shower, walked barefoot into the room as she towel dried her hair, squinting at the TV that had the words “Breaking News” running across the bottom of the screen in bright red letters.

“Officials say that the information was provided anonymously, though the authenticity of the allegations were soon confirmed by Agent Asun Emring and his private investigation team. Details on the investigation are being kept confidential, as the culprits of the hacking are still at large. To you Sheila.”

Vex’s lips slowly drifted apart, producing a face she usually made when she was processing something ridiculous or unbelievable.

“Well that was fucking fast,” she blurted out. “Allura wasn’t kidding when she said she knew people.”

Vax shushed Vex as the news story flashed more details, the image of ambulances filling the screen.

“At eight a.m. this morning, Chief Cyber Security Manager of the Cloudtop Center Jeremy Kreig was found dead when authorities tried to seize him from his apartment in central Emon.”

The sound of a towel dropping to the floor was immediately followed by a sharp gasp. Vax whipped his head around to see Keyleth had covered her mouth with her hand, and was now staring at the TV glossy eyed.
“Oh my god,” Pike muttered.

“Current details seem to indicate toward suicide, though we are still waiting for confirmation. Critics claim that these recent developments have complicated the investigation that seeks to confirm Krieg’s involvement in the Cloudtop Center hacking scandal. However, in a recent interview, Agent Emring assured that the investigation will continue.”

“Thank you Sheila. Next up on Taldorei Live: News of missing children still plagues the billboards of most community centers—”

Vax immediately turned off the TV, causing the room to go deathly quiet. As he glanced around, he could tell the girls were in as much disbelief as he was, though he could tell that Keyleth was taking it particularly hard. Looking as though the blood had drained from her face, she ambled over to closest bed and plopped down, eyes lost in distant thought.

Vax reached over to touch Keyleth’s hand, but there was no apparent response from her at first.

“This is a big deal guys,” Pike said, finally breaking the silence that had dampened the room.

No shit it was a big deal. Vax was more than aware of the implications of the alleged news, and the last thing he wanted to do now was to dwell on it. He traded a glance with Pike and bit his lower lip before turning back toward Keyleth and rubbing her shoulder slightly.

The smallest of utterances escaped Keyleth’s lips, her words sounding lost and confused. “This is our fault...”

Vax and Vex looked at each other with immediate concern before getting closer to Keyleth on the bed.

“No...Keyleth,” Vex said, crawling beside her.

“This is actually our fault,” Keyleth said more loudly, her eyes fixed on the blank wall.

“Keyleth,” Vax said, trying to sound comforting. “We don’t know all the facts. We need to just sit tight and let things happen.”

Keyleth turned to face the others, her expression hardened but her voice still soft. “Had we just shut up about this and let things go this wouldn’t have happened.”

Somewhere deep inside Vax, guilt was slowly rising up and messing with his head probably just as much as it was with Keyleth’s, only he didn’t have the courage to admit it out loud like she did.

“We had to do something Keyleth. You know that...” He wasn’t sure if he was trying to comfort her or himself at this point.

“I know but...” She rested her face in her hand for a moment and sighed into it before rubbing her eyes. “I feel like we killed him.” She glanced up to look at Vax. “I mean just two days ago we spoke to him. Percy shook his hand. And he’s dead now. Gone.”

Vax didn’t exactly know what to tell her. It was a fucked up situation; no one could deny it, but he wasn’t quite ready to agree with her either.

Keyleth seemed to become disappointed when Vax didn’t answer, turning back toward the wall and staring at it with a hard expression. “We shouldn’t have snooped around in the first place. We ruined someone’s livelihood.”
Vex’s expression hardened and she took Keyleth by the hand. “Allura said it herself. We did the right thing here. Imagine how that power could have been abused had the hackers not been caught. And for all we know, Kreig was behind this—”

“We don’t know that,” Keyleth snapped.

Vax agreed with Keyleth’s attitude on the matter. It was in bad taste to speak of someone who had passed away, regardless of whether they were responsible of a crime or not.

“You’re right,” Vax said. “We don’t know whether he was behind it or not.”

Keyleth’s expression lightened to one of surprise, which broke Vax’s heart just a little more. She wasn’t used to people agreeing with her on her moral dilemmas all that often.

He forced a smirk and adjusted a stray strand of red hair out of her face. “But there is nothing we can do now but wait.”

Keyleth glanced away with a sigh, her expression finding melancholy once more.

“Just... try to not think about it,” he continued.

Keyleth sniffled slightly, but seemed to be holding it together for the most part. “That’s easier said than done Vax.”

Vax let out a nervous chuckle, shaking his head slightly. “Tell me about it... But trust me. Together we’ll work this out.” He rested a hand on her shoulder and rubbed it. “We’re gonna go grab some brunch and head home. Then we can leave all of this drama behind us and forget about it.”

Keyleth lightly rested her chin on his hand and looked at him with a furrowed brow. “You know it’s not that simple...”

Vax closed his eyes for a moment and tried to stay as composed as possible. “No, it’s not. But do we really have a choice?”

Keyleth simply glanced away.

“This isn’t something we can change,” he continued. “So might as well just try to move on. At least we’ve got each other to distract ourselves so we’re at an advantage...”

Keyleth wiped a single tear from her eye and smiled slightly. “I’m gonna need a fat joint when we get back on the road.”

A small chuckle escaped Vax’s lips and he pat her on the back a few times. “That’s my girl.”

It wasn’t an easy situation to process. In fact, Vax wasn’t exactly sure if he’d ever be ready to process it. He wasn’t even sure if there were experts out there who could help them with this shit, considering the whole situation was all being kept secret. All he could really do was try his best to adopt his favored strategy: set it and forget it.

Vax turned around to notice Pike was sitting on the edge of the other bed, realizing that she’d been pretty damn quiet during the conversation. With her legs crossed and her back straight, she was staring at the TV with a lost look on her face.

“You alright Pike?” Vax asked.

The sound of his voice prompted her back into a state of attention. “Huh?” She turned to look at him.
“Yeah, yeah. I’m fine. I just had a funny feeling, that’s all.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. I’m probably just hungry. We should get going.”

Although he couldn't be sure, Pike seemed earnest enough..ish. She was the type who was pretty fucking good at keeping her cool in tense situations. In fact, she was practically their beacon of hope when everything else went to shit, so he couldn't have her spacing out too. They needed her. He needed her.

Nevertheless, he valued her claim that she was probably just hungry. And he knew better than most people that pancakes were indeed a tried and true weapon against fighting the blues, so it was best they get their asses moving.

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Their walk toward the promenade was a pretty brisk one, so much so that Vax was almost starting to get a little tired. Vex wanted to make sure they had time to eat and return to the hotel before they needed to check out at noon. She was absolutely determined to not have to pay a late fee if she could get away with it.

Vax -- of course -- didn’t want to have to pay extra either, through a very small part of him still kind of wanted to slow down his walking pace just to piss Vex off. He could even justify it by claiming it was his way of getting back at her for not telling him where she’d wandered off to the night before. Nevertheless, he knew better than to mess with her today of all days. She was already stressed enough about them cutting things too close, but she couldn’t deny that they all wanted pancakes, especially Grog and Pike, who were eagerly marching beside Vex at a speed that could only be fueled by a desire for, well... fucking pancakes.

As the team strolled down the sidewalk amongst the tall, concrete business buildings and bustling commuters, Vax glanced over his shoulder to look at Percy, who was busy speaking to Keyleth and Tiberius a few feet behind him. They didn’t seem to be speaking about anything all that serious, but snooping wasn’t what Vax was trying to do anyway. What he actually wanted to do was see whether he could detect any signs of hickies on Percy’s pasty white skin. Of course, the bastard was dressed from head to toe, covering up everything including those fucking tattoos that Vex couldn’t shut up about. To be fair, she hadn’t really brought them up recently so either she’d given up on the obsession, or she’d gotten a chance to get a real good look at them, and Vax had a pretty decent list of scenarios in which that could have happened.

Unexpectedly, Percy lifted his head and narrowed his eyes in Vax’s direction, which prompted him to quickly turn his head back around just in time to notice what had caught Percy’s attention so suddenly.

Vax’s eyes widened in horror and he immediately grabbed the closest person to him, that being Scanlan.

The ear piercing sound of screeching rubber against asphalt hit the ears of the group like a vicious creature from the Hells, causing the crowds surrounding them to scream and scatter in terror as they witnessed the enormous semi-truck barrel straight toward them. It wedged cars out of the way in deafening crashes, roaring and buckling its way onto the sidewalk and devouring people underneath its gargantuan form.

The rush Vax felt rise from his feet to his head was nearly blinding. He couldn't breathe, couldn't
hear; all he could process was the position of his twin...just a few feet away. *Just a few fucking feet away...*

But she was too far... out of reach; now out of his control; now turning to look at him, now opening her mouth to scream, now vanishing from his view as a massive red form shoved her out of the way.

And then he saw their mother.

Smiling, beautiful; a radiant queen in simple clothes. Her russet, work-hardened hands contrasted against the immaculate white sheets she was hanging to dry. They billowed in the wind like the very clouds Vex and he used to watch every afternoon when they were children and still new to the world...

Instinct kicked in just as chaos found purchase. With newfound strength, he yanked Scanlan out of the path of the behemoth and they both rolled onto the asphalt.

And then the blindness set in...

But it was not a dark blindness. It was white. Hot. White-hot like pain. Pain he found in his elbows, and his knees, and his palms, as if he’d rolled into a bed of needles. He no longer knew which way was up and who was around him. The echoes of screams felt muffled under the weight of the haze that had taken him. For a moment everything seemed to slow down and go silent. He felt dazed, lost; lost in white --no, lost in blue; sky blue.

He blinked a few times and flipped himself over, grimacing in pain. Suddenly, he felt warm, warm in his chest, warm on is knees and elbows, warm on his shaky bloody palms which he lifted in front of his face. Letting out a strangled cry for strength, he lifted his body off the ground and felt like he would vomit. The world was spinning and he grasped the curb for stability, feeling the sharp pain in his palm crawl up his arm and into his mind.

His eyes darted across the sidewalk, frantically searching for any point of reference, any point of security, any point of sanity... And that is when his gaze settled on a long, wet, crimson streak smeared across the concrete, ending at what looked like the tattered, motionless body of Pike.

Chapter End Notes

Content Warnings: Mention of Suicide, Graphic Violence (Truck collision with pedestrians)

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This is pretty important so be sure to read this note:

You probably now understand why I hesitated posting this chapter for so long. Given recent world events, it felt in very poor taste to post this chapter right away.

I had originally timed my writing schedule so I would reach this chapter about two weeks ago. However, when the first van attack happened in London, I slowed down my writing to give it some time, so I could then publish this chapter a few weeks later when I’d given the event its due respect. Then, a few days ago, there was the second van attack...

I had planned the events in this chapter months ago, and although terrible things happen
every day, I never could have predicted that this chapter would parallel so eerily with the real world. In fact, I had actually jumped around with numerous ideas, ranging from having Pike get in a simple car accident, to putting the Vox Machina team in a hostage situation along with other Cloudtop Members, but ultimately settled with a truck attack because it created the simplest narrative while still keeping things in the spirit of the canon material.

All this being said, I want to profoundly apologize if the events in this chapter upset anyone. This is one of those stories that will sadly address horrors that also happen in the real world. It won’t get any easier for Vox Machina; I can tell you that much.

Thank for understanding, Keep Calm and Carry On. <3

Edit 23/6/2017 post CR livestream: The curse of bad timing continues...
Chapter Summary

Last Time, on The Butterfly Effect:
After successfully speaking to Allura about the hacking incident at the Cloudtop Center, the group returns home to their old hotel for some rest and relaxation. The next morning, they are disturbed to learn that Jeremy Kreig, the lead Cyber Security Manager of the Cloudtop Center has committed suicide in light of the new investigation that was leading in his direction. Though feeling somewhat guilty, the team deems it best to just have brunch and leave Emon as soon as possible. However, on their way to eat, the team is run over by a truck, causing utter chaos.

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings for this chapter are in end notes

Back to Vex’s point of view. Definitely struggled with the second part of this chapter so bear with me. A lot of this was rather experimental.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The complex emotional high Vex felt on their way back to their old hotel was a discordant combination of discomfort and exhilaration. She could not believe how well their conversation with Allura had gone, considering how badly it could have gone. Now, with tensions quelled and their moral responsibility fulfilled, she was currently in the process of trying to resolve the fierce internal battle in her mind, in which her desire to sleep clashed against her necessity to talk both Percy and Vax’s ears into oblivion. It was simply a matter of figuring out who she’d get to first...

After settling into their respective rooms, she soon realized that getting a moment alone with Vax would be nearly impossible, given that he was far too determined to nap his day away in the presence of Keyleth and Pike. Nevertheless, Vex figured she’d make the best of her twin’s current state of lethargy to speak to Percy instead. She knew that at least Tiberius and Scanlan had planned on going downtown, so she’d likely be able to steal Percy away from any sort of “riveting” conversation he’d be having with Grog.

After waving her middle finger in front of Vax’s face a few times to confirm he wasn’t doing that weird-ass thing where he pretended his eyes were closed, she gingerly stepped off the bed and left the room, taking care to close the door as quietly as possible.

A few brisk knocks and a long wait later, a very tired looking Percy answered the door, dressed in his signature gray sweatpants, and to her dismay, his tank top...

His tattoos were in full view in the yellow hallway light, shifting and twisting as he stretched. She’d try her best to not stare this time, because any respectable woman in their right mind would be over the novelty by now, right?
With heavy lids and a messy head of silvery hair, Percy leaned the side of his face against the half-opened door and rubbed his eye behind his glasses. “Yes?”

Vex wrinkled her nose and stuffed her hands into her baggy sweater pockets. “You were sleeping weren’t you?”

He winced as he scratched his bad case of bedhead. “How ever did you guess?”

“I’ve seen your morning face more than enough times to get a good idea of what you look like when you first wake up. Kind reminds me of this zombie movie I watched when I was a teen.”

“Fantastic…”

She studied him for a moment, before standing on her tiptoes to look behind him. “Anyway. Is anyone else in there?”

Percy furred his brow, side glancing as he processed the question. “Went downtown...I guess.” He casually glanced behind him, “Unless someone is hiding very quietly in the bathroom. I haven’t really checked.”

Vex clasped her hands together and looked at him intently. “Well I need to talk to you.”

Percy simply blinked at her.

“Like now.”

He blinked once more, adjusting his glasses. “Why do I get the vague impression that I’m in some form of trouble?”

“Because you are,” she said, abruptly shoving him inside and forcing her way through the door.

“Excuse m-gah!” Percy stumbled back as she closed the door behind him.

Vex let out a satisfied exhale as she looked around, confirming that there was indeed no one else around. She then turned toward Percy, narrowing her eyes at him and crossing her arms. “So,” she said, standing tall with her chin slightly raised.

Percy simply stared at her for a few moments, looking a little lost for words. However, at the sight of her staring him down in silence, he eventually spoke up, slowly rubbing his bare arms and glancing around. “I feel like I’m missing somethin-”

“What was that about?” Vex interrupted.

“What?”

“What you said back there when you were speaking to Allura.”

Percy stared up at the ceiling and let out a long drawn out sigh. “Ah…” He removed his glasses from his face and started to clean them on his tank top, a nervous habit Vex had picked upon. “You’ve got to be less cryptic Vex. I’m running on like two hours of sleep…”

Vex snorted, making no note of his plea to innocence, considering he was usually the cryptic one. Besides, he knew exactly what she was talking about.

She took a step closer, squinting her eyes at him even further. “What possessed you to even attempt to take the blame for all of that?”
Percy simply huffed, before walking away and taking a seat on his bed as he put his glasses back on. “I...felt responsible.”

“How so?”

“None of this probably would have happened had I not pointed out the problem I noticed on my phone.”

Vex followed him and stood at the foot of the bed. “Well, we could have handled it differently.”

“Like?”

She shrugged. “We could have said we were sent the information. We didn’t have to admit that we were the one’s who discovered the hacking.”

Percy huffed out a quick laugh, adjusting some of the pillows on the bed. “I hardly believe Allura would have bought that story.” He slowly crawled his way into a laying position, propping himself up with a few pillows so he could sit up as he spoke. “Either way, it worked out in our favor in the end.”

“But what if it hadn’t? Then what? You would have been locked up.”

He released a yawn and tucked his hands behind his head. “That was the goal. I thought it best to spare your brother of the blame. Of course, I failed to predict that he too wanted to be the hero. He never really struck me as the heroic type until today to be honest.”

Vex stared him down, somewhat annoyed by his blatant attempt to appear as aloof as humanly possible. “That is a conversation I feel I will have to have with Vax later. But we are talking about you right now. Why...”

“I told you,” he glanced at his feet and wiggled his toes in his socks. “I just figured if anyone was going to be locked up for our crimes it was best it be me. I’ve known you all the least amount of time, and your brother...Well we couldn’t have him locked up again now could we?”

Vex’s shoulders dropped a bit, and she clicked her tongue. She was almost offended at the mere notion Percy was implying. She refused to accept that he genuinely still believed what he was saying.

“Percy...How could you think that about yourself?”

He continued staring at his feet. “It’s the truth. I don't know you all that well.”

“Percy...”

“I’m the most expendable at this point, objectively speaking-”

“Percy look at me.”

Percy shut up real quick and glanced up at Vex with a furrowed brow.

Vex let out a deep sigh and sat beside him on the side of the bed. “Thank you.” She paused for a moment, collecting her nerves. “Really, I mean it. Don't believe that I don't appreciate what you tried to do back there.”

“I know-”
“But,” she lifted a finger at him, giving herself some time to reflect on how she wanted to share her thoughts without coming off as too intense. She and Vax both had a bad habit of putting too much emotional weight into their conversations at times.

Percy was staring at her with a hard expression; one that didn't necessarily approve of her scolding behavior. Perhaps she was overstepping, but she needed to make her thoughts known or she'd never feel at ease. She shifted her body slightly so she was facing him.

“I want to make sure you understand this so listen very carefully and achieve this in that big head of yours.”

Percy shifted his arms from behind his head to a crossed position, staring her down intently, almost daring her to say her piece.

But she did not waver. She leaned in and spoke softly but firmly. “I don’t want you to ever believe that you somehow don’t belong in our group. It’s true, we may not know you as well as we know each other, but that will change over time. We are family now, and that isn’t going to change.”

Percy’s somewhat guarded expression softened, and almost saddened at the mention of family. She could see him crack the slightest of smiles, yet once again, that familiar melancholy had resurfaced in his eyes.

“You’re very kind…” he said, looking away from her.

Vex chuckled. “I’m not being kind. I’m telling the truth. You’re stuck with us now, whether you like it or not.” She grabbed his ankle to make her point. “Everyone in this family is valuable. You included.”

Percy glanced down at her hand on his ankle and he quirked a brow, shifting his captured leg to find that she was holding it firmly in place. “Thank you...I suppose.”

“And don’t forget it,” she said, shaking an angry finger at him. “I don’t want anything bad to happen to you or anyone else in our family, alright?”

“Alright,” Percy said, staring up at the ceiling with a sigh.

She smiled, her own expression softening a bit. “If something were to happen to one of us I don’t know what I’d do with myself…”

The silence they shared in that space quickly turned awkward as they stared at each other for moments that felt far too long. Alone, in that curtain darkened room, on that queen-sized bed, in their comfortable clothes, Vex’s mind couldn't help but consider all the possible ways in which this conversation could escalate... though she tried her best to remind herself of the oath she’d made with the universe about stuffing her hands down friends’ pants.

As if realizing her discomfort, Percy studied her with newfound concern, and seemed intent on speaking up when he suddenly flinched at the sound of a door opening.

Vex quickly removed her hand from Percy’s ankle just as Scanlan walked into the room, reeking of beer.

“Woah now,” Scanlan said. “Didn’t mean to interrupt anything.”

Vex groaned, standing up. “No Scanlan, I was just leaving.”
Vex gasped as her vision clarified, the sound of screams and horns echoing in the distance, muffled by what felt like warm cotton in her ears. Pain found her but seconds later, a soreness akin to a vice clamped around her joints and head, threatening to crush her beneath its pressure.

But pain meant she was still alive...

She tried her best to make sense of the blur of events that had transpired. One moment, she was but a blink away from being crushed beneath a blood red truck that she'd already witnessed trample so many others. The next thing she knew, she was instead being shoved by something else... Someone else; someone that grabbed her and threw her with the strength of a giant, nearly sending her airborne before she hit the ground with an impact so hard that it made her see white.

She no longer knew which way was up. The world felt like it had been knocked off teeter, with the sky below and the rough concrete above, pressing down on her face like sandpaper.

As she tried to peel herself off the ground, her sense of confusion morphed to severe agony, her arm buckling at the discovery of a sharp pain in her wrist. Using her elbow to prop herself up, she scanned the scene, her thoughts funneling into one direction: Where was Vax?

In an instant, her eyes found crimson and followed it, fear welling in her stomach and threatening to spill all over the ground. It was a long, gruesome streak, tale tale signs of black hair caked onto the concrete, which caused Vex’s heart to drop so hard it felt like it had broken. She tried her best to push herself forward to get a better view, and her eyes welled with tears as her eyes found purchase on the source of the blood. There lay Pike, motionless, contorted, her small body jammed in a space between a brick wall and a currently smoking bright red truck. But a few feet from her was the rippling form of Grog, scraped and sweating, roaring out to the universe as he worked on prying open the driver's door which was partially crushed shut.

With tears in her eyes, she called out to her friends, but was startled by a hand that grasped her shoulder and turned her around.

“Vax,” she gasped, relieved at the sight of his relatively unharmed state. However, as she tried to lean in for a hug, she hissed in pain as she lifted her shaky hand, her face turning pale at the sight of the horrible direction in which her wrist was twisting.

Vax was in tears as he examined the wrist, patting her on her shoulder as he stood. “Don't move. Wait here,” he said, quickly running off before she could respond.

It was only then that her mind began to process the rest of the chaos around her. On the path the truck had ravaged, she saw nothing but utter destruction. Sides of cars were crushed and smoking,
corners of buildings were scattered across the ground, a fire hydrant was spewing out a column of water that was raining down on what looked like…

Vex turned away and shut her eyes as she tried her best to block out the gruesome sight she had just caught glimpse of. Three, four, five bodies? She didn’t dare get a closer look.

As she found the courage to open her eyes once more and look behind her, she spotted Scanlan, a few feet away, currently in the process of standing up and grasping his shoulder with an expression of immense pain. Behind him, she saw Tiberius, laying on his side and cradling his arm with clenched teeth. A few feet away from him, partially in the road, was Keyleth, laying on top of Percy as if she'd shoved him out of the way and fallen on top of him. She was screaming in utter agony as Percy held her steady, one of her legs currently bending in two separate directions...

At the end of the trail of destruction was the truck, which seemed to have crashed its side into the brick wall of a building, currently holding the body of Pike in place as Grog worked on the door in a frenzied rage. Vax was kneeling beside the body of Pike, currently on the phone and speaking rather quickly as he covered his free ear, a stranger standing next to him.

Without warning, the sound of bending metal, followed by a loud crack caught Vex off guard as she watched the driver’s door swing open. In a flash of black clothing, a pale wiry-looking man with red hair leapt out of the truck and went darting across the concrete.

“Stop!” Vex screamed, though her voice felt muted under the chaos that was surrounding her. She stood up on shaky legs, desperate to do something, anything.

As she reared up to scream once more, she gasped at the sight of Grog, now barreling after the man like a raging bull, leaping over debris and cars with no sign of tiring or slowing. With a roar that could be heard echoing through the streets, Grog’s left off the curb and closed the distance with the man, slamming into him in full force and forcing them both to roll a few feet into the road before ultimately pinning him into the ground between his trunk-like thighs. In a fit of pure rage, Grog then immediately started to wale on the man mercilessly, his knuckles turning redder and wetter with each punch.

“Grog, stop!” Vex shouted, limping toward him where a crowd of people had already gathered. She shoved them out of the way as she clenched her arm, adrenaline now fueling her need to understand what the fuck was going on.

As they both came within her sights, she gasped as she watched Grog punch the man’s nose deeper into his face until it was nearly no more. She quickly grabbed hold of Grog’s arm with her one good arm and pulled back with all her body weight, wincing in pain as she shouted once more. “Stop it Grog! We need him alive!”

Grog, whose veins were now red and bulging around his bald head and neck, took a couple of deep breaths as he stared Vex down, the animalistic rage slowly softening as his eyes met hers. With a clenched jaw and his nostrils still flaring, he shook free of Vex’s grasp and grabbed hold of the man’s arms, keeping them pinned against the ground as Vex leaned in.

She stared the man down with intensity, studying his young face that was now painted in blood and fear. In a voice that was rough and strained, she asked the only question that she could even articulate. “Why?”

The man, who had blood running out of his nose and into his mouth, whimpered and groaned underneath the vice-like grip.
Vex leaned in closer, raising her voice to where it was nearly a growl. “Why?”

“One last job,” the man squeaked. He sounded young, almost like a teen. “One last job and I could go.”

“What job?”

“Delete you folk.”

Vex watched Grog’s grip tighten around the man’s arms, and as he squirmed, she felt no satisfaction in his pain; only anger, confusion.

“They wanted to send a message…” he continued. “Teach a lesson. I don't know why.”

“Bullshit!” Grog roared, causing even Vex to flinch.

She could hear sirens in the distance and she knew that their time with the man was almost up.

“Who is they?” she asked.

The man winced in pain and started coughing up blood. “They wanted one last thing from me. But I fucked up.” He stared up at the sky and his eyes seemed to lose focus. “I fucked up.”

“What? You’re not making any sense.” She snapped her fingers at him, trying to get his attention.

“But they'll send someone better… Someone who can do the job.”

“Why you?” she asked.

“They'll send someone else…”

“No they won't!” Grog shouted, raising his fist high and threatening to bash his head in.

“Grog, no!”

Grog slammed his fist into the asphalt mere inches from the man's head and let out a roar of absolute grief just as ambulances and police made it to the premise.

In a last-ditch effort, Vex stood tall and waved them down, before the pain finally broke past the adrenaline in her system, causing her vision to blur and her body to crumple to the ground besides Grog, where she leaned her head against his shoulder and waited for the nightmare to end.

Chapter End Notes

Content Warnings:
Aftermath of truck attack, Graphic Violence, Blood and Gore, Death.

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We’re just about done with this arc...Almost.
Chapter Summary

Last time, on The Butterfly Effect: After speaking to Allura and returning to their old hotel, Vex goes to scold Percy about trying to be a hero. When the party is hit by the truck, Vex does her best to convince Grog not to kill the driver who ran them over.

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings for this chapter are in end notes:
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Okay. So I kind of picked a weird chapter to insert some lore/exposition, but hey, I suppose now is as good a time as any, no? Although this chapter will clarify things, I suppose it’s probably wise to point out that this Modern AU does ‘not’ take place in our world. I hope it doesn’t get too confusing. World building is hard work and mistakes will be made, I promise. Bear with me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The hours that followed the attack felt like the scenes of a disjointed nightmare. People looked like shades against the strobing bright lights of the emergency vehicles and the glare of the pale, midday winter sun. Police and paramedics seemed to speak in riddles, asking questions that the party couldn’t answer. The cries of the living seemed to get lost amongst the distant wails of the ambulances that spirited away those less fortunate.

Vex sat on the edge of the ambulance pressing an ice pack against her wrist as she watched her scraped up twin argue with someone who looked important, though from that distance she couldn't tell whether it was an officer, or a paramedic...or maybe just some guy in a suit…Frankly, she didn’t care, or perhaps couldn’t care.

She was struggling to fully plug her consciousness into the scenes before her. It was as if she were viewing everything through an aquarium; the sounds were muffled, the people were muffled, her memories were muffled. She had trouble distinguishing facts from fabrications.

At some point, she remembered Vax saying something about his phone not working, but she wasn’t sure if he was referring to that very moment or permanently; she certainly hadn’t been in a state to ask for clarification. Visuals seemed to be the only thing that could bring her back to a semi-state of clarity, much like remembering scenes of a dream after waking. One by one, she watched her friends get shipped off to where she imagined was the nearby hospital, or at least she hoped. The thought of them somehow being separated was something that would not settle well with her current state of mind. She watched as a couple of paramedics carried Keyleth away, wrapped in a thermal blanket and writhing in pain as she was loaded into the ambulance, surely to treat her leg, which Vex now remembered had been reduced to a horrendous state.

In the far distance, she recognized Grog, being forced to step away from what looked like an entire
crowd of individuals hovering around Pike, who’s still body was being loaded into a separate ambulance.

She remembered now...

She remembered the blood; the blood on her twin, the blood on Grog’s fists, the blood on the young man’s face, the blood on the truck, the blood on the concrete, the blood in the puddles of water in the street…

In an instance, Vex felt her stomach curl and contract before promptly releasing its contents onto the cold asphalt.

***

“Breaking News: Semi-Truck mows over pedestrians in Central Emon. At approximately eleven fifteen a.m, a semi-truck driven by nineteen year-old Samuel Green rushed down Abadar’s Promenade before crashing into the side of a Central Bank, killing four and injuring twelve. Investigators are still trying to discern the motive of the attack, as Green has fallen silent on answering any questions regarding his employers. Stay tuned for the latest developments.”

Vex leaned back in her seat and shut her eyes, utterly unwilling to absorb any more information the television captions had to offer. Hospital waiting rooms were supposed to be relaxing -- she thought -- so the fact that Emon’s Central Hospital had decided to leave the TV on Taldorei Live was maddening to her.

The details of how or when Vex made it to the hospital were lost on her... She could only barely recall certain scenes in the blur that was the continuation of the nightmare: how it hurt so bad when they set her wrist back into place; how she started to cry when she was told that Pike and Keyleth were in surgery; how she sat for what felt like hours in the waiting room in a state of drug-induced dissociation, cradling the new cast around her fractured wrist.

The physical pain was minimal; they’d shoved enough pills down her throat to sedate a grown horse. Yet now, without the pain to distract her, she needed to seek other ways to hide from the reality that she still struggled to accept, even within her already jaded outlook on life.

She wasn’t a naive person by any stretch of the imagination. She never was, and probably never would be. She’d grown up in enough poverty, and had experienced enough abuse to where she had come to terms with the fact that the world simply wasn’t fair. Hell, even the most spoiled of rich assholes could figure it out; all they had to do is turn on the fucking news.

Exandria was by no means a peaceful continent, neither in its convoluted history nor in the present day. Its cultural diversity and political turmoil made for a landscape that was constantly evolving. In school, Vex recalled their classroom replacing its political map a good three times in the span of four years just to keep the morphing regional borders up to date. Private wars between cities and territories were the main source of these changes, and were so common that most respectable communities ran emergency drills every couple of weeks just to keep their population prepared for the worst. Furthermore, all able-bodied citizens -- with few exceptions -- were required to join the "reserves" of their resident cities as a standing militia of sorts. Most cities required mandatory training of at least two years, but other cities like Westruun made service for its residents voluntary. These laws were mainly why Vex, Vax, and so many others had moved to Westruun in the first place. Sure, in the end, the cities did it for self-defense; no one knew when one city, region, or private army would attack the other, as the element of surprise was a prized tactic.

Vax -- of course -- blamed these conflicts on the evils of capitalism, though in all honesty, he wasn’t
entirely wrong. Many of the wars that ravaged Exandria were between private armies paid by business tycoons or private organizations with the sole purpose of backing their favoured political leader. Others were entirely rogue and worked for their own self-interest. By all means, some were wars that even Vex supported to an extent, such as P.E.L.O.R.’s decision to seize control of forests in northern Taldorei so they could be protected from logging and poaching back in the 1900s. However, many conflicts, especially in her own lifetime, were far less noble and resulted in a lot more suffering. Either way, whether these mercenary forces fought for something that was more or less justified, the outcome was usually the same: those with the most money and popular support usually won… And when the continent was not being ravaged by conflict and civil war, misfortune more than made up the difference. A few examples came to mind rather promptly, such as the slow demise of her and her twin’s reservation after the construction of a chemical refinery on its outskirts, or the downfall of the now orphaned City State of Whitestone due to a freak accident that killed the ruling family. These events were solid testaments of how quickly things could go wrong in the delicate socio-political climate. Yet despite of it all, until a few hours ago, it was a reality that Vex was willing to accept.

But not anymore… Not now that her family had been thrown into the blender.

She didn’t know why that young man had been sent to run them over; she didn’t even know whether she’d ever be given the luxury of a definite answer; however, she could certainly make an educated guess. Chances were, her and her friends had likely stumbled on something far larger than a simple team of hackers hanging out in a basement. She feared that they had gotten involved with some sort of econo-political struggle between the Cloudtop Center and this unknown entity, and now, they were paying the consequences, because no good deed went unpunished in their world…

Nevertheless, it wasn’t something she wanted to think about anymore. She needed to get out of her philosophical funk and find something more productive to brood over while she waited for her friends to emerge from their respective appointments. Yet even with her most focused attempts, she couldn’t fully escape from her worries. When it wasn’t the big things that were troubling her, the little things found room to poke and prod: there was the fact that they likely weren’t going to be able to leave home that day, or the fact that she wasn’t going to be able to drive, or that she’d likely have to call into work to warn them that she wasn’t going to make her shift, and of course, the harsh reality that Trinket would have to stay a few more days with grumpy old Eskil…

No. She needed to ground herself and escape from her thoughts lest she drive herself to madness. She needed to find someone, anyone to talk to.

Vex glanced down at her newly cracked phone and sighed. She’d gotten no new text from the group message. Either people weren’t answering or there was no signal. The last text she’d received from them was an update from Tiberius, who informed the group that he’d broken his elbow, and that Keyleth was going to need bolts in her leg. No one else seemed to answer after that, which was unfortunate to say the least.

Vex grimaced in pain as she re-adjusted the position of her arm so it was putting less strain on her wrist. The meds were likely wearing off, which she considered a blessing in disguise; a means of distracting herself as she glanced around for any sign of her friends.

Emon’s Central Hospital was dreadfully crowded in the afternoon. The smell of disinfectant and stale air was inescapable, and Vex worried it would take at least a couple dozen showers to scrub it away; she’d likely have to burn the clothes. As for the waiting room, it was less of a room and more of a long hallway, with a reflective linoleum floor and a seemingly endless row of metallic chairs lining the eggshell blue walls, filled with people from all walks of life.
With her visual scan of the crowd baring no success, she felt ready to give up her search. Although she could potentially abandon her spot in the hopes of finding her friends down the hall, she felt unwilling given her current state of exhaustion, granted she was sandwiched between an old woman with a horrible cough and a man who was taking far too much space with his legs. Nevertheless, in a last ditch effort, she stood up on her toes and squinted her eyes down the hall, before her shoulders dropped and a sigh of relief escaped her chapped lips.

Among the tangle of miserable looking faces sitting in the waiting room, there was one distant form that she finally did recognize: large, muscular, bald, hunched over and glaring at the wall as if he were staring right through it. She noticed that there were actually free spots on both sides of him, which saddened her slightly, though she was mildly relieved that she could at least sit next to him. It wasn’t all that uncommon for people to be afraid of Grog. The gang tattoos on his arms, neck, and shaved head were usually the major deterrent, though his general physical presence probably would have warded off anybody else who didn’t otherwise care about old ink.

With a bit of a struggle, Vex lifted herself out of her seat and wobbled down the hall before reaching where Grog sat, still hunched over and staring at the wall with his hands braided with each other in a demi-praying position.

Finding him distracted, Vex spoke softly, though she discovered her voice to be a bit creaky, and she realized that she hadn’t actually spoken to anyone for at least a few hours. “Grog.”

He didn’t answer.

Vex furrowed her brow and bent over a little, trying to get within his visual range. “Grog?”

Grog flinched, turning to look at Vex with a look of genuine surprise as if he truly hadn’t heard her the first time.

“Sorry…” Vex said with a forced smile. “Mind if I sit next to you?”

Grog straightened his back and cracked his neck, drawing the attention of at least a few others. He then brushed off the seat beside him, that seemed to have a few crumbs scattered on it, before patting it a few times. “’ere”

Vex smiled once more before settling down beside him, her shoulder now pressed against his. He was the type of guy who took up a lot of room no matter how conservatively he sat, so he generally didn’t even bother. Nevertheless, the contact was comforting to her. Ever since the accident, she felt a sense of coldness she could not shake away.

After a few moments devoid of conversation, Vex turned to study Grog. He seemed virtually unscathed, save for a few bandages that were wrapped around his knuckles, and his clothes, that were tattered and worn at the joints. She noticed a hole in his jeans that hadn’t originally been there before, and his red jumper was still covered in dry blood, though she was almost certain it wasn’t his. What she did notice, however, was a sky blue scarf he held tightly in his grip that she had not noticed previously. She felt a lump form in her throat and her vision grew blurred at the realization that it was actually Pike’s, and she rested a hand on his arm, which got his attention.

“How are you feeling Grog?”

His eyes darted at the scarf for but a moment before fixing his black eyes on the wall in front of him. “I’m aright…”

Vex didn’t want to press the conversation any further than she needed to. He’d open up to her if he
wanted, since she knew he had enough confidence to confide with almost anyone in the group. She turned away and stared at the wall for what felt like at least ten minutes. The tears that had newly formed in the corners of her eyes had since dried, and she felt that she needed to bring up what had been on her mind, while it was still relevant at least...

“Hey Grog,” she started, still staring at the wall. “Were you the one who threw me out of the way of the truck?”

Grog smothered a burp as he spoke. “Yeh.”

Vex morphed her expression into a forced smirk, before resting her hand on Grog’s and squeezing it a little. “Thank you.”

Grog didn’t say anything at first, though he didn’t move his hand either. His hard eyes remained fixed on the wall.

Vex waited for a few moments to see if he’d speak up, and just as she was about to continue, he contributed to the conversation, though not in the direction she’d hoped.

“Did I break your ‘and?”

Vex let out a nervous laugh, staring down at the wrist that had fractured during her not so graceful landing.

“I think a lot more would have been broken had you not thrown me. You saved me.”

With those words, Grog pulled his hand from underneath hers and seemed to turn his torso away from her, his face now facing a window at the far end of the hallway. “But I couldn’t save Pike.”

Vex closed her eyes, keeping a few tears at bay. Of course, Grog hadn’t meant to come off as harsh, but part of her couldn't help but feel as though he regretted tossing her instead of Pike, who she remembered had been walking right next to him on the other side of the sidewalk. Not that she’d care even if that were the case. He was entirely justified to feel that way, and she’d never, ever blame him for him.

Pike was everything to Grog. She was his roommate, his best friend, his family, and of course, his fucking savior. Her and Wilhand had practically adopted him when he was eighteen, giving him a chance at life that no one else would. The world was not kind to ex-convicts, and even less so to those with traumatic head injuries. It was hard to say whether he would have ever been able to get back on his feet once he was released from prison, but Pike made sure there was no debate on the matter. Sure, perhaps their friendship started out as more of a private charity project, but it soon turned into so much more. Pike immediately saw in Grog what most people took years to figure out: his heart.

With a lump in her throat, but determined to show no weakness, Vex stared down at her knees and picked at her ripped tights under her shorts, sighing deeply. “This isn’t your fault Grog.”

Not much conversation was exchanged after that, making it soon clear to Vex that Grog had only been speaking for the purpose of humoring her. She knew her questions had been too prying, and the fact that Grog was even tolerating her was a testament to his patience, so she didn’t resent him for it. Given the circumstances, she didn’t exactly have much to share anyway; nothing appropriate at least. Speaking of anything beyond what had happened to them felt in bad taste, but speaking of it also weighed on their hearts. Therefore, silence sincerely felt like the most appropriate course of action.

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Nearly an hour elapsed before familiar faces finally started to make their appearance.

The first to show up was Vax, who upon spotting Vex, rushed over to hug her at a speed that was not appropriate in the confined space of a hospital. He, of course, didn’t give two shits and took no note of the disapproving looks as he embraced her, trying his very best not to hurt her any more than she already was.

Immediately following him were Tiberius and Scanlan, who seemed to be twinning arm slings and looked quite a bit worse for wear.

Vax gave Grog a firm pat on the arm, giving a solemn look before turning back toward his sister and examining her from head to toe. “So what happened? What did the doctor say?”

“Did you see my text?”

Vax sighed, “I told you... I broke my phone. And these two fuckers couldn't agree on whether you’d broken your hand or arm because your text was confusing as all hell.”

Vex chuckled nervously. “Sorry about that...I was a little high on meds. It’s actually just a fractured wrist. They said it should heal up in about six weeks.”

Scanlan reached out his palm toward Tiberius, who promptly slapped it away.

“No,” Tiberius growled, “Neither of us won that one!”

Scanlan pouted theatrically. “But my bet was that she didn’t break her arm.”

“No, you bet that she’d broken her hand.”

“Ah, you see. That’s what you thought I bet on. Give me my dollar.”

Tiberius slapped his hand away again. “Now is not the time Scanlan!”

“Seriously you two, give it a fucking rest,” Vax scolded. “How is this even mildly appropriate?”

Tiberius seemed as though he wanted to cross his arms, but in rediscovering his injury, he simply rested it on his hip. “Your mistake was assuming that Scanlan comprehends the definition of appropriate.”

“It’s one thing to understand something...” Scanlan smirked. “It’s another entirely to subscribe to it.”

Vax rolled his eyes before turning his attention back toward Vex with profound concern. “Six weeks? But what ab-” He shook his head. “Nevermind, don’t worry about it.”

“What?” Vex narrowed her eyes at him.

Vax adjusted some of the hair in her absolute mess of a braid. “I was going to say ‘what about work?’”

Vex huffed. He’d been right to drop the conversation the first time. She was anxious about the prospect of not being able to do any sort of serving, but she hoped that her manager would have the decency of at least stationing her at the front desk instead, which was something she knew she could do even in her condition.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said, giving him a nervous smile. “I’ll figure something out.”
As she spoke, her eyes settled on yet another familiar face, now walking very slowly toward the rest of the group as he adjusted his glasses with a signature clearing of the throat.

With newfound relief, Vex ran up to Percy with the intent of giving him a hug, but was stopped by a quick hand that halted her at about a foot from him.

“No…”

“What?” Vex squeaked.

“Sorry, I can’t... Doctor’s orders.”

Vex tilted her head at Percy, who quickly clarified.

“Two fractured ribs. No hugs for at least a month.”

Vex dropped her shoulders and half smiled, rubbing his arm, “You poor thing.”

“I’ll survive.” Percy smirked. “I’ve been through worse….”

Vex quirked her brow, genuinely curious as to what he could have possibly experienced that was worse than this. She certainly didn’t want to assume, but if he was just using it as a figure of speech, it was insensitive as fuck; though -- to be fair -- it wouldn't have been the first time.

After giving Percy a quick once-over, she turned back toward the others, who had now gathered in a circle. It had been nearly four hours since the attack, and most of them had been divided in separate parts of the hospital, working out paperwork or otherwise receiving treatments for their injuries. With most of them finally back together, they all tried to make sense of their own misfortune, now that they were no longer preoccupied by doctors or the obstacles of fragile technology.

Vex was somewhat relieved to learn that most of them were in better shape than she would have expected. Vax and Grog were virtually unscaved, though they both had some pretty bad scrapes that were treated to avoid infection. Tiberius broke his elbow falling out of the way of the truck, while Scanlan fractured his collarbone when he landed onto the corner of the curb. Percy, who had been shoved out of the way by Keyleth, fractured two of his ribs when she fell on him, but didn’t sustain any other serious injuries. Keyleth however, was not rewarded for her heroism and had one of her legs crushed and broken as the semi-truck ran it over with two of its wheels.

However, the one that everyone was most worried about was Pike. Her condition was in a state of flux, and they were still unsure as to what exactly happened to her. Vax confirmed that she was indeed still alive last he spoke to the nurses, though he was unable to get any other information out of them. All he knew was that doctors considered her survival borderline miraculous, and rumors were already spreading of how she’d been protected by her faith, her heirloom pendant left virtually unscathed during the entire ordeal.

Nevertheless, the fact that Pike was still alive was a small ounce of relief in the sea of dread that had overtaken them. Upon hearing the news, Grog’s mood made a full one-eighty, as if he’d been injected with a new dose of hope. It was now clear to Vex that his rough state had likely been fueled by the fear that she had perished, and Vex felt immediate guilt in realizing she’d failed to comfort him sooner.

Nevertheless, even after the new dose of good news, the general mood of the party was still rather grim. Aside from Grog, Scanlan seemed to be taking it worse than the others, even if it wasn’t immediately apparent to the unsuspecting outsider. Vex knew Scanlan well enough to pick up on the small tells that defined his range of emotions, so much so that she suspected he was quite possibly
just as upset as Grog. Behind his smiles and witty comments, she could tell his eyes looked different. They were tired, red around the corners, and heavy with emotion that no fake grin or joke could mask. It was a sadness she’d never seen on him before, and she knew that they needed to get to Pike as soon as possible, for all of their sakes.

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With little else to do, the party head to the room where Keyleth was being held after her surgery. She was currently recovering from her anesthesia, and was a little loopy to say the least...

“I luv you guyz sho much...” Keyleth slurred, crying into the side of her pillow that was covered in drool.

“We love you too Keyleth,” Percy said, trying to humor her before turning to whisper to the others, “She’s still really high…”

Behind his generally composed demeanor, Vex could sense just a twinge of guilt in the way Percy looked at Keyleth. She suspected he likely felt partially responsible for her current condition.

Vax held Keyleth’s hand and forced a smile, glancing at her with a look of pity. “How long will you have to stay here…?”

Keyleth absentmindedly clawed for Vax’s hair -- which was dangling over her in his bent over position -- much like a cat swatting at a toy. “Forevur…”

The nurse, who was standing on the other side of the bed, shook his head before speaking softly to the others. “She’ll need a day for her leg to recover enough to be moved safely. We need to make sure there are no further complications.”

“So she’ll be able to be discharged tomorrow?” Vax asked. “Because we need to leave.”

“Where will you all be headed?”

“Westruun,” Tiberius answered.

“By plane?” the nurse asked.

They all looked at each other before Vax replied. “No...by car.”

The nurse’s face morphed to one of formal concern. “I’m afraid that is going to be very difficult. She has to keep her leg in this position for at least a few more days.”

“Jush leav me here…” Keyleth cried out, lifting a fist into the air. “Go! Go withow me.... I’ll hold dem at bay...”

Percy blinked at her odd choice of words before the nurse clarified, his expression soft. “She’s still recovering from her anesthesia. I think we should give her some time to rest. I’m sorry.”

The group didn’t argue with the nurse, and let themselves out.

Leaving Keyleth to her loopy self, melancholy soon found the group once more. The most recent news was regrettable to say the least. Logistics were going to be a nightmare, and the chances of them leaving Emon anytime soon were growing slimmer and slimmer by the hour.

Before he could make his leave, Vax caught the nurse’s attention. “I don’t know if you can help us, but we’d like to get in contact with the doctor who saw one of our friends... We want to know if we
can see her.”

“Is it Pike Trickfoot?” the nurse asked rather quickly.

Vax looked a little surprised at the nurse’s prompt response. “Yes.”

“Your friend mentioned her quite a few times,” the nurse said, raising his brow and running his finger across his work tablet. “I can get you in touch with the doctor. Follow me.”

***

Heading to the wing of the hospital where Pike was being operated on, they got hold of the doctor who first examined her. He was an elderly gentleman, kind in demeanour, with long, balding white hair tied back in a ponytail who introduced himself as Dr. Tristan.

“She sustained a serious head injury,” Dr. Tristan said, speaking softly and carefully. “She lost a significant amount of skin and blood on the side of her head and face as she was dragged across the concrete. She also fractured many bones in the process.”

Vex winced as the memories returned to her. She noticed Grog’s fist clench as the doctor spoke.

“Fortunately, emergency responders were quick to act and we don’t believe that she will experience too much permanent damage, however, we won’t be entirely sure until she enters the recovery phase.”

“Can we see ’er?” Grog asked rather suddenly.

“She is currently in the middle of her second surgery, but we can let you know when visiting hours are available.”

Grog lowered his head and nodded much like a child resigning any form of disagreement, and the rest of the party deemed it best to not take up any more of the doctor’s time.

After thanking Tristan for his help, they all wandered off to a nearby waiting area and found a few seats, though Vax, Grog and Percy volunteered to stand.

“The fuck do we do now?” Grog asked, looking somewhat impatient.

“I don’t know…” Percy said, staring down at the floor as he pressed his glasses to his face.

“We wait,” Vex said, resting a hand on her hip.

“But for how long?” Scanlan asked. “We have no idea of how long it will take before we can even speak to Pike…”

Vax nodded, “This is going to sound shitty, but Scanlan has a point. We can’t stay here forever. We’ve already stayed longer than we had originally intended, and now we risk staying stuck here for who knows how long.”

“But we can’t just leave Pike and Keyleth,” Vex said.

“I know…but a lot of us have work and school. This might just be one of those situations where we have to pool some money and get them some tickets.”

Vex clicked her tongue, looking away from her brother. The thought of having to spend even more money on plane tickets was frightening to her, though the prospect of missing more work shifts was
even more concerning. The fact that most of Taldorei offered some form of free health insurance was a literal lifesaver, but in moments like these, time almost felt more valuable than money, and in that moment, they had neither...

“I might be able to scrounge from the savings we made when we were given a free stay at the suites…” Vex sighed. “But that still only gives us maybe enough money for a single ticket, and I hate the idea of forcing them to pay out of pocket for something that wasn’t their fault. And that’s not even taking ticket availability into consideration.”

“Do we really have a choice at this point though?” Vax said. “We can’t exactly stuff Keyleth into the van with a broken leg.”

“She could rest it on my lap,” Percy said, immediately gaining some suspicious looks from Scanlan.

“For two days?” Vex scoffed rather skeptically.

Silence found the group for a few moments, before Scanlan found it necessary to voice the thoughts of the rest of the party. “Well this fucking sucks.”

“It’s quite the conundrum,” Tiberius added, rubbing his chin.

A few groans of agreement were exchanged before Grog spoke up.

“Well I’m gonna stay till I can see Pike. I’ll take a bus back if I ‘ave to.”

Vex sighed, “Grog...”

“No, I don’t care,” he said, crossing his arms. “If you’re all in a rush to get back I get it, but I’m not leavin’ Pike till I can see ‘er again.”

There was no convincing Grog in situations like these, so Vex figured they might as well find a way to make the situation work in their favor.”

“I suppose if we stayed longer maybe we could give Keyleth enough time to recover and then we could drive her home...” Vex said.

Percy turned to look at Grog, “And if you really want to stay with Pike, with one extra space in the car we might be able to give Keyleth a spot to rest her leg.”

“Though that would mean we’d have to buy an extra plane ticket…” Vex added.

“I said I can take the bus,” Grog insisted. “Done it before. I’ll sleep all the way through it anyway. No problem.”

Vex closed her eyes and sighed. “I suppose. I just-”

“There you are!”

Vex’s eyes darted open at the sound of a familiar female voice, and a wave of relief washed over her at the sight of the frost-kissed blonde dressed in dark blue.

“Ms. Vysoren!” Tiberius exclaimed, waving her down with his good hand.

The others seemed to second his level of excitement, as did Allura -- who looked awfully relieved to see them as if she’d been hunting them down for some time. However, as she made her way through the crowded hall, Vex soon realized that she wasn’t alone. She was being accompanied by a rather
stark looking and somewhat... familiar looking individual? Though she couldn't place where she’d
seen him before.

He was short in stature, slender in build, and as bald as Grog, sporting what looked like some sort of
traditional tattoo on one side of his head, and an expensive looking black suit and tie.

As they both made their way to the party, Allura took no time for formalities and immediately cut to
the chase.

“I’m afraid you’re all going to have to come with us,” she said. She then turned toward the man, who
stood nearly motionless as he scanned them all rather methodically with a pair of narrow eyes, “This
is Agent Asum Emring. He has some questions for you all.”

Near instinctively, Vex turned to look at her twin, and found her predictions confirmed: He looked
just as terrified as she felt, and in that moment she knew things had gotten a lot more complicated.

Chapter End Notes

Yes… “P.E.L.O.R.” is an acronym and actually does stand for something that I have
already decided. Anyone ready to make some guesses? *eyebrow wiggle*

P.S.

Also, #AllHailtheDragonQueen … ;)


Years of Prison Time

Chapter Summary

Last time, on the Butterfly Effect: After the truck attack, the Vox Machina team regroup at the hospital where they are tended for their injuries. As they are busy weighing their options as to how they will transport their more severely injured friends back to Westruun, they are approached by Allura and apparently a certain Agent Assum Emring, who would like to ask the group some “questions.”

Chapter Notes

No Content Warnings this chapter.

Depression induced writer's block combined with RL work and drama doesn’t make for the ideal writing environment. I’m soon moving to a new apartment to start grad school and I don’t do well with changes in environment...But hey, better late than never I suppose.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“This is Agent Assum Emring,” Allura said, a subtle hint of urgency coating her voice as she gestured at the well dressed man beside her. “He has some questions for you all.”

As the word “Agent” found Vax’s ears, he came to the sobering realization that he was probably going to throw up all of his internal organs. Thank the gods they were in a fucking hospital...

Now to be fair, he’d never exactly been one to have the most stable of stomachs to begin with, (yet another ailment he’d likely inherited from his father). Still -- at least from an emotional standpoint -- he was usually pretty fucking solid at keeping his nerves in check...ish.

But not this time. No way in hell. Not after he’d almost died and had his intestines shaken into near incontinence. He felt like he was getting thrown under a truck all over again, only this time, by none other than a supposed ally. Allura had promised that their identities would have been kept secret, or at least... that’s what he’d gathered from their last conversation with her just one day prior. And yet, there they were, standing in front of her and a rather stern looking motherfucker who was sporting a face that Vax would have recognized from a mile away; a face that read “Oh, I know what you did but I just want to hear you say it first.”

Vax knew they were fucked, and no one, not even Allura’s fake smile, could convince him otherwise. He knew how this shit worked.

“Best we not slow things with formalities,” Agent Emring said with a small smile. His voice was high, almost delicate, but with a control of enunciation that hinted toward a level of education that surpassed most people Vax had encountered in his life. “Now, if you could please follow me, I’d like to speak to you in a location that is slightly more private.”
“We’re actually waiting to see a friend,” Vax said rather suddenly, more as a reaction than a true
response to Assum’s statement. He felt a drive in his body he could not stop; like a creature ready to
fight, chained down only by his own sense of decency which was -- mind you -- the flimsiest of
things.

A moment of slight trepidation in Agent Emring’s eyes was followed by a look of realization. He
hummed, his small smile ever present. “I would strongly suggest against stalling this conversation
Vax’ildan Jones, if you care so much about the well being of your friends.”

Oh, he was good. Not remarkable, but good. To be fair, Vax was well aware that finding
information on himself was child’s play given his... rather colorful criminal record. Hell, a quick
google search would likely display his mugshot, which had at one point been unceremoniously
displayed on Syngorn’s local news with the headline: “Son of Syldor Vessar Sentenced to Years of
Prison Time.”

Talk about being fucking dramatic. “Years of prison time” made it sound like he was gonna be in
there for decades; not the two years he’d been given and the twenty months he actually ended up
serving. But hey, “two” technically counted as “years” in the plural form so who was he to judge
the media’s legalistic use of grammar to convey unrealistic expectations to the general public... He
was one eye-roll away from ripping a nerve. Again, thank the gods they were in a hospital.

Either way, it was definitely the most amount of fame he’d ever seen in his life, and the most he ever
thought he was going to get...that is, until this new development. Hell, if he got any more news
coverage, he imagined the number of love letters sent to his cell would double at the very least. Who
would have thought that there was a whole community of me, women and enbies whose soul turn-on
was men in prison? Either way, it wasn’t something he was looking forward to in the slightest.

Vax narrowed his eyes, testing his luck a little further. “I think at least one of us should stay-”

Vax felt Vex grab hold of his shoulder, nodding ever so subtly in the direction of the nearest door,
which was now being casually guarded by two suspect looking men in black suits.

Vax swallowed once, realizing their predicament and accepting the reality that they’d all been royally
fucked.

“You were saying?” Assum asked, raising a brow.

Vax straightened his back, shaking off Vex’s hand and staring the agent down. “Never mind...”

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Vax clenched his jaw in a rhythmic fashion as Assum and Allura lead them into the sunset painted
parking lot. He had no idea where the fucker intended on taking them but the farther they got from
the hospital, the more Vax realized that this wasn’t going to be your average Q&A.

They soon found themselves facing a rather large, black van where a man and a woman in suits
stood standing with their hands behind their backs.

“Oh hell no...” Vax muttered to himself, catching the attention of Percy and Vex who were walking
beside him.

The two individuals in black nodded at Assum’s arrival and opened the back of the van, revealing a
relatively comfortable looking, though disturbingly clean interior with seats lining the sides. Needless
to say, the entire visual was unsettling as fuck.
Assum turned towards the group and straightened his back. “Take a seat. As you do, please do me the favor of extracting your identification cards, passports, diver’s licenses or any other forms of identification.”

The group exchanged a few looks with each other before cautiously stepping into the van like cows being wrangled for the fucking slaughter. Vax sized up both the suited individuals helping them into the car and quickly identified handguns on their person, at which point he immediately commenced suppressing his sudden urge to convert his anxiety into profanities. His level of unease was justified, to say the least, but the fact that they had not been overtly told that they were under arrest was even more disturbing. This was how people disappeared. Hell, if he were a criminal organization who had failed to kill them the first time around, he’d probably do so in a much more delicate fashion on the second attempt...

Allura stepped into the van as well, passing most of the seats and instead head through a small door at the front of the van. She turned to look at the others just before closing the door behind her. “Don’t worry. I intend to have another conversation with you all once this is all taken care of.”

Vax tried his best not to roll his eyes into his skull. None of her words mattered to him. Time would tell whether they’d be around to have any more conversations.

Putting on their seat belts as instructed, Vax watched as Tiberius struggled to get his student visa out of his wallet with his one good hand, using his teeth and muttering syllables that didn’t sound like Common. The armed woman approached him and gestured to hand her the wallet, and Tiberius did so without hesitation before pressing his spectacles back on his nose. The woman extracted the document and handed it to Assum, who pulled out a small device and scanned it. After his eyes darted across the small screen for a few brief seconds, he nodded once and immediately gave the document back to the woman, who slid it into the wallet before handing it back to Tiberius.

As the suit-clad individuals shut the doors of the van, Vax felt it lurch into motion, and his eyes darted nervously as he watched Assum gather everyone else’s I.D. Vax turned to look at his sister, who was currently sandwiched between Grog and Percy opposite him. She spotted him staring and she forced a small smirk, though his returned smile was probably pitiful as fuck.

His eyes drifted toward Percy, who was currently staring at the floor with a blank expression on his face. One of his hands was stiffly pinching his I.D. while the other was resting, no -- more like grasping his knee, the glistening of perspiration quite visible on his forehead and nose. Vax found Percy’s nervousness pretty out of character, considering that everyone else seemed to be, for lack of a better term, sedated as fuck...

Percy on the other hand, seemed strained, sweating, and a little paler than usual, his mind clearly wandering behind those zombie eyes. Maybe he was constipated.

However, as Assum approached him, like the flip of a switch, Percy’s face immediately morphed to a bright, almost smug smile as he handed over his card. Assum returned the smile with no apparent hesitation and began scanning the license. Had Vax not been paying such close attention, he probably wouldn’t have noticed Percy’s incessant finger drumming on the side of the chair just out of anyone else’s view as Assum studied the screen on his device. He was taking much longer than he had for all the others, seemingly reading and rereading with an expression that was completely blank and devoid of any sort of tell. After what felt like almost thirty seconds of unusually long silence, Assum gave Percy a quick nod and smirked before handing back his I.D.

“Sorry about that Mr. Robinson. Quite the crisp picture you have there. Here you are.”

Percy returned the smile and mouthed what looked like a “no problem” before slipping the I.D. into
his wallet. As Assum walked to the front of the van and vanished behind the small door, Percy closed his eyes and leaned against the back of the van, letting out a long exasperated sigh as if he’d been holding his breath or some shit.

Vax stared him down for a long while, but as Percy’s eyes drifted back open and noticed Vax’s gawking, he simply lifted a hand and waved at him, prompting Vax to let out a huff and look away. His patience for enigmatic behavior had been all but consumed.

***

For what felt like almost twenty minutes, the party sat in relative silence as they were transported, exchanging a few whispers that were surprisingly uninterrupted by the two individuals who were supervising them. They probably didn’t believe that the Vox Machina gang was even capable of plotting any sort of clever escape, which was -- although demeaning -- true as fuck.

Hell, they were barely able to check out of a hotel on time, much less plot any sort of master plan, which was sad considering that at least two of them were college educated, and that included Pike…

Vax squinted his eyes shut and rubbed away a few dry tears. Throughout the drive, he had tried his best to keep track of the distance and direction traveled, but with no windows to view the outdoors, he got disoriented pretty fucking quickly. The interior of the van had a nasty smell of bleach, which made Vax increasingly more nauseated as the minutes passed. Then again, his discomfort may have also been linked to the feeling that they were all going to be shot in an alley somewhere, but who was he to be the final judge of his own feelings on the matter…? Fuck if he knew.

Either way, Vax gathered he was gonna grind his teeth into fucking oblivion if they didn’t reach their destination soon. They’d given him plenty of time to reflect on his actions and he just wanted to get it over with.

Fortunately, his internal wishes were ultimately granted, as they all suddenly felt the van come to a complete stop.

Soon after, the back doors opened, revealing two other individuals, also dressed in suits, who stepped to the sides and gestured everyone that they could come forth. One by one, Vax and each of his friends were helped out of the van, followed by Assum and Allura.

Unlike the others, who were now glancing around at what looked like the inside of a completely empty underground parking structure, Allura seemed entirely unfazed by the odd atmosphere, as if she had already been there before.

“Thank you all for being so very patient,” Assum said, his voice echoing in the hollow, neon-lit space. “I’m aware that the drive was a little long but I wanted to make sure that you were all transported safely.”

Once again, Vax contained his desire to spew profanities by biting down on his tongue. This would have all been a lot easier if he had a few shots of alcohol in his system.

“Now, if you could all follow me,” Assum continued, “we will take an elevator to my office.”

With that, the team was lead down the parking lot, the clicks of Allura’s short business heels the only true noise reverberating through the place besides the occasional chatter of the group, and the droning hum of what must have been fans or an unseen motor, possibly circulating air.

The elevator ride felt relatively short and in an upward direction, though there was no indication as to what floor they were being taken to. Assum had simply scanned his hand and typed in a few digits,
and the elevator began its ascent. It was pretty fucking clear by this point that Assum had no intention of letting them figure out where they were.

As the elevator came to a stop and the doors slid open, they found themselves before a rather pristine though empty hallway, with numerous numbered doors lining the cream colored walls.

In a silent procession, Assum lead them to one of the doors marked with the seemingly arbitrary number 14, which opened to a pleasant looking, though windowless waiting area. The room was decorated with comfortable looking chairs that seemed like they’d been taken straight out of a 50s catalog, a water dispenser, and a coffee table displaying science and political magazines that were surprisingly recent.

With the team finding their seats, Assum spoke up once more. “Make yourselves comfortable and speak freely amongst yourselves. Our conversation will begin shortly.”

Allura simply nodded to the group with a smile, quickly closing the door behind her before anyone could get any words in.

Silence overtook the room for a few seconds. The place felt quiet. Almost too quiet; as if the whole room was soundproofed or something, allowing no stray sounds to permeate the premises save for the whirring of the ceiling fan above them.

With the demons of anxiety quickly crawling up his spine, Vax immediately stood up and started pacing around, scanning the room for any sign of cameras, though finding none. He huffed loudly, crossing his arms and pacing around the coffee table.

“Vax…” Vex said, “Just sit down.”

“I’ve been sitting all fucking day,” he snapped, continuing his pacing.

“Well,” she snorted. “You’re suspicious as fuck and look super worried.”

“I’m not.”

“Bullshit,” Vex scoffed, looking away.

“I’m just a little claustrophobic, that’s all,” he said, stopping in his tracks. “Haven’t seen any windows in like half an hour. So I think I have the right to feel a little worried.”

“Well hey now,” Tiberius said. “At least we can rest assured that we have a higher chance of surviving a tornado!”

“Great... I feel so much better…” Vax droned.

“I mean, given our current track record I wouldn't be all that surprised if a tornado decided to hit us too…” Vex said.


Eerie silence found the room once more.

Vax continued to pace around a little more slowly. “Our lives do feel as though they’ve become a little more shitty as of late.”

Scanlan shrugged, but immediately found the movement far more uncomfortable than he expected with his broken clavicle. “I mean...song material, am I right?” he chuckled nervously, glancing at the
others for any sort of support.

Everyone turned to look at Scanlan with a sour expression. Too soon. Too fucking soon Shorthalt.

Vex let out a sigh and turned to look at her twin. “Vax, just sit down-”

“I mean I can’t even get a fucking breath of fresh air in this hellhole!” he said, aggressively ripping off his leather jacket and tossing it on one of the empty chairs, but still refusing to sit down.

Tiberius perked up once again, “I suspect the lack of windows is so we cannot determine where we are, so to make our escape all that more difficult!”

“How observant…” Vex eye-rolled.

“You know, I’m pretty sure we can just ask to leave whenever we want,” Scanlan smiled. “We all came here voluntarily.”

“You sure about that?” Vax asked, sarcasm seeping from his pores.

“I don’t see why not?” Scanlan said, sounding sincere.

Vax narrowed his eyes at him. “Because the last time I tried to opt out of coming here I was practically threatened.”

The others looked at each other for a few moments before looking back at Vax.

Vax furrowed his brow, taken aback. “What? You heard the asshole. Said something along the lines of “If you value your friends’ safety then come with us” or some bullshit…”

“Vax…” Vex sighed. “I’m pretty sure they just want to help.”

“Or at the very least rule us out as suspects,” Tiberius added.

“Or fucking arrest us for wrecking their plan to hack the Cloudtop,” Vax scoffed.

Everyone looked at each other once more, some biting their lips, others sighing patiently.

Vax lifted his chin at them, his eyes darting across each and every one of them. “You guys think I’m being paranoid don’t you?”

“I don’t think you’re being paranoid,” Percy assured him, sounding surprisingly honest.

Vax stared up at the ceiling fan and mocked a gesture of prayer. “Well thank the fucking gods someone else here doesn’t have optimism leaking out every orifice…”

“I’m nervous too,” Grog suddenly spoke up, sitting rather conservatively in the chair that was a little small for him.

“Why are you nervous Grog?” Vex asked.

Grog rubbed the back of his neck. “Well what if I don’t know the answer to some of the questions?”

“You don’t need to know all the answers Grog,” Tiberius said.

“Then what’s the fuckin’ point? Isn’t that ‘ow this stuff works? Like you fill in the bubbles with a number two pencil and they give you a grade or sum shit?”
Vex gave Grog a look of pity and half smiled, “Just answer honestly and this shouldn’t be a problem...”

Scanlan turned to Grog and winked, “Besides, I’m pretty sure it’s an oral examination.”

Grog gave Scanlan a disgusted look and his nostrils flared a little, prompting Scanlan to shrink in his seat.

Vax spoke up, now staring at a painting of a house on a farm. “Look. The fact that we are here is already a problem.”

Vex rolled her eyes and humored her brother. “And why is that?”

“Well for one, Allura fucking lied to us.”

Vex furrowed her brow. “No she didn’t.”

“Pretty sure she said that she’d try to keep our identities anonymous.”

“And I’m also pretty sure she also said that she wanted us to stay in town in case her contact needed to speak to us.” She gestured to the room and gave Vax a feigned look of surprise. “And what do you know? Here we are, now waiting to speak to who I believe we can safely assume is her fucking contact...”

Vax shoved his hands into his jeans pockets and huffed. Vex was always good at remembering legalistic details like that. God, how her skills were being wasted...

“Well don’t fucking crucify me for not liking a situation that involves a lot of suits with guns.”

Vax noticed Percy nod and mumble something under his breath.

“What?” Vax barked.

Percy looked up at him, “I said I understand your concern...”

“Do you though?”

Percy furrowed his brow, seemingly confused and almost... offended? However, before he could properly respond, their discussion was interrupted by man who peeked his head into the room.

The formally dressed man gave the group a once-over before glancing down at a clipboard, “Tiberius Stormwind. If you could follow me.”

In a jumbled series of frantic movements, Tiberius stood up and brushed himself off with his one good hand before saluting everyone with a nod and following after the man, who shut the door behind him, leaving the group in silence once more.

“I guess we’ll see how things go then,” Percy simply said, giving Vax a stern look that revealed a little more than Vax understood.

“Everyone be honest, okay?” Vex cautioned, giving Scanlan a particularly scrutinizing look.

Scanlan simply gave her a wink and a finger gun.

Feeling defeated, Vax let out a deep sigh and took a seat beside Vex, gesturing her to turn away so he could rebraid her hair. No way in hell was she gonna give up her hairstyle on account of a broken
wrist; not on his watch.

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Fifteen minutes in, there was still no sign of Tiberius. Now, why they were taking so long, Vax had no fucking clue... It wasn’t like he was hiding any sort of crucial information, unless of course, they suddenly felt like his nationality had something to do with any of this shit...which was fucking stupid yes, but entirely plausible. Frankly, he wouldn't put past suits like these to discriminate, and the more he thought about it, the more he felt like they were all sinking deeper and deeper into the shitpool that was their lives.

However, just as Vax was about to bring it up to the others, his intent was quickly interrupted by the appearance of the same suited individual, who studied the room before glancing down at his clipboard.

“Vex’ahlia Jones.”

Vax felt his stomach curl in on itself and he instinctively grasped for Vex’s had, but she grabbed his first. With a half grin already curling on the side of her lips, she turned toward him and whispered softly.

“It’s okay. And no matter what...just be honest. Okay?”

She caressed his cheek and pinched it a little, much like their mother used to do, which prompted him to crack the smallest of smiles and mouth a very quiet “okay”. She then gently slapped him on the cheek once for good luck before standing up and commencing her signature prep. In a manner that was rather uncouth but aggressively Vex’ahlia, she adjusted her cleavage, hiked up her shorts and straightened her tights with her good hand before giving the man a bright smile. “Right then, lead the way.”

As his twin vanished behind the door with a flip of her freshly braided black hair, Vax closed his eyes and exhaled some of his pent up anxiety. This was fine. This was all going to be just fine. Funky fresh. They were probably sending back Tiberius right...about... now.

***

But he didn’t come back.

Vax and the others sat in almost complete silence for about twenty more minutes before the man in black showed up one more, this time calling for Scanlan. With Tiberius and Vex nowhere in sight, Vax felt like he was going to go berserk, but he knew he needed to keep his shit together, for his twin’s sake. Twenty more minutes passed before Percy was called forth, now leaving Vax and Grog alone in a room that only seemed to grow smaller with every casualty.

Sitting in chairs against different walls, their eyes remained fixated on the floor directly in front of them for what felt like the most awkward thirty seconds of Vax’s life. However, with his need for human interaction reaching its peak, he finally decided to rip his gaze away from the oh-so-very fascinating carpeted floor, finding Grog looking grimmer than he was used to seeing him.

“Hey big man,” Vax muttered, his voice louder than he’d intended in the silence.

Nothing in Grog seemed to budge except for his eyes, which looked stained and a little bloodshot. “Yeh?”

Vax leaned forward in his chair and stared him down intently. “Saw you throw my sister out of the
way of that truck.”

Grog’s forehead visibly wrinkled, staring Vax down for a few long, nervous seconds before speaking up. “Yeh…”

Vax bit down on his lower lip and simply nodded at him. “Thank you.”

Grog, however, didn’t say anything else in response, which gave Vax the impression that maybe it was best to change the subject before he had his face caved in.

He leaned back, resting his head against the wall and staring up at the slowly spinning ceiling fan. “So um... You looking forward to going back to work?”

Grog simply shrugged, and Vax realized he was now at a complete fucking loss for words, which wasn’t all that great of a tragedy because soon enough, the same suited individual appeared once more.

“Grog Strongjaw. If you could please follow me.”

Grog cracked his neck loudly before standing up and rolling his shoulders. He walked past Vax and gave him one last stern look before vanishing behind the door, leaving Vax in what was now a very quiet, very hollow room.

For a few seconds, Vax sat in the utter silence, embracing just how unsettling the room was with no other souls to keep him company. After rubbing his arms a few times, he soon realized he was holding his breath, and quickly exhaled a few words of wisdom.

“Fuck me sideways…”

He glanced around nervously, feeling more observed now than ever before. With no working phone to keep him company or offer him any sense of time, he had a feeling this was going to be an agonizing experience if he didn’t find something to do.

His eyes settled on the magazines in front of him. He’d never been the biggest fan of reading; he was more of a SparkNotes type of guy, but he wasn’t opposed to being up to date with shit.

He picked up the first magazine he could reach, which appeared to be the newest edition of “Science&You”, and he started to skim the headlines.

“Vasselheim’s New Archeological Find Halts Subway Construction Once Again.” He sighed and skipped a few pages forward. Too fucking boring.

“Whitestone Pharmaceuticals Proposes New Neuro Medication to be Tested on Select Patients.” He rolled his eyes and flipped a few more pages. Too fucking complicated...

“Kraghammer’s Water Supply Showing Trace Signs of Dangerous Chemicals? Citizens are Sceptical.”

Vax quirked a brow and promptly looked for the article, flipping past an obscene amount of garden furniture ads before finally finding the correct page.

“A Darkness Beneath the Mountain, by Dr. Kima Vord. -- After months of study, my findings seem to point toward the water supply of the little mountain city of Kraghammer, which I’ve hypothesized to be the culprit of the failing crop seasons. However, with no immediate signs of poor health in the city folk, they shun my research and are reluctant to put any blame on the mining industry that has
been the heart of Kraghammer for centuries. Although their skepticism is understandable, my experiences with other cases keeps my attention fixed on Kraghammer, and I dare not venture further until I find the source of this problem, lest we see another Byroden-

Vax slapped the magazine shut at the mention of his hometown and tossed it back onto the coffee table, causing it to slip and slide off the edge with a loud slapping sound. He threw his head back and closed his eyes.

He just wanted everything to go back to fucking normal, whatever the hell that was. All he knew for sure was that he wanted to see Pike and Keyleth healed and well. He wanted to finally give Gilmore a call. He wanted to go home. He wanted to see Trinket. He wanted to eat at Pho King. Hell, even work sounded better than this bullshit.

Still, he knew his shitty little wishes would never be granted, regardless of their simplicity, because he knew simplicity was a luxury reserved to the rich and privileged. Ever since birth, his life had been doomed to be complex in almost every facet, so it wasn’t like he expected things to ever get any fucking easier. Still, one could only dream...

He opened his eyes and stared down at his bandaged hands, now stained with the dampness of the newly mending wounds. He let out a sigh and chuckled to himself.

Healing was never pretty.

It took patience, and lots of it; he’d experienced enough physical and psychological healing in his life to know that little turd of wisdom. So perhaps, now more than ever, it was his spirits that needed healing. It wasn’t something that could be rushed, and he was by no means obliged to love the bullshit in between, but he could at the very least accept the fact that he’d get through it, one way or another. He’d healed from much bigger wounds before, and in much more unpleasant of places...

Vax flinched at the sound of a loud knock, and he wiped his attention toward the door. Swallowing hard, he sat straight as his eyes settled on the all too familiar man in black, who looked as inexpressive and hollow as usual.

“Vax’ildan Jones. Follow me.”

Chapter End Notes

Although I know Assum doesn’t actually show up until the stream starts, but I ultimately decided to give him an appearance early on for future narrative purposes that I won’t share just yet.

Bidet!
Chapter Summary

Last time, on The Butterfly Effect: The Vox Machina gang is confronted by Agent Assum Emring and transported to an unknown location in a armoured black van. There, as they wait in a quaint little waiting room, they are one by one called in to be interrogated, leaving Vax as the last one to be called in for questioning.

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings for this chapter in end notes

Hurray for a dialogue heavy chapter! Here is a little song to get you all in the mood. No doubt Scanlan is writing this up in his head as we speak:

“Party in the CIA”, by Weird Al: [YouTube link]

Disclaimer: Assum is not technically CIA.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Vax squinted before the sheer brightness of the perfectly cubicle room he'd been confined to. The chamber was quiet, devoid of any drafts, and whiter than Percy on one of his “bad days”. It had an all too familiar smell of bleach fuming off of it as if it had just been cleaned. The walls were white, the tiles were white, the desk and chair were white, and the light above him was so damn fucking white and bright that it just about made everything else look...whiter, if that was even perceptually possible.

In his all-black attire, Vax knew he definitely couldn't hide, though taking refuge under the desk in front of him would at the very least give him some relief from the oppressive light above. The place was clearly anti-vampire, and Vax suddenly felt a deep sense of grief in realizing that Percy likely didn't survive the ordeal...

Sitting with his arms crossed and his legs in a wide stance, Vax chewed incessantly on the inside of his cheek like a piece of gum, waiting for the chair directly across from him to be filled. No wonder each interrogation was taking so fucking long. With Assum needing to take a shit every session he wondered if they would pay the asshole overtime.

Rubbing his aching neck, he turned his head to his right and stared down his indignant reflection in the mirror he knew was a two-way situation. With nothing better to do with his time, he stood up, wandered up to the mirror, and started grooming himself, adjusting his various facial piercings, picking at his teeth and checking out his nose hairs that were growing in quite nicely. He still couldn't grow facial hair to save his damn life, though he tried to quell some of his dysphoria by rationalizing that it would look bad on him anyway.
After a few more minutes of grooming, Vax concluded that his mirror fuckery had probably gotten the attention he needed, because soon enough, a stern though composed looking Agent Assum Emring finally came through the door, holding what looked like a folder stuffed with documents.

Not wanting to cause more trouble than he could get away with, Vax politely took his seat back in his signature spread-out position, giving his junk ample room to breath in his black skinny jeans, which now had a few more rips than they’d originally had, not that he minded.

“Thank you for your patience,” Assum said, adjusting his black tie and taking a seat in front of Vax in an orderly, almost robotic fashion. “Know that this interview is being audio and video recorded and may be used in the court of law.”

Vax disguised his eye-roll with a quick glance around, though he was unable to identify any obvious cameras. Still, he didn’t doubt Assum’s claims. Vax’s line of work taught him that there were plenty of ways of concealing recording implements in bare rooms.

His attention settled back on the man who he’d had little time to truly study in detail. With the bright light now highlighting Assum’s figure like a beacon, Vax couldn’t help but notice just how peculiar the man looked.

His age was hard to place; he couldn't have been much older than thirty-five, but being so high up in his field, he imagined he was either older than he looked, or far more clever than he let on. In his left ear, it was clear he had an earpiece, though he was in no way trying to conceal it. His head tattoos were artful, but nothing he’d ever seen before. Vax himself only had one tattoo between his shoulder blades the Clasp very kindly branded him with, and he’d only given a few other tattoos, including the feather line art he’d given his sister beneath her ear that he intended on coloring in one day. But Assum’s tattoos...for some reason they were giving Vax pause. In a way, their placement was reminiscent of Grog’s gang tattoos, but even those were far less refined than Assum’s, which were almost tribal, though fresher than what Vax usually saw in tattoos that were cultural. All he could gather from them was that he was likely just another rich asshole who had the money to have them retouched more often than your average joe. Frankly, he was surprised he didn't cover them up considering his position, unless he was a private investigator or some shit, in which case etiquette could go right out the window, if there actually were any bloody windows...

Vax gave himself another look in the mirror, just to make sure his indignant expression was up to standards, before turning back toward Assum, who began to speak as he read off a crisp white document that looked freshly printed.

“Vax’ildan Jones, son of Elaina Jones and Syldor Vessar, born in Byroden and former resident of Syngorn. You’re a current resident in Westruun. No military service on record. You had a legal name change at age 18, both first and last names. Your sister Vex’ahlia Jones also had a legal name change but only had her last name changed. Is this all correct?”

Vax’s felt his upper lip twich, but he tried his best to not let the reminder bother him. Assum gave off serious asshole vibes, but at least the man had the decency to no deadname him. "Yes..."

Assum hummed a little before continuing. “Says here you were part of the Clasp between the ages of nineteen and twenty-one. Arrested for a lovely cornucopia of crimes including but not limited to breaking and entering, identity theft, computer fraud, creation and distribution of malware, carrying a concealed weapon, illegal possession of firearms, trade and possession of drugs, vandalism, and resisting arrest…” He simply quirked a brow and almost smiled entertained. “Interesting. You’ve lived quite the complicated life. Definitely the most decorated out of all of your friends. Perhaps not the most interesting, but certainly the most decorated by far...”
Vax squirmed uncomfortably in his seat, his gaze briefly darting toward the door before fixing back on Assum. “Where are the others?”

“Safe,” Assum said, now organizing a few papers in neat stacks on the desk. “You’ll be reunited with them soon, so long as you answer honestly and concisely.”

Vax lifted his chin, his heart beat fast in his neck and ears. “And if I don’t?”

Assum’s dark brown eyes did not lift from the papers as he answered. “Then this process will take longer and you won’t see them as soon as I told them.” He glanced up at him and smiled. “Surely, you don’t want them to worry? We do, after all, have a case to solve and a man to convict. I can’t imagine why you wouldn’t want to help with that...considering how badly he maimed your friends.”

Vax unruffled is feather’s slightly and tried to take a deep breath as he grounded himself in his chair. “Forgive me if I am uncomfortable with all of…” He waved his hands around. “This.”

Assum simply smiled.

“As you clearly know,” Vax continued. “My lovely ‘cornucopia’ of experiences has taught me that this usually means that I am in some sort of trouble.”

“Oh...” Assum’s smile did not change. “But you are in trouble.”

Vax felt a knot form in his throat, and his mouth flinched ever so slightly, though he tried to maintain a modicum of composure.

Assum seemed somewhat unphased in the light of Vax’s reaction. “But I surely don’t need to be the one to explain that to you.” He stared down at his papers and raised his brows with a sigh. “That being said, there are some people who are in more trouble than you are, and let’s just say that we are currently in a situation where careful triage is of the utmost importance.”

Vax briefly glanced at the mirror to his side, feeling watched. “What if I want a lawyer?”

Assum clicked his tongue, and stared up at the light with an almost pained expression. “Oh please spare me...Don’t get the government involved in this. They always manage to muck things up and drag a case out to an absolute crawl. I want this solved in days, not months.”

Fucking fantastic. That meant he was either private or corporate…neither option good news in Vax’s mind.

Assum glanced back at Vax and snickered ever so slightly. “Oh, and by the way, forgive my assumption, but judging from your records it’s safe to conclude that you can’t afford anything more than a government lawyer anyway.”

Vax ground his teeth behind a sealed pair of chapped lips. Sure, the fucker was right, but that didn’t mean Vax had to like it. He felt like he was being tricked; blackmailed even. He only wished he knew more about the law to know what was really going on. He really should have paid more attention to Tiberius’ rants back when he used to drive him to university.

“What shouldn’t I ask for a lawyer though?” Vax asked, hoping that Assum would at the very least acknowledge the absurdity of it all. “You do realize this all feels pretty fucking unlawful on far too many levels?”

Assum calmly rested his elbows on the table and steepled his fingers. “Laws are fluid in these walls, and it is that fluidity that is keeping you, Percy, and all of your other associates from being arrested
Vax’s nails dug into his leather jacket as he kept his arms crossed, his eyes narrowing at every new word that left Assum’s mouth.

“So…” Assum continued. “We can either do things your way; call a lawyer and follow the procedures adequate for a criminal of your level. Or…we can do things my way, so that we may all come out of this as winners.”

Vax wanted to respond. He wanted to spit in his eye. Flip him the double birds. Tell him to fuck off and call a lawyer just to waste his time. But he knew better...barely; just enough to bite down on his own tongue until his mind came up with something better to say.

Assum waited patiently, staring at Vax for what must have been at least fifteen seconds before leaning forward, his chin now resting on his steepled fingers as he spoke softly but briskly. “Listen Mr. Jones. Although you are probably accustomed to something different, I am not going to be playing good-cop bad-cop with you because I am not a cop. You do not have to hate me like a cop, nor should you feel comfortable around me like a cop. I am simply here to gather information and get ahead of the those who want to hurt other people. So rest assured, I am not your enemy. If anything, I am your saving grace. Be thankful that Allura spoke so highly of you, or we would be having a very different conversation right now.”

For a moment, Vax didn’t realize that he had been holding his breath the whole time, which was likely why he was feeling so damn light headed, though the pain meds and stress probably weren’t helping. In a desperate need for a breather, Vax closed his eyes and sighed for a moment. The whole situation was nerve-wracking to him because he almost felt like he believed this man, even though every last cell in his body expected a lie.

“Yes.”

“Very well then,” Assum said, his composure and politeness not breaking as he wrote down a few notes. “I suppose we should get started then.”

“I just…”

Assum hummed and glanced up at Vax, looking genuinely curious.

“I just don’t exactly know what you want from me. You seem to know everything about me already, and if you’ve questioned my friends as thoroughly as I expect, I’d think that you already know everything that I would be able to provide.”

Assum smiled at Vax with a look that almost seemed patronizing. “Everyone has secrets. I do, you do, you’re friends do; Secrets that you are not even aware of. Secrets that would likely shock you.”

Vax let a nervous chuckle slip. “I’ve known these people for years…”

Assum gave him an exaggerated “are you sure?” look.

“Well... most of them.”

“And therefore you are certain you know them all as well as you’d like to believe? Would you bet money on it?”
Vax’s mouth hovered in a state of pause for a few seconds before Assum interrupted him.

“Didn’t think so. Either way, I don’t think we should waste any more time. I’m simply expressing a truth, just as much as I’d expect you to speak the truth. I’d be a hypocrite otherwise.”

Vax closed his eyes once more, praying to whatever greater power that had cursed him to please cease and desist this patience test he was being forced to endure. “Alright…” He ran one of his bandaged hands through his glossy black hair and flipped it over one shoulder. “What do you want to know?”

“Well,” Assum said, sliding a picture forward to reveal a mugshot of a scrawny redhaired young man Vax recognized as the one who had crashed the truck into them. “Unfortunately, the man who was assigned the task of killing you has been rather uncooperative despite our more… intensive strategies. I hope you will be easier to persuade.”

Vax quirked a brow. “I rather stay away from any “intensive strategies” if at all possible.”

“Understandable,” Assume said rather matter-of-factly. “Now. Have you ever seen this man before?”

“No.”

“You are certain? No previous encounters? Even fleeting ones?”

“I don’t have the best memory but I feel like I would have noticed him before. He’s young and reminds me of a janitor in high school. It would have stood out to me.”

“Though you don’t believe this is the same person?”

“No. I’m still in touch with them and they have a mohawk and are much older now.”

“Alright,” Assum said, reading off from the documents. “Your sister mentioned ‘texts’. Would you like to elaborate on that?”

Vax figured Assum had likely already received an explanation, but he tried his best to recall everything he remembered, given the fact that his phone was busted up beyond repair and he currently couldn’t retrieve any of the information. He mentioned everything, including the bribe, and their claim to fighting a cyberwar, and the request to leave Emon immediately.

“Jurazel...Interesting,” Assum muttered, writing down some notes. “If you are willing to give up your phone, we can likely retrieve some if not all of the data, and then return a USB copy to you along with the rest of the phone.”

The offer sounded appealing, though Vax needed to run a mental log of whether he had anything incriminating on there.

“We would provide you with a small check for your time and resources…” Assum added, in a clear attempt to sweeten the deal.

Needless to say, the mention of money attracted Vax’s attention, though he still felt quite suspicious on the matter. For all he knew, this man could be Jurazel. But then again, why they were not dead in an alley did somewhat debunk his theory on the matter... Besides, he wasn’t a stranger to making stupid gambles in the past, and his phone was no good to him in its current state anyway.

“When would I receive this check?”
“The moment you handed over your phone,” Assum said, his expression stoic and his palm slowly opening as if expecting the phone in that very instant.

Vax quirked a brow, staring down at his phone for a long while, before sighing out the words “fuck it” and sliding it into Assum’s reach, who quickly pocketed it.

Almost immediately, the door to the chamber flew open, causing Vax to flinch in his seat as a tall, bald woman in a black suit slid something in front of Vax before disappearing behind the door and closing it behind her.

Vax slowly glanced down and blinked away his disbelief at the sight of a one-hundred and twenty-four dollar check staring right back up at him, just waiting to be endorsed. The rich motherfucker...

“Your cooperation is both recognized and rewarded,” Assum said with a smile. “Now, let us continue, shall we?”

“Yeah, of course…” Vax licked his lips before pocketing the check on the inside of his leather jacket.

“I’m going to ask you to please describe your day from when you woke up to when we met. Leave out no details even if you believe them to be unimportant.”

Vax pursed his lips and shrugged, feeling his the request to be odd but not impossible to comply with. Besides, maybe if he behaved he’d get another fat check. He scooted a little closer with his chair and began to recount his day. He made sure to tell him about everything from dreams to bowel movements, and of course, didn’t fail to mention the message he had received from Jurazel that morning, to which Assum promptly stopped him mid-sentence.

“What is your relationship with your twin sister?”

Vax quirked his brow at the question that felt like it had come completely out of nowhere. “We are extremely close. We share everything with each other.”

“So why didn’t you tell her about this new text?”

“I…” Vax blinked.

“Although your sister informed me about the previous texts, she did not mention you receiving any texts this morning.”

“She...may have…” Vax stopped himself, remembering that he needed to stay honest. “No, you’re correct. I didn’t tell her.”

“If your relationship is truly that close, then why hide such important and relevant information from her? Unless, of course, your description of your relationship with her is inaccurate.” Assum’s dark eyes began to dart across Vax’s face and body. “Judging from your posture and the way you carry yourself beside her, the distance at which you follow her around, the way you glare at those who approach her, the manner in which you grasped her hand the moment it was her turn to be questioned, and your immediate concern to know where your friends were, this behavior is less so indicative of a closeness and more of a...dare I say, obsession?

Vax’s brow twitched and Assum continued.

“Yes I agree, obsession is a strong word, though not entirely unfounded. I should specify that you are obsessed not so much with her but with this overwhelming need to protect her, perhaps founded
in the underlying guilt you harbor deep inside but do not dare address; the inability to accept that you once failed to protect her.”

His eyes now wielding daggers, Vax leaned back in his seat, amazed by Assum’s deductions but unwilling to give away his bewilderment. Now he was certain there were fucking cameras in that waiting room.

“Though you may correct me if I’m wrong…”

Vex’s words resonated in Vax’s mind once again. Be honest, she cautioned. He couldn’t let her down now. “No, you’re right. I am overprotective. But recently I’ve been trying to give her more space. Especially during this trip.”

“Interesting…”

Vax leaned back slightly, “Why?”

“It’s interesting because your sister mentioned the same exact thing. About how she wanted to give you more space. Any reason as to why that may be? What changed?”

Vax smirked slightly, growing more and more amused by the fucker. He’d only now begun to understand his strategy; why he’d been picked last out of all of his friends. He’d been picked fucking last because Assum wanted to see if he was a liar. This motherfucker had fact-checked him though his friends just to cover all of his bases, and now this was the test.

Thank the proverbial gods that Vex had read this guy so quickly. She guessed what Assum was planning from a mile away, and she had made sure her dumbass brother wouldn’t fuck things up. What would he do without her?

With a small sigh, Vax glanced up to Assum, “Well we’d… Had a bit of a disagreement on the way here.”

“Do elaborate.”

“I didn’t want her to worry about me. She’d been worrying about me a lot as of late and that isn’t her concern.”

“A hypocritical belief but carry on.”

Vax ran both hands through his now greasy black hair and stared up at the ceiling, spiritually preparing to recount the bullshit that he really didn’t want to bring up anymore. With a quick stretch of the neck, he stared back down at Assum and braided his fingers on the desk. “While we were driving to Emon, we stopped at a diner. I was separated from my group when I went to go grab Pike’s wallet from the van and that is when the Clasp approached me.”

Assum hummed. “Vex’ahlia told me you had had dealings with the Clasp on the way here but she couldn’t give me specifics on what was said since you gave her none.”

“There were no dealings. It was a conversation.”

“Yes. Forgive my inaccuracy. Did you recognize any of these people?”

“Yeah, shit…” Vax groaned, rubbing his eyes. “Modeth, for starters, my old… superior. Couldn’t really see the faces of the others.”
Assum’s eyes grew wide for a moment, and Vax’s brow quirked at his odd reaction, horrified that he’d fucked shit up.

“What’s wrong?”

“Modeth?” Assum asked, now jotting down a few notes.

Clearly, Assum was onto something, but fuck if Vax new what. He certainly wasn't gonna try to guess right now. “Yes, Modeth.”

“If my memory serves me right Modeth was released a year before you, pardoned with some -- forgive my french -- legal bullshit excuse...” Assum let out the smallest hint of a chuckle. “Needless to say, I found the decision to be a grave mistake, and it seems as though I was correct.”

He had a good memory. Disturbingly so. Could he recall every criminal on record?

“Well,” Vax crossed his arms. “I guess you were right. Because they wanted my help for something. And something bad I’m guessing, knowing them. So, of course, I refused immediately.”

“What was it they wanted?”

“Well that’s the thing... weren’t exactly clear, you know? They simply told me they wanted me to make connections at the Cloudtop. They knew we were going to Emon and they were apparently going there themselves. Guess they’d been keeping an eye on us for a while now. I found it very odd that they were interested in someplace like the Cloudtop. We’d never aimed that high before; not when I was there.” Vax cleared his throat as he continued. “But honestly, I didn’t really think about all of that at the time. I was more preoccupied by their reaction to my rejection and how they seemed intent on either cutting me or our van’s tires. Thankfully Pike came around and ran them off.” Vax concealed a smile with his hand, “The lil’Monstah, love her.”

“And they didn’t mention anyone else. Any new boss?”

“Honestly, I got the impression that Modeth was running things.” He closed his eyes and rubbed them. He just wanted this damn interrogation to be over. “Look Mr. Emring; the only way that you’re gonna get any proof is if you catch them in the act. At this point, it’s my word against theirs, and they are one big fucking bunch.”

“Oh, do not worry Mr. Jones,” he said, gathering up all of his papers and slipping them into a folder. “We have our ways.”

Rather suddenly, with no prompt or indication that the interrogation was over, Assum stood up, pushed in his chair, adjusted his suit, and walked to the door from where he had entered.

With a slight tilt of his head and a wrinkled brow, Vax observed Assum open the door and beckon him into the hallway. “Your interview is over. You may join your friends where we will soon take you to a safe new hotel. Your belongings have all already been collected and moved to your rooms.”

And that’s when it happened. Vax’s jaw dropped ever so slightly and he simply stared, not sure if he needed to be annoyed, angry, or fucking relieved. Instead, he just sat there like he’d smoked himself into a daze for what must have been apparently way too long, because Assum then began to...laugh.

“You’ve given us a lead that probably would have taken us at least a couple of days to track down. Take solace in that. Now come now. I have work to do and your friends are waiting for you.”

Vax wasn’t exactly sure what his life had become, but one thing was for certain: This was officially
the weirdest fucking weekend that he’d ever experienced, and that was saying a lot, considering he
once spent an entire weekend pretending to be someone’s estranged cousin to get their credit card
number…

Accepting the chaos that had seemed to invade his life, Vax slicked back his hair, stood up, and
joined Assum down the long hallway.

Soon enough, they stopped in in front of another boring wooden door with an arbitrary number 25
on it. Vax could hear some muffled laughter on the other side, and the smallest of smiles cracked on
his lips.

As Assum opened the door -- revealing a nearly identical waiting room to the previous one -- Vax
saw his sister gasp and shove Scanlan out of the way as she ran toward him, before giving him one
tight, one-armed hug.

Chapter End Notes

Content Warnings:
Brief mention of dysphoria, brief mention of deadnaming.

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I feel like Seeker Assum is one of the most underappreciated NPCs Matt has created. He
gets very little attention from the fandom and yet it is clear to me that Matt put a lot of
work into his creation, so much so that there is even a small entry about him in the
Campaign Guide, though I won’t spoil what that entry says here. By the way, to build
his personality in this fic, I definitely gathered inspiration from the characters Varys from
Game of Thrones, and Mycroft from Sherlock.

As for Vax, I am pleased with his character development this chapter, and hope you
enjoyed it as well. I was a little nervous about releasing the truths about his past (and
him being transgender), but I ultimately felt it was right to do so now, since it made
sense with the current narrative. Vax has always been trans in my head in this fic,
though I wasn’t sure if it would ever come up, but it ultimately did.
Chapter Summary

Last time, on The Butterfly Effect: After the violent truck attack in Emon, the party is gathered for questioning by Agent Assum. Vax is interrogated last, and after a very long and tense conversation, he is released and thanked for his cooperation, and Assum informs him that they may have a lead on who sent the truck. With that, Vax is reunited with his party.

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings for this chapter in end notes.

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Hope you all like the direction I went with Scanlan. Also, I sort of weaseled in some more world building/lore stuff, so if any of you find that confusing, don’t worry. It will get cleared up as the story moves forward.

But anyway... Scanlan’s point of view... here goes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Vax came moseying through the door with that roguish signature grin of his, Scanlan was pretty damn sure he’d just lost his bet to Grog. Not that it was necessarily a problem per se, considering he’d wagered Vax was gonna go to jail… It was a win-win situation either way.

Besides, ten goldies weren’t something Scanlan was going to miss, especially given his most recent fatty paycheck from the Cloudfop. Sure, he could have made do without all the death and destruction that followed… but hey -- it wasn’t anything he wasn’t already accustomed to. It was just another day in the life of Scanlan Shorthalt: A man running on three hours of sleep, enough morphine in his blood to sedate a horse, and with yet another debt in his name; granted, a debt he could actually afford to pay off this time around.

He was -- however -- going to need change... considering he only had a fifty and four ones in his wallet. It was probably a detail he should have considered before making the offer to his seven-foot, ex-bruiser travel partner, who was currently looming over him expectantly.

Scanlan glanced up and grinned nervously. “Got change for a fifty…?”

Grog’s nostrils flared and his brow wrinkled, displaying that signature thinking face of his that looked like constipation to the untrained eye.

Scanlan licked his lower lip. “You know... Like two twenties; or a twenty and two tens; or two tens and four fives….”

Grog grunted, pressing a finger into the center of Scanlan’s chest, “Just pay me later. I know where you live anyway.”
Scanlan let out a sigh, patting Grog on his beefy arm with his good hand before turning his attention toward Vex, who was currently giving him the smelliest stink-eye he’d received in a long time; she was probably well aware of the wager he’d made on Vax, so her upset was understandable; he’d sort of made betting on Vax’s life decisions a sport by this point.

So consequently, he couldn't really blame her when she elbowed him out of the way to greet her brother. Scanlan knew he sort of deserved it. Though she could have at least remembered that he had a freshly broken collar bone... That would have been nice. Polite even. But then again, Scanlan wasn't entirely sure whether “polite” existed in Vex’s vocabulary. If anything, he was disappointed that she didn’t understand that in all his jests, he still appreciated Vax immensely; probably more so than anyone else in the group at this point. The man had, after all, pushed him out of the way of that horrid machine, which wasn’t something he’d soon forget. So no matter what Vex thought, Scanlan didn’t want to see Vax go. Not permanently, at least... Though he privately imagined a little more jail time would do him some good.

The group’s reunion was a simple one, if one could consider the chaotic chatter orgy that transpired “simple”. It was as if he’d been locked in a room with a bunch of sea lions, all barking away as if this were the only chance they’d ever get to speak to each other for the rest of their lives. For a solid five, or maybe ten minutes, the group discussed their interrogation experience, recounting every question Agent Assum had asked them, desperately trying to figure out whether anyone had somehow slipped up. Scanlan simply leaned against the wall, supporting his arm to take the pressure off his broken collarbone. He didn’t have all that much to say, as most of the questions Assum had asked him felt pretty unimportant, and frankly, somewhat random.

He was asked if he’d been in touch with any of his old bandmates, which he, of course, had not; he asked whether Scanlan knew of any musical competitors, which he also knew nothing about because... let’s be real now, no one bothered competing with Scanlan anymore. He was also asked whether he had any groupies of fans that he couldn't shake, which Scanlan instinctively wanted to answer with an "absolutely", but ultimately denied. Realistically speaking, he hadn’t really had any crazy fans wanting to sit on his cube since he was in his thirties...

The only people he could really call “groupies” were his traveling companions, who followed him around like flies to honey... Which he wasn’t gonna hold against them, because he knew from personal experience that some people just couldn't help but gravitate toward the awesome power of Scanlan Shorthalt.

Either that, or they somehow felt like he owed them or some shit, which he of course didn’t! In fact, most of the time they owed him money; not that he could really hold that against them either... They were just kids after all, and he remembered what it was like to be poor and their age. Hell, he was still pretty fucking poor, but at least hanging out with them made him feel a little better about his financial situation.

Anyway, Assum went on to ask a fuck ton of question about Vax, (surprise surprise) which he sure as hell didn’t answer honestly because frankly, he couldn’t even if he wanted to. He hadn’t exactly been paying much attention to what any of his compatriots were actually doing, or at least, not over the last few days. To be honest, he didn’t exactly listen to them unless they addressed him specifically. And it wasn't even out of spite! (Most of the time). He just had more important things to do... like practice his performance in his head over and over again, or listen to his works in progress, or you know...worry about the unconscious love of his life. Besides, even if he wanted to pay more attention, it wasn't like it was gonna be easy, what with all the sleep deprivation, and alcohol, and cocaine, and hospital painkillers...

And sure, it wasn't like it was a bad thing that everyone was so temporarily overjoyed. He
just...really didn't give a shit. Speaking of which, he really needed to take a shit.

“I don’t really know what we’re expected to do now,” Vex said, speaking up above the others.

“I just wanna get the fuck out of here and go back to the hospital,” Vax said, “I’m worried about Pike and Keyleth.”

“Perhaps we need to complete some paperwork before they can release us,” Tiberius added.

“Fucking ‘ell,” Grog groaned, rolling his eyes. “Don’t jinx us.”

Scanlan couldn’t agree more. The last thing he wanted to do was deal with more legal drama. He was a fan of the hospital idea, though whether his compatriots would successfully come up with a solid plan was wishful thinking at best. They were nothing more than a big bunch of disorganized, barely employed, perennially high, draft dodgers. Though it’s not like he had the right to expect any better from a group he’d picked up in Stilben, and followed to Westruun...

The only reason anyone ever moved to Westruun anymore was to avoid the mandatory years of military service that all the other city-states demanded as a residency requirement. The tastefully ironic cherry on top was that the only person in their group who was an original resident of Westruun was Pike, and she was actually part of Westruun's reserves as a field medic even though she wasn’t legally obligated to join. But that’s just how Pike worked. She was determined, hard-working, and ready to help people at a moment’s notice. It was probably why she was the only competent adult in their posse, which also explained why they were doing so poorly without her.

No one came close to Pike when it came to her perfection. Sure, Scanlan had once-upon-a-time been part of his hometown reserves, but that was such a long time ago that he barely even remembered his training, or at least... he pretended not to. And yes, Tiberius had technically also completed his reserve training in Draconia as an air-force office rat or something, but it’s not like Scanlan gave a damn about Tiberius. Again, Tibs’ participation in the reverses had been mandatory; same with Scanlan. Pike on the other hand, was a perfect little angel of courage, beauty, and perseverance, and the only fucking person who knew how to get things moving around here. If they didn’t get a move on soon, there was a good chance they’d lose their opportunity to even see Pike that evening, and Scanlan wasn’t sure if he could wait another day.

In fact, he was very much tempted to take a stroll down the hallway to see if he could hunt down any of the suits, but before he could complete the thought, the door to their little cubicle waiting room cracked open, revealing the slightly flustered, though smiling visage of Allura Vysoren.

The room went quiet, but only for as long as it took Tiberius to realize Allura had entered the room.

“Ms. Vysoren!” He exclaimed.

“Oh poppycock! It is lovely to see you once again. You cannot imagine our relief!”

Clearly, Tiberius couldn't imagine anyone else’s relief either... because judging from the looks of the others, nobody else seemed all that pleased to see Allura, and Scanlan had a pretty good idea why.

“I heard the good news,” Allura said, smiling at Tiberius. “Assum told me everything.”

“Define everything,” Vax snapped, his arms crossed and his tone of voice inching toward irritated.

Percy let out a deep sigh in response to Vax’s attitude -- which incidentally -- reminded Scanlan that
“Perseus” was indeed still with them. The kid could be so damn quiet, and honestly, it was a little off-putting at times. In fact, practically everything about Percy was just a little off-key. Scanlan hadn’t exactly had the heart to mention it to the others, but given the little time he’d spent with the kid — which granted wasn’t all that long — he felt like Percy was hiding something, though what that was exactly, he couldn’t tell. All he knew was that Percy sort of reminded him of this one old band mate of his — what’s-his-face. Bane. Or maybe it was Ben? Whatever. The poor son-of-a-bitch ended up getting hospitalized for a drug-induced psychotic break, which involved a gun and a bunch of dead fish in an aquarium. Granted it was hilarious at the time, but maybe not so funny in hindsight.

Not that Percy was necessarily going to fall into a drug-induced homicidal spree but… Well, to keep things frank, Scanlan wouldn’t have been all too surprised if it did end up happening; that’s all. He didn’t even think it was that big of a deal, but he knew if he dared suggest the possibility to anyone, he’d never hear the end of it. They’d all give him hell for shitting on their favorite new adopted suspicious homeless person, and Scanlan would have to drown out their complaints with cheap boxed wine and some old 70s funk.

Besides, he had bigger things to worry about, like the fact that Vax was in the middle of trying to get arrested again with his snappy behavior toward a woman who clearly had more power than anyone else in the room.

As Allura’s gaze met Vax’s, her smile wavered slightly, and silence settled in the room once again. Tiberius looked like he was about to hyperventilate, glancing at his compatriots like he’d been betrayed, and staring at Allura with apologetic eyes as a string of incomprehensible utterances began to roll out of his lips.

Realizing the conversation was growing sour fast, Scanlan resigned himself to the idea that now was probably a good time to speak up. With the quick smoothing of his shirt and a clearing of his throat, he put on his best signature grin. “Look Ms. Vysoren… I don’t think my compatriots feel comfortable expressing their feelings in full — so if I may, I’d like to share an honest opinion on their behalf.”

Allura tilted her head in curiosity, as did the others. “Of course, go right ahead.”

Scanlan’s brown eyes remained wide and his grin stretched even wider. “We were all pretty sure we were gonna motherf*ckin die.”

“Scanlan Shorthalt!” Tiberius shouted, before quickly covering his mouth.

Allura eyes widened at Scanlan’s bluntness, though it wasn’t something he would concern himself with. It wasn’t the first time he’d left a woman speechless with his quick tongue.

Indeed, sure enough, after that brief moment of communal breathlessness, Allura covered her mouth and started to laugh loudly.

Everyone else nervously chuckled away their relief, and Allura spoke up after wiping a tear from her eye. “Oh dear… Well I can’t say I blame you.” She turned to the rest and smiled. “I do apologize for this whole mess. It’s a situation I wish we could have all avoided, but at least things seem to be going in the right direction. Assum has informed me they now have a lead.”

“They think they know who did this?” Percy asked.

“That he did not say,” Allura said. “I don’t want to be one to assume.”

Of course. Never assume the behaviors of Assum. He masked a chuckle with a cough as he realized the fantastic pun, mentally kicking himself for not noticing it sooner and using it on Assum when he
had the chance. He really was off his game.

"But they do have a lead," Allura continued.

“So what happens now?” Vex asked.

Allura relaxed her shoulders with a sigh. “Well, you now have a driver at your disposal that will transport you wherever you need to go. For now, they suggest you not use your van until the dust in the air has settled.”

Vex turned to the others, clasping her bandaged wrist. “Guys. I know it’s been a really long fucking day but...I just want to see how Pike is doing.”

Grog took a step forward, “Yeh, me too.”

“And Keyleth probably needs someone to keep her company while she comes down from her pain meds...” Percy muttered.

Vex turned to Vax, “If you don’t mind Vax, I think we’ll stay at the hospital for a bit Ms. Vysoren.”

“I don’t mind staying there either,” Vax said, rubbing his sister’s arm.

“Well I suppose we have a consensus then,” Tiberius spoke up, giving Allura a nod, “Both Pike and Keyleth could use the moral support. We shall not abandon them.”

Scanlan let out a deep sigh. Again, he had absolutely nothing against going to the hospital. In fact, he desperately needed it for his own sanity. It just would had been great to express that himself instead of everyone else coming to a consensus without him. He didn’t exactly know why they systematically forgot about him. Part of him wanted to believe it was because they all knew him so well and simply assumed his desires, but realistically speaking, it was probably because he was short and they just didn’t see him. Out of sight, out of mind, he imagined.

“Very well,” Allura said. “We can leave when you're ready then, unless you have any more questions.”

“Not really-” Vex barely uttered before being interrupted by her brother.

“I’m sorry but, who the fuck was that agent?”

“Oh,” Allura said, snickering slightly. “That is my dear friend and colleague, Agent Assum Emring. We have worked together at the Cloudtop Center for many years. He is by far the most talented and reliable in his field. And he is also my main contact.”

Vax slowly rolled his eyes as he crossed his arms, and Scanlan couldn't help but take a little pleasure in the show that was Vax’ildan. The man was honestly one of his favorite people to watch, because he was just so damn dramatic in his reactions and mannerism. Frankly, it made for great inspiration when thinking up of character ideas for musical theater skits.

Meanwhile, Allura didn’t seem all that phased by Vax’s behavior. Instead, she glanced around and leaned forward a little, whispering. “Assum is also one who practices a little more flexibility when interpreting the law...So I trusted he wouldn't get you in trouble.”

Vax simply snorted, but did not waver from his indignant pose.
Scanlan agreed with Vax’s apparent feelings on the matter and decided to speak up for his edgy compatriot, “Would have been nice to know.”

Allura cringed a little, looking genuinely embarrassed by the situation. “Oh I know. When I first told him about your involvement with the Cloudtop hacking scandal, he was initially quite comfortable with leaving your identities anonymous for this investigation. However, after the attack, he realized that he needed to speak with you all in person, though he didn’t want me to share any of this information with you until after he asked his questions. And he explicitly told me to not tell any of you that you were innocent.”

Scanlan’s eyes widened, and with a grin, he pointed at Allura, “Now that is fucked up.”

“I know,” Allura quirked a nervous smile. “Agent Assum is an odd man but his techniques catch a lot of bad people...”

Scanlan let out a heavy sigh, as did the others.

“It’s quite alright,” Tiberius said, walking up to her with a smile. “You did what you needed to do.”

She took his hands and gave them a pat, causing his ruddy cheeks to redden further. “I hope you can forgive me.”

“B-but of course,” Tiberius cleared his throat one too many times before looking down at his feet bashfully.

“It’s alright...” Vex agreed, sounding quite exasperated by this point, albeit relieved. “We’re all just incredibly tired. All we want to do is see our friends again.”

For once Scanlan found himself agreeing with Vex. It wasn’t that he disliked the lady twin. He didn’t exactly “dislike” any one of his traveling companions. He just found her slightly more abrasive than the rest, especially when she gave him shit for his personal life choices. I wasn’t as though she and Vax had their lives together any more than he did; much worse, in fact. Not to mention she constantly demanded money from him that she dare not ask from anyone else. The damn money pincher... Probably spent it all feeding that mangy bear she called a dog. The woman had a problem. He knew she did. No one could possibly be that stingy and be mentally stable.

“Right,” Allura said. “In that case, follow me.”

With that, Allura lead Scanlan and his groupies down the hall, into the elevator, and through the underground parking lot where a rather nondescript looking black van was waiting for them. Scanlan would have assumed it was the same van that had brought them there, had it not been for the fact that its license plate didn’t have an S in it, and Scanlan loved the letter “S”. All things that were good started with “S”.

As they approached the van, he noticed that a couple of guards in black suits were already waiting for them.

“If you don’t mind,” Allura said, before getting into the back of the van. “I’ll actually be joining you. I have a few more technical matters I’d like to discuss with you, and I would like to know if your friends are alright, even though I’ve known them only shortly.”

Vax turned to Vex for a moment before nodding, “Yeah, no problem.”

As the others nodded in agreement, they all entered the van one by one, accompanied by the rhythmic sound of their tired feet stepping onto the metal steps, with Scanlan taking the rear... Just
the way he liked it.

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A nurse stepped out into the hallway and wrinkled her nose and she read off her clipboard. “Vox Machina?”

Vex turned to Scanlan and hissed at him, “You seriously signed us up with the name of our fucking van?”

“Well I wasn’t gonna put “Jones” on there. That’s so fucking basic, I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, thanks a lot Scanlan,” Vex scoffed, leaning her shoulder against her brother. “Could have at least put Shorthalt…”

Scanlan didn’t know why Vex was being such a brat about his name choice. She’d more than once highlighted how much she liked the sound of the van’s new name, though in hindsight, it was probably because she was just happy he’d painted over its previous name. For months she had begged Scanlan to change “The S.H.I.T.S” to something more palpable. To be fair, Keyleth was making a pretty big fuss about it too, but that was before she started smoking a lot of pot. She’d since then become a lot more low-maintenance.

“That’s us,” Scanlan spoke up, maintaining a pleasant smile on his lips as he ignored Vex’s scowling.

The nurse quickly scanned the group. “You may see Pike Trickfoot now, though I’d ask you to please to enter no more than three at a time. It’s the hospital’s protocol for cases like this…”

The group exchanged a few nervous glances with each other, reluctant to volunteer, though it was unclear to Scanlan whether their behavior was out of chivalry or fear; not that those two possibilities were necessarily mutually exclusive.

Realizing he probably needed to speak up before they all hesitated away their visiting hours, Scanlan spoke up. “Why don’t you two go first?” He said, nodding at Vax and Vex. “I’ll go with Grog last. We’re probably gonna take the longest anyway.”

Grog didn’t respond, though he didn’t disagree either. He simply stood solemnly with his arms crossed as he listened to the conversation with the same look on his face that often scared small children, but that Scanlan recognized simply as his ‘confused’ face.

Vax and Vex exchanged a quick look with each other that could only be psychic twin communication, before they both stood up, locked arms, and slowly followed the nurse into the brightly lit hallway.

Everyone else became deathly quiet, which was in no way conducive to a worry-free environment. Even Tiberius had gone silent in the wake of the twins’ departure, which was remarkable considering he’d taken a seat right next to Allura. Percy was busy staring down at his phone like an awkward teen at a party, and Grog looked like he was thinking again, so it was best he not be interrupted. Scanlan however, was not doing well. With the pervasive silence offering no auditory distractions, there was plenty of vacant space for Scanlan’s darker memories of that morning to propagate and grow loud.

Very loud. Louder still. And yet somehow, there was still one memory that resonated louder than the rest:
A shrill, cutting, discordant sound, reminiscent of a scream, or perhaps the breaks of an enormous vehicle, though which of the two it may have been, he did not know, nor did he want to know... It was a sound he knew would keep him up at night in a cold sweat, though at this point, the thought of sleep seemed trivial. It wasn’t something he’d attempt anytime soon anyway.

Things only got grimmer when Vex and Vax walked out of the room, looking like they had both just had a very messy cry. At that point, Scanlan knew he needed to get out of there before he lost his mind. As Percy, Tiberius, and Allura followed the nurse, Scanlan dug through Grog’s backpack for his iPod and headphones, and retreated to the closest restroom. There, in the privacy of the furthest stall in the men’s bathroom, he rested his rear on the cold seat of the toilet, slipped the earphones over his ears, rested his face in his hand, and relieved his anxiety to the tunes of one of his favourite songs, namely the cover he had written for Pike so long ago.

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When Scanlan jogged his way back to the others, Percy, Tiberius, and Allura had just reunited with the group. In the light of their most recent visit, Percy didn’t seem all that unfazed, though Allura was clearly trying to console Tiberius with soft words that Scanlan couldn’t hear.

As Scanlan walked up to Grog, he pat him on the arm. “Oi. You ready big guy?”

Grog simply nodded, taking point as the nurse led them down a hall to a heavy door.

She then turned to look at the two. “Your friend is stable, but her condition is severe. We’ve put her in a medically induced coma so she may recover from the head trauma.”

Scanlan simply nodded with a smile, but only because he knew he had to; for Pike’s sake. As the nurse opened the door and ushered them inside, the first thing that caught Scanlan’s ear was the soft beeping sound that was so reminiscent of his youth spent visiting irresponsible friends in hospitals. As the sound fully registered in his mind, he felt a rush of uncomfortable warmth crawl down his neck and into his gut, sending a shiver down his spine.

Grog, who was still deathly quiet, walked forward and took vigil by the foot of the bed, now revealing to Scanlan the full extent of Pike’s state.

Lying propped up under starch-white bed sheets, her image was surreal in the neon white light. Her neck was currently in a brace, keeping her head facing forward. Her blushed and dewy face was hooked up to an oxygen mask, with a resting expression that was both so peaceful yet so haggard. Her right side -- though glistening with moisture -- was mostly put together, save for her black and purple hair that was now uncombed and frazzled. The left side of her, however, was another story. Swollen and bruised, bandages covered most of her left side, as well as one eye. On the same side, one half of her head was completely shaved, and it seemed as though she had received a myriad of stitches. Her left arm was also in a cast, now laid to rest above the bleached white sheets.

Scanlan took a few hesitant steps forward before the nurse spoke up. “You may both take a seat if you’d lik-”

“I’ll stand,” Grog snapped, holding his position at the foot of the bed with his arms crossed and his expression hardened by the scene.

The nurse simply nodded, speaking softly, “I’ll leave you two alone for a few moments.”
With that, the nurse ducked behind the same door they had entered, now leaving the three alone in that lonely, sterile silence that was only alleviated the soft mechanical beeping, and the even softer sound of slow, labored breathing.

Scanlan respected the silence for a few more moments, glancing at Grog for good measure before taking one of the two seats beside the side of the bed. As he settled down, he leaned in a little and whispered. “Pike…” He forced a smile.

There was no detectable response from Pike. The bright light above created deep shadows around her sunken eyes, and beneath the oxygen mask, Scanlan could see that her lips were now purple, horribly swollen, and cracking at the seams.

Scanlan closed his eyes and took a deep breath in a desperate attempt to keep his image together. He couldn’t break down now. Not with Grog there. Opening his eyes, he exhaled cheerfully and scooted in a little closer, braiding his fingers before continuing. “Pikey…” He smiled again. “I know you probably can’t hear me, and you definitely don’t care but…” He rested his chin on his braided hands. “I still think you look really beautiful. You’ll always be beautiful. So don’t feel bad.”

He heard Grog snort, but he didn’t bother giving him any sort of attention this time. He was too focused on the hope that Pike would miraculously wake up with his healing words and throw herself into his arms. Alas, one could only hope. He waited another moment longer, observing her chest rise and fall which each breath. It comforted him, but only slightly.

“Pike…” Grog suddenly spoke up, his voice deep and almost loud in the relative silence. He was now staring down at her blue scarf in his large hand. “So um…” He swallowed once. “I been savin’ this for you. I know you really care about it, and I wanted to make sure these fucks didn’t lose it. It has a lil’ blood on it so I think I’ll keep it so I can wash it. That way you can ‘ave it all clean when you wake up.”

The two of them waited in silence, fully aware that Pike probably wasn’t going to answer.

“That’s very nice of you Grog,” Scanlan eventually said, wiping a tear from his eye with a smile. “But you know blood stains are really hard to get out of light clothing…”

Grog cringed a little, leaning in toward Scanlan to whisper, “Yeh about that... you don’t think maybe you could ‘elp me out with this?”

“I’ll try my best…” He smirked. “And you know what? Worst case scenario, we can buy her a new one.”

“But she’s ‘ad this one forever.”

“If she notices a difference we’ll just deny it and tell her the surgery must have just messed with her memory.”

Grog furrowed his brow, as if picking up on the blatant moral deviousness of what Scanlan was implying. Alas, the thought didn’t last long, and he ultimately shrugged. “Sounds like a good plan C.”

“Wait, what was plan B?”

Grog expression hardened further, exchanging an irritated whisper with Scanlan. “I don’t fuckin’ know! I thought you were keepin’ track? You know I’m no good at this numbers stuff…”

“Yeah,” Scanlan snorted. “You’re right Grog. Silly me…”
The two of them glanced back at Pike, sighing in unison as they looked at the woman they admired so dearly, though probably for different reasons entirely.

In all honesty, Scanlan couldn't exactly articulate why he adored Pike so dearly. It was far more than just her angelic beauty that enchanted him, or the fact that she was foxy as hell. It was her heart that he loved. He knew the kindness that she harbored was something that few others had, except for perhaps his mother, bless her soul. The thought of losing yet someone else like that was unbearable to him, and he couldn't even begin to imagine what he'd do in a world without Pike Trickfoot. He had fully acknowledged and internalized the harsh truth that the good always died before the cruel in their world, but he didn't like it.

After a few more moments of silence, Scanlan sniffed away his sorrows and turned toward his compatriot. “Oi Grog. Could I get my notebook out of your backpack please?”

“Yeh,” Grog said, walking up to Scanlan and lowing the backpack to his level.

After digging through the endless void that was Grog’s backpack, he pulled out his notebook and cracked it open, revealing two hand-painted portraits of both Scanlan and Pike that he’d had commissioned just the day before. He smiled at the image of both him and her side by side before taking the painting he’d had made of himself and resting it on the bedside table.

“Here…” he whispered. “So you won’t be alone. You can have me by your side even when I’m not here.” He brushed his finger on the side of Pike's portrait and smiled, “And I’ll keep you here with me until you get better.”

With one final resonant sigh, he stood up and rolled his shoulders a little before grimacing at the realization that his collarbone was still very much broken. “Right…” He cringed. “We should probably join the others.”

He saw quite a few painkillers in his immediate future, both for his body and for his heart.

Chapter End Notes

Content Warnings:
Hospital setting, depiction of serious injury, mention of mental breakdown.

Let me know what you thought of Scanlan’s POV, and don’t be afraid to criticize. This is my first try and I’m definitely not opposed to making changes once it’s been published. I’ve done it in the past for other chapters. This is definitely a side of Scanlan we don’t usually see: that cynical, jaded interior hidden behind a cheeky grin.
Will Always Love You

Chapter Summary

Last time, on the Butterfly Effect: With the interrogations complete, Scanlan, Grog, and the others visit Pike at the hospital.

Chapter Notes

No Content Warnings this chapter.

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This chapter is a bit all over the place. But whatever, I shouldn't complain. Not to mention it's hella meta on a more levels than I intended… Oh well.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Vax wasn’t the type of guy who liked to bitch about shit. He was more of a “sit on your problems until they suffocate under the weight of your sexy little ass” type of guy. Still, he couldn’t help but feel as though the universe was taunting him with some time-warpy bullshit, because he was pretty fucking sure he’d experienced at least forty hours in that godforsaken day.

Hell, the last few days since they’d first left Westruun felt like fucking months in his head. He wasn’t big on theoretical physics, but he was sure Percy could probably give him a rundown of what the hell was going on, because he sure a fuck didn’t know anymore.

Vax exhaled in frustration and leaned his head against the back of the wall.

“Give them time,” Vex said, her head rested on his shoulder.

“Yeah…” He muttered.

Of course he wasn’t frustrated at Grog or Scanlan for taking so long, but he didn't feel like explaining his thought process at the moment. Claiming they were exhausted was an understatement, and seeing Pike in her condition was even more emotionally draining, though in a way, also calming. There was something incredibly cathartic about crying in the wake of realizing that a critically injured friend was probably going to be okay, and they’d both done plenty of it. All that was left to do now was wait for Scanlan and Grog so they could check on Keyleth and get the fuck out of there.

Vax was sick of hospitals. He was sick of rich hotels and rich-assholes. He was sick of law enforcement. And he was very much sick of the shitstain of city people called Emon.

And yet, his feelings were still mixed on the matter. Of course, a massive part of him wanted to get back to their hovel in Westruun as soon as fucking possible, but another part of him knew that figuring out transportation for Pike and Keyleth was going to be a living nightmare; not that they had the luxury of many options. Both him and Grog, as well as his sister had to get back home so they could work, and Tiberius had class. Healthcare was free in Taldorei. But not the rest of their fucking lives...
It was already Sunday night, and Vax knew that Vex had only gotten Wednesday, Thursday and Monday off. At this rate, even if they left that night, there was still a good chance they wouldn’t make it home until at least Tuesday morning, which was being fucking optimistic because the team’s injuries now meant they were short on drivers. His own boss was pretty flexible with him and Grog because they were hard workers, and Tiberius was a good student. But Vex’s boss was nothing short of a dictator who saw his workers as little more than pretty things to look at. Therefore, Vax could only hope that her boss had the heart to consider a near-death experience as a justified excuse for a missed day at work…

Nevertheless, he had no time to think about it now. As he noticed Scanlan and Grog reemerge from the hall with a look that implied they were just as fucked up by the experience, Vax stood up, prompting the others to stand as well.

Meanwhile Allura, who had been sitting rather quietly and respectfully during the visit, approached the group with a soft expression on her face. “I know this is going to come off as somewhat sudden, but when do you all intend on leaving Emon?”

Fuck if he knew. Though he wasn’t exactly sure why she cared. If anything, the thought that she had even more shit in store for them was a tad anxiety inducing. Still, he tried his best to rationally accept the fact that Allura had overall helped them a lot more than his emotions gave her credit.

He turned to the others and shrugged, “We haven’t really had a chance to discuss it yet. We’re probably going to see if we can speak to Keyleth and her nurses about it...Maybe see if we can prop her leg up during the journey back or something. Hopefully tomorrow.”

“Oh, that won’t be necessary,” Allura said promptly, as if expecting Vax’s response.

Vax gave her a stern look, but before he could comment, Allura spoke up again, now glancing down at her phone.

“I’m getting you all tickets to fly back home tomorrow. I will arrange safe transport for Pike and Keyleth as well.”

Vax whipped his head around to notice his sister’s jaw had rather appropriately dropped to the floor, and in realizing that Percy was now staring at Vex with her mouth wide open, Vax slowly nudged her jaw shut with his knuckle.

“But that’s…” Tiberius quickly counted on his fingers. “Expe-”

“Extremely generous of you,” Vex interjected, her tone of voice taking on that signature squeak that often accompanied the mention of large sums of money.

Tiberius furrowed his brow at Vex. “But we couldn't possibly-”

“That’s quite alright,” Allura said, waving her hand at them. “See it as a gift from the Couldtop.”

Vax turned to Vex and gave her a stern look. Yes, the gift was immense, but he wasn’t sure if he felt comfortable accepting such an act of kindness after everything she’d already offered them. Even if it was a genuine gift, it already felt like they owed her, and he hated owing things to people.

In response to Vax’s stern look, Vex closed her eyes and sighed. “No...Tiberius is right. We can’t accept it.” She stared down at her opaque reflection on the floor. “Besides, we need to drive the van back anyway. And you’ve already done so much for us.”
Allura smiled softly, though there was a hint of sadness in her eyes. “At least allow me to pay for some of you. Pike and Keyleth, and perhaps one other? How does that sound?”

Vax was still trying to process how fucking kind Allura had been toward them. She’d managed to break every expectation he’d built around rich-assholes too many times already, and yet she was still surprising him.

“I suppose that could work,” Tiberius said, before turning toward Grog and adjusting his glasses. “You should go. You can keep an eye on Pike while you await our return.”

Grog furrowed his brow. “Yeh, um. Not so sure about that plan. Ain’t I like... the only one who’s got two working ‘ands to drive now?” He wiggled his beefy fingers at the rest of the group.

Tiberius muttered under his breath, adjusting the sling around his broken arm.

“That’s a very good point big man...” Vax said.

“I think I could manage a few miles myself,” Percy said with a raspy voice, raising a pained hand. “I’ve driven many days at a time on my own,” Vax added. “I’m no stranger to it.”

“Scanlan...you could go,” Vex suggested, smiling.

Scanlan glanced up at Grog with a smirk. “I wouldn’t say no, but I know how much you care about Pikey. And you could drive to and from the hospital once you’re there. I don’t think I could with my injury anyway.”

“How about I pay for both of you then?” Allura offered. “I don’t mind.”

A look of longing spread over Scanlan’s face. “Like I said, I won’t refuse. So long as you’re all okay with Grog and I leaving you all by your lonesome selves. You know... since Grog and I are the only reason anyone watches this improv show we call our lives anyway.”

Vex snorted, “I think we’ll be alright. You two take care of Pike.”

“Percy and I will manage,” Vax half-smiled.

Everyone else nodded, outwardly comfortable with the proposal.

“Very well then,” Allura said, adjusting her blue suit jacket. “I’ll arrange the flights for Pike, Keyleth, Grog, and Scanlan then. They’ll most likely be in the evening tomorrow. As for the rest of you, I suggest you all wait until more news comes from Agent Assum. If he deems it safe, you might be able to leave tomorrow as well. Otherwise, we may need to arrange a group that can escort you as far out as possible.”

Free flights. Free hotels. Free escorts. It all felt so surreal to Vax. Part of him wondered whether he had actually died, and that this was all just some trippy afterlife where he was stuck in a strange alternate reality. It wasn’t like he could prove it either way, so he was better off just rolling with it.

“Thank you Allura.”

“No, thank you Vax’ildan. All of you. You’ve done so much for the Cloudtop and Emon.”

Fucking hell. If she could just shut up it would help him feel less like an asshole. Vax was really starting to feel bad about the way he’d treated this woman. She didn't deserve it. He’d misjudged her
so terribly that he actually felt physically uncomfortable. Or perhaps it was just gas from the stress... Either way, he had to make amends.

“And I…” Vax paused, staring at his boots as he waited for the words to come to him.

Scanlan leaned in and whispered, “Will always love you…?”

Vax couldn’t help but crack a small smile as he pressed his palm into Scanlan’s face and pushed him out of the way, before continuing his train of thought, “I truly apologize for any doubts I harbored toward you.”

Allura simply quirked a brow at Vax with a smile.

“I can be a real asshole sometimes…”

Allura chuckled slightly. “Well that’s quite alright. Working in this field gives you a tough skin. But I accept your apology.” She flipped her braids behind her and adjusted her collar. “And I apologize as well. I’m only glad that you are all alright, all things considered...You young people have so much to offer to this world.”

Vax simply shrugged, though his posture quickly straightened as he watched Allura perk up, as if she’d remembered something.

“Oh, and by the way,” she said. “I almost forgot to mention that Gilmore sends his sincerest regards as well. He expressed deep concern when he heard news of the attack, but he couldn’t get in touch with you. He truly hopes that this hasn’t left a bad taste of in your mouths. Emon has so much more to give than violence…”

Vax felt his insides warm like a sauna at the mention of Gilmore. “How is he doing?”

Allura simply smiled at Vax, though it wasn’t one of those regular, polite little smiles she always gave. This one was a knowing smile...and now his heart felt like it was running was 120 feet per round. “He’s a bit shaken but alright. He actually asked if you could give him a call if at all possible.”

“I…” He felt everything on his face was melting off. “Well my phone is dead. And um, currently in Agent Assum’s possession…”

Allura’s smile widened a little more. “Well I’m sure your friends could help, couldn’t they? Otherwise we could call on my-”

“I could give him a call on my sister’s phone actually,” Vax said rather quickly, reaching out an expectant hand in Vex’s direction.

Vex wrinkled her nose at him. “Thanks for asking brother,” she scoffed, handing the phone to Vax with a subtle eye roll, who in turn gave the phone to Allura.

Allura typed in the contact and tried to hand the phone back to Vex, but Vax intercepted it daftly and plucked it out of his twin’s fingers with a grin. “Thank you…”

“Oh course,” Allura grinned, before turning to the others and clasping her hands together respectfully. “Again, despite all that has happened, I am so relieved and thankful for all of your help. You may have just saved the Cloudtop. So please be safe, and if you need anything, feel free to call. We may see eachother again before you leave, but if we don’t, be sure to show yourselves if you’re ever in town.”
“Absolutely,” Tiberius said with a soft smile, shaking her hand. “And we too are thankful of the generosity you’ve shown. You are a brilliant sun among the many stars of Emon.”

Despite the eye-roll inducing metaphor, Vax agreed with Tiberius to an extent, and felt that Allura deserved the praise.

After a few more words of appreciation from Tiberius and the others, they offered Allura their final thanks, before giving their goodbyes and leaving her to her business.

As she vanished through the glass doors of the hospital, Percy spoke up.

“Welp.” He clapped his hands together. “I believe I’m going to share the good news with Keyleth, have a smoke, and then I think I’ll be quite happy to call it a day.”

“I must admit,” Vex said with a grin. “Those complimentary hotel rooms do sound fucking amazing right now.”

“I couldn’t agree more but…” Vax said, raising the phone in his hand. “Give me just a moment. I need to make this call real quick…”

“Oh of course,” Vex said with a tone of sarcasm. “Can’t keep Gilmore waiting.”

Vax rolled his eyes. “I’ll see you in a bit.”

With that, he walked away where the cold winter air greeted him.

***

His thumb hovered over the dial button with a sense of hesitation he hadn’t experienced since high school. He closed his eyes and allowed the smell of winter to fill his lungs. It was a gray, dusty smell; much like the city of Emon itself. He wasn’t sure whether it was a smell he would have liked anyway, but now, after all they’d been through, all it did was remind him of violence.

After shaking himself out of what must have been at least a couple of minutes of deep thought, he stared down at his sister’s phone. She had all sorts of stupid little apps she never used, despite all the times he’d told her to not clog up her phone’s memory with bullshit. So, acting like the good brother he knew he was, he spent some time deleting a few GB worth of junk though a cleaning app he’d installed on her phone. Feeling satisfied with his good deed for the day, his finger now hovered over the messages icon and his brow furrowed.

He knew he shouldn’t... He couldn't. There were some things he knew were off limits when it came to his sister.

Alas, his shivering finger tapped the icon on accident, and with that, all of his honor blew away with the wind.

He shrugged. “Oh well, too late now.”

His eyes scanned her inbox quickly, fully aware that she could show up at any moment and fold his fingers in ways nature didn’t intend.

Most of the messages in her inbox were from the group chat, which was filled with panicked texts that were sad attempts at coordination. A few other messages were directed toward him, though he of course hadn’t seen them because his phone was busted, and currently in the hands of some strange investigative organization...Fucking hell; he was already starting to regret that decision. Nevertheless,
regret turned to heartbreak as he read the messages she had sent him during that accident.

*Vex: Im at the ambulance*

*Vex: vax i dont nkow whats going on.*

In her haze she’d probably forgotten he’d told her his phone was fucked. He remembered how messed up she looked wrapped in that thermal blanket staring into the distance as if it were a dark and terrible void. He closed his eyes and exhaled a cloud of condensation into the air before staring down at her phone again, now resting his eyes on what he was looking for in the first place: Personal messages from Percy.

He knew it was her phone and it was her privacy and that he had no right sticking his nose in her business. But Percy was... kind of a freak, and he had full rights to be paranoid. He could never be too careful. Not with his sister.

He opened the messages, squinting as he prepared for the inevitable nudes that would scar his eyeballs for the rest of his life. But there were no nudes.

In fact, the last messages they had exchange seemed to actually date back to a few nights ago. Just a meme with a bear, and some messages coordinating shit before Scanlan’s concert. In fact, their entire message history was mostly boring chatter. No racy comments. No lewd remarks, and certainly no nudes, thank the gods. He’d gouge his own eyes out.

He closed the messages promptly and kicked himself for being an asshole again. After winning the worst brother of the year award he figured it was about time he finished what he’d set out to do.

Dialing the number, Vax pressed the phone against his ear and stared up at the stars. He wondered, on clear nights like those, if their mother was watching... Whether she worried as a spectator, or if she already knew the fates of all of them. He wondered if she could see him when he spied on his sister, and whether she would be proud of his protectiveness or disappointed by his lack of trust. Part of him hoped that she wasn’t watching at all, especially since he was currently hoping to have a bit of a chat with Gilmore…

Then his mind went blank as he heard a familiar voice pick up on the other side of the line.

“You have reached Gilmore, proud owner of Gilmore’s Glorious Goods. If I haven’t picked up the phone, it’s probably because I’m busy making the world glorious somewhere else. Leave a message at the beep.”

Vax sighed, closing his eyes once more as he quickly tried to think up of the words he wanted to say. The beep sounded out in his ear.

“Hey, um…” he cleared his throat. “Allura Vysoren gave me your number and I...Well I did still have the number you gave me in my pocket. Point is, my phone is dead and I’m actually calling from my sister's phone. And this is Vax’ildan by the way. The guy who likes black. I just wanted you to know that we are all alright and, yeah. We’ll probably be leaving tomorrow actually. Tonight we are going to be taking it easy in a hotel so it’s a bit of a waiting game. So yeah. I was actually wondering.” He cleared his throat once more and he felt his voice crack just a little. “You wanna grab a drink or something? I know it’s late but...Yeah... If you’re free tonight just call this number and ask for me. Alright...bye.”

He hung up quickly, biting his lower lip and cursing a hundred profanities under his breath. He felt like every part of him was shaking; his shoulders, his legs, his hands. Only, he then realized that it
wasn’t his hands but Vex’s phone, now vibrating out of control in his chilled fingers. He fumbled the phone like it was a hot potato, nearly dropping it before finally picking up, his heart racing at just under a thousand miles an hour.

“Yes, hello?”

“Ah... Vax’ildan. So nice to hear from you again. ”

The moment he heard that warm timber, Vax felt himself smiling like a fucking moron. “Nice to hear from you too.”

“Listen, I have to run for a quick errand. But how about I take up that offer of yours? ”

Vax’s eyes widened. “Tonight?”

“Why yes. Of course. ”

Vax covered the phone for a brief moment and hissed a soft “yeeees ” to the sky before quickly pressing his mouth against the phone again. “Yeah of course. I’m down. I’ll just. Um-”

“Send me the hotel address. ” There was a brief chuckle through the phone. “I should be free to pick you up around nine. ”

Vax swallowed. Gilmore’s voice was deep and soothing, warming his body in the cold air like a hot bath. He could almost smell his cologne through the phone. “Alright.”

“Alright. See you then Vax. ”

And with that, before Vax could even say another word, Gilmore hung up.

Now there was definitely no doubt in his mind: he really was dead. And fuck, was it beautiful.

Chapter End Notes

No Content Warnings this chapter.

The decision to have this small section from Vax’s POV was something I’d been considering for almost a month now. I suppose having this little moment was something we all sort of need in the community right now...for one reason or another.

Don’t worry, Vex’s POV will be back next chapter. I’ve definitely missed it.
Chapter Summary

Last Time, on The Butterfly Effect:
After the team visits Pike and Keyleth in the hospital, Allura offers Pike, Keyleth, Scanlan, and Grog flights to Westruun. Meanwhile, Vax calls Gilmore and arranges to go on a date with him.

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings for this chapter are in end notes.
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Took me fucking long enough...
I will admit. This was a hard chapter to write. Lot of difficult topics, lots of complex emotions. It’s almost as if I enjoy making things harder for myself. Oh well. Enjoy. And please do check the TW for this one if you are a person who might feel uncomfortable knowing details about Vax’s past as a teen.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sleep did not come easy to Vex in that sterile, ivory white hotel room. In fact she imagined sleep would be quite the luxury for the next few days, with the memories of the attack still raw in her mind, and her levels of paranoia welling in her gut like bad tequila. She could feel the pain in her broken wrist growing more acute now that she had no more distractions in that darkened hotel room.

Of course, she imagined all this would have been a lot easier to handle had her brother not decided to fucking abandon her on the first night after their near death experience. Nevertheless, she wasn’t going to be a brat and tell him: “No brother dearest. You may not go on a date with that guy you have the hots for who clearly has the hots for you too. You must stay with me and wallow in pain and misery.”

As the loving sister she knew she was, she’d never get in the way of Vax's pursuit of a sexy health life.

Fucking hell.

Healthy sex life. She could already feel her mind getting all cloudy, though whether it was exhaustion or general anxiety, she wasn't sure.

Vex rolled over, resting her broken wrist on her chest as she stared up at the popcorn ceiling. As she watched a light of a car creep across it like a ghost, she let out a little shiver and checked her phone to see whether Tiberius -- also known as Vax-with-Tiberius's-phone -- had texted.

Tiberius had been far too kind. He’d offered up his phone to Vax for his date after Vex graciously refused giving up her own phone for the night. In hindsight, she felt rather shitty about it, but Tiberius insisted it wouldn't be a problem, since he’d been in the habit of putting his phone in
airplane mode before going to sleep anyway, so to avoid getting calls from Draconian telemarketers in the middle of the night. To be fair, at first she thought it was some sort of joke, until she actually witnessed Tiberius receive a call from them when they were out at bars one night, at which point her drunken and belligerent self decided to do him a favour and inform the telemarketer to kindly shove their magazine offer up their own ass.

Alas, unlike the telemarketers, Vax clearly wasn’t using the resources that he’d been granted. The last text he’d sent her was at nine twenty claiming that everything was going fine and that she didn’t have to worry about him anymore, as if that would somehow alleviate her distress. Chances were he had either forgotten about her need to know that he hadn’t been murdered at least every hour, or that he had been murdered...

And she wasn’t just being paranoid. She was genuinely worried about her brother, especially when it came to dating. She was gladly willing treat him the way he wanted to be treated in all other aspects of his life, by all means, but even he understood the dangers and complications that came with “dating while transgender”. She wanted to have the luxury to not worry about it, but the thought still bothered her. Not to mention the unrelated yet very relevant fact that they were all technically still under Assum’s protection from other possible assaults. Vex had no fucking clue how Vax had managed to wiggle his way past the hotel’s guards, but then again, it was Vax.

Truth be told, she felt guilty about worrying sometimes. She was fully aware that Vax knew how to fucking take care of himself, probably better than anyone else she knew. He didn’t just carry a knife around as a fashion statement, and he could hotwire a car if he had to. He’d reminded her plenty of times that he did not need her protection. Yet it wasn’t just his physical health she worried about: It was mostly his emotional health that she constantly fretted over.

Claiming that Vax had been dealt some bad cards in life was the understatement of a fucking lifetime. Vex had grown up by his side for her entire life, witnessing people break his heart time after time after time. Therefore, she felt more than justified in redefining her “controlling behavior” as something that was an absolute necessity for Vax’s well being, even if he swore he didn't need it anymore. She couldn't help it; the behavior was deeply ingrained in her, held strong by the resentment she felt toward their past. It was he driving force in life, really. Resentment.

During Vax’s early adolescence in Syngorn, he'd mostly dated straight cisgender guys and lesbian cis girls, as the gender diversity at their school was... rather invisible. However, as he began to make his transition more public, his love life grew increasingly more complicated, as he started to become less and less attractive to those assholes he’d dated in the past. Meanwhile, the few openly gay cis men at their school didn’t seem to fancy him all that much either, and although a lot of straight cis women enjoyed his company and flirted with him on occasion, very few made any romantic advances, claiming that they just “weren’t into that sort of thing”. They played with him, teased him sexually and acted like he couldn't really care. It was a behavior that sickened Vex to no end and prompted he to spit in their hair when they weren't looking on more than one occasion.

Needless to say, most of Vax’s flings during that period were short lived, and form Vex’s perspective, they were more draining than satisfactory.

Unfortunately, there were no other trans or non-binary students that Vax or Vex knew of. In fact the only non-binary person they new at the time was the school's head janitor, who was of course much older than either of them, but still way cooler than anyone else they knew in Syngorn at the time.

Around sophomore year, Vax began to experience a long series of depressive slumps. He’d often ditch class, sometimes wandering around town in the middle of the night performing small acts of vandalism, shoplifting from the mall, or spending evenings and sometimes even early mornings at the
skate park speeding away from his problems. To make matters worse, he also started to get into a lot of physical fights, so much so that he once got suspended for his misbehavior, to the dismay of Vex, but especially their father...

Yet despite everything Vax did, she could never blame him. Being a teen and feeling completely undesirable, unwanted, and misunderstood was nothing short of psychological abuse, and given the fact that she was having dating troubles of her own -- albeit for entirely different reasons -- Vax couldn’t help but release his frustration on those who gave Vex a hard time.

For months, Vex did everything in her power to help him understand that he was indeed desirable, and that he simply got the impression that he wasn’t because they went to a shitty little private school with close minded individuals who didn’t know how to have a good time. She even helped him make an account on a dating website to try and prove her point. And yet, no matter how much she tried, there were some things she simply couldn’t do for her brother. There was practically nobody at their school he could relate to, and although their teachers were for the most part devoid of judgement, they didn’t do much to help the misbehavior of the students outside the classroom.

It was mostly why most of Vax’s friends during that time were people he’d met outside of high school through online sites; people who were often much older than him, which was problematic since both Vax and Vex were too young to go to the gay bars in Syngorn. Adding insult to injury, their father wasn’t too keen on Vax hanging out with people who were so much older that him, as he believed it to be the major cause of his delinquency, and Vax’s refusal to listen to their father only worsened their already strained relationship. The only redeeming quality of their father was that he never once misgendered Vax after he came out to him. It was quite remarkable actually, and for a period of time, Vex almost respected the man, only to later remind herself that he didn’t deserve any sort of admiration for not being an absolutely abhorrent human being...

So yeah...

Vex didn’t blame herself for being viciously protective of her brother and those who dare seek his affections. If she so much as suspected that a person was simply toying with him, she’d rip them a new one. And thus, she was stuck in a very awkward position where she needed to be both supportive and protective of her brother in all aspects, and it could certainly be draining when she barely had her own shit figured out.

It was why she was so nervous about his “date” with Gilmore. She didn’t know much about Gilmore except for the fact that he “seemed” okay. She also had no idea where Vax and him were or when Vax would be back, nor had he told her what he intended to do with Gilmore. Justifiably so, when she woke up at one thirty in the morning realizing she’d fallen asleep sometime during her long recollection of their shitty high school years, and noticed Vax was still absent... she panicked.

Like an asthmatic clawing for their inhaler, she scrambled for her phone and checked her messages, letting out a long sigh of relief when she saw three from “Tiberius”, their contents far less terrible than she initially feared. The first message had been sent at 11:47 P.M., the second at 11:49 P.M. and the third at 1:08 a.m.

_Tiberius: Gilmore is my new favorite person._

_Tiberius: I’m kidding. You’re still my favorite person._

_Tiberius: Gonna be late. Don’t worry about me._

It was 1:31, which meant that it still wasn’t too late. Yet.
Vex: *Let me know when you’re on your way back. Have fun.*

She almost immediately received a reply, alleviating her worries, slightly.

*Tiberius: Already am :)*

With another deep sigh, she slumped back onto the bed and stared up at the ceiling once more. Her levels of adrenaline were too high to sleep, though in all honesty, she sort of wanted to wait for Vax to get back anyway. She knew sleep would come to her far quicker knowing someone was in the room with her. It was simply a matter of finding something to occupy her mind.

Of course, her first instinct was to grab her computer and look for something raunchy, a pastime that had never failed her in the past. And yet, just few minutes into “Woman Rides Sexy Mechanic for Discount”, she soon realized that her libido was absolutely nowhere to be found. The fact that she’d broken her working hand certainly didn’t help, that’s for sure.

She slapped her laptop shut and stared into space for what must have been at least a few minutes before she eventually grabbed her phone, staring at its bright screen intently in the darkness. There was really only one person she knew who might still be awake at this time of night, because from what little she knew about vampires, they were indeed nocturnal. That being said, she questioned whether it was a good idea to initiate a conversation...

Percy knew Vax had gone on a date, and that she was alone in their hotel room. So the fact that he had not texted her was pretty much undeniable proof that he wasn’t interested, which was *fantastic* news because that meant that she could invite him over for a chat without making things dreadfully awkward.

Unless of course...he hadn’t texted her because he was waiting for her to text him first. She wrinkled her nose at the thought and rested her phone on her chest. Well, he could be gay, in which case it wasn’t and never would be a problem. Humming to herself, she lifted her phone back to her face and stared at his name in her contacts. Unless he was bi...in which case it was indeed a problem. She put her phone back down on her chest and stared up at the ceiling once more. Though there was always the strong possibility that she was just being full of herself for assuming he was interested... Maybe he only liked blondes.

In an aggressive fashion, Vex rolled over onto her stomach and pressed her face into her pillow, releasing a drawn out groan that reverberated in her own ears.

*Of course* she’d managed to overthink even the simplest of acts into oblivion. It’s what she did best after all, especially when she was alone and stressed and exhausted. Why did she do this to herself? Why couldn’t she think straight when she needed to the most? Only Vex could screw up her own thought process so bad as to convince herself that she feared both Percy’s affections and lack thereof.

She rolled back over and slapped herself in the face a few times. She knew herself all too well and understood that -- more than anything -- she needed someone to talk to lest she trigger some sort of panic attack. With no more patience left for her own ego, she picked up the phone and sent a text to Percy with no second thought. She’d find someone to help her through this, even if it meant giving that someone the wrong idea. Fuck if she cared. He probably couldn’t screw her with his broken ribs even if he wanted to.

Vex: *Hey*

She let out a loud huff and rested her phone on her chest with a thud, her eyes pressing shut as regret immediately welled inside of her -- as expected. Of course she cared. She never wanted to lead
anyone on; she’d gotten enough shit for it in high school and she was so over it like... a decade ago.

For but a moment, she wished she had just stuck with her porn, however, that moment was cut short as she felt her phone vibrate on her breast. She rolled her eyes and resigned to her fate, fully aware that she’d made her bed and now she needed to lay in it.

She wasn’t all that surprised when she learned that Percy had sent her another picture. For her own sanity, she hoped it was another bear meme.

And she was not disappointed. Percy had sent her a picture of a polar bear holding up a branch to his ear with the text in bold that read “Hello, yes, this is bear.”

Vex cracked a small smile. This wasn’t going to be that bad.

Vex: What are you up to?

Percy: Just looking for jobs on my phone. Can’t sleep? *bear emoji*

“Sure I can. I’m just sleep texting, clearly...” she muttered to herself. Percy could ask the dumbest questions sometimes.

Vex: Vax hasn’t come back.

Percy: Did you text him? *bear emoji*

Vex: Yeah and he’s fine. I’m just restless.

Percy: You try counting sheep? It works in cartoons. *bear emoji*

Vex smirked again. Percy was always a little weird at this time of night, especially via text message.

Vex: lol. No I didn’t. But I just kind of want to wait until he comes back anyway.

Percy: You wanna talk? I can call you. *bear emoji*

She bit down on her lower lip, glancing at the time. It was almost two o’clock, and she knew Tiberius’s bedtime was like ten o’clock because he needed like twelve hours of sleep each night or he got obscenely grumpy.

Vex: Is Tiberius sleeping? I don’t want you to bother him.

Percy: Yeah he is but I can go outside. *bear emoji*

Vex snorted. He clearly wanted to talk to her. And she didn’t blame him. Chances were he was just as uncomfortable as her about the whole truck incident. She couldn’t fathom anyone sleeping tonight, which is why she both respected but also sort of worried about Tiberius’ level of sedation. Maybe they’d given him too many meds.

Vex: You might as well come over.

Percy: Your brother might kill me he catches me there alone with you. *bear emoji*

She narrowed her eyes. She was pretty sure that was just a joke, but she couldn’t be too careful. She needed to cover her bases, just in case.

Vex: Lol? For talking? Just come over.
For a moment, Vex wondered whether Percy had fallen asleep, because fifteen minutes passed and there was still no sign of him. Yet as she layed in bed contemplating her life choices, she got a feeling. Slipping her flip-flops over her socks, and adjusting her Mama Bear shirt over her PJ shorts, she rolled out of bed and peeked her head out the hotel room into the hallway, smirking at the accuracy of her own primeval intuition.

Percy was currently wandering aimlessly, staring at the hotel room doors as he rubbed his chin.

“You know you could have just texted me darling,” Vex whispered.

Startled by her loud whisper, Percy flinched in her direction before letting out a sigh of relief which resonated in the deathly silence of the hallway. “I was so sure I’d remember it if I thought for just a little longer...”

Vex clicked her tongue and beckoned him over. “C’mon.”

Ushering him inside, she closed the door behind him and turned on the light. Percy was wearing his standard pair of sweatpants and his black thermal shirt. She really needed to get him some real PJ’s at some point.

“Sorry,” she said. “Been sitting in the dark being miserable with myself.”

Percy stuffed his hands in his pockets as he glanced around casually. “I’d be lying if I said that I wasn’t sort of doing the same thing, albeit while seeing who wanted to pay me to look at their cars.”

Vex chuckled with just a hint of bitterness. “Well at least you were being productive with your misery.”

Percy seemed amused by Vex’s remark, smiling as he adjusted his glasses before taking a seat on the armchair that wasn't covered in Vex’s clothes. “Being productive with my misery is the only way I ever survived.”

It was a dreadfully depressing thing to say, Vex thought. Though as she settled her eyes on his very relaxed smile, she tried to not read into the remark too deeply.

“Right...” she muttered, plopping down on the bed.

For a moment, they both sat quietly, each staring mindlessly at whatever was in front of them. Soon though, Vex lost her appetite for silence and huffed out a small laugh. “C’mon now...” She said. “You don’t have to sit all the way over there. My brother isn’t going to murder you if he sees us talking.”

Vex caught Percy glance briefly at the door before huffing slightly, lifting himself out of the chair with a groan, and making his way toward the bed. With a bit of rigidness in his movements, he carefully sat down at the edge of the bed beside her, his weight shaping the mattress and forcing her to adjust her balance just a little.

As if warming up to speak, they both cleared their throats at the same time, though neither of them volunteered to do any form of talking, almost as if they were actually avoiding the conversation. A couple in this situation would have likely just started making out, but given their already precarious relationship with each other, they simply sat staring at the wall.

In the face of the silence between them, it occurred to Vex that they still hadn't exactly had a moment
to talk since the attack. Everything had been far too hectic, and her brother was in a mood so he seemed to need the moral support. And yet, now that her brother was temporarily out of the picture, there was a heaviness to the air she could not shake. Perhaps it was her anxiety flaring up again. Maybe it was the fact that she still had this strange feeling about Percy, though she couldn’t place it.

Regardless of what it was, Vex likely would have been comfortable being quiet for the rest of her life had Percy not broken the seal.

“Is everything alright?” he asked, turning to look at her.

“Of course,” Vex said too quickly, flipping her braid to her side and staring down at her bare knees, They were growing cold.

Percy quirked a brow at her before turning toward the wall and bringing his hands together. “Alright then. Suit yourself.”

Vex huffed, resigning to his bluff, “Okay fine. The truth is-”

Percy laughed with an air of smugness. “I knew it.”

“Shut up.”

“Okay.” Percy covered a small chuckled behind a cough before composing himself. “I’m all ears.”

Vex bit the inside of her cheek, now realizing that he probably expected her to talk about her feelings. God. She’d give anything to just avoid it and ask him about radiators and shit instead. But rationally she understood that this was probably the closest thing to therapy they were going to get, and she knew they both needed it.

“So um…” She started, staring down at the floor. “I’m sure you’ve figured out by now that the relationship between Vax and I isn’t exactly normal.”

“Not sure what you’re talking about. Seems rather standard twin behavior to me.”

Vex hummed in amusement. “Something tells me you haven’t been around a lot of twins.”

Percy gave her a strange look, before shrugging slightly. “Maybe I have, maybe I haven’t....”

Vex scratched a dry tear from her eye and laughed. “C’mon Percy.”

“Alright, I’m sorry,” he said, adjusting his position on the bed so he could look at her better. “Carry on.”

Percy’s bouts of strangeness were generally no surprize to Vex, but something about him felt stranger still. It was something in his eyes. They looked a tad wild, glossy, and perhaps a little dilated. In fact, it was a look that was vaguely similar to what she’d seen in the past when he first moved in with them. Frankly, if she didn’t know any better, she’d say he was high on something, though in hindsight it was entirely plausible given the fact that they’d all been prescribed some form of pain killers...

Vex took in a deep breath and held it for a moment before exhaling a bit of collected anxiety. Oh, how she wished she had Pike to speak to in moments like these. But alas, Percy would have to do for now. She tried her best to compile her thoughts once more, trying to find the core source of her distress. Perhaps she needed to start with the basics. It would probably make things easier to talk about if she was clinical about it.
“So Vax and I,” she said, tucking one of her legs under her butt. “We were actually both diagnosed with Adult Separation Anxiety our senior year, but we never ended up going to therapy to have it treated.”

With a completely new and more respectful attitude, Percy nodded in understanding, now staring down at his unzipped boots. Perhaps he was looking for the right words, or perhaps he simply didn’t believe there was a proper response to such a personal statement. In all honesty, it almost seemed like he was simply studying the scuff marks on the leather of his boots.

His silence did not comfort her, and a nervous laugh slipped from her lips, “Though I’m sure you already figured that out the last time we sat waiting for him that one night…”

“Ah yes,” He chuckled slightly in response, adjusting his glasses. “The night I made you my personal treasurer.”

“Right…” She smiled. “You’ve spent quite a bit of that money on this trip, you know…”

“Oh, I’m well aware,” he said, finally turning to look at her. “I’ll be sure to get on a strict diet when we get home.”

“Darling, I don’t need you starving yourself again.”

His eyes went wide. “I don’t starve myself!” He sounded almost genuinely offended.

Vex simply stared him down with a look that indicated that she was more than willing to challenge his perception of the facts, to which he simply let out one of his signature, slightly wheeze laden sighs.

“Anyway…” she said, staring back at the wall.

There was more silence between them, before Percy dispelled the silence once more with a clearing of his throat. He really needed to cut back on the smoking.

“Anyway.” His voice was now little more than a gravelly whisper. “Going to therapy isn’t easy.”

Vex was reminded that they had indeed originally been discussing her anxiety disorder, a topic she’d tried to skirt but Percy clearly wanted to explore. She didn’t mind it of course. If she wasn’t going to go to therapy she might as well do the next best thing and discuss it with a friend. The softer tone he’d used prompted her to speak softer as well. “Honestly, Vax and I both got better on our own.”

She sighed, now tucking her knees against her chest and wrapping her arms around them. She cracked a smile to fight away the sadness. “We were sort of forced to.”

When she turned to look at Percy, there was a hint of confusion in his eyes, though just as Vex was ready to remind him, he nodded a couple times, making it clear that’d he’d caught on to what she was talking about.

“Yeah…” Vex simply nodded back, staring down at her own feet for a while. “I mean it was either get used to him being gone or...You know.”

“Yes,” he said with a sigh, leaning back on his hands, but quickly grimacing at the stretch of his torso and curling back in his hunched position.

Vex chuckled slightly, resting a hand on her shoulder. “You alright darling?”

“Just me being an idiot and forgetting about my broken ribs.” He groaned. “The pain medication
takes care of most of the discomfort.”

“Do you need some more?”

Percy laughed loudly, a little too amused by the question. “Definitely not.” He turned to her and smiled a little. “I’m so sorry. I interrupted you.”

“No, it’s fine.” She looked away. “I don’t really have much else to say on the matter.” She shrugged. “Those months being separated from Vax were probably the hardest months of my life. But I do feel like it helped me put things into perspective. I don’t worry about him leaving home anymore.” She smiled at her own little lie. “Or well... at least not as much as I used to.”

Percy hummed to himself as he reflected. “Perhaps it’s a break in schedule that makes you a little more anxious about this.”

“Yes, that. Among other things...” She casually started to play with her hair again, braided so kindly by Vax before leaving. “Thing is, he doesn’t exactly leave very often to socialize, you know? Not so much anymore at least. These days he doesn’t really have that many friends that aren’t my friends as well.”

“Is that a problem?”

“No. Not at all. And of course, we established long ago that we could have our own friends if we wanted to. We just...”

“Don’t want to.”

Vex smiled right back at him, wide eyed. “Precisely. I don’t really see the point in seeking out other people if we have each other. I just... don’t really want anyone else in my life right now. I don’t know why he would either. You know?” She laughed at her own inability to express herself. “It’s hard to explain.”

With a quick, though subtle shift in his expression, Percy lowered his gaze, breaking eye contact with her and turning back toward the wall.

Vex furrowed her brow, rather perturbed by his sudden shift in body language. Though his next few words alivated some tension.

“I don’t think you need to explain yourself.”

Her expression lightened once more, releasing some tension from her shoulders. “Thank you.”

“Sure,” he muttered. He stared down at his hands and began picking at a scrape on his palm. “Don’t feel as though you need to justify the way you feel on my behalf. I won’t question your motives on matters that involve your brother. I understand that sibling love can be... complex.”

He could probably tell Vex was struggling with the topic, but at least he had made some sense of her ramblings.

As a sudden bout of tiredness found her mind, she absentmindedly watched Percy pick at the wound on his hand for quite some time before she actually realized what he was he doing to himself, and grabbed him by the wrist.

“Stop that,” she said, holding his wrist firmly.
Yet his reaction was not what she expected. As if offended by her transgression of his personal space, his eyes fixated on her hand, that was now holding his wrist firmly. Taken aback by his odd response, she quickly tried to make amends with a smile and friendly squeeze.

But his expression didn’t change. He simply kept on staring at her with those same cold blue eyes that now seemed so dark. They felt harsh, judging, as if he were peering right through her, perhaps looking for something. And she didn’t like it.

As if his skin had suddenly turned too hot, she rapidly retracted her hand and hid it in the folds of her shirt on her lap. “Sorry,” she said, laughing nervously. “I just get a little paranoid when someone messes with their own wounds. Wouldn’t want to make it wors-”

“What do you want from me Vex’ahlia?”

A cold chill ran over her body as her theatrically cheerful expression faded, her jaw dropping slightly as she tried to process the question that felt completely uncalled for. However, as his behavior started to register and his question settled into her conscious mind, her confusion morphed to realization, which then morphed to a sick feeling in her stomach.

She should have stuck with her intuition. She’d done it again.

Feeling a knot harden in her throat, she studied her possible courses of action while dreading every last one of them. She knew an easy way to get out of this: she could kiss him. Right then and there; throw caution to the wind and accept the consequences of entering yet another dysfunctional fling. Or, she could stay true to her promise to herself and not complicate her life any further.

Although one of those options felt like the easy way out; something that teen Vex would have done in a situation like this, she knew better.

“Nothing,” she said softly, feeling a cold chill run down her spine.

In response to her answer, is face shifted to an expression that could really only be respectfully described as “disappointed”. Not even the small smile he’d mustered could fool her at this point.

With a deep sigh, he stood up, wiping his glasses on his shirt before putting them back on.

“Look, that’s not what I meant,” she blurted out. Only it was what she’d meant. All she was doing was digging herself deeper into a hole at this point.

“I think you should try to get some sleep,” he said coolly. “Your brother will be back soon.”

She didn’t know what to do anymore. “We can talk about this.”

“It’s been a long day Vex,” he said, not turning to look at her. “I think we both need to take some time to reflect on our own.”

With those final words, he head out the door and shut it behind him.

Vex sat paralyzed in the newfound silence as her mind tried to process what had just happened, trying her best to resist the temptation to storm down the hall and slap him in her face.

Was he really fucking mad at her because she didn’t give him any tail?

Because she refused to believe, that after all this time, he was capable of being so fucking petty. Then again, why should she have expected any different from him? He was human, after all. Not a
vampire. Not an android. A human. And humans had urges; urges that she had taunted because God forbid you be a nice to a man while female. She rested her face in her hand and let out a muted scream.

No. Perhaps she had dreadfully misjudged his reaction. Perhaps he was angry for something entirely different, something that she hadn’t picked up on. She tried her best to run the conversation in her head, desperately hunting for any sort of word or phrase or behavior that he may have taken offence too. Maybe he thought she’d been selfish; that she’d taken up too much time complaining about her own stupid problems without asking how he felt.

Not that he ever actually *wanted* to tell her how he felt. He hadn’t in the past at least, so how was she supposed to know? She wasn’t a fucking mind reader. She was Vex’ahlia Jones, queen of the fabled “friendzone” after all…proud high-school title.

Just as she lifted her face out of her hand, reddened by anger, or embarrassment, or sadness, or perhaps some combination of the three, she flinched at the sound of the door opening.

Sitting up straight, her eyes settled on Vax, who was already staring her down with a deep look of concern. “What the hell happened?”

Chapter End Notes

Content Warnings: Mention of transphobia, bullying (General recounting of Vax and Vex’s high school years.)

—

There are a lot of complicated emotions flying around in this chapter, and frankly, I’m still not quite sure how it all went south so quickly…

...

Okay, that’s not true. I know what happened. And man, if there was ever a time where I would have liked to give you all a peek of what was going on in Percy’s head, this would have been the chapter. Who knows. Maybe in the fic about Percy I might throw in a few little one shots that include scenes from this fic from his POV.

P.S.
Here is the bear meme that Percy sent Vex. Let’s only hope it’s not his last: [Link to meme](https://example.com)
Too Excited

Chapter Summary

Last Time, on The Butterfly Effect: While waiting for Vax to return home from his date with Gilmore, Vex invites Percy to her hotel room to keep her company. However, their conversation abruptly turns sour and Percy storms out of the room just as Vax is returning from his outing.

Chapter Notes

So before we get started, in case you didn’t catch me on twitter or on here, as per popular request, I have released the very first chapter of “Edge of Chaos”, Percy’s Backstory in this AU as a little holiday present for you all. <3 So feel free to go check it out. I don’t believe I will be updating it all that much until I finish the “Butterfly Effect”, which will end at the canonical year-long break Vox Machina took before starting STREAM CONTENT with “Chaotic Scattering”. (So looking for Kima, Vasselheim, Briawoods...etc). Depending on what people want to see, I might also start working on “Dynamical Systems”, which is Vax and Vex’s Backstory from when they were teens to when they eventually joined the others.

So, to make things clear, this whole AU essentially part of a series called “Chaos Theory”, in which “The Butterfly Effect”, “Edge of Chaos”, “Chaotic Scattering”, “Dynamical Systems” etc… are all part of one universe. It’s a lot of work, but the support from you all makes it worth it.

But enough of me rambling. Here is your new chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There was very little doubt in Vex’s mind that Vax had seen Percy storm out of their room. The look in his eyes and his flaring nostrils said it all. Not that Vex could afford to give a shit right now... No matter how justified his concerns were, she was pretty sure she’d expired every last ounce of willpower on that dreadful day, and she was hoping Vax would have the good sense to just let this one slide.

She shrugged, staring down at her all but entirely chipped nails.

“Seriously Vex,” Vax hissed, glancing back at the door he’d just shut. “What the fuck happened?”

With a loud groan, Vex allowed herself to fall back onto the bed, eyes closed in an attempt to keep her cool. “Nothing happened, brother dearest...”

Taking a peek through the peephole of the door, Vax hummed sarcastically, clearly unimpressed by the blatant lie. “Would Percy say the same thing if I asked him?”

Vex rested her forearm on her face, her patience for questions far beyond exhausted for that day.
Paramedics, Allura, Assum, Vax; all so dreadfully eager to test her levels of knowledge. “I thought you were going to text me when you were on your way back...”

A little laugh escaped Vax’s lips, “So I could warn you two to stop-”

Vex immediately sat back up and pointed an angry finger at him. “Don’t say it!

Vax paused for effect before giving a little curtsy “-Fucking.”

Slapping her hand on her face, she muffled a scream. “C’mon...” She gasped. “You should have texted. You know I get worried!”

With an eye-roll, Vax pulled Tiberius’ phone out of his leather jacket and shook it, wiggling his eyebrows at her. “Out of battery.”

Indignant, she tossed her braid back over her shoulder. “I knew you should have taken his charger...”

Vax hummed, plopping down on the empty armchair. “So nothing happened between you two?” he asked, rerouting the subject as he took off his first boot. “Because he looked a little crazy storming down the hall.”

“Because he is crazy,” Vex blurted out, lazily tossing her arms in the air before allowing them to plop back down on her lap.

Vax paused mid zip and stared up at her. “And this is somehow news to you only now?”

Vex huffed and stared up at the ceiling. “I mean... he’s always been strange. But this time he just got all pissy at me for no good fucking reason.” Not that it was entirely out of character. She could never forget the time he’d snapped he was feeling ill a few weeks back.

Vax’s expression hardened, “If he hurt you I’ll cut him.”

“Good grief Vax! As if we haven’t had enough bloodshed today?” She sighed, looking away. “Either way. He didn’t hurt me. He’s just...I don’t know. On edge.”

Vax took a few more moments to scrutinize the situation before giving a little shrug and working on his other boot. “He did seem oddly tense today. Especially in the van when Agent Assum was taking us to that windowless madhouse.”

“To be fair, who wouldn’t be crazy after what happened to us?” She shrugged. “He probably just popped a fuse or something...”

Vax held his second boot in his hand and simply stared at her, his expression still showing hints of skepticism. “That’s all?”

She glanced up at him, incredulous in the face of his insistence. “Vax...” She dropped her shoulders a little. “You know I don’t fucking care. I’d tell you if there was something going on between me and him. But there isn’t.” She laughed a little bitterly. “And there never will be. He’s volatile, and sentimentally confused, and strange, and sleeps on our fucking couch.” She turned away and pouted. “Messing with him just seems like an awful idea.”

“But you want to.”

Her eyes widened at him. “Absolutely not!”

“So you didn’t fuck?”
“Vax, I swear to God if you ask me one more fucking tim-”

“Okay, okay. Shit…”

Vex rolled her eyes and crawled back under the sheets, feeling cold and tired and ready to end this godforsaken day. “Like I said, I don’t know what happened.” She nuzzled her face in her pillow. “And honestly, I don’t think I care anymore. I’m so fed up with emotionally constipated people.”

Vax simply snickered at her statement, taking a seat by the foot of the bed as he started to comb out his hair with his fingers.

“What?” she groaned, her voice slightly muffled by the fabric.

“Oh nothing…”

Vex sat up once more. “You think I’m the same way, don’t you?”

“Of course.”

“Asshole…” she said, throwing a pillow at him.

Vax caught it without an issue. “Don’t worry,” he said, molding the pillow in his hands. “It’s the plight of our generation. None of us know how to share our feelings with each other anymore. And those who can are considered “emotional” and “immature.” Look at the way strangers treat Keyleth when she gets into debates in public. The very moment she starts expressing her honest feelings on a matter, she is crucified for her strong opinions, and by those who are too fucking scared to share opinions of their own. People who know how to share the way they feel are brave, and we live in a generation of fucking cowards.”

Vex wasn’t sure if that rant was meant to make her feel better or worse. She’d have to think about it more; perhaps when she wasn’t an angry ball of emotions ready to explode. “I’m sure you’ve thought about this long and hard brother…”

Vax half smirked. “Not really, no.”

“Okay.” Vex snorted, pausing for a moment and giving him a good long stare. “So... Are you done asking questions for the night?”

“Well if you don’t intend on giving me any more answers,” he tossed the pillow back at his twin, “then I suppose so.”

“Good.” Vex grinned, catching the pillow with her good arm and hugging it against her chest. “So how did it go with Gilmore?”

Vax chuckled, taking a hair tie off of his wrist and tying his hair in a high bun. “It went well. We had a couple of drinks; a nice chat.”

Vex quirked a brow at him. “You had a drink and a nice chat for five hours?”

Giving her a quick wink over his shoulder, he stood up and reached for his sleep attire. “Yep.”

Vex narrowed her eyes at him, “I find that very hard to believe…”

Just before vanishing into the bathroom, Vax peeked his head back out the door and smirked. “You know we’re really fucking similar in that regard.”
“Aha... how so?”

Vax’s smirk morphed to a grin. “We don’t kiss and tell.”

Before Vex could process the implications of the statement and protest, Vax shut the door behind him, which was soon followed by the sound of a shower turning on.

Vex let out a long drawn out sigh and took refuge under the sheets. She wasn’t going to fight this day any longer.

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There could be no ruder awakening than the shrill sound of a phone ringing at eight in the fucking morning. Apparently some lady on the other side of the line wanted to inform a sleep deprived Vex that their party was to meet Allura Vysoren and Agent Assum Emring in the hotel lobby at nine. It was something that neither Vex nor Vax wanted to hear after staying up until nearly three in the morning. Not to mention the fact that Vex felt like she’d had maybe a grand total of five minutes of actual sleep, coupled with about a lifetime’s worth of stress induced nightmares. Adding insult to injury, the aches and pains she’d fallen asleep with only seemed to have gotten worse, and she had the distinct feeling she was catching a bit of a cold.

Nevertheless, realizing that it was probably best they get the day moving as soon as possible, the twins mustered the strength to drag their asses out of bed, and with a few words of encouragement and a touch of makeup to cover up their respective bruises and dark circles, they made their way down into the small though quaint little lobby, each twinning ponytails.

Tiberius, being a bit of an early bird, had already taken a spot in the semicircle of chairs that was facing a quiet little fireplace, located in a more private alcove of the lobby.

With a large yawn, Vax stole the seat closest to Tiberius and handed him back his phone. “Thanks Tibs,” he said.

“Not a problem Vax’ildan,” Tiberius replied, pocketing the phone. He sounded tad more sedated than usual. “I hope your date was a pleasurable one.”

“Oh yes,” Vax said with a small smirk, crossing his arms and sinking into his chair. “Would do it again in a heartbeat.”

It had been a very long time since Vex had seen her brother so pleased with a date, which lead her to believe that there was about a seventy-five percent chance that him and Gilmore had exchanged some form of bodily fluids. Vax was being far too smug and pleased with himself to imply otherwise. Then again, he may have just been putting up a show just to spite her for all the times she’d ever kept him guessing. She knew he wouldn’t tell her either way. so musing over it was just about as useless as musing over why Percy had been such an ass the night before...which -- speak of the devil -- was a subject she was going to have to either forgive or forget.

Looking like he’d just had a sloppy makeout session with death, Percy meandered into the lobby, unshaven and puffy eyed. As he sat down in a seat next to Tiberius, she gave him a nice long once-over, noticing that he looked quite pale and a little dewy.

Likely sensing her eyes on him, Percy’s gaze settled on her for a few seconds before he cracked a wimpy excuse for a smile, which Vex of course did not reciprocate. Instead, she flared her nostrils and faced the fire, resting her chin on her good hand. No way in hell was he going to play this off like nothing happened. Not this time.
By the time Scanlan and Grog made their way into the lobby, Allura had already gotten settled in one of the seats, and was busy unraveling her scarf as she spoke.

“Assum will arrive shortly, but for now, I believe it’s best we discuss the most recent developments.”

“Is this really a safe place to talk?” Vax asked, glancing around the quiet alcove.

“This hotel is run by Assum’s wing,” Allura said with graceful confidence. “All the guests here are either part of the witness protection program, in Emon’s military, or are people with far higher a security clearance than you lot.”

Vax recrossed his legs and turned his attention back toward the fire. “Fair enough.”

“So what’s the news?” Grog asked bluntly, his patience clearly growing thin. “We allowed to leave or what?”

“It would seem so,” Allura said.

Grog acted as if he was getting ready to flee the premises, but both Scanlan and Tiberius grasped his massive arms and pulled him back down with their own body weight.

Allura seemed unphased by Grog’s impatience and continued her train of thought. “The people who wanted to kill you have all been successfully dealt with. You don’t need to worry about it any longer.”

“Wait wait wait…back up a little,” Scanlan said, a large smile plastering his face. “So they actually wanted to kill us? Like... us specifically?”

Allura’s expression softened a little. “I’m afraid so. They knew who you were and they did not like you meddling with their devious affairs. Had their actions gone unchecked they likely would have put the very Prime Minister in peril. They were in an incredible position of power before you lot intervened.”

Vex covered her mouth, glancing at the others, “We were so lucky...”

Percy shrugged, the reflection of the fire dancing off his glasses. “Debatable. In hindsight, the whole attempt struck me as a rather sloppy effort.” Vex noticed his eyes briefly glance at her before continuing. “Why send someone so mentally unstable to do a job that guns could have accomplished far more efficiently?”

Vex wrinkled her face at his words. They were so blunt, cold, and frankly, in terrible taste considering the number of people who were actually killed. Still... he did have a bit of a point, and frankly it was something she wanted to know as well.

“A valid question,” Allura answered, “But I believe Lady Luck truly does deserve some credit in this case. It appears as though the young man was simply a pawn the Clasp was willing to sacrifice. Seems as though they considered their resources better spent using him and a commandeered truck instead of drawing attention to themselves. It would have been difficult to bring guns into the city. Furthermore, I imagine they weighed the risks and figured the driver getting caught would have been a minor setback.”

"Though why pick someone like that? Someone with no real experience?" Vex asked.
“Yeah,” Vax seconded. “Why go to such an effort to reduce their profile while jeopardizing their position with someone that could easily be interrogated?”

“Funny thing about interrogations...” A familiar voice chimed in behind the group. “People can’t give up information they don’t know.”

Everyone wiped their heads around to see Agent Assum, standing but a few feet behind them and holding a sealed envelope right next to Vax’s ear.

Vex smirked as she watched Vax squirm in his seat, before accepting the envelope with a quirked brow.

“Seems as though the driver was employed by a middleman,” Assum said as he took a composed standing position beside the fireplace. “The young man who drove the truck had no choice but to complete the job. He had a whole laundry list of financial and psychological problems of his own, and judging from what we gathered, the assignment was given to him anonymously.”

Vex leaned in to get a closer look at the envelope, and as Vax ripped it open, he perked up as he unveiled a USB labeled “Vax’Ildan Jones phone data”, along with his cracked phone.

Percy snorted, pressing his glasses against his face. “Again... sloppy. Their biggest mistake was not taking us out when they had the chance.”

“Oh yes, I’d have to agree,” Assum said. “Although I believe it goes without saying that they wouldn’t have skimped on the firepower the next time around. Which is why it was so important we uprooted the heart of the problem immediately.”

“So just to confirm, these people have officially been taken care of?” Vax asked. “We can walk freely now?”

“You could always walk freely Vax’Ildan. Though judging from the way you snuck out last night you likely didn’t know that. It’s alright though. We kept a close eye,” Assum said with the subtlest of winks.

Vax turned three shades of pink before he concealed his expression with a fake cough as Assum continued.

“But to answer your question. Yes, the threat has been neutralized.”

Tiberius furrowed his brow. “I’ve been following the news all morning. I heard no such announcement.”

Assum simply chuckled, though there was a hint of patronizing tenderness to his words. “The news doesn’t find out about these things until I deem it appropriate.”

Allura nodded, “We will release the information to the media once you are all safely on planes or on the road.”

Vex took her brother’s hand and gave it a little squeeze. “So that’s it…? We can go home?”

“Of course,” Assum replied.

The relief emanating off the party was almost palpable. No words could have sounded more beautiful to Vex’s ears in that moment. Their lives had gotten so damn complicated in the last few days so much so that she feared they’d never get back to normal. It was strange, really; wanting to go
back to their ratty little apartment and settle back into the status quo. But there was something so comforting about their old way life: her tiny little bedroom, their simple little kitchen, her smelly not-so-little dog... Oh Trinket. She’d be home soon. Finally.

Grog threw his head back and groaned, “Thank fucking go-”

“Though...” Assum lifted a finger. “I do have one final request...”

“-god fucking dammit.”

A chorus of sighs was followed by deep silence as the party awaited their fate wide-eyed.

“So now... don’t look too excited,” Assum said with a chuckle. “I simply wanted to ask you all if you’d be interested in accepting an invitation from the Prime Minister Uriel Tal’dorei. He seemed rather eager to meet with you all, possibly before noon.”

The silence was immediately broken by the sound of shattering glass and plastic, as Vax’s husk of a phone slipped from his fingers and had its last word on the slate floor; an adequate metaphor to describe the state of Vex’s mind.

Chapter End Notes

You know, I started out this fic asking myself the following question: “How do I get a bunch of ex convicts, college students, and poor sons of bitches into the good graces of the Prime Minister of Tal’dorei?” In a way, this is what this entire fic is about. Getting from point A to point B. It wasn’t easy, but I feel confident saying that I’ve finally set things up so that all the events that happen later on in the story will make narrative sense. Granted the narrative is precarious as fuck and could fall over at any moment. It’s kind of like a Jenga tower. A big wobbly Jenga tower. #Jenga.
Troubles with Bears

Chapter Summary

Last time, on The Butterfly Effect: Right after Percy storms out of the room following his tense moment with Vex, her and Vax discuss Percy’s irrational behavior before ultimately calling it a night and going to bed. The next morning, the party meets with Assum and Allura, who inform them that those who were in charge of the truck attack were convicted, and they are now free to go home. However, before they leave, they are invited to meet with the Prime Minister at noon.

Chapter Notes

No Content Warnings this chapter.

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Twitter knows I had trouble writing this chapter. But I’m glad I finally figured it out. Reason why I was having so much trouble will be in end notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As early as she could remember, Vex had always harbored dreams of grandeur. Fueled by the stories her mother used to string together before bed, she’d often fantasize of an idealized world where she had everything her little heart desired: a castle, a jeweled crown, a magic bow, a big poofy dress, a mighty flying steed, and thousands of subjects who adored and respected both her and her twin, the valiant knight who protected the realm from evil with his Vorpahl sword. Together, they’d rule a peaceful and prosperous land, where they threw enormous festivals for everyone to sing and dance and eat cakes on silver platters.

Yet as adulthood started to catch up with her, and the cruelty of the world took its toll on her psyche, Vex eventually settled for more...reasonable dreams, such as finding a twenty dollar bill on the ground, or buying her favorite brand of dog food on sale.

Therefore -- with almost two decades of constant negative conditioning -- it was no surprise that she was having quite a bit of trouble digesting the information that they’d just received. Never in her adult life would she have ever conceived something as preposterous as meeting with the Prime Minister of Tal’dorei. And for what? “Saving the region”? Not in her wildest fucking dreams! This was right up there within the realm of improbability as “saving the world from dragons” and “marrying handsome princes”. And the mere notion that she was supposed to just “gracefully accept” her new reality was so far beyond the threshold of reason that she couldn’t even see the logic of it anymore.

Not to mention the fact that she was long overdue a mental breakdown, and felt as though she was entirely justified to have one, right now, in the privacy of her bedroom, far, far away from any secret agents, or big bad boss ladies, or any other random important figures wandering the hotel grounds.

The scream she released into her pillow was shrill and prolonged, so much so that she probably
deserved a pat on the back for having such impressive lung capacity. Alas, the only other person in
the room who could give her such praise was currently partaking in his own coping mechanism,
which was of the more brooding, window-staring variety.

After what may have very well been thirty seconds of lung purging, Vex gasped for air just as she
heard a knock at the door. She whipped her head toward her brother, gearing up for a series of
profanities when he eased her with a calming hand gesture.

“It’s fine, I got it,” Vax said, heading over to answer the summons.

Listening in, Vex nearly ripped her optic nerves in an eye roll that could only be induced by the
sound of Percy’s voice.

“Is Vex with you?” Percy asked.

Vax widened his stance as he maintained a barrier between Percy and their room. “What do you
want?”

Percy cleared his throat and spoke more softly, though Vex could still hear him very clearly. “Could
I please have a word with her?”

Vax turned to check in with Vex, who gave him an exasperated look as she spoke loudly. “Gods,
no…”

Vax glanced back at Percy, who reacted promptly, “Yes. I heard... Suppose that settles it then?”

“Aw, afraid it does,” Vax said with an insincere grin. “See you later Percy!”

“Wait-”

With that, Vax practically slammed the door in Percy’s face, before theatrically dusting off his hands.

“There.”

“Tactful as usual…”

“Anything for you Stubby.”

“How did he look?”

Picking at his nails, Vax seemed somewhat amused with the whole ordeal. “Kind of pathetic to be
entirely honest… Like a puppy in an uncomfortable Winter’s Crest costume.”

Vex closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose, finding herself regretting her decision
sooner than she predicted.

“But trust me. I know the game he’s playing. And I won’t let him bother you,” Vax continued.

Only it was going to bother her; probably for the rest of the day as a matter of fact. As much as she
wanted to prologue this silent treatment, she knew better. She needed to rectify this before things got
any more tense; and definitely before seeing the Prime Minister. Otherwise it would ruin the entire
experience.

Staring up at the ceiling, she muttered a few profanities before promptly standing up, quickly putting
on her flip flops, and scurrying out the door.
Vax’s eyes went wide as they trailed his sister. “Wait...I thought-”

“I’ll be back,” she barked, quickly closing the door behind her before he could respond.

Biting her lower lip, Vex scanned both ends of the hall only to find that Percy was already out of sight. Letting out an audible groan, she quickly darted down his most likely direction of escape. As she turned the corner that lead to the elevators, a little jolt of combined satisfaction and dread crawled down her spine when she found the sly motherfucker, currently staring down at his own feet with a blank expression on his face as he waited for the elevator.

Vex clicked her tongue and made her approach, nudging his shoulder and snapping him out of his trance-like state. He looked genuinely surprised to see her, but before he could say anything stupid, Vex made sure to get her two cents in.

“Look,” she started, her voice a little strained. “My patience for bullshit is razor thin, so I hope you came over with the intention of offering some form of apology or els-”

“I did.”

“Oh.” Vex blinked, briefly glancing down for a few seconds before directing her attention back up at him and feigning an expression of nonchalance. She rested one arm in the other and lifted her chin at him. “Alright then...Let’s hear it.”

The elevator dinged, and both Percy and Vex watched the large metal doors open as a housekeeper rolled out with a cart and nodded at both of them. “Morning.”

“Morning,” Vex and Percy both said in harmony as they stood like an awkward pair of teens caught kissing, waiting for the woman to vanish down the hallway.

As soon as the wheels of the cart were out of earshot, Vex grabbed Percy by the arm and pulled him aside, closer to a window and next to a potted plant, which was well out of the elevator's way. “So?”

Percy closed his eyes and chuckled to himself, stuffing his hands in his pockets and resting against the wall before speaking. “I want to apologize for last night.”

Vex straightened her back a little, her chin still raised high.

“I wasn’t myself,” he continued. “I should have been more forthright and admitted I wasn’t feeling well. Instead, I pretended I was fine and then I lost my patience.”

Vex tried her best to keep her expression harsh, though she could already feel her face softening. “Well.” She cleared her throat and looked away. “I suppose I’m sorry as well. I was dumping a lot of information on you.”

Percy chuckled, likely amused by her stubbornness, though not phased enough to make note of it. “It’s quite alright,” he said, “In any other situation I would have been ready to hear it but-”

“I know I can be a little heavy at times.”

“Oh please.”

“No really, I understand.” She lifted her nose to the air with almost an air of pride. “I drive everyone a little crazy.”

“Vex. Seriously. It wasn’t you. At all.”
Percy’s new-found seriousness subdued Vex’s joking demeanor, and she gave him her undivided attention as he continued his train of thought.

“I just…” He glanced out the window. “I was irritable. And I repeat. It had nothing to do with you or what you said.”

She still had trouble believing that. But she’d humor him, for now.

“I probably would have gotten mad regardless of the topic of conversation,” he continued. “Whether it be your troubles, or bears, or troubles with bears…”

Vex couldn’t help but release a small chuckle, which she immediately censored.

Percy seemed to smile at his own humor, if only briefly. “It was me. Not you.”

“Is there a reason why you were so irritable?”

With his eyes still scanning the cityscape, he shrugged. “I was in a lot of pain.”

Vex wrinkled her nose in genuine concern “Really?”

With a subtle look of disdain spreading across his face, he raised his brows at the memory. “I was an imbecile and used up all my pain meds, which left me with none for the night.”

At first, Vex simply nodded. In a way, he was right. He really was a dumb-ass for allowing something like that to happen. Though at the same time she felt rather guilty for assuming he had some sort of personal qualm with her. It was self centered of her...as per fucking usual.

All she could really do now is makeup for her poor judgement by helping him pin the blame on a third party. “I’m sorry. But don’t blame it on yourself. They should have given you more if you were in that much pain-.”

“Oh, God’s no...” he stammered, before releasing a chuckle that seemed tad off; nervous, even. “The dosage was fine. I just...Well I got a little carried away after visiting Pike. Things had gotten so very complicated, what with the stress of the attack, and the interrogation, and seeing our injured friends, and I, well-”

“Darling,” Vex interrupted with a light giggle as she rested a hand on his arm. “I understand entirely. It’s fine.”

Raising a brow, he glanced down at her hand, which prompted her to immediately cease and desist her intrusion of his personal space. She was only now beginning to figure out that Percy wasn’t exactly the biggest fan of physical contact, which was of course quite an alien concept to her, though that was beside the point.

“Anyway,” she sighed, staring down at her nails for a brief second. “You should have told me what was going on. That’s all.”

“I know.”

“At any rate.” She looked up at him with a little smirk. “I’m pretty sure I asked you if you wanted some of my painkillers so...”

“Yes, I remember.” He smiled, though even behind that smile she could sense he was concealing something else.
“Well, you should have accepted my offer.”

“But I didn’t want any more,” he said a little more insistently, though still maintaining a decent level of composure. “I’d already taken too many.”

Vex cocked her head as she gave him a long once-over. He seemed awfully instant on this whole painkiller situation. She’d never seen someone be so fucking anal about something this mundane, though perhaps it was her mistake to assume that it was mundane at all...

In all honesty, the whole conversation felt a little -- off. Something wasn’t clicking with her, and yet she still had that familiar gut feeling she was inching closer and closer to some form of revelation, though she couldn’t quite put her finger on it. It was as if he were leaving out a crucial detail; one that perhaps was a lot more in reach than she first suspected: The one detail that he’d been dancing around this whole time -- as a matter of fact...

She smiled slightly, trying to disguise her scrutinizing tone. “Took too many of what?”

Like a man now choking on his own words, Percy was plagued with a sudden coughing fit, though it did little to divert Vex from her investigation. If anything, it only proved to her that she was now onto something.

“If you don’t mind me asking, of course,” she said with a foxy grin.

He cleared his throat and gave her a meek smile in return. “Oh no, it’s fine.”

And there it was again. A hesitation that could only mean he was hiding something. Heavens help him if he was lying to her.

“Percy…”

Like a shy student in middle school unsure of his own answer, he rested his hand over his mouth and muttered something that she sure hoped wasn’t his sad excuse for answer, because he had to be a true idiot to believe that she had actually heard him.

“Pardon?” she asked, batting her eyelashes at him.

He cleared his throat once more, before shoving his hands in his pockets and glancing out the window. “Just a little morphine…”

Vex’s eyes widened and she blinked at him dramatically, her tone of voice raising slightly. “They gave you morphine for broken ribs?”

He glanced down at his feet and shrugged. “I was surprised too. But I saw no reason to refuse.”

Vex’s expression glazed over for a moment as her mind processed this newfound information. It was a detail so simple in it’s delivery, yet so terribly complicated when allowed to catalyze with everything else she had learned about Percy in those past couple of months: Every conversation, every argument, every outburst and oddity; they all lead to this single moment in time when everything was suddenly falling into place so perfectly that she felt like an idiot for not putting it all together sooner. It was as if she had just found a missing puzzle piece that she had been hunting for weeks, and she was now uncertain as to whether she liked the direction in which the puzzle was headed...

She perked up as her vision refocused on him, realizing that perhaps she’d allowed her silence to linger for too long.
“Well alright then,” she said, giving him the sweetest smile she could muster while trying her very best not to make her concern known. “Though you’re okay now. Right?”

Percy didn’t seem all that perturbed, which she hoped was a good sign that she hadn’t become too transparent. “Well I called in this morning and had some more delivered. So I feel much better now.”


“Right.” He smiled slightly. “But that’s as much as they’re going to prescribe without me having to pay an extra fee. The only reason they agreed to even give me the new dose was because I told them I needed it for the trip.”

“Right…” Vex muttered as her synapses continued to go off like a fucking firing squad. At this point she figured there was no harm in throwing in some more bait to see if she could catch any more proof to support her hypothesis. She only hoped it wouldn’t backfire. “Percy, if you need some money I can-”

“Absolutely not,” he said, his response so quick it could be nothing but incriminating.

“You sure…?”

“Yes.” He smiled. “This is it. I’m not taking anymore after this. Ibuprofen will do just fine.”

Vex closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath as she tried her best to bury her feelings for just a little longer. “Right!” She said cheerfully. “I couldn’t agree more.”

However, despite her attempts to appear supportive, her response did not seem to get any more traction after that, and the hallway soon fell into silence, save for the subtle humming of the elevator running behind closed doors.

Percy continued to look out the window, though it didn’t seem like he was looking at much of anything, unless he legitimately found the backs of industrial buildings intriguing.

“Well I’m glad we had this talk,” Vex finally said, trying to break the silence.

Percy turned to look at her and gave her a smile that seemed more sincere than the others. “Same. I’m glad we’re on the same page.”

Where they though? Did Percy have any idea of what she currently suspected? And was she even right? Surely this couldn’t be the end of their conversation. Yet as Vex tried to come up with something else to say, Percy made his way toward the elevator and pressed the down button.

“Of course,” she eventually muttered. “Always good. Transparency is key here, after all.”

“Indeed,” he said right as the elevator doors opened. He stepped inside and held the door with his hand. “Anyway, I should probably get going.”

He seemed to be in an awful big hurry all of the sudden. But in the end, it wasn’t like they had much else to talk about… Save for topics that would take far too long to discuss if she brought them up.

“Right,” she forced a smile. “We should probably go get ready for this meeting…thing.”

“ Seems wise,” he said with a smile as he released his hand from the door.

Realizing she had no more time, she blurted out the first thing that came to her mind. “But we’ll talk later, yeah?”
He hummed with a nod as he pressed a button, giving her one last look. “Yeah.”

With that, the elevator doors closed with a thud, bringing their conversation to a definite end.

She stood staring at the doors for a long while, as if part of her hoped that they’d open again and he’d come back out, taking her hand and telling her with absolute clarity that her suspicions were founded in truth.

Alas, as her rational brain took hold of the rains once more, she knew she wouldn’t get such a satisfaction, nor would she dare ask him for confirmation. All she could really do now is think. And think a lot.

***

And think she did. All the way back to the room where Vax -- of course -- asked the most appropriate and non-provoking of questions.

“So. You two kiss and make-up?”

Vex sighed and she knelt in front of her travel backpack, “I guess you could say that, yeah.”

“No, but seriously. Everything okay?”

Vex legitimately didn’t know how to answer that question. Yes. In a way, things were significantly better considering her and Percy were on speaking terms again. But the revelation she’d had more than made up for the stress that she’d alleviated with their peacemaking. The worst part about it was that she wasn’t even sure if what she suspected was even true. Perhaps she was jumping to conclusions. Maybe this was just as crazy as her secret writer conspiracy theory, or her android theory, or the vampire one. And yet, the more she thought about it, the more she found her hypothesis to account for all of Percy’s... eccentricities.

“Vex?”

She flinched, turning to Vax with a smile, “Yeah, I’m fine.”

Vax didn’t seem all that convinced, but she didn’t have the energy to fight his bias.

Instead, she directed her attention back to her very sad excuse for a clothing selection. “I just…” Her options where either far too grungy, or far too nightclubby. Nothing that was even close to appropriate for a meeting with the Prime Minister. “...I just have absolutely nothing to fucking wear.”

Alas, perhaps her mental faculties were better spent coming up with something creative to adorn herself with, or maybe she could use her head organ to discover the moral loophole that allowed her to borrow something from Pike even though she was still in the hospital...since her clothes were a little more on the “adult” side of the spectrum.

Either way, it was certainly better than stewing over the uncomfortable possibility that she had in fact been offering up her couch to a drug addict.

Chapter End Notes
Such a difficult chapter to write. Not so much because it was in any way stylistically complicated, but mostly because I wasn’t sure whether I wanted to open the narrative can-of-worms that involved Vex starting to suspect that Percy might have a drug problem. I could have just left her blissfully ignorant of the situation, but I soon realized that it was too out of character for her not to figure it out. She’s a clever woman with a really high insight modifier, and to have her dumb for so long just felt wrong. So I hope you all understand why it took me so long to get this chapter out there and I hope it was worth the wait. I promise we will see Uriel next chapter!
Chapter Summary

Last time, on The Butterfly Effect: Vex confronts Percy to discuss his ill behavior from the day before. In the conversation he reveals that he was acting up due to pain because he had run out of the morphine doctor prescribed him. Since this revelation, Vex hasn’t been able to get her mind off the conversation.

Chapter Notes

So I made a poll on Twitter which I also shared on Tumblr to see whether people wanted a shorter chapter with a cliffhanger now, or a longer chapter later with less of a cliffhanger. Somehow, out of 8 votes, the opinion was 50/50. One reader mentioned of a conspiracy that you all voted like that so that I would have to ultimately chose, and honestly, I wouldn't doubt it.

ANYWAY, here is a new chapter. Am I mad at myself for making essentially no narrative progress? A little. This chapter is overall pretty insignificant and I think and editor would say “cut that!” But hey. When in doubt, just call it character development...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She was going to have to talk to someone about it sooner or later.

However, Vex also knew that Vax was not an ideal audience, given his tendency to escalate even the smallest of things. Granted, Percy plight wasn’t exactly the “smallest of things”, and she wouldn’t necessarily judge her brother’s predicted reaction, but she rather keep things simple until after they had had an audience with the Prime Minister.

Nevertheless, despite Vex’s deepest desires to keep the information she’d learned about Percy a secret, she knew it was only a matter of time before the information spilled out of her like champagne in the glass of a drunk bachelorette.

She couldn’t help it. No secret was safe when Vex was around, and it was precisely why she needed to get away from Vax as soon as possible, lest she give in to her nature and confess the thoughts she couldn’t even confirm to be true.

Therefore -- mindful of her own shortcomings -- Vex deemed it best to no longer hold her tongue under house arrest, and instead allow herself a little bit of a thought purge with someone whom she knew would keep the information to himself, none the wiser.

Besides, it would give her ample opportunity to rummage through Pike’s clothes for something passable...
“This some kind of test?” Grog asked, deep ridges forming across his face as if he’d been asked the most difficult question of his life. Either that, or he was growing frustrated with his button-down shirt again.

Vex furrowed her brow at Grog, her lips parted for a solid two seconds before replying. “What? No. I’m simply curious to hear your take on him.” She flipped her hair out of the way and continued sorting through Pike’s suitcase. “That’s all.”

He gave her a look through the mirror and lifted his nose to the air, “Bout fuckin’ time someone appreciated my opinion for something…”

Vex blinked right back at him and forced her mouth into something akin to a smile. “I’ve always valued your opinion darling.”

“Well, thank you.”

“Your welcome.”

“Cool beans.”

They shared a moment of silence, which soon turned into an awkward pause that hinted at the possibility that Grog wasn’t going to speak up again.

“Grog?”

“What?”

“So?”

His signature thinking face prompted a second momentary lapse in the conversation before he finally spoke up. “What was the question again?”

She rested her face in her palm, “Percy.”

“What about ‘im?”

“Do you think he’s acting strange?”

“Fuck if I know…” he said, rolling his shoulders and drawing his attention back to his shirt buttons, undoubtedly more preoccupied with dressing himself than answering the question that was, to his own credit, pretty random.

“Well, what do you think of him in general then?”

His eyes raised to the ceiling as his face puckered, before shrugging slightly. “Guess ‘e’s alright.”

“Alright…?”

“Yeh.”

Vex sighed, lifting a blue shirt to her chest to check its size before shaking her head and neatly placing it into the reject pile. “Think you could elaborate?”

“Hell yeah I can fuckin’ elevate,” Grog snorted, taking some time to reflect before “elevating” his statement. “The few times ‘e’s come out with us ‘e’s been a good sport. Know’s ‘ow to drink. Bit of a lightweight t’be ‘onest. Well, compared to Pike and me. But waaaay better than Keyleth or Vax so
I can’t complain, you know?"

“Fair enough...” Vex muttered. “But do you like him?”

Grog turned to look at Vex with a grimace, distracting himself from his buttoning once again. “You know I don’t swing that way.”

Vex rubbed her eyes with her thumb and index finger. “That’s not what I meant...”

“Ah fuck...” Newfound concern painted his tone of voice, “Is ‘e into me? Fukin’ ‘ell Vex. You know I’m no good with all this drama shit. Not keen on ‘urtin’ anyone’s feelings. And then things would get all awkward... and Pike would be so disappointed in m-”

“Grog,” Vex gasped, throwing her head back. “Nobody likes anybody in that way. I am just curious to know if you like him as a friend.”

He snorted. “Well fuck... no need to get all nippy ‘bout it.” However, as he glanced back at his shirt, his expression grew from cocky to dreadfully confused as he tried to figure out where he’d left off buttoning. “But yeh... Pike seems to like ‘im so I guess I do too.”

Vex perked up as she uncovered a crisp white shirt that matched what she was looking for. “So what you’re saying is that you haven’t really thought about it independently on your own.”

“Nope.”

Vex rolled her eyes as she stood. “Figures.”

After another brief pause, Grog spoke up, which surprised Vex, considering he was usually the type of man who needed to be prompted to speak. “No, but seriously. Why all the question all of a sudden? ‘e do somethin’? You want me to fuck ‘im up?”

“Gods no,” Vex said, laughing nervously.

Now would have been a good time to bring up her suspicions. And yet, part of her now worried that perhaps, even in Grog’s simplicity, the topic of drugs may wave too many red flags. Besides, if she brought it up now, there was nothing stopping Grog from innocently asking Pike for guidance on the matter when she got better, and if that happened, there is no way in hell that Pike would allow Percy’s mystery to go unaddressed. She was, after all, training to be an addiction specialist.

Pike’s aspiring professions was something that Percy new; they’d discussed it over drinks on more than one occasion. Vex’s fingers tightened around the shirt as her mind wandered to the memory of him refusing to see Pike when he was feeling unwell, and a swelling knot formed in her stomach.

She shook her head and tried to focus on the now. One thing was certain. If she was to buy time and keep her investigation simple, she would make no mention of drugs to Grog. The last thing she needed was him speaking to Pike and making things complicated.

“I’m not that big of a people person Vex,” Grog said rather suddenly. There was the smallest hint of guilt in his words, which in turn made Vex feel awful. What if he’d picked up on her disappointment toward his contributions? “I don’t really know if someone’s a lil’ shit or not. I only recognize big shits, you know? That’s what Pike and you are for. And is it me or is this shirt fukin’ impossible!”

He may have not been the most articulate creature on the planet, and he wasn’t terribly informative, but at least he was honest. Besides, even when he did lie, he was absolutely terrible at it. Therefore, despite his relatively poor contribution to her investigation, his genuine opinions combined with his
wardrobe struggles left a smile on her face.

“You’re right darling,” she said, reaching over to help him button up his shirt as payment for his time. “And you were helpful.”

In all fairness, she didn’t expect much else from a conversation with Grog, though it was worth a shot. She never would have been able to have such a conversation with anyone else, lest she rouse suspicion. Therefore, she would treat it as a good honest chat and pry no further. Besides, she didn’t want to overstay her welcome, and wanted to be long gone before Scanlan got out of the shower and gave her shit for being alone with Grog. Because he’d totally do it too.

***

“Want to bet our trip was more vertical than it was horizontal?”

Raising a brow, Vex glanced down at Scanlan. “Are you referring to our trip from the hotel to the Prime Minister?”

“Yes.”

With a small smirk, she took note of what floor they were currently zooming past. “Considering we just passed the 49th floor, I think we both know the answer to that one.” She chuckled. “We’re high up...but not that high up.”

The journey to the Prime Minister’s office in the Cloudtop Center was indeed a combination of elevator trips and long walks across sky bridges. So, justifiably, one could find the feeling of upward travel both invigorating, and perhaps even a little stomach curling... But they certainly hadn’t traveled in that elevator more so than they’d traveled in Agent Assum’s van.

“Though it would be pretty cool...” Vex continued with a smile and a sigh, feeling a touch of nostalgia for the time when she would have believed something silly like that. Alas, she could at the very least say that she felt accomplished for once; granted she knew that sense of accomplishment would soon fade once she reminded herself that they had no merit in their chance victory; that they were all but pawns in a dice game played by a bunch of lazy gods.

With a roll of her shoulders, she let out a sharp huff. They’d reached their destination, which meant it was time for her anxiety to be released like a hungry dog. Which part of the “Good, Weird, Bad, Worse” cycle were they currently in? Had things already gone from worse to good or from good to weird? Because she sure as hell wasn’t ready for some more bad. Not yet.

A tactfully decorated hallway lead them to the opulent waiting room, that had clearly been sprayed with some sort of vanilla air freshener to cover up the far more stubborn smell of cigars.

But why bother hiding it? If they truly thought the smell of cigars was all that offensive to visitors, why not disallow their consumption entirely? Surely someone of high enough influence could put a stop to the problem. Then again, maybe not. It was, after all, an environment likely saturated with individuals who were not used to being told “no”. It was probably that much less of a hassle to simply humor their habit and then cover up the evidence later.

“Typical...” Vex muttered under her breath as she adjusted Pike’s button-down shirt over her shoulders with a sigh. Unfortunately, it fit just about as well as one of her ex’s shirts, though it made sense. Pike was both bigger busted and had broader shoulders than herself, so she couldn’t really do much about it but smile. It’s not like anyone else had concerned themselves with looking presentable
anyway...

Vax was wearing his black jeans under his black button-down shirt and had not brought his tie, and Percy had foregone the waistcoat. Scanlan and Tiberius were acceptably dressed, but only because they were both generally better dressed than the rest of them on any given day anyway. In fact, the only one who had seemed to have made any effort was Grog, and considering he likely hadn’t done it on purpose, the irony was not lost on Vex.

It pained her to admit that she probably would have felt a lot better about herself had she not been so fucking concerned with impressing people. But she couldn’t help it. It was like a pavlovian reflex. Whenever she found herself in elegant company, her anxiety skyrocketed, and all she wanted to do was steal a fairy godmother’s wand and make them all look classy as all hell so they could leave feeling like they hadn’t completely embarrassed themselves.

She laughed at her own nervousness as she stared down the elegant door that supposedly lead to the Prime Minister. If Vax could hear her thoughts right now he’d give her hell, and she wouldn’t even blame him. She was fully cognizant of the fact that she had a tendency to overthink things, and she probably would have continued to do so had she not been distracted by the communal gasp that signaled the appearance of the familiar smiling figure currently being pushed in a wheelchair by Allura.

Vax shot up from the leather chair and shouted out rather uncouthly. “Keyleth!”

The others quickly followed, barraging her with love and questions that were lost in the commotion, all the while trying to avoid her extended leg currently locked in an enormous cast.

“I’m fine. Don’t worry! I’m fine,” Keyleth insisted, her wide grin unwavering as she exchanged high fives and awkward side hugs. “I was so worried I wasn’t gonna be able to join you.”

“Now now,” Allura said with a smile. “I wasn't going to have you miss out on this invitation.” However, her expression quickly saddened as she looked at the others. “I’m sorry Pike Trickfoot isn’t well enough to join you all.”

“You owe us no such apology,” Tiberius said. “Your kindness knows no bounds. As a testament, you’ve brought us our dear friend, and that in itself is more than we would have hoped for.”

Allura chuckled. “No point in doing a day’s work if you’re not helping someone while you do it.”

With the same caution one would have with a small bird, Vex approached Keyleth, quite taken by the state of her leg. “How are you feeling dear?”

“Eh.” Keyleth shrugged. “Been better. But you know what would really help?”


Keyleth pointed a finger at him, “Yes!”

Vex snorted at Percy’s comment, though his deadpan expression didn’t waver.

“But also…” Keyleth stuck her face into her canvas bag before pulling out a box of colorful sharpies.

Percy closed his eyes and pressed his glasses against his nose with an expression that hinted mild second-hand embarrassment, to which Keyleth justifiably reacted by shaking the box of sharpies in his face.
“C’mon Percy. You know you want to!”

“Do I though?”

“It doesn’t have to be a masterpiece Percy.”

Scanlan grinned wickedly “Can I draw a-”

“No,” Keyleth interrupted as she worked on opening the box with her teeth.

The team seemed as though they were all rearing up to volunteer, when Agent Assum peeked his head from behind the elegant door, calling for their attention with a clearing of his throat. “My apologies for the interruption, but the Prime Minister will see you now.”

The group immediately composed itself, and as Percy took control of Keyleth’s wheelchair, she let out a little huff, resting the sharpie box on her lap, “Well never mind…”

Vex twirled around and immediately started adjusting her hair and chewing on her bottom lip like a piece of jerky, though her nerves were immediately quelled as Vax sequestered her hand and gave it a squeeze. She gave him a long, scolding stare, and he returned the treatment; it was an exchange that others often interpreted as some sort of secret twin communication, but really, it was just a showdown to decide who would cave and speak first.

And cave he did. “If father could see us now…”

Vex restrained a chuckle, “I know right?”

“He’d be so fucking jealous. You should remind yourself of that. It will make you feel a lot better.”

“I’m not nervous…”

“Never said you were dummy.” He smirked. “But I am, so I wanted to hold your hand.”

Vex returned the smallest of smirks and squeezed his hand a little tighter, though she didn’t dare say anything else lest she betray her emotions any further.

“Alright then…” Vax said as he tucked a strand of hair behind his ear. “Eyes forward. Smile wide. And none of them will know how much we fucking hate this…”

Chapter End Notes

So yeah. I lied. No Uriel this chapter. BUT NEXT CHAPTER I SWEAR IT.

Also, I know this has been a long time coming, but I’ve finally compiled enough songs to where I feel confident sharing Keyleth’s playlist with you all. Many thanks to those who helped me pick songs, and suggestions are still welcome! The playlist will be forever growing.

YouTube Link
Vox Machina

Chapter Summary

Last time, on the Butterfly Effect: After learning about Percy’s disconcerting confession about his use of painkillers, Vex does her best to glean more information off of Grog as she gets ready to meet the Prime Minister. As the group awaits an audience, they are pleased to see Keyleth being wheeled in a wheelchair by Allura.

Chapter Notes

No Content Warnings this chapter.

Well. It’s finally here. I’ll be honest. I was this close to dividing this up into two chapters, but I had promised that this would be the chapter in which we saw the Prime Minister, and thus, I kept my promise. It’s so fucking nice to get a chapter out after so many months. I had gotten so lost in personal matters that I had lost sight of what I truly loved to do, which is writing this fic. But summer break is coming very very soon and I intend on releasing chapters more frequently. Ideally, I would like to finish this first “book” as we’d like to call it before I begin my last semester of grad school. But knowing me, that’s not gonna happen.

But anyway, without further ado, here is a chapter from Keyleth’s POV...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Keyleth’s trepidation was overwhelmed by the intensity of her longing. It cowered and knelt before her, allowing her to step right over it and continue forth into the immense crystalline expanse that awaited her. She took one step onto the water to find that she could stand on its surface like a mirror, and as warmth filled her body, she smiled away a tear and took another step, and another... and then another... slowly making her way where her mother stood at a fair distance.

Her mother spoke softly, though her voice was as clear as if she were mere inches away. “What’s wrong sweetheart?”

With a wide smile and eyes filled with tears, Keyleth stopped but a few feet from the woman who had vanished from her life almost two decades ago, gawking at her everlasting youth. She had never seen her mother from this point of view before…eye to eye, peers in height.

“You can tell me,” her mother spoke again, her soft tone ever persistent.

Though her joy was unwavering, Keyleth’s voice struggled to find its volume; it was almost in a whisper, threatening to crack under the pressure of her emotions.

“It’s hard having to hide it...” she said.

“And why is that?” her mother asked, though her tone indicated that she likely already knew the
Ripples formed under their feet which propagated out into the endless horizon.

“People like who I am now,” Keyleth answered.

A soft smile found Vilya’s lips and she approached Keyleth, reaching out and ice-cold hand to wipe a tear out of her daughter’s eye. “Those who matter will always be by your side.”

The words were kind, but the feelings that they brought were not. Keyleth’s expression hardened, though she tried to maintain her smile as she spoke.

“But you left...”

Vilya simply chuckled before closing her eyes.

“You left me when I needed you the most.”

Suddenly, Vilya’s form began to sink down into the water. “No Keyleth.”

Keyleth’s eyes went wide. “W-what?”

“You’ve only lost me,” Vilya said with a smile as her form melted away.

“Wait!”

“But you’ll find me again.”

“No.” Keyleth could no longer hold the tears at bay. They streamed down her cheeks in hard lines. “How?” She gasped, grasping at her mother’s slippery form. “How?”

Vilya did no answer. Instead, as if pulled down by a heavy weight around her ankles, her body fully vanished beneath the water without a trace, leaving nothing but a silent series of ripples.

Keyleth fell to her knees in an attempt to go after her, but her hands found no purchase; only a cold, solid surface. Her shoulders heaved as she wept softly, allowing her body to slouch into a deep praying position. With her chest pressed against her knees and her forehead resting on the water, water... the cold temperature soothed her troubled mind as her eyes opened to see two individuals in white, now standing over her, one holding a damp cloth against her forehead, the other clasping a clipboard in hand.

“Ms. Ayre?”

Keyleth’s eyes struggled to focus and regain consciousness. She muttered the first thought that thrust its way into the forefront of her mind as the memory of pain found her body once gain “P-pike?”

A whisper echoed as one ghostly figure turned to the other. “Is she talking about Pike Trickfoot?”

“How...? F-uck. Why couldn’t she talk? Whers... is Pike...?”

One of the pale figures leaned in and shoved what looked like thirteen fingers in her face, “How many toes do I have on my head?”

Keyleth’s single attempt to blink revealed to her that her lids were far too heavy to open again. In fact, they were so heavy that by the time she finally managed to pry them apart, the two individuals were gone, now replaced by six more familiar figures...
Those fucking little shits.

“I luv you guyz sho much...” Keyleth slurred. She could feel dry tears pulling at the sides of her face, which ignited in her some unidentified sappiness that she quenched with more tears because why not? Crying is healthy.

When she opened her eyes again, Percy was in her face, looking about as pale as he usually did.

“We love you too Keyleth,” he said, before turning to whisper to the others so loudly that she could feel his deep timbre echoing between her ears. “She’s still really high…”

Hell yeah she was fucking high. She had no idea how she’d gotten from being the top slice of a Percy-road sandwich, to being in a scratchy hospital bed with enough sedatives to drop a horse and oh-god-something-cold-and-clammy-was-touching-her-get-it-away.

And pull away she almost did, before realizing that it was just Vex...

Ah...Nope.

That was definitely Vax. She recognized his scent.

“How long will you have to stay here...?” he asked.

She’d always wondered why he smelled so nice. Even after a long day at work, when he’d been sweating all morning lifting boxes with Grog, he always had this smooth scent about him; like the smell of leather, but with the slightest hint of vanilla. Kind of musky, actually, but not in a bad way, you know? Maybe it was his shampoo...

She reached out and clawed for his hair, dangling tantalizingly close to her face. Its texture was satisfying. More coarse than Percy’s but much smoother. Frankly, she felt like she could do this...

“Forevur...” she said out loud.

Voices around her droned on and on, but all she could focus on was his hair between her fingers, like a kitten’s tail. For a second, she felt herself doze off, but she flinched awake when she heard him say, “Because we need to leave.”

Oh god. Yes. She wanted to leave. Halp.

“I’m afraid that is going to be very difficult,” the nurse said.

Were they seriously going to keep them all hostage? Heeell no they weren’t. Shits needed to fucking go! They had work and school and lives and stuff. They didn’t need her. She could handle herself just fine. Besides, all she ever did was buy them food, alcohol, and weed with her dad’s money which she was supposed to be using for rent anyway...She was the bonus friend.

Her eyes narrowed as she tried to refocus on what was going on around her. At this point, she could tell they were having some sort of heated discussion with the nurses, so she knew now was the perfect time to concoct the diversion of a lifetime. A chance to escape they would not refuse...!

She took a brave stance on the other edge of the water, raising her hand high and calling forth the lightning above her. She would hold back these evil doctors who would dare hold her friends captive, and with the wind blowing her hair in a dramatic display, she shouted out to her comrades:

“Jush leav me here...” she cried out, lifting her fist into the air and watching the clouds above the
battlefield swirl above her. “Go! Go withow me…. I’ll hold dem at bay...”

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Balls.

Keyleth’s lids fluttered open and immediate pain found the back of her eyes as the morning sun pierced through her vision.

Life sure did have a weird way of dealing out its lessons.

Now... weird didn’t necessarily mean **bad**. In fact, it usually didn’t. But there was definitely a lesson here. Of that Keyleth was certain. It was just a matter of figuring out...what lesson that was exactly.

She let out a groan as she propped herself into an upright position. After having one of the most bizarre trips of her life, she was pretty certain she could handle anything the world threw at her. Save for the maybe a foot race...

“What time is it...” she muttered to herself, her voice croakier than a bullfrog. She glanced around and spotted her phone beside her hospital bed, which immediately triggered a series of memories which mostly depicted her spending an nondescript amount of time deciphering text messages while tripping some serious balls...

She recalled an avalanche of text messages she’d gotten from various sources, including one from her father...which was both impressive and a little unnerving considering she had no recollection of informing him of her little **situation**. She also remembered a message from Percy telling her Pike was probably going to be okay, which was good...One more thing to take off the list of brain clutter. She also vaguely recollected something about meeting the Prime Minister...or seeing the Prime Minister...or something. Either way, she was certain it was no more than a drug induced fabrication...

...

Or was it.

Keyleth blinked.

“Wait...”

She aggressively scratched the side of her head.

Did she also get a text from Percy saying Vax had gone on a date with Gilmore?

“Nah...”

That didn’t make any sense. When would he have found the time? Yeah, no. She’d probably dreamt that part up because she shipped him and Gilmore like... hardcore.

She stared out into space for a few more moments before her eyes went wide. “No...wait.”

With a grunt, she quickly grabbed her phone and rapidly began to sift through the endless backlog of distressed messages and disjointed conversations.

“Oh Vax.” She snorted. “You really did go on a date.”

She kept on reading.
Tiberius: We will be meeting the Prime Minister at noon. I hope you are well enough to join us.

She blinked once. Rubbed her eyes. Read it again.

Tiberius: We will be meeting the Prime Minister at noon. I hope you are well enough to join us.

She blinked again.

And then once more.

“HOLY SHIT!” she squealed, before immediately covering her mouth and looking around frantically as she whispered to herself. “Crap crap crap crap crap…”

Keyleth glanced back down at her phone. It was 11:12.

“Ballsack,” she hissed under her breath.

She debated texting back, but she didn’t even know what to fucking say. There was no way in hell the nurses would release her without a mode of transportation. She could call a taxi, she figured, if they’d let her… Though she couldn’t imagine why they wouldn’t? Then again, she’d have to actually get the nurses’ attention first. Where were they anyway? She could be having a heart attack now and they wouldn’t even know.

Realizing she was wasting time, she started scrambling for some sort of button to call a nurse before realizing that she was being a dumbass and could use a little something called her vocal cords.

“Hey?” she said, in a mildly loud tone.

No reply.

She cleared her throat and spoke up a little louder. “Helloooo?”

A wave of relief rushed down Keyleth’s back as the door to her room opened on cue, though that relief immediately morphed to butterflies as she watched not a nurse, but Ms. Allura Vysoren herself peek her head from behind the door.

“Aw crap…” Keyleth grimaced. “Am I still high?”

Allura simply chuckled as she let herself in, followed by a couple of nurses “Not exactly…”

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All things considered, Keyleth found it pretty disconcerting that their most recent experiences hadn’t left a deeper scar on her psyche.

Sure, she was shook. She’d be insane not to be. But for some reason, she didn’t exactly feel...broken yet. At least, not as much as everyone else. She could see it in their eyes. They looked tired; drained; spent. Not to mention that lightly veiled sense of dread she could smell off of them from a mile away…

Vax looked on edge, as if he’d had way too much coffee in an attempt to ward off a sleepless night. Vex looked pretty tired as well, not to mention incredibly nervous; she could tell by the sweat stains under a shirt she recognized to be Pikes… Tiberius had that deeply furrowed brow that indicated he was probably thinking about things way too hard. He tended to do that when there was too much going on. And Grog too -- only there was more ansiness in his demeanor. He was pacing around a lot and seemed like he really wanted to get things moving. Scanlan was his usual grinning self, but
not even his smug expression could hide the puffiness around his eyes. As for Percy? Yeah...he looked off too. Anxious? Pained? Maybe even a little sickly to be honest.

Frankly, it was like they’d all gone through a completely different experience than she had... which was evidently true in part. From what she’d gathered reading the avalanche of text messages, and listening to the information Allura had given her on the drive over, the whole crew had gone through quite a bit of questioning from none other than that “Agent Assum” individual she’d heard so much about on the news. Allura said he was a good man, but she knew her friends well enough to understand that any interaction with authorities -- good or bad -- could be nerve wracking. Especially for Vax and Grog...

God, just thinking about it made her own trials feel so silly in comparison. She was so out of the loop. Entirely free of any form of true pain.

Sure, she had been upset when she learned about Krieg’s passing. But her friends were there to help her process that information. And sure, she had a broken leg. Big fucking deal. Meanwhile, her friends looked like they’d been through the apocalypse while she was too busy getting high in the fallout bunker. Needless to say...it made her feel sort of guilty; guilty that she wasn’t hurting as much as they were.

It was as if her view of the world was constantly skewed with a positive bias. Rose colored lenses, if you will. She seemed to have so much more hope than everyone else; so much more patience. A good part of her suspected this was due to her upbringing in what most would consider to be a privileged setting; she would never dare claim that she didn’t. Though the little voice in her head never ceased to wonder: Was it all the merit of nurture? Or did nature have something to do with it as well...

Either way, Keyleth had always known that she was a little different. It certainly didn’t take her parents all that long to figure that out. In fact, at first she thought the special treatment was...kind of nice.

But the homeschooling got old fast, especially when she was old enough to realize that it did nothing but exasperate her social shortcomings, which she knew she had. She wasn’t an idiot. And it wasn’t even so much that she didn’t understand people. No. In fact, she felt like she understood people perfectly fine. Better than others even.

It’s just that when it came to articulating her thoughts and opinions, she was a hot mess. And she knew it made her look like an airhead. Whenever she had real-talk with Percy, he always claimed she had a brilliant mind, but even she could tell he was patronizing her at times... though she’d never show her cards and admit that she knew that. Needless to say, her lack of people skills was why she was so reluctant meeting the Prime Minister. She knew the moment she opened her mouth would be the moment he lost all respect for her, which pained her because she was... well... supposed to be good at this sort of thing.

Being an Ashari ambassador in training was no laughing matter. She needed to be eloquent, articulate, respectable, well informed; all the things that she knew she wasn’t. But hey. That’s what she was here for. She needed to “become more worldly” as her father so aptly put it, and if meeting the Prime Minister didn’t count as gaining worldly experience then she didn’t know what would. She certainly knew smoking weed and drawing in adult coloring books all day wasn’t going to do it...

As Percy wheeled her closer to the door, she bit down on her lower lip and pinched her fingers around the box of colorful sharpies. She felt like a fool. An excited, anxious, silly looking fool with a terrible case of bedhead and morning breath. No biggy. No biggy at all. This was all just training; a quick way to level up fast with little or no effort on her part. Besides, she’d have to flex her
diplomatic skills eventually. So might as well start from the top and work her way down...

The man she recognized as the infamous Agent Assum bowed his head as he gestured the party into the Prime Minister’s chamber, and as they entered, Keyleth could almost feel the air leaving the room as everyone held their breath at once.

The room smelled oddly of home. It didn’t have that artificial, clean smell of bleach and flowers, nor did it smell like tacky candles or air fresheners. It was the soft, lived-in smell of aged wood, and old books, and leather, and old coffee in a mug that was currently resting by the hands of an imposing, yet kind looking man.

Keyleth was cautious as they entered space, doing her best not to gawk at the individual sitting behind a dark wood desk with his hands clasped; a man that she’d only ever seen on the news, and on TV, and on that large screen in the Cloudtop Club. And yet, in her attempt to avoid his glance she found herself staring at another individual instead.

It was a young boy, dressed in far more adult attire than she’d probably ever own. He had a black tie, a gray suit, and a wide smile that made the whole outfit look a lot more colorful. He was absolutely brimming with excitement, which struck Keyleth as odd considering he was probably the type of kid who was exposed to excitement on a daily basis; that is, if he was who she suspected him to be...

The group eventually came to an awkward, crawling halt, all unsure as to what distance was formally appropriate.

“Come now,” Uriel gestured with a soft chuckle. “No need to be shy.”

As prompted, the group took exactly one step closer, which caused both Assum and Allura to share a few looks with each other and mask some laughter behind cupped palms.

“Yeah yeah... Laugh it up”, Vax muttered, though it was just loud enough for Keyleth to pick it up.

The Prime Minister was a strong looking man, nearing middle age, with dark hair that was beginning to gray on the sides, and a well-kept beard. He was wearing a similarly colored suit to the young boy, but with a red and bronze-gold tie, which matched the gold watch around his wrist.

Behind him stood an imposing looking woman with cropped hair, a black suit, and very clearly armed and ready to give any of them a bad time if she so pleased.

Not that Keyleth had any intention of getting on anyone’s nerves. Nope. Not her. She was doing just fine, sitting in her comfy little wheelchair with her cute little box of sharpies -- minding her jolly old business and trying her darnedest not to embarrass herself while she allowed everyone else to introduce themselves and...

...Everyone around her went deathly quiet.

“What?” Keyleth blinked, too lost in thought to fully process why everyone had gone so silent all of a sudden.

However, it didn’t take her long to figure it out; the group made sure of that. They all turned to look at her with enough panic in their eyes to imply that she’d shot someone, which was -- incidentally -- just enough to help her realize what she had actually done. With a grimace, she glanced forward to find that the Prime Minister was staring at her. Expectantly.

“And you?” he asked.
Of course she’d been asked a question. It was only natural for it to happen when she wasn’t paying attention. She watched Tiberius hide his face in his palm, while Vex rubbed her temples in some desperate attempt to keep her head from exploding.

She turned to look at the Prime Minister Uriel and traded a nervous smile with him. “Pardon?”

The young boy chuckled as he stood patiently, and Uriel simply smiled back, “Your name.”

As she watched Scanlan throw his head back and grin to the ceiling, an immediate sense of dread fluttered up her gut and out her mouth. “Oh ugh…”

Words Keyleth. Use your words.

“Uh...Keyleth.” She blurted out. “I mean Ayre. Keyleth Ayre. Of the Ashari.” She shook her head. “Keyleth Ayre of the Ashari.”

The second hand embarrassment radiating off her friends was almost palpable. God. She could practically smell it.

She took a deep breath and tried to compose herself, desperate to salvage the situation. “You know...um. Korrin’s kid.”

Uriel’s eyes narrowed. “Korrin?”

Great start Keyleth. Great fucking start.

“I mean. Oh god...” She laughed nervously, but a squeeze of Percy’s hand on her shoulder encouraged her melting brain back into her skull. “Korrin Ayre of the Ashari. Stand-in Ambassador of Zephra.”

The young boy’s smile grew even wider as he turned to his father, “Father, the guy with the electric helicopters.”

Uriel clicked his tongue as realization found his eyes. “Ah yes.” He chuckled. “Forgive me for my lapse in memory. As a matter of fact, I now see the resemblance...”

She wasn’t sure if that was good news for her or terrible news for her father. But hey. At least his conference on Zephra’s new electric helicopter design resonated with someone.

“No no…” She muttered, glancing down. “It’s fine. My bad…”

A wave of sighs filled the awkward silence, and Keyleth closed her eyes as she tried to shake the embarrassment off her mind.

“Well, it’s a pleasure to be in such interesting company,” Uriel said, leaning into his desk and allowing his expression to grow a touch more solemn. “Though it is even more of a pleasure to be in the presence of the individuals who single handedly saved the reputation -- and possibly the very security -- of thousands of employees here in the Cloudtop Center. And for that, you have my utmost respect and gratitude. Thank you.”

It was so strange to hear those words come from the mouth of someone so iconic. In a way, it made him seem so much more tangible; so much more real. He was no longer just a face on a screen reading off a teleprompter. He was a living breathing individual -- addressing them specifically -- speaking of their deeds and their trials. Frankly, it was sort of freaky.
In a tone that was far more polite than Keyleth was used to, Vax spoke up rather unexpectedly, perhaps as a means of filling the silence that had stunned them. “We only did what we thought was right.”

Uriel smirked at Vax’s words. “Do not sell yourself short. I would expect no less from a group of upstanding citizens, prepared to risk their skin for the good of the people.”

Oh. Keyleth wasn’t sure how Vax would take that, nor was she the only one who had the thought. Both Vex and Scanlan turned to check on Vax’s reaction, though it was soon apparent that Vax knew better than to reveal any sign of his standard resentment toward government institutions.

“Of course,” Vax said with a smile, before staring down at his toes that were likely writhing in his boots.

“And as you may imagine, such services to Tal'Dorei have not gone unnoticed,” Uriel continued, before giving a subtle nod to Agent Assum.

“Soon the rumors of your deeds will spread across the city,” Assum said, picking up on Uriel’s cue. “And the people will have questions, and in turn, the press; and after that, likely some foreign officials. There is no avoiding it really…”

His words weren’t exactly helping Keyleth feel any less anxious about the situation. Was this seriously the man that her friends had been subjected to for the past few days?

Assum paced across the room before stopping beside Uriel’s desk. “Oh yes. There will be a whole slew of individuals seeking out the names of the vigilantes behind the unmasking of the Cloudtop Hacking Scandal.”

Uriel hummed, “I believe we already discussed using that word lightly Agent…”

Assum turned to Uriel and quirked a smile, clearly jesting. “You mean “scandal”?”

Uriel simply smirked back, giving Assum a long hard stare.

The relationship between the two was oddly casual. Though upon closer inspection, Keyleth noticed clear proof of their friendship peppered across the room in the form of pictures, many depicting much younger versions of both individuals, shaking hands or standing in group photographs. She even recognized Allura in some of them.

Eventually, Uriel spoke up, recollecting an air of formality. “Ms Vysoren.”

“Heroes,” Allura smiled, “Is the term we believe is more...press friendly.”

“Though not nearly as exciting…” Assum trailed off, staring up at the ceiling.

“And as heroes,” Allura continued, “we deem it proper to give you all an opportunity to speak to the press in a safe, contained setting. In a few weeks, that is.”

“Wait…” Vax muttered.

“You don’t mean an event do you?” Vex squeaked.

“Does the word ‘party’ sound more appetizing to you?” Assum asked with a subtle hint of mockery. “Surely, you wouldn’t be opposed to celebrating your new green stamp statuses with a party?”
Vex simply chuckled, though her tone was one that Keyleth recognized as deeply aggravated. This guy sure was good at picking up on people’s soft spots.

Allura closed her eyes and sighed for a moment before restoring her signature smile. “It will be an event that will allow you all to speak to those who are worth your time, while also giving you the space to breathe and enjoy some special treatment.”

“We’ve already gotten a lot of special treatment,” Vax stated, a hint of nervousness hiding behind his fabricated smile.

Percy traded a quick little grin with Vax, “But the people Vax; the people want to hear what we have to say.”

“I swear to god Percy…” Vex grumbled.

Grog nudged Scanlan and whispered, “Am I gonna ’ave to wear this suit again…?”

“You might as well start sleeping in it Grog. Will save you a lot of time.”

Vex subtly elbowed Scanlan in response, which prompted a soft chuckle from Percy which Keyleth only heard because he was right behind her.

Allura turned to Vax with a smile that urged trust, “Do not take my words as hyperbole. Know that many are indeed starting to see you all as heroes.”

Uriel briefly turned to look at the young boy. “I know someone who already does…”

With that, as if given the an unspoken word of approval, the child grabbed hold of what looked like a newspaper from Uriel’s desk and quickly approached the group with a look of anticipation.

“Don’t forget your manners Gren...”

The child rolled his eyes, before taking a formal stance in front of the party, newspaper in hand. “My name is Gren Tal’Dorei, and it is a pleasure to meet all of you.”

“The pleasure is ours, young Gren,” Tiberius said with a formal bow, never ceasing to remind the group that he had vast experience when it came to these sorts of things.

Meanwhile, Keyleth couldn’t help but smile at the little miniature politician in training. Apart from the obvious fact that she believed that children represented the most beautiful version of human hope... there was something else about this kid that gave her some serious feels. It was a bizarre combination of maternal pride and jealous inadequacy; a realization that this kid was leagues ahead of her. Full of purpose and hope and a desire to learn. She only wished that she had harbored so much initiative when she was a child.

“I was…” Gren cleared his throat. “I was hoping you could all sign this newspaper. Agent Assum said it’s the story they plan on releasing once you all leave the city. So I...wanted to ask you all for an autograph.” He swallowed once. “Please.”

In response to Gren’s request, most of the party shared what could be interpreted as an appropriate level of surprize and humility. This however, could not be said for Scanlan who -- as expected -- had already read the entire story and was halfway through signing the newspaper by the time Keyleth could even process what the hell was going on. Soon enough though, the rest of the party warmed up to the idea, and they each took turns carefully following Gren’s instruction as he pointed exactly
where he wanted them to sign.

Eventually, the paper made its way to a nervous Keyleth, who twiddled the pen between her fingers as she stared down at the conveniently empty spot Gren had so carefully left for her to sign.

“Make sure to leave a little bit of room for your friend who’s in the hospital...I hope I’ll get to meet her when you all come back.” He glanced up at Keyleth and looked at her straight in the eye. “You will be coming back right?”

“Of course,” Keyleth exclaimed with a big smile, though it dawned on her that perhaps it would have been wise to speak to the others on whether they were actually accepting the invitation or not. Oh well...She was in too deep now! “We all look forward to it,” she continued, signing her full name on the newspaper, complete with a little smiley face.

“I can’t wait Ms. Ayre. I have a lot of cool ideas that I think the Ashari would like.”

“Oh?” Keyleth perked up as she handed the pen back to Gren.

“Yeah.” Gren giggled. “We’ve been talking about recycling in school, and clean energy, and sustainability, and when dad had that conference with your dad a year ago about the helicopters I made this poster with this project proposal and-”

“Gren...” Uriel cautioned, though his smile was warm. “Let’s be sure to not waste much more of their time. They have a long trip ahead of them.”

“Of course father,” Gren said, before turning back to Keyleth apologetically. “Sorry.”

Her smile was wide. “Don’t be sorry. I’m sure you and I will have plenty to talk about.” She then leaned in and mocked a whisper. “And who knows. Maybe one day we can organize a conference! How does that sound?”

Gren’s eyes were practically twinkling with admiration, though as he opened his mouth to speak, his thoughts seemed somewhat derailed as his gaze settled on Keyleth’s leg cast. “Yeah, that sounds good...”

Picking up on Gren’s lapse in attention, a burst of inspiration greeted Keyleth’s senses, and she handed the box of sharpies to Gren. “You know what sounds even better?”

As if already savvy of what Keyleth had to say, Gren eagerly took the box of markers into his hands and bit down on his lower lip, staring at her expectantly.

Keyleth shared in the boy’s excitement as she spoke. “Would you like to sign my cast?”

Gren immediately turned to look at Uriel, clearly seeking approval.

Uriel let out a sigh before waving a hand dismissively, which prompted Gren to immediately start picking a color. He took his time, as if the decision had political weight, which was flattering to say the least. Eventually, he settled for a bright orange, and carefully scanned the cast before finding a perfect spot right below the knee.

Keyleth could tell that the other’s didn’t necessarily understand or approve of her bold request. But she knew exactly what she was doing.
Just as they had been honored with an autograph request, she figured allowing Gren to feel such an honor was the least she could do. And who knew? Maybe in a few decades they would both be sharing a table, discussing some fancy new green policy while sipping Ashari tea and having a jolly old time reminiscing over the time when they exchanged autographs.

So yeah, it felt like a great fucking idea. “Networking”, as the fancy kids called it.

With a bit of a flourish, Gren finished off the autograph before neatly placing the marker back into the box and returning it to Keyleth. “Thank you,” he said, before backing away slowly and taking his spot by his father’s desk once more.

With a sigh, Keyleth glanced down at the child’s autograph with adoration. Damn. The kid had some great penmanship.

“And thank you all, for honoring us with your time,” Uriel said. “I do hope you all accept the Cloudtop’s invitation.” He glanced at Allura for a moment. “We agreed upon a Winter’s Crest celebration yes?”

“Indeed,” Allura confirmed. “And we will be sure to stay in touch to settle all the details.”

“Yes yes, of course!” Tiberius spoke up. “You may keep correspondence with me. If that suits you, of course. You don't have to feel obligated to contact me. Though it would make communication with the group far less troublesome... You can imagine they are all quite busy. Though I suppose I am also busy~”

“Tiberius,” Vax sighed.

Tiberius straightened his back and cleared his throat, “What I meant to say: Whatever works for you Ms. Vysoren…”

“Easy there tiger…” Scanlan muttered, before being promptly silenced with one of Vex’s venomous stares.

“Yes. That sounds entirely doable Tiberius,” Allura said with a smile, before turning to Uriel and giving him a nod.

“Then it’s settled. I look forward to seeing you this coming Winter’s Crest.” Uriel leaned back in his chair, trading a smile with each and every one of them. “And please, have a safe journey home.”

“Thank you Prime Minister,” the group said in chorus.

Uriel’s expression softened. “No. Thank you-

“Vox Machina,” Scanlan blurted out.

Deathly silence fell upon the room once more as the rest of the party gawked at Scanlan with lax jaws and pulsing temples.

Scanlan crossed his arms with a grin, unphased by the others. “The group’s name Sir. It’s Vox Machina. Put that on record Agent,” he said, directing a pair of finger guns and a wink at Assum.

“That is not-” Vex squeaked, but Vax quickly grabbed her hand to silence her. “Oh my fucking god…” Vex mouthed mutely.
“Just let this one go,” Vax whispered. “Just let it go...”

After spending a nerve wracking couple of seconds giving the group a long onceover, a warm smile suddenly spread on Uriel’s face, and he spoke with no hesitation. “Thank you, Vox Machina.”

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Keyleth’s dreamlike haze did not leave her as the party was lead out of the chamber with relative haste. Scenes of the conversation that had just transpired flashed across her mind in an incessant cycle, causing her to relive the embarrassment and joy over and over again. So preoccupied was her head space that she hardly processed the fact that Gren was waving at her goodbye, which she only barely returned before the ornate wood door closed with a heavy thud.

With their business in the Cloudclop officially concluded, there were now faced with a task so daunting that not even Keyleth believed they could pull it off: It was time for “Vox Machina” to return to their normal lives...

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your constant support, and I hope you enjoyed this chapter from Keyleth's POV. She really is a fascinating character, so I look forward to hearing what you all have to think about my take on her. I hope I did her personality justice.
Chapter Summary

Last time, on the Butterfly Effect: After Keyleth joins the party from the hospital, they are all introduced to the Prime Minister Uriel and his son, and have a warm conversation. The party (whom Scanlan coins “Vox Machina”) are invited to Emon in a few weeks to give some interviews and Celebrate Wintercrest, and the party agrees to attend.

Chapter Notes

No Content Warnings this chapter.

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Finally found some time to write. My summer has started but I’ve spent most of it moving apartments. Though I still find times to rest every once in a while. Writing this more subdued chapter was a breath of fresh air.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The gentle droning of Vox Machina’s engine had nearly lulled Vex asleep when the voice of her brother broke though the white noise.

“What…” Vex grumbled, adjusting the terrible position she’d subjected her body to while seeking some much needed rest.

“Sunglasses Stubby.”

Sighing loudly, she lowered the glasses to the tip of her nose so she could get a good look at the obvious lack of direct sunlight in their vision. “We’re driving east.”

“So?”

“We’re not even facing the sun brother.”

Vax winced briefly. “It’s shining in my eyes through the mirror,” he said, opening his palm expectantly. “C’mon now.”

With an adequate though carefully controlled level of disdain, Vex let out one final huff before surrendering the glasses, making sure that her brother knew just how much he’d inconvenienced her with his need to see the road clearly so they wouldn’t all crash and perish. To be frank, she didn’t even know why she always insisted on keeping them.

With little more than a muttered “thanks” from her twin, she counted her blessings and turned to face the road as she cradled her healing wrist.

After ten seconds of what felt like hours of intolerable boredom, Vex grumbled to herself and began
fidgeting for the mechanism that would permit her to recline her seat to the point where she could practically stare at the stars -- that is -- if Vox Machina had a sunroof...and if it were nighttime. Alas, they did not have a sunroof... nor was it nighttime, so Vex had to make due and spend her moments of supine bliss staring at the dangling multi-colored herbs that bobbed and swung at their own unique rhythms. Had she been high she probably would have been able to find some twisted meaning in the hypnotic sway of the rosemary and sage, but sadly, Keyleth wasn’t around to assist.

Still, she had to allow herself to enjoy the little things. She never got to travel like this; not when the entire van was full. But with only four people in Vox Machina, the bitter-sweet emptiness granted both freedom and loneliness. Tiberius was sitting behind Vax with his *Book of Mending* partaking in some “light reading”, a term he used for something that normal people called “heavy research”. Meanwhile, Percy had taken the three seats in the very back and drawn Keyleth’s homemade curtains to get some sleep.

Indeed, traveling light and leaving their troubles behind was all quite lovely, albeit it meant heading back to the troubles they’d conveniently left at home. One could almost say it was peaceful, or at least, peaceful when she wasn’t annoying the hell out of Vax with her stubborn behavior.

She knew it was rude of her. They’d already been through so much that week. Though perhaps that was part of the problem: she desperately longed for things to go back to normal as quickly as possible, even if that meant getting into territorial disputes with her brother. Still, it was best that her irritation with him be short lived. He was afterall, along with Percy, doing most of the driving; not an easy task on their tight schedule.

With Grog, Pike, Scanlan and Keyleth all taking a plane that evening (thanks to Allura’s incredible generosity), they would not only leave after the van, but arrive to Westruun before them. Vex figured it probably would have been wiser to go on the plane with the others, but she didn’t want to leave her brother all alone with two nerds; and especially not Percy. She had to stick around to diffuse any tense situations, considering Percy had already proven to be a bit of a difficult case the night before, and she suspected he’d only get worse if he truly was experiencing drug withdrawals. She only hoped that he’d last the drive.

She turned her head and gave a good long look at the man in question. With the curtains drawn, the sunlight was projecting colorful floral patterns all over Percy’s sleeping face -- a look that, although flattering, didn’t help him appear like any less of a sketchball...

The good news was that Keyleth had promised to retrieve Trinket from the landlord as soon as they arrived home, which was one less stresser Vex had to worry about. She’d given Keyleth the keys to the apartment so she could sleep in her bed until they got back. Of course, Vex was well aware that walking Trinket with a broken leg would be obscenely difficult -- or at least without asking the neighbors for help, she so didn’t want to leave the two alone for too long.

Fortunately, the driving schedule Vax and Percy had formulated before the trip was precise down to the very minute: The plan was to drive for four hours at a time, taking half-hour breaks in between, and switching off every two shifts. With a schedule that had them driving all through the night, they hoped to arrive in Westruun in twenty hours, which would set their arrival time at around ten in the morning on Tuesday; an hour after Vex’s work shift began...

She hoped that her boss would allow her to work the night shift that evening so she could at the very least get paid for the day, but she understood if that was asking for too much. She wasn’t even all that sure as to what she could actually do, what with her broken wrist making it hard to do anything with her right hand.

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Vex sluggishly opened her eyes and glanced out the window to see that their van was coasting right next to another van of equal dimensions, though it was far newer, and of a dull military green. Vex licked her dry lips and hoisted herself up to get a better look at party driving next to them.

It was a van of young people, possibly close to their age -- but honestly -- probably a bit younger, all grinning and laughing while in uniform, and likely singing to some song on the radio.

“Poor saps,” Vex muttered. She’d been conditioned by her brother to react to people in the military in a somber manner, and fully predicted her brother had something to say about them as well.

However, what she did not predict was Percy decision to speak up instead. “Looks like they’re from Emon.”

Vex turned her attention toward the response only to realize that Percy had now taken Vax’s place in driver’s seat, while her brother was in the very back with his feet propped up on the windowsill. Had she seriously slept through their change?

“I bet they’re taking the next exit to Kymal,” Percy continued, his eyes briefly glancing at the military van before focusing back on the road.

Vex hummed, giving Percy a scrutinizing look. “How do you know?”

“I don’t. An educated guess, I suppose.”

Vex hummed. “And what makes you guess that?”

“It’s how Emon affords to give its reserves a stipend after their one mandatory year of service. Cities that need more help pay Emon to send its finest to go do other cities’ heavy lifting.”

Vex sighed, rubbing her arm and leaning back in her chair. “Mercenary work…”

“That is inaccurate, technically speaking,” Tiberius interjected, not bothering to look up from his book as he spoke with a finger raised, as if he were speaking up during a college lecture.

“Enlighten me,” Vex dared, raising a brow.

Tiberius adjusted his glasses as he spoke, “A mercenary is a professional who is paid by a foreign power to do their work. Young Emon reserves are paid by Emon to go work in a foreign power’s territory with the money given to Emon by foreign powers.”

Vex blinked.

“You see? It’s entirely different.”

Vax propped himself up and began poking Tiberius on the head, “So with Emon as the middleman it suddenly makes them not mercenaries?”

“Bah!” Tiberius huffed, lightly smacking Vax’s hand away as if it were a some angry bird. He then slicked back his hair before clearing his throat. “Precisely.”

“Right…” Vex muttered, watching the van slowly pass them.

Frankly, she didn’t really care to know who those young people were, or why they were so happy to risk their lives for people they didn’t know. In fact, after just one week of vigilante work in the name of a city that wasn’t her own, she was already fed up with it and knew that it wasn’t the life for her.
Of course, she understood the importance of protecting her home, but she agreed with Vax when he said that the city states in Exandria took things far too seriously.

Now, it wasn’t just Emon that invested in the military. Years of schooling had taught Vex the well known truth that most cities, in one shape or another, had some sort of army to protect it, especially after the conflict with Thordak Enterprises in the late 2020s following the contamination of Byroden. Whether it be government funded, or privately owned, cities needed to defend themselves from “hostile outside forces”, which were also known as...well...other cities. It was a vicious cycle really; fueled by unpredictable political landscapes and corporate development. And it was, of course, the people in the reserves that had to do all the grunt work.

Cities like Emon and Syngorn, required mandatory participation of all able bodied individuals in the reserves, and expected its citizens to complete one year of training after they turned eighteen, though you could defer your service if you wanted to do your schooling first. Still, Emon and Syngorn weren’t nearly as extreme as Vasselheim, that required four years of training to be completed immediately after turning eighteen. Other places, like Westruun, were small enough to only require volunteers.

“Does Kymal have reserves?” Vex asked.

“I believe so,” Percy said, “but they may have recently adopted Westruun’s policy to make it voluntary. I’d have to look it up.”

Vax chuckled slightly, “It would be nice if other cities modeled after Westruun. I kind of liked Emon...”

Vex snorted.

“What?”

Vex turned to look at Percy, “Kind of liked Emon he says...”

“I did,” Vax reiterated, furrowing his brow at them.

“I suspect her indignant burst of laughter is in reference to your admiration for a certain someone in Emon...” Tiberius said with a small smile.

“Gods forbid I fancy someone,” Vax said, crossing his arms. “Really though. I genuinely enjoyed certain parts of the city. The humbler parts. Rich parts were shit and I’d never live there even if they paid me.”

Percy briefly glanced at Vax through the rear-view mirror. “You know. Emon pays for your schooling once you’ve completed your training and officially become part of the reserves.”

“And they give you a stipend!” Tiberius added.

Vax huffed, crossing his arms and leaning back in his chair. “It’s barely worth it.”

“Right,” Vex laughed, concealing her nervousness with a smile and glancing out the window.

She’d completely forgotten about Emon’s new policy, considering the Prime Minister had passed it when she was still too busy to pay attention, given she was trying to survive off of saltine crackers and peanut butter while living in their car. Still, she knew Vax had no desire contributing his life to the system. Frankly, she wasn’t even sure if he could participate with his criminal record. So it wasn’t an option that she wanted to humor. They’d live their simple lives in their simple apartment making
ends meet with their simple jobs as best they could.

“I debated studying there,” Tiberius said. “Still am as a matter of fact.”

“I’m sure Allura would be quite happy to see you move there,” Vax said with a devilish grin.

Tiberius grumbled. “I most certainly doubt that.”

“You know that’s why you’re considering it.”

“Poppycock!” Tiberius exclaimed, turning a deep shade of red. “I simply wish to take advantage of the cheap schooling there...What’s one more year of service anyway?”

Percy tilted his head slightly, “I recall you telling me you already did your service in Draconia, right?”

“Indeed!” Tiberius perked up, closing his book shut. “Two years in the valiant Draconian Air Force! Though...I suppose I didn’t see much action. Spent the majority of my time organizing papers and documents and files... It was quite dull you see -- sitting hours on end sorting through backed up bureaucracy and trying to discern why my superior felt the need to-”

“Here we go again…” Vex muttered to herself, glancing out the window once more. She’d heard the story of Tiberius’ terrible secretarial stories enough times to where she’d practically memorized them. So she figured now was a good time as ever to catch up on some sleep, what with the sun setting on yet another day in the life of the Vox Machina gang.

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The rising sun found Vex in a terribly groggy state. She stretched the best she could and cracked her neck, before reaching for her phone that she’d left to charge in the glove compartment with one of Tiberius’s portable chargers. They were just about four hours away from reaching home, and she could not wait to see Trinket and catch up on all the love he’d likely missed out on staying with grumpy old Eskil Ryndarian.

Checking up on the latest news, her eyes widened and her jaw went lax when she stumbled across the most recent headline from Emon.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me!” Vex squealed loudly, piercing the air of the otherwise silent vehicle.

Percy flinched, glancing at her briefly from the driver’s seat.

“Pardon?” Tiberius asked.

“W-whu?” Vax mumbled, raising from the back seat like something undead.

Vex turned around and tossed her phone toward Vax, whom -- even in his dodgy state of consciousness -- managed to avoid taking a screen to the face by catching it with one hand mid-air.

After letting out a dramatic yawn, he raised a brow and read the headline outloud. “Prime Minister Invites “Vox Machina”, Heroes Responsible for Exposing Cloudtop Hackers, to Private Winter’s Crest Celebration”

“That’s hilarious,” Percy said, flaunting his signature deadpan tone.

“Seems as though the name has stuck,” Tiberius added.
Vex rested her face in her hand, muffling her distress, “I can’t believe this is happening...”

She wasn’t sure if she was supposed to be overjoyed that they had been invited to Emon again, or enraged that they had been invited as “Vox Machina”, the name that was conspicuously spray painted on the side of the van.

“You know what Vox Machina means in Latin?” Percy asked.

“It’s Latin?”

“Of course. It loosely translates to Voice Machine. Kind of a fitting name don’t you think?”

“How so?”

“Come now.” Percy smirked. “It’s brilliant really. A name for a group of individuals who speak up against injustice and act as the voice for those who do not have one.”

Vax snorted, “As if the Cloudtop Center doesn’t have a voice...”

Vex wrinkled her nose. “Now how in the Nine Hells do you know Latin?”

Percy simply shrugged. “I know a word or two...”

Bullshit. Vex knew this was just another one of those things Percy was trying to conceal under his fake identity as a drugged-up homeless person. A treasure hunter perhaps? Expert in ancient pre-Divergence ruins and collector of hidden treasures? Then again, that didn’t explain why he was hanging out with a bunch of losers...Perhaps they were an ethnographic case study?

“Well either way,” she said, “we’re never going to hear the end of it. Scanlan’s going take pride in this for the rest of his life.”

“So what?” Vax released another loud yawn. “Seriously sister, not sure why this irks you so terribly. Though you liked the name.”

“I do. It’s just-”

“You just need to complain about something,” Vax said.

“I do not!”

Percy simply chuckled at Vex’s response, to which she did not hesitate to react.

“And what are *you* laughing at?”

He immediately sealed his lips and tightened his grasp on the wheel, and Vex narrowed her eyes at him before turning toward Vax again, “Seriously brother...”

“Percy, pull over at the next gas station,” Vax said, taking no note of his sister’s pleas. “I’ll drive the rest of the way.”

“Don’t you dare change the subject on me!”

“Will do,” Percy said with a grin, ignoring Vex entirely.

“Guys!”
“Shall I play some music?” Tiberius chimed in.

“GUYS.”

In all honesty, part of her felt like she deserved the treatment. Still, there was nothing quite like moments like these to help remind her that the only man she could ever fully tolerate in her life was Trinket. Oh Trinket...she’d be home soon.

Chapter End Notes

I was obsessing over the editing of this chapter and then I eventually gave up and had to post it. So as usual, if you notice any glaring typos, feel free to inform me in the comments or in a PM on Tumblr or Twitter. It helps me immensely.
Chapter Summary

Inconvenient Time

Last time, on the “Butterfly Effect”: Driving non stop, Vex, Vax, Percy, and Tiberius travel to Westruun, discussing many topics along way, such as the state of the private military in Emon, and their invitation to the Winter Crest party as “Vox Machina.”

Chapter Notes

No Content Warnings this chapter

I caught so many mistakes and plot holes while editing this chapter that I grew paranoid and delayed posting it for a while. I blame it on my terrible sleep schedule. But hey! I eventually patched it up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Somehow, Vax and Percy had achieved the impossible: With Percy’s unsettling, albeit useful tendency to drive way over the speed limit, and Vax’s insistence on keeping their breaks as short as humanly possible, their arrival to Westruun was not only on time, but a solid hour and a half earlier than predicted, leaving Vex with a hefty thirty minutes to spare before work; plenty of time to get changed and grab her stuff real quick... so long as someone had the willpower to drive her to work.

As they made their way into the heart of town, Vex rolled down the window and allowed the crisp morning air to nip at her face and cleanse her lungs of the dank humidity that had built up in the van. The familiar smell of Westruun welcomed her with a bitter nostalgia that she’d grown accustomed to. It was a smell that reminded her of late nights, and late tears, and later rent. It brought back memories of lonely minutes at the bus station, and long dinners at Pho King, and empty pockets in malls. And of course, who could forget the long walks in the park with…

“Trinket!” Vex squealed, stumbling out of the van and making a beeline toward the apartments.

Vax let out a small chuckle as he watched his sister dart off, but the moment did not last long. Well aware of Vex’s obligations, he leaned out of the van and shouted across the parking lot.

“Don’t take long Vex’ahlia, Percy needs to drive you to work!”

Percy? Surely Vax could muster one last bit of energy to get her to work. Then again...if he was indeed planning on working the night shift that evening, he needed his rest. Alas, it couldn’t be helped, nor was it something she could dwell on. She had bigger things worry about.

She continued darting through the parking lot, her muscles threatening to buckle under the weight of her exhaustion, yet still smiling like a clown and crying over the thought of seeing Trinket again, when... something entirely different gave her pause.

Stopping in her tracks, she narrowed her eyes as she scanned the scene. There was an unfamiliar
vehicle parked in front of the office, bearing what appeared to be a foreign licence plate and a vaguely familiar symbol she couldn’t quite place.

Painted on its side, the insignia depicting a wide canopied tree that appeared to be on the foreground of some helicopter blades circling it like a halo. It certainly wasn’t the symbol of something wholly corporate, Vex thought; she would have recognized those -- merit of Vax’s preaching sessions. Yet she had no recollection of any tree symbology paired with the air-force. Surely something like that would stick out like a sore thumb in her brain. Was it part of an air deliver company? No...she’d seen very little helicopter traffic over Westruun. What if it was some sort of new business? No, no...the foreign licence plate. God! Why didn’t she recognize it?

“What are Zephyra Ashari doing here?” Vax muttered beside her.

Vex flinched at the sudden vicinity of her brother’s voice. Clearly, her inquisitive pause had been long enough to not only grant Vax ample time to park Vox Machina, but to allow him the convenient element of surprise as well.

“I don’t fucking know,” she scoffed.

Of course he would know about the Ashari. They were essentially the only private organization that he fucking tolerated. In fact, one could argue that he almost respected them, despite the fact that they too partook in private defense force training like so many other organizations that he held in great disdain. It was something about their political philosophy that appealed to him; their success as a tight knit, though highly advanced and specialized community out in the Midlands “spoke to him on a moral level” (as he once said while obscenely drunk). But beyond that, Vex wasn’t entirely sure as to why he’d grown so interested in them.

Either way, he had a good point. What were they doing here?

As she glanced up toward their apartment, she was surprised to spot Keyleth, who was currently being helped down the stairs by a couple of sturdy looking individuals wearing what appeared to be air-force garb.

Vex’s eyes narrowed. “Who’s that?”

“Not sure,” answered Vax, jogging over without giving it a second thought.

“Fuck,” Vex muttered, before chasing after him. “Wait for me!”

Of course, Vax took no head of his sister’s words of caution. To this day, she still didn’t understand how he could be so paranoid one day, and fucking careless the next. It would be the end of him. Or her. Or someone...

“Oi, Keyleth!” Vax shouted, waving to get her attention.

Noticing the commotion in the parking lot, Keyleth perked up and started waving furiously, albeit with a wide smile on her face.

Both confused and mildly irritated by her inability to keep the people around her in check, Vex felt utterly incapable of mustering the same levels of positive energy as Keyleth. However, her doubts were immediately dispelled when a loud bark gave her a surge of adrenaline. Her heart thawed and her eyes filled with moisture as she watched Trinket -- who’d been out of her line of sight beside Keyleth -- bound down the stairs in majestic strides. Calling out his name, Vex sprinted so fast that she surpassed Vax, and as she opened her arms wide, the dog immediately leapt up on his hind legs
and went straight for her face.

To any outsider, the sight of a massive canine tackling a tiny woman would have been a terrifying spectacle, but to Vex, it was but the purest and most precious display of love in the universe. Giving him some hearty belly rubs with her good hand, she allowed him the time to lick away her tears of joy, and after indulging him for a little longer, she pat him on the side as a signal to get down. “Yes yes, I missed you too buddy. Now down. Trinket down.”

Obeying Vex’s commands, the dog whimpered as he settled back on the ground, trotting around her a couple of times before indignantly resting on her feet with a grunt.

Vax eventually caught up to Vex at the bottom of the stairs, soon followed by a slow walking Percy and a slightly quicker walking Tiberius, who had watched the whole ordeal from the safety of Vox Machina parked just a few feet away. The last to join the group was Keyleth and the two individuals, who completed the circle they had formed at the bottom of the stairs in the middle of the parking lot like bunch of assholes.

“Guys,” Keyleth said, clasping her hands with a smile. “These are some of my fellow colleagues from the Ashari. We met after I finished home-school and joined the academy. We worked together for almost three years before I left for my sabbatical.”

“Oh,” Vex cracked a smile that desperately tried to hide her confusion. Academy? She never knew about any academy.

Drumming her fingers together once, Keyleth gave a nervous laugh and pointed at a young woman with bright blue eyes and a blonde undercut swept to the side “This is Zephyr.”

“Kaitiyake,” the woman said, throwing the group a nod as she patted the left side of her chest.

“And this is Sirocco.”

The young man with tightly curled black hair and rich brown eyes rested a hand on his heart with a gentle smile. “Kaitiyake, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“The pleasure is ours!” said Tiberius, rushing over and giving the two individuals handshakes. “I am Tiberius Stormwind, member of the valiant air force of Draconia. It’s quite lovely to see individuals in familiar garb. I’ve heard great things about your Academy from Keyleth.”

As much as it made Vex feel like a terrible friend, it wasn’t all that surprising that Tiberius would know about the academy, considering all the time him and Keyleth spent in the van. Still, she was dreadfully curious as to what in the Nine Hells they were talking about. Nevertheless, the introductions put Vex at a little more ease, prompting her to crack a small smile herself.

“A yes.” Percy chuckled, “Keyleth has mentioned her academy shenanigans in the past.”

Seriously... Even Percy knew about the damn academy? She’d really slacked off on her social skills. This was unacceptable; not that she could do anything about it now.

“Are you two visiting Keyleth?” Vax asked.

“When we heard the news we rushed over immediately,” Sirocco said.

“We didn’t want to leave her hanging,” Zephyr added. “Not in these conditions.”

The non-Ashari looked at each other with a little confusion, hinting to Keyleth that there was much
“Aw crap...you didn’t get the text did you?” Keyleth bit her lower lip and muttered to herself. “I knew my phone didn’t have service…”

“What are you talking about?” Vex asked.

“Well...” Keyleth began, leaning against the van with her crutches. “I’m going home for a few weeks.”


“I know. But it’s to heal up and stuff,” Keyleth said quickly. “It will be easier for me to take care of myself there. Less stairs, you know?” She let out a nervous laugh. “And anyway, I’m gonna take the time to do some office work so I can bring back a bunch of canned goods and produce.”

“Are you gonna be working?” Vax asked.

“I guess you could call it that.” Keyleth exchanged a quick look at her fellow Ashari, before giving a small shrug. “But not really. We don’t get paid. The community pays for all our expenses, and they give us food. And it’s a lot of food! So I’m definitely bringing some back.”

Vex cracked a genuine smile, even in her mild confusion. “Keyleth, that’s wonderful.”

“Your generosity is commendable,” Tiberius said, raising his chin.

“Yeah. It’s really great of you Keyleth.” Vax nodded. “But... you’re leaving now? Like right now?”

Keyleth grimaced slightly. “I’m sorry it’s so short notice, but I am. I sent you guys a message, but I guess I ran out of credit on my phone; and I couldn’t exactly walk over to a coffee shop to get wifi...”

“Shit...” Vax muttered.

Oh, he knew. This was exactly why Vex constantly gave him so much crap for refusing to get internet. He insisted he could hack into a different neighbor’s internet if their current benefactor changed the passwords on them (which – incidentally – happened almost a month ago). And yet, he never did. Instead, they’d been using their phone data plans for the last few weeks, since “they were going to be traveling anyway.”

Letting out a long sigh, Vex exchanged a small smile with Keyleth to ease the tension, “No Keyleth, it’s fine. You stay with your family for as long as you need.”

“We’ll survive without you.” Percy added as he hovered beside Vex. “We will try to keep busy with hobbies, and reading, and...” he cleared his throat, looking at Vex, “jobs.”

“Ugh Gods, right.” Vex groaned as she threw her head back, before turning back toward Keyleth and giving her a big hug. “I’m so sorry. I’d love to stay and chat but I need to get ready for work. It was lovely meeting you all.”

“Nice meeting you too,” Zephyr said.

Sirocco smiled. “You’re good people.”

The Ashari seemed like such respectful and sincere individuals. Perhaps there was more merit to their
organization than Vex initially imagined.

“We’ll miss you,” Vax said, giving her a hug. “Stay safe.”

Tiberius gave Keyleth a big hug as well, nearly lifting her off the ground even with his broken arm. “Safe travels Ambassador. May your rest bring you good health!”

Keyleth cringed as she was carefully put back down, where she stabilized herself against the van once more. “That’s not my title yet…” She laughed nervously. “Not yet…”

Percy opted out of the hug to spare his broken ribs, and went for a high five instead. “Send me some pictures. I’d love to see where you’re from.”

“Will do, and you take care of yourself Percy,” Keyleth said, shaking a scolding finger at him. “I won’t be around to spoon feed you.”

God. That’s right.

Vex hid a grimace as she began climbing the stairs toward her third story apartment. She imagined things with Percy were going to get worse before they got better; that is, if her suspicions about his drug withdrawal were correct. She’d give anything to have Keyleth stay, but she knew it was selfish of her to want that. She could only hope that things wouldn’t get as bad with Percy as they did the last time.

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Vex bit down on her lower lip as the silence in the van grew too intense to bare. Maybe being stuck with Percy was Vax’s subtle way of getting back at her for being difficult during the trip...

“Thank you for driving me Percy,” she said, trying to sound sincere.

He shrugged, staring at the red light with a lazy pair of blue eyes. “What’s ten more minutes?”

“You guys drove all day and all night.”

“Seriously Vex.” He turned to look at her intently. “It’s a non-issue. Anything to get you to work on time.”

The two sat staring at each other for what felt like a little too long for Vex’s comfort. It almost felt like he was playing a game of chicken with her, seeing if either of them would cave and bring up the massive elephant in the room; or at least, the one that she saw. For all she knew, Percy was oblivious to the fact that she knew about his little...problem.

“Oh, um...” Vex muttered, looking away.

“What?”

“It’s green,” she said, pointing at the traffic light.

“Ah shit,” he blurted out, stepping on the gas. “Thank you.”

Vex sighed, a little sadness forming in her eyes. “You’re tired darling.”

“I know. I’ll get some rest when I go home.”

Vex furrowed her brow at him. “And don’t just say that. Actually do it.” She huffed. “Instead of
staring at your phone all day doing gods know what.”

Percy’s brows raised slightly, though he seemed unfazed by Vex’s insistence. “No harm in a little online self promotion. Where do you think I get my extra cash from?”

She shrugged, resting her head against the window and letting out a deep sigh. “I just figured you knew the secret location to a money tree or something…”

“Remarkable.” He smirked. “How ever did you guess?”

His positive reaction boosted her mood, and she felt some tension escape her shoulders. “No secrets are safe from Vex’ahlia,” she answered with a grin, though she wondered if he was clever enough to glean anything else off of her comment.

Alas, no other words were exchanged between the two, and eventually, the van rolled to a halt in front of the diner. Closing the door behind her, she gave Percy a wave, who nodded back before driving off without a word.

The poor sap. Surely she owed him by this point; especially after everything he’d done for her. Still, the more selfish part of her believed this was due payment for his rotten behavior the other night, and she figured that if she stuck with that narrative, than perhaps her soul would be a little more at ease.

With the smell of hot, old grease filling her nostrils, and the sight of the neon “open” sign flickering before her, she let out a sigh and resigned herself to the fact that she had to work that six hour shift in the hell hole that was “Twenty Three & a Half-Hour Diner”, whether she wanted to or not.

After adjusting her shirt one last time, Vex eventually made it inside just as it was beginning to snow. However, before she could even hang up her jacket in the cellar-like box they called a staff-room, she was immediately confronted by two other waitresses she *sort of* knew; not that it was her fault: her boss had a tendency to hire by type, that type being young, thin, and female...

“There you are,” one said, speaking frankly. “McKee wants to see you.”

Vex turned to look at her coworkers with a raised brow and a touch of irritation, though her confidence soon withered at the sight of their expression, which was enough to make anyone’s heart drop.

“Wait...What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

The two waitresses simply stared at each other as they shared a moment of hesitation, before giving Vex a smile that could only mean one thing: pity.

Vex immediately rushed to McKee’s office, a closet sized room located just off the kitchen where every imaginable odor pooled and festered before becoming a beast of its own.

“Sir?” Vex said as she peeked through the open door, where a ceiling fan circulated the stagnant air in the windowless chamber.

As expected, McKee was lounging at his desk, staring at his boxy old monitor as he ate handful after handful of fries, or onion rings, or whatever the hell he’d managed to scavenge from the kitchen with his chubby little hands.

Without turning his head, he briefly glanced at her before nodding at a piece of paper on his desk. “There’s your last check,” he said, his mouth half-full.
Eyes widening, her voice raised slightly in pitch, “Last check?”

Turning back toward his computer, McKee spoke with a calculated coldness. “We’re thinning the staff.”

Vex took one, then two, then three steps toward the desk, and picked up the piece of paper. It was a check for four hundred and thirty two gold-prints.

No. She had to have misheard. There was no way…“Excuse me?”

“You just didn’t make the cut.”

Vex took a step back as she felt the pit in her gut grow heavier. “Sir…I came here directly after a twenty-two hour drive from Emon and-”

“And I hope you had a jolly old time.”

Vex felt her throat tighten, her voice on the brink of betraying her and revealing her desperation. “Sir, I don’t think you understand-”

“Listen girly,” he snapped, now turning to look at her with a large pair of hazel eyes. “Don’t take this personally. We had to cut staff. End of story.”

“But-”

“End. Of story.”

Vex lunged forward, lifting her arm to show off her broken wrist. “I was almost run over by a fucking truck!” she shouted, her voice so loud that the chatter in the kitchen died down a little, likely having heard her sudden outburst.

For but the briefest of moments, Vex detected what could have been shock in the eyes of the Pit Fiend that was her boss. However, the moment soon passed, and his eyes narrowed once more.

“Look. The decision was made before you left for Emon. Not my fucking fault it happened to fall on an inconvenient time.”

“Inconvenient time,” Vex scoffed, unable to contain a nervous smile as she stared up at the ceiling. “And you’re giving me no warning? No probationary period? Not even a fucking text message?”

“You’re not being fired. You’re being laid off,” McKee sneered, his stomach pressing into the desk as he leaned in. “But if you’re going to be a brat about it, I can give you plenty of reasons as to why we picked you instead of someone who’s a little more useful to me: You never smile, you don’t socialize with the staff, you hide in the pantry to text, and you constantly take time off to do god’s know what.” He gave her a big, sarcastic smile. “But because I am a kind and forgiving kind of guy, I decided to write this off as a consequence due to downsizing so you can get yourself some unemployment or something.”

Vex couldn’t believe this was happening. This wasn’t happening.

With his speech done, McKee’s expression dropped flat, and he leaned back in his chair so he could look at his computer again, “That’s all I’ve got to say girly.”

Did he seriously not even have the decency to look at her? Of course he didn’t. For all she knew he was watching porn or some shit. It wouldn’t surprise her.
With a strained exhale, she clasped the strap of her backpack so tightly her knuckles whitened. “Sir-”

“Don’t bother coming into work today, okay?” McKee continued. “That check counts today as a day worked; you’ll get paid. So just go home. You look like you need the break anyway.”

Vex’s stood motionless as she stared him down, her jaw clenched so tightly that her teeth grew sore.

McKee stuffed another handful of fries into his mouth before glancing up at her with a raised brow. “Don’t look at me like that. Just go home and take a fucking break. Lucky for you, energetic young girls are hard to come by in Westruun, so you’ll still be on the top of list if we start hiring again.”

“Don’t bother,” Vex snapped, before storming out of the office.

Stuffing the check into her pocket, she wove through the diner, bumping into a good number of ex-coworkers and familiar patrons until finally making it out onto the sidewalk, where gently falling snow melted against the tears streaming down her face.

Chapter End Notes

EDIT: For those reading part way and have noticed a change in the currency name to help it coincide more with the canon. Many thanks to everyone who contributed ideas.
Leopard Print

Chapter Summary

Last time, on the Butterfly Effect: After making it home safely, the Vex and the others are surprised to learn that Keyleth is planning on going back to Zephra for a few weeks to recover. Although worried that they won’t have her help, the group gives her a warm goodbye and Vex rushes to work. However, upon arrival, Vex is devastated to learn that she’s been laid off, and storms out of her workplace after having a heated argument with her boss.

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings for this chapter are in end notes.

Links to music mentioned in this chapter are in end-notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She couldn’t go home. Not now; not after she’d royally fucked herself beyond repair...

In her defence, burning bridges with “Twenty Three & a Half-Hour Diner” was probably one of the healthiest decisions she’d ever made in her life. She’d always been out of her element working a shut-in job, devoid of trees, or birds, or fresh air, or the sky, or windows for that matter... Then again, it probably would have been wiser for her to gain some self respect after she’d paid off her fucking expenses.

Point being, she couldn’t go home. Not if she wanted to spare her family of the disappointment by keeping her unemployment a secret for as long as possible. Besides, calling any of them would be a terrible inconvenience to all parties anyway.

Percy would have likely just gotten home, and the last thing she wanted to do was call him to come pick her up minutes after he’d dropped her off, considering his exhaustion. Besides, he was a smart guy; he’d catch on to her eventually, even if she tried to lie.

Vax was even more out of the question. He knew how to read her better than anyone. He would not only guess why she was upset, but give her hell for it too. His outburst would then be followed by the inevitable barrage of consoling remarks to make amends, which she imagined would likely push her to the point of nausea. Needless to say, she wasn’t ready for that type of emotional roller coaster.

She knew Tiberius wouldn’t mind -- but his broken arm made it impossible for him to do any driving at all. Moreover, even if he could drive, he was terrible at keeping secrets, and she wasn’t in the mood to lie. Not directly at least.

Of course, she could take the bus home, but that still didn’t help the fact that one of them would most certainly approach her if she showed up too early, and that wasn’t a conversation she was ready to have. Not even with Trinket.
So really, the dilemma was a simple one: she had six hours to burn.

But where?

She buttoned up her flannel shirt a little higher and adjusted her teal scarf under Vax’s leather jacket, watching her breath materialize before her. Even though it was well past ten in the morning, the cold had not dissipated, and instead lingered like a heavy veil, nipping at Vex’s ears and fingers. After wiping a quickly freezing tear from her cheek, she stuffed her hand into her pocket, where she was immediately reminded of the check as it crumpled between her fingers.

“First things first Vex…”

***

Cradling her broken wrist, Vex chewed her lower lip as the ATM processed the check, mentally preparing for the worst as the screen displayed their current financial situation.

Current balance: 873 GP

She let out a deep sigh, some tension releasing from her shoulders. They weren’t fucked. Not yet.

When she included the gold-prints her and Vax owed the Vox Machina fund, and her last check, and Percy’s part of the rent, and Tibs and Keyleth’s small contributions for using their kitchen and bathroom, and the money Vax had gotten for giving Agent Assum his phone information, they could actually pay rent and utilities with twenty-three gold-prints to spare. Not terrible, all things considered, though she still hadn’t put food and gas expenses into account...

Needless to say, things were going to get complicated if she didn’t find a job soon. Withdrawing her card, she stepped away from the machine and started to pace slowly, staring up at the sky as she did some quick math in her head:

Vax usually made about seven hundred and fifty gold-prints a month, which was just a couple hundred shy from paying for rent and utilities all on his own. Now that Percy helped with rent in addition to Keyleth and Tiberius, it was enough, but barely... And it wasn’t going to be sustainable, not for ever. Even with Percy helping them top off rent every month, they could last for maybe... nine more months before Percy ran out of money; and then they’d really be fucked.

That of course, was the worse case scenario. Percy kept on mentioning how he’d made money on odd jobs, and subtly implied that he’d continue doing so, Gods willing. She trusted that both Tiberius and Keyleth would continue helping out as well, especially since Keyleth had mentioned she planned on bringing food and supplies in a few weeks.

So all things considered, things weren’t looking too terrible. More than anyone, Vex knew how important it was to keep things in perspective. It wasn’t the end of the world, or at least she’d try to convince herself otherwise. This wasn’t even the poorest she’d ever been: She had a roof over her head, a family to support her, and clean clothes on her back. Besides, nine months was a long time. If it was enough time to build a baby, then it would be enough time to find a job. In fact, she imagined she could get another job again a lot sooner than that. She’d done it in the past. She could do it again: walking dogs, babysitting; all quick, easy options...once her wrist healed.

Releasing a deep, cloudy sigh, she watched as the cars sped by, casting their multicolored reflections on the glassy storefronts that were making preparations for yet another joyous Winter’s Crest.

“Fuck; that’s right…”
Figuring out how they were going to afford a second trip to Emon by the time Winter’s Crest came around was going to be even more of a challenge now, but she figured she’d cross that bridge when they got to it. Besides, Allura’s generosity had allowed them to save large sums of money during their stay, and she hoped that being invited as special guests meant they would get a tiny bit more help...

As she reflected on her ever branching options, her eyes settled on an approaching bus, which stopped on the corner across the street: it was bus 69...

For years now, Vex had not been able to forget where that bus lead; the individual who lived on the rout made sure of it. Naturally, she imagined that the bus’ arrival was some sort of a sign indicating that perhaps it was about time she asked for some insight from the local lecher.

***

Vex stared at the ratty old apartment door for what felt like an eternity before it finally opened, revealing a robe clad Scanlan who leaned against the door frame with a sultry smile while “How Deep is your Love” by the Bee Gees played in the background.

“How long has it been since you’ve visited?” His arm was still in a sling, though he’d switched out his boring blue one the hospital had issued for a leopard print design.

“Not since you threw that party a year ago,” Vex said as she cautiously stepped into the studio, immediately noticing that it was being kept far too warm for any form of heavy clothing.

“Oh right, right; the one where I hired the clown strippers.”

Vex blinked as she hung up her jacket and scarf. “No.”

“Shit. Well now that’s out...” Scanlan whispered to himself as he cracked a nervous smile.

“Aaaanyway... make yourself at home. You know the drill. Anything that’s purple is something you can sit on.”

Vex slowly approached one of the arm chairs as she glanced around. Although pleasant, Scanlan’s place was crammed, and not because it was small, but because there was just so much in it: On one end of the room was a tiny kitchen equipped with a mini-fridge, microwave, and enough counter space for one very old coffee maker and a wine aerator. Directly adjacent to it was a bathroom that was no more than a walled off brick box in the corner of the room. On the opposite side of the studio was a couple of room dividers and a heavy curtain that she imagined lead to the “bedroom” portion of the apartment, though she dare not check.

Between the two areas was the sitting space -- where among the couch, the two arm chairs, the TV, and coffee table -- where a collection of canvases, sound systems, and music equipment which took up every last available square meter of space.

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“You want anything to eat? Drink? Maybe something to smoke?”

“All of that,” Vex sighed as she plopped down into the armchair, utterly spent.

“I’ll get us a cheese platter,” Scanlan said with a grin as he spun around. “And I’ve got a bottle of red wine I’ve been dying to open, but I never had anyone to share it with.”

Vex sighed at the prospect of finally getting some alcohol into her system. “Thank you Scanlan. That’s very thoughtful.”
“I try,” Scanlan said as he shuffled toward the kitchen space. “Feel free to smoke from Bigby by the way. He’s already packed.”

Vex glanced down at “Bigby” with a raised brow. It was a large, expensive looking bong made of purple glass, its base forming what appeared to be the shape of a hand grasping the neck of the glasswork. She would have noticed a piece like that in the past, so she imagined it had to be new.

“They let you smoke in here?” she asked.

Although cannabis from Ashari dispensaries was legal in Tal’Dorei (despite some companies insisting on drug testing anyway), she was pretty sure smoking inside was a luxury only intended for the... cheaper side of town, where landlords simply didn’t give a shit.

“There’s a cleaning fee if you do,” Scanlan shrugged. “But honestly, I’m willing to pay if it means I get to keep the place nice and toasty. A fair trade-off, don’t you think?”

“I suppose...” Vex sighed. She envied Scanlan’s ability to not worry about money all the time. She only wished that she’d get to that point one day.

Grabbing one of six lighters strewn across the coffee table, Vex’s expression dampened as she came to the disappointing realization that smoking one handed would be complicated...too complicated for her to bother.

“You need help?” Scanlan asked as he placed two wine glasses on the coffee table, making sure that they were on top of coasters. “You’ve got a good hand. I’ve got a good hand... Together, we might be able to make it work,” he said, giving her a wink.

Vex rolled her eyes with a small smirk, allowing Scanlan to light the bowl for her as she used the other hand to tip the piece. Nodding her head to signal she was ready to inhale, he released the seal around the down-stem, allowing sweet bliss to enter her body and calm her nerves. Thank the gods he didn’t make it any weirder than it had to be.

After exhaling a thin plume of smoke toward the ceiling, Vex allowed herself to sink into purple velvet.

“Caaaause we’re living in world of fools, breaking us down...when they all should let us be...We beloooomg to you and me…”

Her eyes trained on one of the canvases. It appeared to be a work in progress, though it already looked pretty good, considering Scanlan pained as a hobby and not as a profession. Psychedelic as usual, it seemed to depict a big purple hand reminiscent of his bong design, holding up what appeared to be a very buff Scanlan strumming a guitar as if he were some sort of rock hero.

“It’s a rough idea for a new album cover,” he said.

Vex glanced at Scanlan, arching her brows. “It looks nice. I didn’t know you were composing a new album.”

“Yeah...I’ve been too busy with gigs to make any headway, but I actually do have some new songs in the works.”

Vex hummed. “How long to you think it will take you?”

Scanlan shrugged. “Couldn’t give you a date if I wanted to. It’s why I haven’t made it public.” He crouched down as he started moving things around in his mini-fridge which -- from the looks of it --
appeared to be pretty packed.

“Stocked for the winter I see…” she noted.

“Well, you know,” Scanlan smirked, walking over with a knife, an assortment of cheeses, and some crackers all balanced on a tray. “The performance gave me quite a bit of disposable income. So I figured I deserved to treat myself after nearly dying. Life is too short.”

“Yeah…” Vex sighed, slouching deeper into the couch before staring at her feet with a defeated look on her face.

Scanlan raised a brow at her as he placed everything on the coffee table. “What’s up?”

Vex let out an audible groan, looking away. She was going to have to bring it up eventually, so might as well get it out of the way.

Scanlan took his time pouring wine into the glasses, “Well you don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to-”

“I was fired.”

Scanlan paused mid pour, staring at her wide eyed.

Glancing up at the ceiling, she made air quotes as she spoke. “Well... “laid off”, technically speaking. But I’m afraid my insistence on burning those bridges may have gotten me fired instead. I’ll be waiting for an angry email suppose.”

Scanlan simply shook his head with a smirk, taking a seat across from her.

“But, you know,” Vex continued, glancing down at her feet. “It wasn’t the job for me anyway. Too cramped; too humiliating; too...greasy. Definitely a step in the right direction.”

“Vex, if I may-”

“This a good thing!” Vex exclaimed, her eye twitching slightly as her voice raised in pitch. “A very good thing. Wouldn’t have done it any differently.”

“Vex.”

She desperately tried to hide her nervous smile behind her glass as she took a large gulp of wine, before pulling it away from her face and staring at it with an impressed look on her face. “Hm, not bad.”

“It’s local-”

“Look! I’m not overreacting, okay?”

The two stared each other down like a couple of angry cats, and the long awkward pause persisted far beyond comfortable before Scanlan finally mustered the patience to speak. “I never said you were.”

Vex leaned in, her desperation starting to show as she rested her face in her palm. “I’m sorry. I just...don’t know how I’m going to tell Vax. You know how he is...He's going to lose his fucking mind if he finds out. He’ll bitch and rant about how we aren’t going to make rent, and then he’ll make me doubt my own calculations, and then he’ll make me feel bad for not wanting him to sell shady shit for money, and Trinket will bark, and Percy will think we’re a dysfunctional family, and everything
will be horrible!” She threw her head back and stared up at the ceiling once more.

There was another long pause between them, allowing the voice of David Bowie to glide through the silence like a lullaby.

“For heeeeeeere am I sitting in a tin can... Faaaaaaaaaar above her word. Planet Earth is blueee, and there's nothing I can dooo00oo...”

“You done?” Scanlan finally asked, taking a sip from his wine

Vex huffed, still staring at the ceiling. “Yeah…”

“It’s just a bump in the road,” he said. “You’ll be fiine. I know you will. You’re way tougher than I was when I was your age.”

She stared him down, utterly unimpressed. “That’s not saying much Scanlan.”

Scanlan chuckled. “Hey. Don’t mistakenly believe that what I have now is what I’ve always had. Not to play the one-up game, but back in the day, when I was still trying to make a name for myself, I was so poor that I once used my guitar to get something from under the bed because I didn't have a fucking broom. So I think I can at the very least empathize.”

Vex’s stared at her saddened reflection in her wine. It was moments like these that reminded her just how little Scanlan knew about her. She often tried to imagine what her peers would think of her if she told them the truth about what she had done in her life: What she had to do to survive. She wondered how they’d react if they knew she had to shoplift to make ends meet; how she was once kidnapped when Vax wasn’t around to watch her back… and how she had to hurt her captors to escape...how she never reported it to the police because she was afraid. She wondered if they’d see her in a new light if she admitted that her time camping in the wilderness after the fact was... actually one of the most enlightening periods of her life.

But they’d never know. Because she’d never tell them.

So understandably, she couldn’t really blame Scanlan for not knowing what he was talking about. And to be honest, she didn’t truly know much about his past either. Not much at all in fact. In her eyes, Scanlan was just Scanlan. The mere notion that he had once been as young and lost as her remained a hard concept to wrap her head around. So in the end, who was she to judge?

“Though, to be fair,” Scanlan continued. “My generation didn’t have it as hard as you guys. Back in the day one GP could get you cheeseburger. Now you need three goldies just to get some chicken nuggets.”

Maybe he did understand. Perhaps age had given him something that others in his position of privilege didn’t have: Hindsight, experience, street smarts. “Tell me about it,” Vex sighed, still staring down at her feet.

“But don’t let it get you down.” He smiled. “One day you’re going to look back at this conversation and laugh and laugh. I promise.”

Vex couldn’t help but crack a smile, raising her brows. “If you say so.”

The two spent some time savoring the cheese platter, taking turns helping each other spread brie on their crackers, and smoking out of Bigby with gusto. She’d forgotten how agreeable Scanlan could be when he wasn’t trying to make everything a joke.
Scanlan perked up as he finished chewing, “Oh, before I forget.” Standing up from his spot, he disappeared behind the curtain, leaving Vex alone with the cheese. Terrible idea.

She continued to munch, pleased by the variety but equally ashamed by the fact that she had eaten far more than he had, but not ashamed enough to stop.

Eventually Scanlan made his way back, reaching a check across the table. “There you go.”

“What’s this?” Vex asked, staring down at the check for three-hundred gold-prints.

“My contribution to the Vox Machina fund.”

She could smell the ink off the paper, indicating that it had been freshly written. “Scanlan, this is well over what you owe…”

“Think of it as thanks for keeping track of everything. You’re doing the job of an accountant without getting anything in return. It’s about time I payed it forward.”

“Scanlan, you don’t have to-”

“Already did,” he insisted, waving his hand dismissively at her. “Pass me another cracker.”

Sighing deeply, she slid the platter closer to his side of the coffee table and threw him a quick smirk. He wasn’t going to let her win this, which was both heartwarming and heart wrenching. Deep in her gut, she knew Scanlan was only doing this because he felt sorry for her. She both hated and admired him for it, but one thing was certain: she wouldn’t forget it.

“So Allura contacted me,” Scanlan said, breaking the awkward silence.

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Officially letting me know that she wants me to perform again; if I want to, of course. So I need to think of what I wanna play.”

“You have time.”

“A bit.” He grimaced slightly. “But it took me weeks to get things figured out for the last performance.”

“Oh, I know,” she smirked. “You went AWOL on us for weeks last time.”

“You know I’m a perfectionist when it comes to this sort of thing.”

“No no, I don’t blame you. I can’t say it enough: you were amazing.”

Scanlan grinned, twirling his wine in his glass before downing it in one swig. “Speaking of amazing. Did I tell you Grog caught the attention of the security peeps at the Cloudtop?”

Vex’s eyes widened. “That’s not good.”

“Oh no no no, in a good way,” he said, pouring himself some more wine. “Seems as though they’ve extended an offer for him to apply as a bouncer.”

Vex’s eyes widened even further. “No fucking way…”

“Oh yes,” Scanlan said, resting the bottle on the table. “I haven’t told him yet. But I do intend on
“Honestly, I don’t think he’d be willing to do it,” Vex said, speaking frankly. “He’d have to move to Emon, leave Pike and Wilhand…”

“Yeah, I know. But it’s not our choice to make. I’ll let him know when he’s less…” He glanced down at his wine, his expression dampening. “Less preoccupied.”

A wave of sadness brushed over her, and she leaned in, speaking softly. “How’s Pike by the way?”

He shrugged, laughing it off. “She’s alright. She’s stable. But they're keeping her under until they’re certain her head won’t fall apart.” He looked away, staring out the single window. “But she’ll make it. I’m not worried anymore.”

They both shared a moment of peace as they admired the clear blue sky outside the dusty window. Had she not known how cold it truly was, she probably would have misinterpreted the sun as a sign of early spring. Not that they really had spring or fall anymore. Been at least fifty years since they’d had real seasons in Tal'dorei. It was either winter or summer...No real inbetween.

“Did you know that Keyleth left?” Vex eventually asked, breaking the silence.

Scanlan’s attention turned to Vex once more, quirking a coiffed brow. “Left?”

Vex was starting to get the burning impression that their group had gotten increasingly bad at communicating with each other. Not that she was devoid of guilt, considering she was currently hiding out in a musician’s apartment sipping on wine, smoking pot and eating fancy cheese to avoid communicating with people.

Nevertheless, she did not let her own hypocrisy take hold of her conscious as she took the time to explain Keyleth’s situation to Scanlan to the best of her abilities.

“I didn’t know she was in an academy.”

Vex slapped her knee. “See? I didn’t know either!”

“Like, what type of academy?”

“I’m assuming a military one. Her fellow Ashari looked like they were in airforce garb.”

“Huh, who would have thought…?” Scanlan hummed, sipping his wine.

Vex mirrored his movements and took a sip as well, musing over the reality that Keyleth was going to indeed be out of the picture for at least a couple of weeks, which did not bode well for some people in the household, namely one rather complicated and exhausted Percy.

The thought kept on returning through her mind on repeat: She remembered how he’d been reduced to a cold, sweaty pile on the couch; how he snapped at her for trying to help; how Keyleth spent hours at a time nursing him back to health. She dreaded the possibility of it happening again, not so much because she couldn’t necessarily handle it, but because she wasn’t even sure if it would happen again. She couldn’t even be certain that her suspicions were justified, despite it being the simplest conclusion.

The worst part about it was that she didn’t even have anyone to bounce ideas off of. Or at least, no one whom she trusted to lie well enough to...keep the conversation a secret.
As the gears in Vex’s head began to creak into motion, her eyes fixed on Scanlan as he awkwardly packed another bowl with his pinky finger.

“Scanlan…”

“Yes Vex?” He glanced up at her.

“I…” She hesitated, fiddling with one of her shirt buttons. “I need to ask you something…”

“I’m all ears,” he said with a grin as he lounged in his chair, leaning his chin on his hand.

She took in a deep breath and exhaled slowly as she looked up at the ceiling, fully processing that this was the last chance she had to take it back. “It’s about Percy.”

He snorted. “That’s a shocker.”

Vex wrinkled her nose at him, “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Nono, keep going,” he said, grinning his biggest grin yet. “I’m listening.”

Vex gave him a cautious side-glance as she continued, “I think, and I’m not certain of this...but I think he might...possibly... be a drug addict.”

Glancing up with a blissful expression on his face, Scanlan’s smile endured as he spoke. “You know, I was wondering when one of you was gonna finally bring up the massive elephant in the room.”

Vex’s jaw dropped as she tried to process the words coming out of Scanlan’s mouth. “Excuse me?”

“Vex...You’re not gonna seriously tell me you’ve only now realized this?”

“Realized he’s a drug addict?!” she squeaked.

“No. Realized he’s a vampire.”

The sound of a record skipping, followed by deathly silence struck the room as Vex blinked at Scanlan a few times.

Scanlan lifted his finger in anticipation, before immediately dropping it as the music started up again, “The record always skips during that part. It’s weird.”

Vex continued to stare at Scanlan doe eyed.

“Yes of course I mean a drug addict!”

Vex snorted, looking away with an air of indignation. “Well no need to get snappy about it.”

“I mean, I personally thought it was fucking obvious.” He shrugged. “But then again, what would I know? I’m just a dumb old leccer who knows nothing about what a guy looks like when he’s been using systematically. It’s not like I was ever in the music business or anything...”

“Scanlan!” she squealed. “Why didn’t you say something?”

He tilted his head to the side with a feigned pout. “Not really my business…”

“You can’t just keep this sort of information to yourself.”
“Look,” he said, pointing a pinky at her. “Maybe this is me being presumptuous, but wouldn’t your brother-”

She slapped her hand on the coffee table. “What do you have to say about my brother?”

“Let me finish.”

Vex bit down on her lower lip, ready to knock his teeth out.

Scanlan spoke cautiously, easing Vex with a gesture as if he were easing an angry raccoon, “What I’m saying is, I figured... given his past experience, that Vax would have been around people like that, and that he would have been able to recognize the signs.”

Vex’s guard dropped slightly, and her brows slanted as she let out a sigh. “I don’t know. He hasn’t brought it up. In fact, no one has.” She let out a groan. “And to think I believed I was alone in my suspicions.”

“Nope.”

“But Scanlan,” she plead. “You can’t just keep this sort of information to yourself. He’s been in my house this whole time, and it’s all time wasted that I could have been using to help him!”

“Now, first of all,” he said, lifting a finger. “You’ve also been keeping this to yourself, just so we’re on the same page.”

Vex glared at him, pouting her lips.

“And secondly, you have been helping him.”

Vex’s hard expression melted into one of confusion. “How so?”

He clicked his tongue a couple of times, shaking his head as he lifted the glass of wine. “Vex, I am genuinely shocked that you don’t know more about this.”

Vex furrowed her brow at him. “Well believe it or not, hard drugs were never something that crossed our minds, Scanlan Shorthalt. I mean, Vax used to occasionally carry some on him but that was when he was in the Clasp, and he never told me about it until after he was released from prison. But he swore to me that he never tried any of it.”

Scanlan took his time doing everything but acknowledging what Vex had just said. He checked himself out in the reflection of his own wine glass, then took a sip, then hummed to himself a few times; he even had the audacity to pick up the wine bottle and read the label.

“Scanlan?”

With a loud sigh, Scanlan’s expression shifted to a more serious demeanor as he leaned forward, loudly resting the bottle on the table and looking at Vex intently. “Look.”

Vex inched back in her chair, taken aback by the intensity of his stare.

"Here’s the thing about drug addicts," he stated. "Or any addict for that matter: Sure, we always see interventions on TV, and how you can supposedly talk someone out of doing something. But that’s a gross oversimplification. Truth be told, the only person who can decide whether they should stop is the addict in question. They are the ones that need to make the choice. They need to want to get help. Otherwise, if you force them into quitting, they’ll just start up again when you’re not looking."
Vex didn’t say a word, not because she didn’t want to, but because she couldn’t. There was a conviction in his voice that sounded so honest. So naked. As if he were speaking from personal experience.

He leaned back in his chair and took a more relaxed position. “I understand that it’s not easy; I understand that it might make you feel callous and cruel. But you need to internalize that all we can do as friends is provide them with the tools necessary to combat addiction on their own, which is what you’ve already been doing.”

Vex looked at him wide eyed.

“You’ve given him a warm place to stay, friendship, distractions. And I’m not saying you should make things easy for him to continue his bad habits. You definitely don’t wanna be an enabler by like... giving him large wads of cash to do what he wants.”

“Of course not.”

“And I know you won't. But either way, you can’t force someone to quit. If you ask me, Percy seems to have his shit together... for the most part. If what you’re telling me is even true, then I wouldn’t worry about it.” He leaned forward once more, pointing. “Help me take a hit.”

Promptly, she took one of the lighters and helped him light the bowl, her eyes still fixed on his figure, staring at his every movement with the fascination of someone who’d just seen their old friend change before their very eyes. Frankly, she felt bad for ever doubting whether he had it in him. She had now internalized that he actually knew what he was talking about, and that he wanted to help her, even behind his seemingly flippant demeanor. So really, there was virtually nothing she could do but thank him.

“Thank you Scanlan...” she said, staring down at her hands. “For being honest.”

Scanlan exhaled a few smoke rings that broke against the lantern-like ceiling lamp above them before speaking up. “Nah, it’s fine. It’s what I’m here for anyway. To entertain and educate. Sometimes at the same time.” He winked.

“I may not always like admitting it, but you’re pretty good at it.”

“I know,” he smirked, before punching his chest and coughing a little. “Speaking of me being good at everything, you wanna hear a song I composed about my one friend who was an addict? It was one of my biggest hits back in the day and I think you need to hear it.”

Vex leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs, “Sure.”

“Oh...” Scanlan eyes went wide, but his surprised expression quickly morphed into a smile. “Well shit. I didn’t think you’d agree to it.”

“Don’t be silly,” she said, smiling warmly at him.

He smiled right back at her as he opened his laptop, giving her a wink. “Impossible.”

Chapter End Notes
Yo. I loved writing this chapter. So I really hope it’s something you all enjoy. I know the interactions between Vex and Scanlan are few and far between in the show, but the ones that we do have are brilliant.

Hope the currency change wasn’t too jarring for you all. Thank you to all those who gave suggestions and voted on my poll, special thanks to one of my readers who came up with the idea of “gold-prints” as the meaning of “GP”, and to the one that suggested “goldies” as the colloquialism for the name. I envision them as gray banknotes with little gilded bits.

Also, fun fact: I do actually have a real “Vox Machina” fund to work out how much money Vex spends. I have it subdivided in Vox Machina expenses, Percy’s Money, and Vax and Vex money. The calculations are not 100% accurate, as I do quite a bit of rounding, but there is some logic to it I swear.

Oh, and here is a link to the music mentioned in this chapter:

“How Deep is Your Love” by the Bee Gees: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpqqjU7u5Yc

“Space Oddity” by David Bowie: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYVRH4apXDo
Sincerely, Vex'ahlia

Chapter Summary

Last time, on The Butterfly Effect: Upon getting fired from her job at the diner, Vex decides to burn some time at Scanlan’s place so she does not have to return home and reveal what has happened. During her stay, Scanlan and Vex have a long conversation about how addicts should be addressed, and Vex leaves the conversation feeling a little more confident about her next course of action.

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings for this chapter are in end-notes:

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This chapter took me FOR EVER to write. So much backstory. So much Vex. God...Where is my Arizona Green Tea when I need it? So I apologize for the grammar and spelling in advance. As per usual, feel free to point out any mistakes so I can correct them in due time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sun had not yet set on the snow-powdered afternoon when Vex finally left Scanlan’s studio. Though the sky had long since cleared, the cold still lingered, like a stubborn child at a playground.

Realizing it wasn’t quite time for her to catch her usual buss, she deemed it a brilliant idea to browse a nearby cosmetic store while she waited. Not that she could actually afford anything; she just needed to burn some time. Besides, most of the makeup she owned had been stolen during her high-school years anyway. Sure, some would consider her makeup collection a crime against health, beauty, and humanity; but really now... did makeup actually expire? Or was it just some scam to make sure consumers kept on coming back?

Vex sighed as she passed over a painfully beautiful and expensive eye-shadow palette, which contained not only her favorite shade of teal, but special-edition gold and silver shades as well. As much as she hated to admit it, she couldn’t discount the possibility that her bad makeup habits would eventually earn her some horrible eye infection...yet another problem to add to the list of things that she couldn’t possibly afford.

Glancing down at her phone, she noticed it was getting late, and decided the time had come to deftly spray herself with something strong before leaving; no need to incriminate herself with that conspicuous bong smell anymore than she had to.

The ride home on one of Westruun’s many signature blue and green electric buses was as slow as usual. Not that it was in any way the bus's fault; they were actually rather quick: Ashari design, if she remembered correctly. But no. The fault was of all those damn commuters, flocked at every possible stop in the city for the sole purpose of wasting her time...or at least that’s how it felt. In reality -- unlike Vex -- those commuters were doing something with their worthless lives: returning from their
jobs so they could bring home their measly pay, kiss their loving spouse, and slump in front of their TV to enjoy the latest comedy skit ridiculing yet another foreign City State. If only she too had a job, or a loving spouse, or cable, or a fucking TV…

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Her arrival time home was nothing out of the ordinary. In fact, it coincided so comfortably with her usual schedule that it actually alleviated some of her anxiety linked to the dishonesty to come. Alas, even with that increased sense of security, it did not alleviate the crawling discomfort she felt as she approached the outer stairs of her apartment: Percy, whom so often stood outside their door to admire the view of Westruun from the third floor, was nowhere to be seen. This time, the balcony was but a husk, glowing empty in the golden light of the sunset, desperately longing for its broody, white-haired, leather-clad, cigarette-smoking mystery man.

Her jog up the stairs was more habitual than necessary, as she was in no actual rush to meet the others. In fact, if they could refrain from asking her how her day went, that would be outstanding… Not that she had a say on the matter. All she could really do was control her own actions, which in this case, involved mentally planning the path she would take through the tiny one-bedroom apartment to avoid the eye contact of as many people as possible.

Confident that she was walking into a barrage, she held her breath as she opened the door to the apartment, only to find that she was not at all greeted by the regular fanfare: No heated debates on the couch, no one cooking in the kitchen, and not one person playing with Trinket...who was also conspicuously missing. In fact, the only true movement she could detect in the otherwise darkened living space was the subtle stir of a quietly resting Percy, his silvery hair only partly peeking out from under his blanket as he rested on the couch, his back facing her.

Vex bit down on her lower lip as she ever so carefully shut and locked the door behind her, determined to not break the magic. It was so dreadfully out of character for him to take her advice; and yet, there he was: peacefully resting with no phone in hand or computer in sight. As much as she wanted it to be, her instincts sensed it wasn’t a good sign… She recognized the behavior; dreaded it’s implications. And yet, even in her worry, she couldn't help but hope that this simply meant he was actually trying to be more cooperative this time around. He was -- after all -- resting like she’d requested, and she certainly wasn’t one to scoff at little blessings from otherwise cruel and unforgiving gods.

Understandably, given that she aspired to preserve the peace, Vex did the only sensible thing a normal person would do in such situation: She went into stealth mode.

Bending her knees and lifting her elbows, she quickly dipped into an inconspicuously low profile and began to slowly make her way across the room. With the grace of a cat, she spent a meticulously calculated amount of time making sure she made absolutely no noise sneaking past Percy...only to realize that she had conveniently forgotten the fact that her adopted son was a pretty fucking intense fan of cats. This, unfortunately, did not bode well for her technique, and caused her to spend the other half of her journey nearly dying as she tripped over Trinket... Because, of course, the “good, weird, bad, worse” pattern had to be retained for the universe to make any sort of sense. And she was -- apparently -- a sacrifice that said universe was willing to make.

With no more than a stuttered gasp of an apology, Vex flattened herself against the wall and slowly slid away from the embarrassment, eventually taking refuge in her darkened room where her brother currently lurked… as per usual. Though to be fair, his tendency to watch YouTube videos on their shared (her) computer in the dark was less of a conscious choice, and more of a result of laziness, or perhaps absent-mindedness.
“Sup Stubby?” he asked, not looking up from the laptop as he sat cross-legged on his bed, his silver eyebrow piercing glistening in the light that came through the open door. “What happened?”

Vex froze in place, confused as to what he was referring to for a second. “What?”

He quirked a brow as he removed one of his headphones, “Heard a ruckus outside.”

“Oh. You know...” She laughed nervously, closing the door right behind Trinket’s bum and working on removing her scarf with her one good hand. “Just Trinket being Trinket.”

The accused snorted for a moment, looking up at her with a curious pair of brown eyes.

As if mirroring the dog’s mannerisms, Vax lifted his gaze from the computer and stared at her with comparable scrutiny.

Fantastic.

Now she’d made him suspicious. Or at least suspicious enough to where he felt the need to shine some light on the situation. Leaning over, he switched on the busted-up lamp they shared on a single nightstand, which they both watched flicker for a moment before it illuminated the room in a yellowish light.

“You seem off...” Vax noted as he gave her another scrutinizing glare. Only this time, he could get a good look at her poker face, so Vex needed to commit to the lie now.

“Where’s Tiberius?” she asked promptly, hoping to divert his attention. “Did he already get dinner?”

“Oh yeah,” Vax remarked, adjusting his ponytail. “Guess he went out with some classmates to dinner. Said they were probably going to do an all-nighter to study.”

Vex quirked a brow as she began to remove her leather jacket, “That's odd. Wasn't he studying the whole time we were driving home?”

Vax chuckled. “I asked him that exact same question, sister dearest.”

“And?”

“And he said that he was doing research that whole time. For his thesis, apparently.”

Vex eyes widened a little. “That's absurd.”

“I know right? The man’s tireless.”

“Yeah...” Vex agreed, forcing a small smile. She was hoping to transition the conversation into something a little more serious now, just as soon as she took off that damn leather jacket. Working with one arm was proving slightly more difficult than she anticipated.

“Speaking of tireless...” She began, after finally freeing one arm from the jacket. “Did you know Percy was taking a nap outside?”

“I did.” Vax blinked, before narrowing his eyes at her. “Do you need help by the way?”

“No no, it’s okay, I got it!” she insisted, cracking the most honest of smirks she could muster, before fully removing her leather jacket and tossing it over the chair they had designated for the clothes they shared, slightly out of breath.
“Anyway…” Vax continued, focusing back on the screen. “He’s been sleeping since he got home. Said he wasn’t feeling well. I offered him my bed but he was pretty adamant about staying right where he was. Really hope the poor bastard isn’t getting sick again.”

Like a snake in her gut, that same bad feeling she’d felt when she first witnessed his state on the couch slithered through her once more, though she tried her best to ignore it, at least for now. “It was nice that you offered.”

Vax shrugged, “I guess. Though I actually do want to get his opinion on something when he wakes up.”

“What?”

“Been looking for parts to fix my phone this whole afternoon.”

Fuck. That’s right. She’d forgotten Vax’s phone was still dead, which also meant that she’d forgotten to include those expenses into their budget, which was of course great news.

“Oh really?” she asked, forcing yet another smirk. “How did that go?”

“I spent almost three fucking hours trying to figure out which parts of my phone didn’t work. Of course, during that process... I learned that there was practically no point in ordering new parts anyway.”

She really didn’t want to ask, but she knew he was gonna tell her anyway. “Why not...?”

Vax snorted. “As luck would have it -- it’s not much cheaper to repair it. In fact, I’m pretty much better off getting a new phone all together. It’s only a little more.”

Vex's nostrils flared. “And um...how much more exactly?”

“About thirty godlies, give or take. Guess I’m feeling fancy.” His eyes widened for a moment “Shit... You don’t think the Cloudtop is rubbing off on me?”

It was only by pure chance that Vex managed to catch herself staring into the void; and only because Trinket had decided to start licking her boot for some bizarre reason she didn’t care to investigate.

“Treat yourself...” she finally answered, screaming internally.

Vax studied her closely. “And you don’t think it’s selfish of me?”

Vex did her very best to not grimace as she spoke. “Absolutely not,” she said, her pitch raising ever so slightly.

There was a brief moment of silence between the twins, before an expression of concern bloomed on Vax’s face. “You sure you’re alright? You seem-”

“Yes yes, of course,” Vex squeaked, trying to not break her feigned look of serenity. “It’s just I’m...” She glanced around in search of a good excuse, before settling her darting gaze on one of her dirty hair towels. “…terribly distracted by the way I smell. Think I’m gonna go hop in the shower real quick, yeah?

Vax simply blinked at her.

She swallowed once. “Then dinner?”
Letting out a sigh, he shook his head before putting the earbud back in his ear and turning his attention to the screen once more. “Yeah sure, sounds good.”

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There was nothing quite like a nice warm shower to tease out all those pent up emotions. It was a private and sterile space, devoid of shame or judgment; a place where emotional release was allowed, conveniently omitted from her mental log as a sign of weakness, and promptly packed away upon leaving the tiled sanctuary. Nude under the water, her tears left no distinguishable trace under the stream, while her weeping was kept carefully muffled beneath the sound of the shower echoing in her porcelain bunker.

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Not wanting to disturb Percy, the twins resorted to eating their ramen cross-legged on the floor in their bedroom, quietly slurping their noodles as they watched the latest episode of “Shield of Tomorrow” on Vex’s computer, a Star Trek-themed role-playing game that streamed on Twitch. She’d always been envious of Vulcans: logical, calculating, and sure of themselves to a fault. You knew things were bad when a Vulcan got angry. And yet, despite her admiration for those traits in a Vulcan, she was less of a fan of the same personality quirks exhibited Percy: cold, conniving, and kind of a smart ass... Unlike real Vulcans, Percy’s tendency toward callousness felt almost forced, as if he were deliberately trying to smother his own feelings, not unlike a half-Vulcan ashamed to show his faulty, human side.

Now, aside from the fact that Percy was conspicuously missing, their dinner together wasn’t terrible, though she’d be naive to believe everything was fine and dandy. Vax had been unusually quiet throughout their meal, considering he always had at least something to say about the show, whether it be some form of expressed longing for the tech showcased in the game, or a complaint about a slight continuity error in the show’s lore. She figured his silence was an indication that he knew something was up but was wise enough to know that she wasn’t going to give him any answers anyway. Either that, or he was hoping to bait her into asking why he was being so quiet so he could barrage her with accusations, in which case, she wasn’t biting this time. For once, she appreciated his stubborn silence, regardless of how heavy it made the air around them.

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By ten o’clock, both the twins were settled in their respective beds, given that Vax had work in the morning, and Vex had to pretend she had work in the morning. Thankfully, Vax’s eternal state of exhaustion made him quite the heavy sleeper, granting Vex a couple more hours of guilt free internet browsing. Or at least, that’s what she had originally intended it to be…

Her internet journey began where it usually did -- on YouTube -- where she spent a significant amount of time hunting for new music to add to her various mood-themed playlists. After that, she tried to distract herself with some wholesome internet exploring, catching up on the survival blogs she’d been following for more than a decade now. However, as expected, her blissful browsing experience did not last for very long, as it was inevitable that her innocent meandering would eventually take her down a winding and turbulent memory lane, bringing her back to a time when she too had to brave the wilderness, and certainly not for the purpose of getting subscribers...

She would never forget the day she left the prison grounds, after having just confessed to Vax during visiting hours that she had not only lost the car... but was now the new mother of a puppy she’d sequestered after fleeing a pretty sketchy predicament. She remembers finding Vax’s reaction to be... subdued, all things considered; he didn’t dwell on her most recent hardships, or the loss off the car,
or the unexpected new addition to the family. All he wanted her to do was use all the money they had left to get herself some gear, run into the woods, and survive.

And survive she did.

In a day, she’d made herself a rustic campsite by a lake; in a week, a semi permanent shelter out of wood and plastic tarp. And for months, she thrived in her little bunker, living off the land as she waited for her brother, spending each day fishing by the lake, carving survival bows, and watching her new puppy grow from small to...not so small. Sadly, given her precarious situation at the time, she shied away from posting any of her experiences on social media, out of fear that her location could be traced and discovered. Therefore, the only form of documentation that had survived that chapter of her life were a couple of selfies she’d taken on her phone, and a fuck-ton of pictures of her newly sequestered puppy. Trinket was of course, adorable when he was little, and still brought tears to her eyes.

“So precious,” she whispered as she scratched behind Trinket’s collar.

However, the same couldn’t be said for her own face: dirt smeared on her forehead, fingernails short and broken, hair dusty and unwashed. And yet, even after all those years, she knew that she didn’t regret going off the grid while she waited for Vax to be released from prison, because under all that dirt and grime, she was still smiling in those pictures. Too fucking bad it wasn’t something she could put on her resume.

Saddened by the bitter-sweet memory of her life in the Midlands, she decided to check up on the latest news to ground herself in the present once again. She dedicated a significant amount of time scanning social media to see just how badly the name of “Vox Machina” had spread, only to discover that it hadn’t really caught too much traction at all. Hell, the name wasn’t even trending, which was both a relief but also a tad disappointing, considering all the grief she’d given her friends about it.

Though to be fair, it had only been a day... So the potential for viral tragedy was still alive and kicking.

Regardless, given the fact that a few of her acquaintances knew of their trip to Emon, (even though they may not have necessarily known just how close to the danger they truly were), she deemed it wise to post a little something on her page to reassure the people who actually cared that she was indeed safe, even if those people only constituted a couple lurkers from Syngorn whom she liked enough to not unfriend, and maybe Pike’s grandfather Wilhand. Besides, if it weren’t for her, her father -- whom she knew stalked her page like a creep -- would have no idea of whether his spawn were alive or not. And yet, in all her criticism of her mother’s sperm donor, Vex couldn’t help but stumble into the habit herself; one that she could only conclude was genetic.

Regrettably, she had a tendency to stalk old shadows in moments of weakness much like this one, when she could rationalize that she had somehow earned the permission to break her vow to never check up on certain people. This time, the permission was given because she’d convinced herself that she needed to do “research”, prompted by the need to re-asses something that she’d refused to discuss with Scanlan: a mistake she’d once made long ago.

She let out a sigh that was probably louder than necessary as she began to browse through pictures that reminded her that she'd once dated -- and probably loved -- a girl that she no longer knew. It was something she’d refused to think about for years. Almost a decade in fact. She was no longer that wild, rebellious, angry teen who harbored twisted, hypocritical morals that had been fed to her impressionable mind: chastity is a virtue, go to law school or die, drugs are the devil. Adulthood had mellowed her out, teaching Vex that many of the things she had once adamantly believed were far
more complicated than her little teenage brain could have ever imagined.

And among those many complicated things, Tessa was no exception.

Now... Tessa was a girl that found herself into Vex’s life during a time Vex had affectionately coined “the worst years of her high-school experience”. It was when her desire to grow up early and get the hell out of Syngorn was at its climax, and it was also right after she had dumped her first boyfriend, a guy whose name she could still barely stomach.

Either way, Tessa’s companionship was a welcome change from the barrage of slut shaming fueled by her ex-boyfriend’s wrath. Tess was a girl much like her: plagued with a shitty home environment, misunderstood by her peers, and sporting a nice low tolerance for bullshit. Loved by none and harassed by all, it was as if they fed off of each other’s angst and were in turn invigorated by it. They didn’t care if people said they were only kissing for the attention, or if they found anonymous messages in their lockers asking for the porno they were presumably part of. They weren’t bothered if girls left the bathroom whenever they both walked in, or if they got told that good dick would change their minds. If anything, pissing off the others only made their infatuation for each other stronger.

However, as would be expected with any steamy rebound relationship, their love burned like flash paper, lasting not nearly as long as they had often hypothesized during their star gazing sessions. Age eventually caused them to develop a taste for partying, and with that, came bad alcohol, bad music, and bad habits. Among the bright lights and swaying bodies of your typical rich-kid party, Tessa soon found herself in a bad crowd, and it didn’t take long for Vex to eventually find her snorting a line off some other girl’s chest.

Perhaps, had the same situation happened to her during her twenties, she would have given Tess another chance; told her that they needed to talk about it, and explore their options. But sadly, she had not been in her twenties. She was a seventeen year-old girl going on eighteen who knew not how to react other than to utterly retract from the relationship.

For the rest of her high school career, she never got close enough to see how Tessa’s potential habit grew to affect her. Vex only ever observed her from a distance, watching her amble down the halls with the rest of her new compatriots. It was a decision she eventually learned to regret, now that she was older, wiser, and less afraid of those with difficult situations. Indeed, the conversation with Scanlan had reminded her that perhaps... had she looked past the habit, and given Tessa the support she needed, things could have gone differently. Regardless of how rocky her past had been, it would be ludicrous to claim that she hadn’t learned from the experience: She would absolutely not allow herself to make the same mistake with Percy. She’d help him in any way she could, even if it meant getting her hands dirty.

Now of course, getting said hands dirty probably meant doing actual research, instead of wasting her time looking through Tessa’s pictures and trying to pretend that stalking her was in some way helpful to the cause. Besides, it was about time she had stopped procrastinating.

Opening a new tab in incognito mode, she took in a deep breath and typed out the first bit of information she knew was actually relevant: Morphine withdrawal symptoms.

In an instance, the entry provided her with hundreds of pages to sift through, listing everything from official websites to sketchy forums. With her one good hand, she clicked through page after page, making a mental log of anything that felt important.

Now apparently, very early symptoms of morphine withdrawals included yawning, sweating, and a runny nose -- which weren’t all that helpful, given the fact that they’d all had their fair share of
exhaustion after their adventure in Emon. The following symptoms however, which manifested themselves a day or more later, were far more serious…

Vex began to silently mouth the symptoms she read, her expression growing more and more mortified: “chills, goosebumps, heightened blood pressure and heart rate, insomnia, irritability, inability to feel pleasure, restlessness, anxiety, muscle pain, stomach pain, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, sneezing, tremors, loss of appetite, depression, drug cravings…” She threw her head back and sighed. “Fuck Percy... what have you gotten yourself into?”

Now on a roll, curiosity sent her on quite the journey, exploring not only the symptoms of other drugs like heroin and cocaine, but digging through forums to see if she could gather some insight from other people’s experiences.

vamp32: they tend to leave the house at random times without telling u. thell act all mad when they come back and u ask them where they been. look out for weird smells, burns on fingers, wide pupils. if they don;t get their fix thell get sick.

Vex found herself increasingly flustered as the night grew late, and not just because she could only type with one hand. With each new discovery, she was flooded with twice as many questions. Nearly all the drugs she had looked up contained side effects that Percy had exhibited in at least one way or another, an frankly, she felt like an idiot for not noticing it sooner. Still, regardless of how complicated this made things, she had to remember the advice Scanlan had given her: to give him space, and allow things to pan out organically. She would give him support when he wanted it and space when he needed it; because no way in the Nine Hells would she ever have another Tessa situation happen ever again.

Allowing herself to fall back onto her bed, Vex huffed into her pillow and closed her eyes, reflecting on her next course of action. Losing herself to the fog of war that had formed in her head, she rested motionless for what she imagined must have been quite some time... for in the blink of an eye, it was suddenly eleven thirty, and her phone was currently vibrating in her hand.

A message? At this time of night?

After rubbing her eyes and focusing on her bright little screen, she soon discovered that she had just received the message on one of her old social media profiles, and she never got messages from those. She flipped over so she could get her cast in a better position, and as she squinted at the screen, she tried to figure out who the hell was trying to contact her at this ungodly hour, and on that ungodly website.

Hello Vex’ahlia,

My name is Devanna Vessar, the wife of your father and mother of Velora Vessar, your half-sister. I’ve been thinking about this e-mail all day, and I’ve finally gotten a chance to sit down and write it after a long day at work.

“What…” Vex muttered, reading further.

When we briefly crossed paths in the Cloudtop about a week ago, Velora wanted to know who you were. I myself could not be sure, but I had my suspicions given your uncanny resemblance to your father. Nevertheless, I asked Syldor, and upon confirming my suspicions, I immediately told Velora. She was very excited to learn that she had half-siblings, and she was upset that she didn’t get a chance to meet you both. I tried to reassure her, telling her that she might some day get the chance to see you again, but I made no promises.
Therefore, I come to you, now hoping that you are willing to get to know a woman that you barely
know, and your half-sister, who already loves you very much. I understand if you do not wish to
open a correspondence, and don’t feel pressured to do so on our behalf. I have not told Velora that
I’m trying to get in contact with you. So please, take your time.

Sincerely,
Devanna Vessar

Vex covered her mouth, allowing the screen to fall onto the mattress and snuff out any light in the
room. For what must have been at least a couple of minutes, Vex cried in the dark, allowing the
wave of sudden emotion to wash over her. However, after steeling herself, she grabbed hold of her
phone once more, preparing her response. She had to be honest, but kind.

Hello Devanna,

Thank you for getting in contact with me. I must admit that I wasn’t sure whether my father would
have wanted me to make contact with Velora, but I am glad that you thought differently. I do not
know how much you know about us, but we have a bit of a shaky relationship with our father, so I
apologize that we did not reach out first.

I would love to meet Velora, and I’m sure we can find a way where we can have a chat onli

Vex paused, as the sound of someone running to the bathroom caught her wide-eyed attention.
Sitting up, she listened in the darkness for a few moments, honing in on the sound of movement
coming from the bathroom. After a few seconds of listening, her breath hitched as she recognized the
muffled sound of someone throwing up. Vex closed her eyes for a moment and sighed, before
staring down at her phone.

However, I am going to be pretty busy the next few weeks, but I’ll get back to you.

Sincerely,
Vex’ahlia Jones

Promptly saving the message in her drafts, Vex pulled on a pair of sweatpants, ordered Trinket to
stay put, and rushed out the door.

Chapter End Notes

CW: Mention of bullying, biphobia, mention of threats of corrective rape, mention of
drug use/addiction/symptoms.

Yeh...I know. Like half of this chapter ended up being Vex browsing the internet and
stalking social media. But hey, I figured Vex was always doing research in canon, so
might as well get her in the habit of doing this now.

Speaking of social media, I’ve gotten a lot more active on Tumblr, where I post a lot of
Critical Role related essays, as well as D&D prompts, homebrew, and art. I also hang
out on Twitter a lot more, so come over there if you ever wanna chat.
Chapter Summary

Last time, on The Butterfly Effect: Upon returning home, Vex tries to refrain from conversing with her roommates to avoid revealing that she’s been fired. Vax however, catches on that something is wrong, and they have a very awkward dinner together. While browsing the internet, she remembers the bitter breakup with her high school girlfriend Tessa, and eventually dozes off. She wakes up to a message from her father’s wife, explaining that their half-sister would love to talk to them. However, while she’s replying, she hears what sounds like Percy vomiting in the bathroom, and she runs to the rescue.

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings for this chapter are in endnotes.

I haven’t done a song recommendation for a while, so here is one that I believe fits SO well, both in lyrics, and even the video. It’s probably one of my favorite "perc'ahlia" songs I’ve found.

“Sunglasses” by Hopium: [Link](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQw4w9WgXcQ)

(The lyrics page has a link to the YouTube video so you can listen to the music while you read the lyrics).

Vex had never really been the squeamish type. Be it blood, or bile, or anything in between, she had no issue dealing with the occasional bodily mishap. She’d done enough babysitting to know that it certainly wasn’t going to kill her. Not to mention she had dealt with her fair share of inebriated adults, who were arguably even more difficult to manage. Off the top of her head, she could recall at least three cases where she had to take care of someone who’d had a little too much to drink, the worst of them being the time she had to wash Keyleth in Scanlan’s shower during the middle of a raging party he’d thrown at his apartment... Needless to say, things got messy and very wet. Hell, even as a young girl, she was never afraid to take care of her brother, regardless of whether he was contagious or not. And given that she had a pretty distinct feeling Percy wasn’t contagious, it would be cruel of her to simply leave him all alone in their dingy old bathroom.

As Vex stepped out into the cold, darkened hallway, she gently closed the door behind her and made her way toward the bathroom across the hall, guided by the single slither of light that was shining from under the bathroom door.

Freezing less than a foot from the entrance, she stood very still, listening to see whether Percy was still in the middle of relieving his stomach contents. However, after a nearly a minute of cautious silence, she found that there was no sound coming from within. Unable to shake away the worry,
Vex deemed it wise to make herself known, in the hopes of getting a semblance of a reply.

“Percy…” she whispered, and waited.

And waited.

And waited for a few moments longer; but with no confirmation of consciousness from the other side.

She felt a droplet of sweat roll down the feather tattoo on the side of her neck, and she cursed under her breath, staring holes into the door as she tried to calculate her next course of action.

“Percy,” she whispered a little louder, closing her eyes as she leaned in a bit closer to the door. “Do you want me to get you some water?”

With the eerie silence filling the air once again, Vex feared the worse, and was seconds away from trying the handle when a single meek reply finally made its way through the wood.

“Please.”

A deep sigh of relief escaped Vex’s lips, and she gave herself a few moments to regroup before making her way toward the kitchen. It’s not that she wasn’t ready to call an ambulance... but getting him hydrated was so, so much easier...

Approaching the bathroom with the mug of cool tap water, she rested her cheek against the door and listened for a few moments before speaking up. “I’m coming in, alright?”

Hearing him mutter something that sounded a bit like an “ok”, she cracked the door open and peeked inside just to make sure she wasn’t accidentally hitting him with the door, or walking in on something embarrassing. Fortunately, Percy was in no such danger, but was instead seated on the edge of the bathtub, currently blowing his nose as he faced the toilet. Upon entering the bathroom, she found no sign of any mess which was -- admittedly -- a bit of a relief. In fact, had she not heard him throwing up in the first place, she likely wouldn't have even realized it had happened. Though knowing him, that was probably his intention...

“Here”, she said softly, handing him the water.

He accepted it without making eye contact, and pressed his lips against the mug, barely nursing its contents before setting it down on the counter and refocusing his attention on the floor. He wasn’t wearing his glasses, and his tank-top was once again showcasing the tattoos that he clearly didn’t care to hide anymore.

She tried her best to not gawk at him as she stood there, cradling her broken wrist and warming her arm with her good hand. She sensed this was all awfully embarrassing for him, and she wanted so desperately for him to know that she wasn’t judging him. Not anymore.

“How are you feeling?” she asked warily, forcing a bit of a smile.

Percy huffed out a bit of a laugh, though she could tell it was laced with sarcasm. As he did so, he wiped the hair off his sweaty forehead, looking up at her with a pair of bloodshot, icy blue eyes framed in his signature dark circles, his voice creaky and weak. “I’ve been better...”

Vex shared a nervous chuckle with him, not really knowing where to go from here. He was hydrated, conscious, and from the looks of it, relatively put together; nothing that needed close supervision, at the very least. She figured that now was probably a good time to give him some
privacy and call it a night. After all, he didn’t exactly seem like he needed her all that much.

But then, she noticed something; a detail she likely would have missed had he been wearing his glasses. Studying him closely, she watched as a single tear formed and hung from the bottom lashes of his left eye, which he promptly hid away as he scratched the side of his temple.

Vex bit down on her lower lip, praying that she was doing the right thing. Frankly, she wished androids like him came with a manual... Though he probably did at some point; he just happened to lose it on the road. “You mind if I sit down?”

Percy squinted at her with an expression that she could only safely interpret as confusion wrapped in a heavy layer of unwelcoming exhaustion. In fact, so strong was the intensity of his glare that she momentarily feared she had already overstepped his comfort zone. However, her concern soon faded as she watched him scoot a little bit more toward the toilet to make some room, granted he was acting like she were some giant who wasn’t going to fit on the edge of the bath along with him. Her ass wasn’t that massive. Though to be fair, perhaps he simply didn’t want her to be near him, which she of course found a little upsetting, but entirely valid.

Therefore, taking his theoretical wishes into consideration, she took a spot on the complete opposite edge of the bath, giving him as much room as she physically could.

They sat for a while, sharing the silence of the hollow space under the neon light. In fact, so silent was their companionship, that she could actually hear someone taking a late-night shower in the apartment below them. It was honestly kind of nice. It reminded her a bit of rain.

Still, after what must have been at least a few minutes of unsettling silence, Percy muttered something under his breath, though she did not hear it clearly.

“What?” she asked, leaning in a little closer.

Percy closed his eyes and rested his face in his palms, his elbows pressing into his knees as his voice nearly cracked under the unspoken tension in the air.

“I fucked up.”

Vex could already feel her heart beginning to bleed, but she tried her best to ignore her own feelings for once. This wasn’t about her. “How so?”

Percy allowed his shaky hands to drop from his face, and as he braided his fingers, the tendons in his hands visibly tensed as he spoke. “I broke our promise.”

Vex squinted for a moment as she reflected, her mind eventually recalling what he was referring to. “The one we made to each other on the roof? At the Cloudtop club...”

He nodded, once.

She stared down at her own hands and sighed deeply. “Where we promised to each other that we’d always strive to make the best decisions in our power.”

Percy’s face contorted with melancholy as he spoke, as if she were reopening fresh wounds. “I let it happen again.” His jaw visibly clenched under taught skin. “I’d convinced myself that I was doing so fucking well, and then I let it happen again.”

She pursed her lips, trying to contain any impulsive replies. Although she’d confidently bet her life-savings on the fact that she knew exactly what “it” he was referring to, she didn’t want to assume
anything; not even now, when she was so dreadfully certain of his addiction. She had to hear it from his lips first. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Percy continued to stare at the floor, his voice so soft it didn’t even echo in the tub. “What’s there to talk about?”

There was so much to talk about. So very much. Still, she would not allow herself to be overbearing. She had to be kind, but confident. “That’s up to you darling…” she said, smiling.

But he was not receptive to her forced positivity. In fact, he seemed almost put off by it, retracting deeper into his hunched position as his stare burrowed deeper into the linoleum. Yet what he had to say -- to her surprise -- hurt even more. “I’m a fraud. I’m never getting better. I’m nothing but a spoiled brat who gets high the moment one little thing doesn’t go my way… Oaths and friends and family be damned.”

“Percy,” Vex hissed, her eyes widening as she experienced the full breadth of his words. “Surely you’re not trying to describe the truck almost hitting us as “one little thing”. You can’t possibly-”

“It pushed me over the edge,” he snapped, his voice beginning to grow harsh as it struggled to escape his cracked lips. “The whole thing, it…” He grabbed the sides of his head with his hands. "It reminded me…”

“Darling, just breathe. It’s fine. We’re all okay.”

His breathing was getting heavy. “I’m weak…”

“It was a traumatic experience Percy.” She found herself leaning in father and father into the conversation. “You can’t blame yourself for feeling this way. It’s not your fault.”

“But it was my fault,” he insisted, digging his fingers into his silvery mess of hair, losing his gaze to the void before him. “I was the one who made the decision to ask for morphine from the doctor. I was the one who chose to take it all in one sitting. I was the one who got caught up in this ridiculously stupid habit in the first place…” His hands dropped from his head down his neck, then his shoulders, before eventually making their way to his arms, which he absentmindedly caressed as he spoke, his fingers now tracing the smoke tattoos across his skin a little too perfectly; perhaps even intentionally. “I made myself become this.”

Vex’s mouth hung open for a while, trying desperately to predict what he wanted to hear. “Darling I…”

“What?” His eyes fixated on her, the tears now clearly welling in his paining eyes.

Her mouth hovered open for a few seconds. “I…”

“You don’t understand.”

Vex shook her head. “Then explain it.”

“I can’t.”

“Try.”

“Vex, I can’t!”

Looking as though he was right on the brink of bursting into tears, she promptly covered her mouth
in her best attempt to bottle in her deep desire to rip every truth from his body; the truths that were so clearly being kept hostage by the demons he hid away.

Their standoff radiated with anxious tension. For what felt like an eternity, they both sat, neither of them making eye contact as they both lingered in their individual, somber, contemplative states, as if they were playing some sick game of conversational chicken. She wished he wasn’t so cryptic. Television always told of the charms of mysterious men, but this was too much, even for her. It would drive her insane.

“I knew it…” he muttered rather suddenly, his voice barely a whisper. Only...it didn’t feel like he was talking to her anymore. It was almost as if he were talking to himself; or something.

“You knew this would happen,” he growled, his jaw clenching. “You promised yourself you’d stop, but you didn’t.” His expression began to harden as he spoke more firmly. “The very moment the doctor gave you access to your fix...” He tapped the side of his head in an accusatory fashion, “That little voice in your head reassured that you deserved it. That you needed it.”

Vex’s brow furrowed as she reached out her hand, longing to touch him, but having it hover instead. His poor reaction to her physical touch a few days ago made her very conscious about it. She didn’t want to make him more tense than he already was. “Percy, please look at me.”

His brow flinched, but he did not honor her request. Instead, the sorrow in his eyes only seemed to intensify as the ever welling tears dripped down into his sweatpants as he stared at the floor.

He was scaring her, but Vex knew she needed to maintain a modicum of composure; for his sake. “So you slipped up. Once.”

The snicker that escaped Percy’s lips was almost cruel. “Not once. Many, many times.”

Struggling to hold back her own tears, her lip quivered as she resisted the urge to hold him close. “Percy, please…”

As if made aware of his own self-deprecating demeanor, he slouched deeper still, resting his mouth in his hand which muffled his voice as he spoke. “It’s an unavoidable pattern it seems: Trauma, self harm, rinse and repeat.” He started to chuckle lowly, shaking his head as he stared at the wall, or perhaps something past it. “Suppose it’s how it all started, after all…”

Vex didn’t know what to say any longer. She felt like anything she could say was doomed to be met with denial, self loathing, misunderstanding, and vague references to things that he refused to elaborate on...

“Started what?” she asked. “You can tell me. Just tell me what’s tormenting you.”

Of course, he didn’t reply. He was too lost now, it seemed; lost somewhere very far away. “But I tried...” He stared up at the light, his eyes glossy and reddened by his tears. “I blocked phone numbers, gave away my cash, moved in with people who actually cared about me…”

Vex desperately wished she could understand even half of what he was talking about, but alas, she’d gathered that Percy was oversharing out of pure delirium at this point, and that any questions she’d dare ask would be lost on him. At this point, it felt like the only safe course of action was getting him back on the couch so he could sleep it off. This couldn’t be good for his psyche.

“Look...it’s late” she said softly, stabilizing her one good hand on the side of the tub as she prepared to stand. “I think you should-”
With a suddenness that startled her, Percy rested his hand on hers, holding it in place against the cold porcelain of the tub. His eyes however, hooded in shame, did not meet hers.

Vex sat frozen for a moment, feeling an odd mix of fear, sympathy, and curiosity all wrapped up in the morbid little bow that was her relationship with Percy.

“Please…” He whispered, taking in a deep, heavy breath. “I just want to know…”

“What?” She asked, her eyes widening.

Percy’s gaze distanced from her further, now staring at an old crack in the wall. His words were, soft, simple, but very cold to the ear. “Why... do you put up with me?”

Vex’s jaw went lax, and for the first time, she felt like she’d lost her patience. “What a stupid question,” she snapped, pulling her hand away as if he were some vile creature.

However, she instantly regretted her reactive impulse as she watched him cover his mouth to contain the sobbing that erupted from his chest, having lost the capacity to bottle it up.

Vex swallowed her own fears, realizing that if she was to ever make a point that actually meant anything, it had to be now.

“Percy, I’m sorry…” she said, scooting a little closer and leaning in so he could hear her over his own sobbing. “It frustrates me so much that you can’t see how much you mean to us.”

He was a mess. He was clearly trying to muffle his despair in his shaky hands.

“I don’t know what you’ve been through. I don’t know where you came from and how you got here.” She bit down on her lower lip as she reflected, trying her best to handpick her words with the utmost care. “And frankly,” she continued, forcing a smile so she sounded more serene. “I couldn’t care less about what you think you did or didn’t do. All I know is that you are a kind and clever guy with a lot of baggage, who is overtly trying to make things better. It’s so terribly obvious. You’d have to be dull not to see it.”

“You’re wrong,” he muttered, though she could already tell that his breathing was regaining a safe rhythm.

“And you’re too self critical,” she said, trying desperately to maintain her smile under the pressure of wanting to cry herself.

She watched as his expression started to lose its hardness, weakening under her words as he let down his guard one barrier at a time.

She gave him a moment to unwind before speaking again. “Unlike some people, you seem to actually want to get better. You don’t get stuck at the first step, which is acknowledging you have a weakness.” She tilted her head so he could get a good look at her, hoping that her smile would reassure him. “Don’t think you’d still be living with us if I couldn’t tell you were trying.”

With the last of his combative strength all but extinguished, he covered his face and quietly wept in his hands, though the intensity of his sorrow was visible in his heaving shoulders.

She couldn’t be certain that it was her words that forced Percy into submission, but she wouldn’t exactly say she was proud of how things had gone. She longed to show him affection, caress his cheek, run her fingers through his soft hair. But she wouldn’t dare attempt it. Instead, she reached for the tissue box she used for makeup removal and ugly crying, and offered him one.
After another minute of quiet suffering, he eventually noticed the box being held before him and accepted the tissue, sniffing slightly. Wiping away his tears, it was as if he was wiping away some of the sorrow with it, and to Vex’s surprise, she witnessed him crack the first genuine smile she’d seen on his face all night.

“I’m sorry…” he muttered.

“Don’t be silly.”

His smile was weak; resigned. “I really hate who I am.”

“Trust me.” She smiled back. “Sometimes I hate who I am too.”

His brow flinched, and for a moment, he almost looked as though he’d been a little bent out of shape. “And I’m being silly?” he said, staring down at the floor. “You’re practically perfect.”

Feeling her face turn inappropriately red -- given their precarious circumstance -- she quickly tried to remedy the situation with something witty. “Now now…you know I’m not a fan of lying darling.”

He turned to look at her, though his eyes were no longer accusatory, but ripe with admiration that made her feel almost uncomfortable. “I’m not lying.”

Perhaps it was best that she simply drop it and accept the compliment, though she most certainly knew that “perfect” was a descriptor that couldn’t be farther from the truth. Besides, it nothing more than an adjective that people used when they wanted to get in your pants, and although she suspected that wasn’t Percy’s intention, it was a term that didn’t sit well with her. “If you say so…”

He sighed, looking away. “But I have lied in the past…A lot.”

“Then be honest,” she insisted. “It feels good to be honest. It’s a weight off your chest.”

She couldn’t help but feel a little sick as she uttered those words, having spent an entire day lying to the people she cared about the most.

There was a brief, contemplative pause in Percy’s demeanor, which was followed by a deep sigh, and a croaky voice. “Your ibuprofen pills.”

Vex perked up, a little confused by the sudden mention of the vanishing pills that had been bothering her for a while now.

“Last time…” He furrowed his brow. “When this happened last time, I mean… I tried to numb the pain of the withdrawal symptoms with painkillers. Of course, they weren’t nearly strong enough. So, I resorted to…” He cleared his throat and spoke a little more softly, as if he was ashamed of his own words. “...crushing them up and inhaling them, in here, late at night when you all were sleeping.”

Surprisingly, Vex felt somewhat underwhelmed by the confession, though she was -- at the very least -- relieved that things were finally starting to come together: The broken piece of pill she’d found in the bathroom; the blood around his nostril; it all made sense now.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, looking at her like puppy Trinket right after he’d chewed up her favorite pair of shoes.

“No, no…It’s fine dear,” she reassured him, straightening her back a little.

As she watched him lower his gaze once more, she realized that perhaps now was the time to do the
right thing and reward him for his honesty. “Well, if we’re going to be playing the honesty game here...” She swallowed once, lifting her chin. “…I’ll have you know that I’ve made some terrible decisions today.”

Her confession seemed to grab his attention, for his body turned toward her ever so slightly as he raised a brow at her. “What?”

She closed her eyes and pressed her lips together for a moment, praying that she wasn’t being stupid for oversharing. Then, after releasing a bit of tension in a hearty sigh, she resigned to the can of worms she’d opened and leaned in so she could speak more inconspicuously. “I was fired today.”

Oddly enough, Percy looked more confused that upset. “Pardon?”

She tilted her head slightly. “Well...laid off; technically. But then, my smart-ass decided to burn some bridges and tell my boss to fuck off when he offered to rehire me when a spot opened. And trust me, he wanted me back already.” She laughed at the memory to avoid crying. There was only room for one sad person in this bathroom. “Fucking creepy if you ask me…”

Percy stared down at his feet, clearly giving himself time to reflect on the whole situation. “Well shit.”

“I know.”

He rubbed his eyes with his thumb, groaning a little as his spoke. “But then… where the hell were you for six hours? I checked my phone when you got home.”

She smirked. “Scanlans…”

Percy shook his head slightly, blinking a couple of moments, as if he had just finished processing something. “Oh.”

He turned to look at her, and she looked at him, and he looked at her some more, and she started to get the sense that he had gotten entirely the wrong idea.

“No.”

“What?”

“It’s not what you’re thinking.”

“I wasn’t thinking anything.”

She crossed her legs at him, giving him just a little bit of sass with a quick tap of her foot on his ankle. “Sure you weren’t.”

He flinched, biting his lip to conceal a smile. “I swear to the gods I’m simply trying to keep myself from vomiting in front of you.”

She raised a brow at him. “You want me to give you some privacy? Cause I can leave, no probl-”

“No, it’s fine,” he insisted, sipping some more water and giving her a bit of a side glance. “But I appreciate your concern for my privacy.”

She really couldn’t tell if he was being sarcastic or not this time, but she couldn’t be bothered to figure it out at this point. “If you say so…’
After having a couple more sips, Percy rested the mug on the counter as he cleared his throat. “So it’s fair for me to assume that you haven’t told Vax about this little inconvenience of yours.”

Vex groaned, staring up at the ceiling as she was reminded of what a terrible person she truly was. “I couldn’t Percy. You know I couldn’t.”

“But you should.”

“And I will,” she said, her voice getting dangerously close to squeaky. “Tomorrow. I just... I didn’t want to tell him today, alright? It was too long of a day for anyone to handle that properly.”

Percy simply lifted his hands in surrender, now clearly smiling under his tired eyes. “By all means, he’s your brother. You are certainly entitled to the strategy you deem fit.”

This was the Percy she remembered: The pretentious smart-ass that sported a tired confidence she’d grown to like.

“Thank you,” she sing-songed, closing her eyes with a smirk.

Percy let out a very long and very hollow sigh, before rubbing his eyes. “By the way, please don’t tell Pike...”

Vex’s brows raised a little. She was so very tempted to deny him his wish, so much so that her lips parted in protest, only to realize that perhaps this time, and oath of silence was the only true compromise in this situation.

“I won’t tell her,” she promised. “I won’t tell anyone if you don’t want me too,” she half-promised. “But you shouldn’t feel like you need to hide this from us. I understand how hard it is to fight demons on your own...But we’re your family.”

He snorted slightly.

“We are!” She hissed, through the echo in the bathroom made her realize that she’d likely spoken a little too loud.

Percy simply huffed, sipping his water as if he was using it as a means to avoid replying.

She half smirked, “You’re not alone. Remember that.”

“Look” he said as he finished drinking. “I rather not burden you all with my problems,” He rested his hand on his chest. “This is my own, personal demon. And although this is a terrible example of my self-control, trust me when I say believe I’ve been doing quite alright on my own...” he cleared his throat. “...relatively speaking.”

Although this was a welcome change from the beliefs he harbored just a few minutes ago, when he was beating himself up for not trying hard enough, she was saddened by his insistence on isolating himself. It almost felt like he was afraid to get too attached; afraid of commitment. It dawned on her that maybe he’d lost people in the past due to his habit; a past significant other? Roommates? Perhaps his very own family kicked him out because they couldn’t deal with his addiction.

Sure, it made sense, but regardless of his past, she felt like she agreed with his belief that he was doing alright, even if she sensed a bit of sarcasm in his tone. “I can tell how much you try; how much you bottle things up and try to act like things aren’t bothering you. You don’t like burdening other people with your problems and that’s...” She smiled, staring down at her hand. “Admirable. But I also don’t believe it’s healthy to bottle things to the point where you risk exploding.”
Percy raised his brows for a second. “Explosions are not pleasant.”

She tilted her head, staring at him longingly. “I really don’t want you to explode Percy.”

They both chuckled in tandem, and for a long while, they continued to stare at each other, acting like they wanted to say something, but not quite managing to get the words out. Then, right as she felt like things were getting awkwardly quiet, Percy abruptly reached his hand over and formed a fist just above where she had placed her own hand.

She blinked at it for moment, realizing that her physical and emotional exhaustion had fried her brain just a tad. “You’ve lost me darling.”

He looked somewhat defeated, and sighed with a smirk. “I can’t hug you because the doctor said to refrain from partaking in any hugging, or any other activities that put pressure on my chest for at least two weeks.”

Other activities her ass. When would he even have the time to fuck if it wasn’t with one of them…

“Alright, but I don’t understand what the hell you’re trying-” She perked up, “Oh... You want me to fist bump you.”

Percy snorted. “Gods…”

Vex’s face lit up, and she promptly booped his knuckles with hers. She never would have imagined that sharing that little moment could feel so satisfying. She savoured the warm feeling, and for a moment they simply sat smiling at each other, like two friends who’d just come up with their own secret handshake.

“What the fuck?”

Both Vex and Percy flinched in their seat as if they’d just been caught doing something scandalous, and they quickly pressed against the opposite sides of the tub as they stared up at a very, very tired looking Vax.

“The fuck you two doing in here?” He asked, scratching his head as his eyes adjusted to the light.

The two stared at each other before Percy turned to look at Vax, speaking with a tired, though passable confidence. “Chatting.”

Vex turned and nodded at her brother, resigning to the fact that this was the excuse they were going for. “Yes, chatting.”

Vax simply squinted at them in his black My Chemical Romance tank top. “In the bathroom....”

Percy shrugged, giving him a smirk. “The acoustics are fantastic in here.”

Vax waved a hand at Percy as he rubbed his eyes with the other. “Look, I’m way too tired to figure out what the hell you two are plotting, but I need to take a piss so get the fuck out of here.”

***

As Percy settled back on the couch, Vex grabbed him another blanket. The night was going to get colder, and she knew he was prone to chills in his current state.

“Comfortable?” she asked as she approached him.
Percy let out a roar of a yawn and shifted his shoulders a little. “I think I’ll be alright.”

He couldn’t be all that comfortable with his broken ribs, but there was little more that she could do for him, and she knew he wouldn’t accept her bed even if she offered it.

As she rested the extra blanket on the coffee table, he spoke up. “Actually, I’ll take that.”

“Oh. Not a problem,” she said, unfolding the sheet and pulling it over him. As she instinctively tucked him in, pressing her fingers between him and the couch, her hand inadvertently made contact with the bare skin of his arm. In an instant, she felt a warm chill to roll down her back, and she squirmed a little. She didn’t know why it had given her such a visceral reaction. They’d hugged in the past. A little arm squeeze should have been trivial. But it wasn’t. She could feel the firmness of his muscles, the warmth of his bare skin in the palm of her hand. He felt real. Maybe even a little too real.

“Thank you.”

Vex flinched at the sudden loudness of his voice in the relative silence, but she concealed her current awkwardness behind a soft smile. “Try to get as much sleep as you can. And don’t hesitate to call if you need anything, because I know you’re going to hesitate.”

He returned the smile, looking up at her with those intense blue eyes. “I promise.”

“Good night Percy.”

He smirked. “Good night Vexy.”

Biting down on her tongue, she gave him a knowing grin and headed to bed. She’d let this one pass, for now. But she’d remember the violation. It was the third time he’d called her by the forbidden nickname, and he’d eventually have to pay his dues. Eventually …

Chapter End Notes

CW: Withdrawal symptoms, arguing

So fun fact, I actually had to do an F5 search to figure out just how many times Vex and Percy had actually hugged, and it turns out, in 180k + words...they have hugged a grand total of two times… TWO.

No but seriously, I am so sorry to those of you who expected more perc’ahlia in this fic. I never in my life could have expected this story to become so long. It’s entirely my mistake. I should have predicted my writing style.
Chapter Summary

Last time, on the Butterfly Effect: Vex and Percy have a heartfelt conversation in the bathroom about drug addiction, and the two share a few moments of honesty. Percy admits that he got in the habit of snorting crushed up ibuprofen pills to take the edge off the withdrawals, and Vex admitted that she’d been laid off. She promises that she will eventually tell Vax about her loss of work.

Chapter Notes

Notes: Ho boi.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The roar of the monstrosity outside stirred Vex from her slumber at what felt like an ungodly hour. Or at least, so she thought.

She rose out of bed looking more dead than alive with the remnants of her braid: a nest of tangled black hair crowning her head which trailed off to something that kind of looked like a donkey’s tail. As the roar continued to echo off the parking lot, Vex shot out of bed and crawled up onto the windowsill to peek behind the curtains, muttering profanities under her breath.

“Fucking leaf blowers,” she growled as she slapped away the curtain with a huff. “Fucking hell…”

She wanted so desperately to open the window and shout out all the reasons she hated them, but she knew that would cause more of a stir than was worth the bother. Keeping a low profile was more important than her petty vengeance over lost sleep.

Grumbling at her early morning defeat, she pawed for her phone on the bedside table and squinted at the bright little screen.

“Fuck…”

It was already eight thirty, which meant that she had less than two hours to take care of the vast list of self-imposed tasks she liked to have completed before Vax’s return.

“How the fuck did you sleep in this late…” she muttered to herself as she hopped off the bed, slipping into her sweatpants before glancing over at the mound of fur staring at her wide-eyed. “You were supposed to wake me you know.”

Trinket simply cocked his head, before hopping down from the foot of the bed and taking a patient seat by the door, his tail wagging slightly.

The number of duties on her to-do list were many: Walking and feeding Trinket were a must, and checking the mail had to happen at least a few times a week. She liked boiling some water for tea
and oatmeal which increased the chances of everyone else around her having breakfast. When she could, she also always made sure the coffee maker was brewing a fresh batch a few minutes before ten-thirty, which was when Vax generally came back from work. She tried her best to do any dishes that were left from the night before, and she liked doing the laundry if it was a cheap hot water day. Vacuuming the house would probably be a good idea as well, though she probably should have done it before they left for Emon...and given the state of her wrist, she wasn't sure how well any of that would work out.

Now, it wasn’t like her brother demanded she do all these chores, but she believed it helped him relax after a hard day at work knowing that everything was all already taken care of, and with Keyleth not around to help and Tiberius studying for finals, she was going to have to pull all the extra weight herself. Moreover, the fact that she no longer had a job made her very conscious of Vax’s upcoming workload, and the last thing she needed to do was humor her lazy side.

Besides, she had no excuse for slacking off like this: had she not been fired, she would have already been awake for at least a few hours now, completing her chores before her nine o’clock shift like the responsible adult she used to be.

Used to be...

Losing her job felt like she’d been demoted in life.

She blamed her chronic and painful desire to be financially independent on her father. He’d always threatened that he’d stop paying them an allowance if they left Syngorn, as if money was going to hold them back. Only...it was. That’s why they worked so hard, hoarding money for all those years so they could grab an apartment on the outskirts of Stilben and work odd and dishonest jobs to pay for the things that they’d longed to have for so very long: Freedom, physiological healing, and the opportunity to finally be themselves.

Sure, they’d had their fair share of nausea-inducing ups and downs, but overall, by sheer luck and their force of will, they had avoided going back to Syngorn for more than half a decade, and they intended on keeping things that way for as long as possible. She certainly couldn’t go back; there were some people in that terrible city that she knew would make her break into a hundred pieces if she ever saw them again.

Understandably, the threat of being forced to move back made losing her job all the more frightening, and it was why the least she could do was make sure she showed Vax how much she appreciated him and the backbreaking honest work he did to make sure they had a roof over their heads.

Now, it occurred to her that on her real work days, she didn’t usually make breakfast for Vax, though she still made sure everything was set and ready to prepare for when he came home. Considering the time of day, this meant that she either had to do so promptly and leave the apartment so he’d believe she was at work or... honor the promise she’d made to Percy and use the opportunity to admit her unfortunate predicament to Vax.

Neither option felt particularly appealing, but with the pressure of the conversation she’d had with Percy weighing down on her with increasing intensity, she resigned to the fact that today was the day she would speak to her brother, whether her soul was ready or not.

“Percy…” she mouthed, the image of her gangly roommate apparating in the foreground of her mind.

She realized that the first thing she had to do, before doing anything else, was to make sure Percy
hadn’t perished in the night. With the increasingly terrifying prospect invading her psyche, she snuck down the hall and peeked her head into the living room, where she was surprised to see Percy currently sitting up, wrapped in a blanket and staring at the door as if he were expecting someone.

“Good morning,” she said softly, though clearly not softly enough, because her utterance caused Percy to flinch. As he turned to look at her with a deep sigh of relief, Vex covered her mouth, smiling apologetically. “Shit. So sorry darling.”

Trinket trotted up to Percy and licked his naked feet that were sticking out from under the blanket, which he promptly hid away with a small smirk. “No no…it’s fine,” he said, his voice raspy and low. He rubbed his eye for a moment, clearing his throat. “The leaf blowers…”

“Urgh. I know. They’re loud aren’t they?”

He released a high pitched yawn behind a cupped hand as he spoke. “I don’t know how you slept through that all this bloody time. They’ve been going at it for almost half an hour. What the in the Nine Hells are they even blowing out there?”

“Dicks,” was what Vex desperately wanted to blurt out, but she resisted the temptation. “Well, there’s that one tree that Trinket likes to piss under.”

Percy furrowed his brow as he scratched behind his ear. “But it’s winter. The tree is bare.”

“Oh, I know. It’s been winter here since the end of Fessuran...Started snowing by Quen'pillar this year too.” Vex sighed, shrugging as she walked over to subtly check the wastebasket she’d left beside the couch for him, which was fortunately empty.

Percy removed the blanket from his shoulders with a sigh and rested it on his lap. “They're not blowing leaves then. But they’ve got to be blowing something.”

“I don’t know Percy…” she groaned, resting her face in her hands. It was as if he were trying to bait her, but she was too stubborn to give away her immaturity at this point. She leaned her butt against the arm of the couch and turned toward the blinded window. “Sticks,” she finally said. “I guess they’re blowing sticks.”

Percy’s silence in response to her desperate guess did not sit well with her, and as she glanced over her shoulder, her heart nearly missed a beat as she watched his shoulders quake with his face in his hand, terrified that he had started crying. However, a closer reading of his mannerisms soon revealed a far more agreeable outcome.

His laughter was dry and breathless, but it was undoubtedly laughter.

“You dirty bastard.”

He shook his head with a chuckle as he reached for his glasses and pressed them on his face. “Vex dear... Even a ten year-old would have caught on to the irresistible innuendo.”

Vex simply shrugged with a smile, feeling warm and flustered by his odd choice honorifics for the day. “Guess I was too tired to catch what was coming out of my mouth...”

Her lie immediately caught the attention of Percy, who stared her down with a knowing look, reminding her of the uncomfortable truth that he was a grown ass man who knew all about the lovely things humans could do with their organs. It was a thought that didn’t sit well with her so early in the morning. She’d barely spent two minutes with him and she was already feeling hot and bothered.
“Anyway…” She singsonged as her voice raised by an octave, making her way toward the kitchen. “I need to get ready for the day. Vax will be home soon. Though I do hope he catches the later buss…”

“Hope?”

She refrained from grimacing as she prepared the pot of water and turned on the fire. “I’m going to tell him. Don’t worry.”

Trinket circled around her legs a few times, clearly eager for food. She figured she’d feed him before giving him his walk this time, since it was already later than usual, and she didn’t want to upset his stomach too much.

Percy however, did not respond, as if he didn’t hear her.

Vex bent over as she poured fresh food into Trinket’s bowl. “About work, I mean.” She turned back to look at Percy just as he was slouching back down into the couch. “You alright?”

“Yeah.” He muttered, clearing this throat. “Sorry. I’m feeling a little light headed.”

“Well I’m making some water for tea and oatmeal,” she said, “You’re probably just hungry and dehydrated.”

“I’m not really that hun-”

“Oh no you don’t,” she warned, heading over to the fridge. “Don’t you dare believe for one second that just because Keyleth isn’t around to spoon feed you that it’s not happening.” She opened the fridge and scanned its empty compartments. “I’m taking care of you whether you like it or not.”

There was a bit of a pause before Percy asked the terribly bizarre, though justifiably predictable question. “So you’re going to spoon feed me?”

Vex froze in place, staring at the half empty bottle of milk, the quarter of a cabbage, and three lonely eggs. “Well…” She huffed out a little laugh and closed the fridge, “Only if you beg for it.”

She heard what sounded like an amused snort from Percy, but he did not respond this time. Not that Vex didn’t welcome his silence. Deciding on whether she actually wanted to commit to feeding Percy with a spoon like the beginning of some cheap porno was going to take some time anyway.

Stepping behind the couch, she ruffled his hair a little before wandering toward the bathroom. “You need to wash your hair by the way.”

Percy simply sighed as he ran his fingers through his own hair. “I know.”

Waiting for the water to boil, she dedicated some time to doing everything else in her morning routine, which involved getting washed, dressed, and doing her hair. Or at least, that would have been the plan had she not come to the horrific the realization that she couldn’t actually braid her hair. Like, at all.

Now that Vax and Keyleth weren’t around to give her a hand for the first time in almost a week, she didn’t know where to turn. Tiberius would have been her third choice, but he was currently in class...and had a broken arm. Trinket would have been her fourth choice, but sadly, he was a dog. She felt like she could maybe pull it off herself if she spent a couple of centuries, but she had a bad feeling that she wasn’t going to live that long.
“Shit…” she hissed, dropping her hands dejectedly after her fourth attempt.

She never imagined her broken wrist could irritate her so much until now. Alas, this unfortunate turn of events meant that she was either going to have to leave it in its frayed and pillow-ravaged state, unbraided it and have it flow wild like the snakes of Medusa, or…

No. She couldn’t possibly...

Holding her brush, she peeked her head out into the hallway and gave a long hard look at Percy, who was absentmindedly browsing through his phone with a dead look on his face. Only, he couldn’t have been paying too much attention to whatever the hell he was doing because he almost immediately noticed her gawking at him and he quirked a brow at her.

Vex bit down on her lower lip as she looked right back at him, realizing the sheer madness of what she was about to ask.

“Percy dear…”

He responded to her coy behavior with a very slow blink and a voice laden with suspicion. “Why do I get the distinct feeling you need something from me?”

She put on the sweetest smile she could muster as she skipped over to the couch, where she plopped down on the floor in front of him, legs crossed and eyes wide. The point of view was...interesting to say the least, and she could tell from Percy’s puzzling expression that he thought the same.

“Vexy,” she said with a toothy grin, causing Percy’s eyes to grow wide. “You know I absolutely loathe that nickname you seem to be so fond of?”

Percy conspicuously cupped his hands over his crotch as his expression morphed from puzzled to deeply perturbed. “Yes…”

Vex gasped in exasperation. “Dear gods, why would the thought even cross your mind? I would never hit you.” She glanced down briefly. “There.”

Percy’s voice had shrunk to a diminutive state. “One can never be too careful…”

Though somewhat astonished by his terrible assumptions, she tried her best to dismissed his concerns with a huff to reassure him that she had no intention of causing him bodily harm. “As I was saying... I feel as though I need some sort of compensation, so I want you to take this brush-”

“No happening,” he blurted out, his expression immediately flattening.

“Percy!” she squealed, almost smacking him on the leg with her brush and causing him to let out a little terrified yelp as he lifted his knees in self-defense.

Vex was mortified by his reaction, which struck her as almost Pavlovian. “For the love of- Stop acting like I want to beat you.”

“And you stop waving that thing around threatening my rights to fatherhood!” he exclaimed, waving his hand at her brush as if it were a bat or something despicable.

“I’m sorry!”

“Well put the bloody thing down!”
Vex dropped her hands into her lap and pouted. “You won’t even let me finish.”

He continued to scrutinize her in his guarded position. “I already know what you’re asking and the answer is no.”

She tilted her head and half-smirked, lowering her voice to a sultry tone. “But you’re so good with your hands dear.”

Carefully lowering his legs, he appeared to drop his defenses, if only slightly. “If I put my hands anywhere near your hair you’re going to somehow end up bald and probably on fire.”

“Oh shush you.” She knew his hands weren’t going to accidentally scalp her, but setting her body on fire was a different story… “If those hands of yours can work the guts of a sixty year-old van then they can certainly manage a simple braid.”

Strangely enough, his expression seemed to whiten even more, as if the thought of having to work with her hair terrified him even more so than his previous assumption that she intended to maim him.

Alas, she eventually wised up to his state of mind, and she gave him a foxy little grin. “You don’t know how, do you?”

“Why the fuck would I know how to braid someone’s hair?”

To his credit, he had once told her that he had no siblings, and frankly, he didn’t strike her as the type who volunteered his time to grooming others, much less himself.

“Well that can be remedied,” she said as she marched toward the bedroom.

As she grabbed her laptop, she could already hear him shouting from the couch. “What happened to your whole “I’m gonna take care of you” rant?”

She walked back into the room and plopped back on the floor in front of him, opening her laptop on the coffee table. “Think of this as your morning exercise. You don’t even have to get up.”

Percy rested his mouth in his hands, muffling his own voice as he spoke, “I can’t believe you’re actually going to make me do this.”

“You better believe it,” she said, cracking her fingers in her one good hand.

The deep disdain he felt for the situation came through the timbre of his sigh. “This is a terrible idea.”

“Let’s see now…” she hummed as she wiggled her fingers in anticipation, trying her best to ignore him. “B-r-a-i-d-i-n-g t-u-t-o-r-i-a-l,” she sounded out as she typed one letter at a time.

As the various options loaded up on the page, Vex turned to notice Percy’s face lose even more color at the sight of videos that were admittedly far too difficult for beginners.

Vex gave him a nervous smile before clearing her throat and trying again. “Braiding tutorial for beginners,” she specified, pressing enter and cautiously hoping for something a little more manageable.

“Ah, much better,” she said as she clicked an adequately bland looking video. “This one seems a little more up your alley. Nice and easy.”

Percy appeared as though he was about to protest, but seemed to change his mind mid-breath.
“What?”

“Oh, nothing. By all means, carry on this ridiculous charade.”

The feminine voice in the video was so bland and monotone that it sounded synthetic, but she figured this was just the type of instruction an android like Percy needed.

They sat in relative silence for a few seconds as the video played, when Percy spoke up. “Says we need to wash your hair.”

“No no no,” Vex said, waving her hand at him. “We can skip that step.”

“Why?”

“I washed it last night. I don’t need to.”

“But what if it spontaneously combusts or something?”

She turned to face him. “Percy…”

“What?” He asked in feigned innocence. “I’m serious.”

“No, I’m being serious.”

He pointed at the screen. “It just mentioned we need a pomade.”

Vex pinched the bridge of her nose. “I don’t have a pomade. Just braid the damn hair.”

“Ah…no,” he said, his tone switching to one that was almost teacherly. “I must comb it first.”

She sighed, handing the brush over her shoulder. “Very well.”

Percy accepted the tool and gave it a quick scan before looking at her expectantly.

She let out an exasperated sigh and paused the video before fully twisting her torso to look at him. “What.”

“This is a brush.”

“Yes…”

“But the video used a comb.”

“And a brush.”

“But also a comb.”

“Oh my fucking god!” Vex gasped, nearly slamming her forehead on the coffee table. “I know you’re not this dense.”

And yet, even in her irritation, she could detect an ever-growing hint of amusement in his voice. “I told you this was a terrible idea.”

She did not lift her head from the table as she spoke. “You are deliberately making this very simple task a lot harder than it has to be. Vax can do it with his eyes closed.”
“Vax has long hair,” Percy noted.

“Exactly,” she confirmed, lifting her head to look at the screen, “So just imagine how impressive it would be if you could do it. No one would ever expect such a specific skill from someone like you!” she howled, straightening her back as she felt his fingertips run through her hair and brush against her scalp and the nape of her neck.

Trinket stood up and barked once, and Percy immediately retracted his hands. “So sorry.”

The warm chill she felt run down the back of her neck and down into her nether regions made her realize that perhaps he was right: this was a terrible idea. But she was too stubborn to give in now.

“Just make sure you hold the top end when you brush out the tangles so you don’t yank my hair out.”

He hummed at her remark. “So there is the possibility of you going bald.”

Vex rolled her eyes. “Sure. If you yank all my hair out.”

Percy gingerly rested his palm on the top of her head as he began to very slowly and carefully brush out the sections. “I won’t let that happen.”

Exhaling deeply, Vex held her head as still as possible, trying to focus on everything but the feeling of Percy’s hands running down her neck and back. Trinket had taken a sprawled out stance in front of the door, anticipating his walk and quite visibly unphased by Percy’s proximity to her. There was no doubt in her mind that he trusted them together. But she most certainly didn’t. Percy was always so sheepish when it came to physical contact that this all felt very...close.

Her eyes wandered toward the wide-leaved green plant that had been the sole element of decoration in the otherwise drab apartment for so many years now. “You need to remind me to water Keyleth’s plant,” she said, attempting to start a conversation to distract herself.

But Percy did not answer. He seemed to be completely focused on the task at hand, as if the contact with her hair had triggered a new script in his programming. In fact, she was actually rather impressed by his delicate touch. Even Vax had a tendency to get too aggressive when he brushed, but Percy seemed to go out of his way to ensure that he didn’t pull a single strand of black from her scalp.

“Alright,” he said, running the entirety of her hair through his hands before handing it to her in bulk.

“Impressive,” she hummed, savoring the satisfaction of freshly detangled hair. “Ready for the next step?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be, I suppose.”

Pressing play, the oddly robotic voice narrated the next phase of the process. “Divide tangle free hair into three even sections.”

He imitated the hands in the video as he spoke. “How could a human possibly have this much hair?”

“Mine?”

“Yes.”

Vex couldn’t help but smirk at the compliment, intentional or otherwise. “Thank you.”
“Place the left section between your left index finger and thumb-”

“Hold your damn horses robot woman,” Percy grumbled as he worked.

“It doesn’t have to be perfect.”

“Of course it does.”

Vex rolled her eyes, pausing the video and setting it back a few seconds. “You done?”

“Nope.”

Vex closed her eyes and huffed. She had to accept the fact that beggars couldn’t be choosers, and she was most certainly the beggar in this situation. Not that the experience was bad by any stretch of the imagination. In fact, it was quite the opposite. There was a soothing intensity behind the touch of his fingers; delicate in pressure but rough in texture. She couldn’t help but muse over what those hands would feel like on other parts of her body, though she dare not venture further down that dangerous train of thought.

“I never really got a good look at your tattoo,” Percy remarked, noting the feathers tattooed under her ear as he sectioned off the hair with unnecessary precision. “It’s nice.”

“Thank you. Did you know Vax did it for me?”

Percy chuckled slightly. “Why does that not surprise me?”

“He does come off as that type of guy, doesn’t he…”

“Would you be mad if I said yes?”

“Not at all.”

They shared a moment of silence as he smoothed out the sections.

“It’s very well done though,” he continued, brushing wisps of baby hair out the way. “Lovely linework.”

“I want him to color them blue when we get the opportunity.”

“I’m sure he could do it. He’s talented. They look like real feathers.”

Considering Percy had quite the collection of masterfully done tattoos himself, his words were far more than flattering. “You should tell him that,” she said, turning to look at him with a grin. “He’d probably like you a lot more.”

Percy’s brows pressed together as the words sunk in. “He doesn’t like me now?”

“I wouldn’t say he doesn’t like you…” she said, giving him an innocent smile.

He closed his eyes and sighed as he adjusted his glasses, “Just play the video…”

“Well look at you,” she said, giving him another foxy grin and pressing the space bar. “Suddenly so eager to complete the job.”

“I may be a lot of bad things, but a quitter isn’t one of them.”
“Place the left section between your left index finger and thumb, let the middle section hang free, and place the right section between your right index finger and thumb.”

“No shit Sherlock…” Percy muttered, “Why does the audio part of this video have to be so needlessly confusing?”

“I didn’t make the damn video. Just braid the hair like it says and stop fussing.”

Percy suppressed another chuckle. “Yes, your majesty.”

Vex simply huffed. It was a nickname that she would tolerate for now, waiting patiently as he finished his handiwork.

“Oh sweet sons of Pelor,” Percy muttered. “Why is this suddenly getting complicated?”

“You need me to pause it?”


Vex purred. “Determined.”

“Quite.”

As much as he was complaining, she could feel he was getting the hang of it, and before long, she sensed he had made it to the tip of the braid well before the video had even concluded.

“Do you have a hair tie or…do I just tie it in a knot or something.”

“Don’t you dare,” Vex warned, grabbing hold of the braid and bringing it around her shoulder so she could examine it, glancing back at him briefly with a pair of narrowing eyes.

Percy looked nervous, like a kid waiting for his teacher to tell him what grade he’d gotten for a presentation.

“This is really good Percy.” She smiled. “I don’t know why you were making such a fuss.”

Percy leaned back into the couch and sighed, seemingly exhausted by the ordeal. “I’ll leave that up to interpretation.”

As she used the hair tie around her wrist to fasten the braid, she faced him with a furrowed brow. “I can’t tell whether your trying to be mysterious but it won’t work on me either way.”

“I don’t believe I catch your meaning…”

She couldn’t really tell if he was being honest or not, but regardless, Vex did not humor him with clarification. She would be the mysterious one at the end of this conversation. “Ah, well would you look at that. The water is boiling. Time for breakfast!”

***

Vex did not spoon feed Percy, though she did sit next to him while he shared a packet of oatmeal and with her with and sipped a cup of ginger tea to soothe his stomach. They had a brief conversation about Keyleth’s house plant, which enlightened Vex to the fact that Percy didn’t know a flying fuck about plants, though he seemed to like to pretend he did. She wondered if he had ever pretended to know anything else in the past.
With their bowls washed and set to dry, their conversation then led them outside, where Percy smoked a cigarette as they both leaned against Vox Machina and watched Trinket sniff around his piss tree. She was relieved he had the willpower to go outside with her to get some sun, but she could tell from the dark circles under his squinted eyes and his slouched position that he wasn’t too fond of their brief outing. Still, Vex believed that it was exactly this sort of lighthearted activity that Percy needed to forget his woes.

When they went back into the apartment, Percy took a shower while Vex vacuumed the house and changed his sheets, and after gathering up the various clothes littering their bedroom, she loaded it all up into the washing machine and carefully measured out the detergent to ensure it would last them at least a couple more washes.

Her eyes widened as she heard the front door unlock, and she turned around just as she watched Vax wander into the apartment and drop his backpack by the couch. “Hey Percy. How you holding up?”

Percy glanced up from Vex’s computer and nodded. “Better.”

Vax wandered up behind Vex and pulled off his sweater and sweaty work shirt before stuffing it into the open washing machine.

“Morning Vax,” she said, trying to not make eye contact.

“Morning Stubby,” he replied, giving her a curious look. “You’re home early.”

Vex turned to look at Percy out of panic, but he simply shrugged at her distress before returning his attention back to her computer. She wasn’t going to get bailed out of her responsibilities this time. She’d have to own up to her mistakes and act like the responsible adult she desperately wanted to be.

Chapter End Notes

Well this chapter ended up being a lot more slutty than I originally planned… Sorry not sorry?

No but seriously, writing this braiding scene got me all flustered and I don’t know why. I guess this is what happens when my love for Perc’ahlia is rekindled.

(This is the actual video Vex used to teach Percy: Link to video

Also, in case you haven’t already heard, go check out “The Taryong Darrington Queer Society”. It’s a M9 Modern AU and it’s amazing. If you’re craving more modern AU stuff and love fluff, and drama, and queer stuff, it’s definitely the fic for you. Link to fic
Talking and Stuff

Chapter Summary

Last time, on the Butterfly Effect: Vex tries to have Percy braid her hair for her. It goes...well. However, as Vax comes home, she comes to the realization that she most speak to him and admit that she’s lost her job.

Chapter Notes

No content warnings this chapter.

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I don't think I can even begin to articulate how much I struggled with this chapter; so much so that I resorted to creating fan art to procrastinate. (You can find it on my tumblr and twitter). But overall, I think I'm content with the final product. It's a bit of a long chapter, but most of it is dialogue.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Vex struggled a smile as she handed Vax the cup of piping hot coffee she’d painstakingly prepared for him, trying her best to enjoy the last few moments of calm before the storm. Her edgier half had just gotten out of his shower, and was now settling down on his bed to enjoy the first few moments of respite after a long day at work. Truth be told, it simultaneously felt like the worst and perfect time to bring up the bad news; a bit of a Schrodinger's situation, in a way.

After taking a few seconds to savor the smell of the fresh coffee, Vax glanced up to study Vex with typical scrutiny, a sure sign that he was already onto her...

“I know Keyleth usually puts a little cinnamon in your coffee,” Vex said, forcing a smile. “Hopefully I didn’t put too much.”

He took a small sip and smirked, unbothered. “It tastes good, thank you.”

Vex bit down on her lower lip as she plotted her next course of action. Nothing could feel worse than the fact that she could still walk away at any time. That’s right. She could leave the conversation and spend the rest of her miserable existence pretending she was working until she found another job. It’s not like he would ever find out, considering she was the one who ever bothered keeping track of the finances in the first place. In fact, Vax was in such a habit of asking her how much they had, that unless they literally ran out of money, he'd probably never question her.

Because he trusted her...

“Did you braid your own hair?” Vax asked abruptly, knocking Vex out of her daze.

She smiled at the memory of the near disaster. “Actually, I made Percy do it.”

Vax’s brows raised as he took another sip from his mug. “At gunpoint?”
“Honestly, a gun would have helped,” she said as she sat down next to him, exhaling deeply. “He was being extremely difficult.”

Vax seemed more saddened than amused by her struggles. “Wish I could have helped. We have such terrible fucking schedules—”

“No, you’re fine,” she interrupted, staring down at her bound wrist. “You do so much more than you should. I think you might just be the hardest worker I know.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I’m very serious!” she insisted, turning to face him as more sadness surfaced on her face. “And I’m sorry I don’t show my appreciation more frequently.” Her shoulders dropped as her energy faded. “I should though... You deserve it.”

Vax’s expression furrowed as he listened closely, narrowing his eyes at the floor before shifting his gaze back at her. “Stubby?”

She instantly straightened her back and lifted her chin ever so slightly, trying to maintain a modicum of composure to hide her otherwise crumbling interior. “Yes brother?”

He licked his lips and closed his eyes for a moment, clearly trying to process how best to present his next statement. “I can’t help but feel like something is troubling you.”

Vex flipped her braid over her shoulder and started to play with it in an attempt to cover her face, as she so often did when she was in trouble as a child.

“You know I can tell,” Vax cautioned.

Of course, she knew he could tell. He knew she knew he knew.

She let out a little nervous snort, staring down at her knees. Still, he searched for her eye contact anyway, leaning in to get a better look at her.

“If you didn't want me to know, I wouldn’t know.” He poked her on the shoulder. “Because you’re a very good liar.”

A small smirk escaped Vex’s lips in the face of the embarrassing truth; she didn’t believe being proud of it could be a good thing, but she still couldn’t help it.

Her twin poked her once more, prompting her to shift and actually look at him with a defeated sigh.

“Which means...” he continued, returning the smirk, “You want me to know something but you just don’t know how to fucking say it.”

Why was he so terribly good at this? He was generally pretty awful at reading other people, and yet, he probably knew her better than she knew herself. She couldn’t help but laugh at his brilliance.

“I’m being serious you know,” Vax warned. “Now... Do you want a hint on how to tell me this secret of yours? Because I can give you a hint.”

She got one look of her pitiful self in the reflection of his dark eyes: So much like hers, yet still different enough to be his. On days like these, it felt like she was looking at a magic mirror with a reflection that believed that she was the better version. She disagreed; she knew he was the better half. Always was and always would be.
“A hint?” Her sigh ended with a smile. “I’d love to hear it.”

Crossing his arms, Vax studied her more intently than a Westruun border security officer before leaning in to whisper his sage advice:

“Just fucking say it.”

Vex rolled her eyes and looked away, somewhat covering her mouth with her palm as she muttered her words. “You’re not going to like it.”

“I don’t have to like it,” he said. “If it’s shit you think I should know then fucking tell me.”

“Vax…”

“I’m your brother.”

Vex closed her eyes and rested her entire face in her hand, groaning loudly as she prepared herself.

“Stop psyching yourself out and just say it-”

“I was fired!”

Vax’s lips sealed shut, and Vex felt the weight in her head drop down into her gut.

Blocking her face with her hand to create some distance between them, she tried to desperately defuse the situation, though she could already feel her words dragging out of her as if they were kicking and screaming the whole way. “I suppose…laid off is the more accurate term.”

She waited for a reaction. Any reaction.

But she heard no gasp. No swearing or kicking. Not even a shift in position. She wasn’t sure if talking was helping or hurting the situation. She figured she’d have to just roll for it.

“So…” She swallowed once. “I practically told him to fuck himself, and then I left.”

She closed her eyes and slouched into herself. With the truth out, she no longer felt weighed down by the intensity of the lie, though she was now floating free, fully exposed to the elements and the wrath of her brother. She cautiously peeked through her hands to get a look at Vax, noticing that his expression had most certainly straightened, though it was difficult to discern whether he was angry or not.

“So yeah…” she huffed, slapping her hand down on her knee and looking at her better half with a forced smile and glossy eyes. “Not gonna be working there anymore.”

They shared a moment of silence with each other; tense, breathless, anxious silence. The type of silence that usually followed with Vax storming out of the house in his typical flighty fashion: too angry to care about what it did to her. Though even she knew it was something that he needed to do; something that helped him defuse. She kept her eyes shut, listening for the footsteps, feeling for the shift in the mattress.

But he did not walk away this time.

He simply sat, still, staring at her with a face that started to soften, before eventually shifting to something that looked...kind of like a smile.

“Thank god,” he said, rather suddenly.
Her eyes widened and her lips parted slightly. Had she just misheard him? Because she could have sworn he'd just thanked god that she'd lost her job.

Her tears demanded they be set free, but she tried to hold back the chains.

But didn’t feel right. Not right at all. It soured her mind that he was taking it so well, so much so that she felt her stomach churn out the pent up tension in her chest, which manifested itself in sudden, heavy streams of tears.

Vax seemed taken aback by the sudden emotional release, rubbing her back as his voice welled with concern. “C’mon Stubby. You hated that place.”

She could barely grasp what she was feeling anymore. The tears felt uncalled for and unnecessary in the face of Vax's unsettling acceptance. It was a turn of events she could barely process.

“Why aren’t you mad at me?” she asked, her question half muffled by heavy sobs.

Vax’s brow sunk in confusion. “Why would I be?”

She wanted to be angry, but she knew it wouldn’t help. Instead, she took some time to wipe the tears from her eyes, before reaching for a tissue on the bedside table and blowing her nose, before tossing the wad of tissue and missing the bin by at least a foot.

“Fuck…” she muttered, wiping her eye with her wrist once more before looking back at her brother with a more serious demeanor. “Vax. You do understand I’ve been fired, right?”

Vax let out a sigh as he leaned back on his hands and a stated up at the ceiling. “About fucking time. Guess the universe thought you needed a little help.”

The confusion in her expression grew more and more transparent by the minute. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“You were never going to quit working at that hellhole of a diner.” He stretched his neck from side to side before bending over and reaching to touch his toes. He often did this when he was trying to keep calm. She liked to call it “nervous stretching”. It was his way of trying to seem unconcerned...calm. He probably didn’t want her to feel bad, and she wasn’t sure if she hated him or loved him for it.

“You were never the type of person to let go of a bird to catch the other two in the bush,” he continued, sitting back up and stretching his back with a few hearty cracks before turning to look at her once more. “You like to play it safe when it comes to finances and you know it.”

She shook her head at him, narrowing her eyes, “Yeah but-”

“Yeah but nothing.” His expression hardened, though there was no resentment or anger in his eyes. “This is a wake-up call. Give yourself a few days to think about it, and once you’ve done some serious soul searching and figured out what you actually want to do with your life, then you can start looking for another job.”

She knew he wanted to help her. He was doing a good job, one could even argue. However, she still felt like he didn’t understand. Not fully at least.

She clicked her tongue and stared down at her knees. “Vax…”

“What?”
She smiled. “I’m not saying you’re wrong. You’re right. I should have dropped that job a long time ago.”

Vax reached over to take her hand in his as he tried to make eye contact with her again. “Remember when we all went to the diner to go see you?”

“Yeah…”

“We could all tell you hated it. Clear as day. It was taking bites out of you. Every day I worried that one day there would be nothing left of you.”

“My god.” She snorted.

“But I was wrong.” He perked up. “You’re tough. And you endured that job for months and months.”

“I know Vax. I get it. It’s just…”

“And it’s not like I could tell you to quit. You wouldn’t do it. I knew you wouldn’t because you worry so much about making sure we’re alright and-”

“Vax, please.”

Heeding her plea, he immediately pursed his lips, wide-eyed and alert.

“It’s just,” she sighed, trying her best to be tactful in her honesty. “It’s just you got so angry at me when we weren’t going to make rent last time, and I was afraid it would happen again. But now you’re not mad, and I’m just so confused because I never fucking know how you’re going to react to something.”

Vax’s energy seemed to get sapped from his very pores as his shoulders dropped and he turned away.

“I’m sorry…” she continued. “I just...sometimes I don’t know how to talk to you. And I’m embarrassed that I don’t know how because you’re my twin brother and you should be the person I’m most comfortable talking to.” She closed her eyes as she felt the sadness rise up again. “And yet, here I was, keeping secrets from you. I feel terrible.”

Vax shook his head as he spoke. “You shouldn’t feel terrible.”

She looked up at him and held her sadness back behind a hard visage.

“You didn’t want to deal with me again,” he continued. “Watch me storm out again like a fucking idiot.”

She looked away as she quickly snuffed out another tear before it could come to fruition. “I’m not mad at you for walking away. It’s how you cope…It helps you cool down.” She smirked at her own selfish desires. “I only wish you didn’t have to.”

Vax leaned in, clasping his hands in prayer. “And I promise you I will try. I want to get better about dealing with my problems; facing them head on-”

Vex raised a finger to interject. “- when appropriate. I know how you are: you’ll always fight over flight. But if you don’t watch your impulsiveness I worry it will get you killed one day.”

His grim expression was broken by the smallest of smirks, “It’s fine balance sister.”
“Oh, I know.”

They sat in silence as they reflected on each other’s words. The sound of the neighbors arguing below caught their ears, prompting them to both laugh nervously and face one another.

“You know it pains me to see you this way,” he whispered.

She hid her guilt behind a smile, whispering back. “I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing for something that isn’t your fault,” he insisted, nudging her shoulder with his knuckles.

She couldn’t help but chuckle slightly. “Sometimes I wish things were simpler, that’s all.”

“We all do, sometimes. But that’s life, isn’t? You win some and you lose some. Like a game of chance; cards, dice. Sure, maybe a little bit of skill is involved but most of it is dumb luck.”

“This isn’t a choose your own adventure.”

“But it sure does feel like D&D sometimes.”

“Closet nerd,” she scoffed.

“Closet brat,” he sneered back.

They both stared each other down for a long while before she broke out into laughter that she muffled behind a hand.

Vax poked her on the shoulder. “You know what Gandalf always said...”

Vex rolled her eyes, “He was like, ‘blah blah, life sucks’…”

Vax shook his finger as they spoke in unison, “All we have to do is decide what to do with the time that is given to us.”

“Fucking Gandalf,” she snorted, wiping another tear from her eyes.

“Yeah,” he laughed with her. “But that’s really all there is to it, right? These are nothing more than growing experiences for us. We’re just two weirdos trying to get through life, and sometimes we go through tough challenges. But it’s those challenges that make us level up. And this is us, leveling up.”

She still couldn’t fathom how well he was taking all of this. He was even using nerd metaphors. The whole situation was feeling more and more like a strange, twisted dream. In fact, for the briefest of moments, she felt as though something was terribly wrong...as if she wasn’t actually part of this world.

She felt something warm drip down her nose.

“Oh shit, Vax said, immediately grabbing her another tissue.

She reached for her upper lip and immediately recognized the feeling. She’d probably popped a capillary. This had been a rough day.

“Do I get any new skills?” She laughed, pressing the tissue against her nose.
Vax smiled back, though the concern still showed in his eyes. “That’s for you to decide.”

She groaned, “Gods...you know how indecisive I can be.”

“I think I’m worse.”

“If you say so,” she said, sniffling as she stared down at the tissue. It wasn’t bad as she thought it was. It had already stopped.

Trinket, who was lying curled up in a ball in the middle of the room, glanced up at her with tired eyes before walking up to her and resting his face on her lap.

“You good?” Vax asked, handing her another tissue.

She accepted the tissue with a smirk and wiped any leftover blood from her skin before ruffling the fur around Trinket’s collar. “I’m fine. It’s just the dryness in the air, I think.” She sighed as she attempted to toss the tissue into the trash, missing again. She was really off her game today. “I’ve just been really sad these days.”

Vax sighed, nodding slightly. “I’ve been sad as well…” He glanced up at her and smirked. “But things are looking up.”

She laughed at his claim. “How could things possibly be looking up?”

“Well, for starters,” he said, looking a bit more serious, though still serene in attitude. “Pike is going to be okay.”

She’d heard it already from Scanlan, but that didn’t lessen the feeling of warmth in her chest. “I hope we can see her soon.”

He nodded, and they both sat silent, as if offering a minute of prayer to their beloved beacon of hope.

“Grog told me at work that Scanlan had good news as well.: Vax added. “Said he got a job offer as a bouncer at the Cloudtop.”

“It’s true. I heard it from Scanlan as well.”

“You’ve got to admit. That’s really good news for Grog.”

“Fantastic, really.” Considering his criminal record, the prospect of getting hired by such a reputable organization was something Grog would likely have trouble refusing, even if it meant leaving them all behind.

“And you’ve gotta admit, we’re doing pretty well financially….all things considered.”

“You sure you’re considering me getting fired into your calculations.”

“You know what I’m talking about,” Vax scolded in a playful manner as he lifted a hand and started counting on his fingers. “You and Percy saved us a lot of money on the van repair. Percy helped us out with rent, and is still bringing in odd change. We were better about balancing our travel expenses this time. People gave us a bunch of fucking gifts we maybe sort of deserved…which saved us money on hotels, food, even clothing…”

“Gilmore…” She hummed, wiggling her eyebrows at him.

“Really now…” He said, quickly taking her hand into his. “We are doing so much better than we
were before.” He shook her hand for emphasis. “So much better.”

Vex sighed, resigning to the fact that he was once again, right. “You’re not wrong. Our account is okay.”

He huffed out a bit of a laugh. “If that wasn’t the case you’d be fucking bawling right now.”

She released her hand from his and poked him, “Oh, cause I wasn’t bawling just now?”

“You were whimpering at best.”

“Shut up,” she scoffed, shoving him with her shoulder.

“You can’t make me.”

They shared another moment of silence with each other, only this time, there was less tension between them. In fact, if anything, his presence beside her comforted her, for once.

“You’re right though,” she finally said, staring down at her feet with a shrug and a grin. “You got me.”

“Of course I did. I’ve known you your entire life.”

“I’ve known you your entire life and I sometimes I feel like I don’t know you as well as you know me.”

“Don’t worry about it Stubby. I’m seven minutes older than you so I’ve got an unfair advantage.”

She snorted out another laugh, “Right, of course. Your poor little sister simply can’t keep up with your incredible wisdom.”

Vax huffed, turning away to look out the window. “If it makes you feel any better, I actually thought this was going to be something about Percy.”

She let out a nervous laugh, staring out the window with him as they caught glimpse of a raven that had perched on the closest branch. “Why would I be upset about him?”

The raven flew away almost immediately, and Vax turned to look at Vex with a grin. “I’ve got plenty of theories…”

She promptly slapped Vax on the shoulder and stomped her feet like a child. “Vax!”

He cowered with a grin as he spoke quickly. “But we don’t have to get into that right now.”

She ceased her assault and leaned back as she stared him down with a raised chin. “You better not…”

Vax adjusted his shirt and tucked a strand of hair behind his ear as he spoke. “Besides, I just assumed you two resolved whatever you were dealing with in the bathroom.”

Vex snorted. “I suppose you could say that…”

“What the fuck where you two doing in there anyway?”

“Oh, you know…” She shrugged. “Just talking and stuff.”
Vax blinked at her, before raising his fingers and creating air quotes. “Stuff…”

Vex glared back at him with venomous eyes, to which Vax responded with a sly wiggling of his eyebrows.

“Vax, stop.”

“Stubby.”

“I’m telling you with complete honesty that it was no more than what were are doing right now.”

Vax snorted. “Talking and stuff.”

“Yeah…”

He leaned back on his hands and stretched his torso as he spoke. “You mind telling me what you two talked about?”

Vex sighed as her body resisted the temptation to betray Percy’s privacy. “I wouldn’t mind telling if he explicitly permitted it. But...I don’t feel comfortable telling you things Percy told me in confidence. If you’re truly curious I suppose you can ask him yourself, but I can’t be the one to tell you. I’m sorry.”

Vax waved his hand at her dismissively, “Look, so long as it’s resolved and you’re okay I don’t really care.” He narrowed his eyes at her. “You are okay right?”

“Of course…”

He gave her another one of those studious glances, before quirking a grin. “Good.”

They sat in silence once again, only this time, their peace was quickly interrupted as Trinket hopped up onto the bed between them and caused all sort so of chaos as he turned back around so he too could be facing toward the middle of the room like his solemn parents.

Vex rubbed Trinket’s side as her mind wandered to memories more mellow. “I bet you think I’m taking this whole job thing really well,” she said, smiling as she looked up at him. “But I did get really upset about it. When you weren’t looking.”

“Hm?”

“About my work situation. I cried about it in the shower like a loser.”

Vax looked almost offended in the face of her self deprecation. “Stubby. It sucks being mistreated. It sucks to not be appreciated. And that’s why life is too fucking short to waste it doing things we hate and missing out on the things we love.”

People may have thought she was joking when she swore on Vax’s wisdom, but sometimes she truly believed he understood the inner workings of the world; like he was hiding behind some great truth that he protected with his very essence.

“I know. You’re right. You’re always right about these things.”

“I don’t know about that.”

He was probably just being humble again. “That’s fine. You don’t have to believe me.”
He huffed out a bit of a laugh as he stared down at his hands. “Listen, I…” He stopped in her tracks, as if suddenly unsure of himself.

“Go on.”

“Well I know we said we would be honest with each other. So I’m going to be honest, but it’s a little bit of a sore subject.”

“By all means.”

He closed his eyes for a moment and sighed, before turning to face her. “I won’t lie. I am a little hurt that you didn’t feel comfortable telling me about your job right away.”

She slouched down as she muttered softly. “I’m sorry…”

“No,” he said, resting his hand on her shoulder. “You know what I said about apologizing for things you shouldn’t be sorry about.” He pointed at himself. “I should be sorry for not being the type of person you can trust with this sort of thing. I’ve made a lot of mistakes, and sometimes I’ve reacted very poorly to things that you should have been able to trust me with, and for that, I apologize. Deeply.”

She clicked her tongue at his apology, feeling as though it was utterly unnecessary as well. “You shouldn’t feel like you can never get mad at me though.” She huffed out a small laugh. “I do some stupid shit.”

“We all do stupid shit,” he exclaimed, throwing his hands in the air. “That’s life. And that’s why we can’t spend all our time telling other people how shitty they were without admitting that we have all inevitably done shitty things too, and that we will continue to do shitty things, and then die. People who try to take a moral high ground while blatantly ignoring their own faults is one of the many fucked up flaws in this world.”

“Vax.”

He calmed down a little, resting his hands on his knees. “But it’s also one of the easiest flaws to fix…”

She didn’t know if she agreed with Vax or not. On one hand, she could totally see the hypocrisy of calling people out on things that you once did yourself. On the other hand, she didn’t believe that people had to be afraid of calling out someone else’s bullshit just because they once did bad things themselves, especially if they had changed and learned. Then again -- in a way -- that’s sort of what Vax was trying to get at: Vax was talking about admitting those faults before calling someone else out; keeping a level and honest playing field, so to say.

“Wise as usual brother dearest,” she said simply, unable or unwilling to elaborate further. She was growing weary of the conversation.

“Look. I know I can be...intense sometimes,” Vax admitted.

“A bit,” she smirked.

“Well, it’s fucking unacceptable. You shouldn’t be afraid to tell me things just because of how I may react.”

She showcased her indignation with a little huff. “I’m not that afraid.”
“But you are afraid, and that’s my fault. Not yours. Believe me when I tell you that I think your concerns are completely justified. It’s why I’m working on becoming someone you’re not afraid of anymore. Alright?”

“Alright…” she snorted.

“I want to be someone you can trust with anything and everything,” he continued. “If we can’t even trust each other, then who can we trust?”

That was a good question. As much as she agreed with the sentiment and longed to have Vax be someone she could trust with everything, she wasn’t sure if she could actually stay true to that desire. To this day there were still so many things he didn’t know.

“You’re right,” she said simply. Anything else would cause more grief.

“Glad we’re in agreement,” he said, slumping down on the bed with a sigh and tossing his legs over Trinket, who seemed unphased by the weight of his skinny little legs. “I appreciate these talks. Catching up on each other’s lives is important. I bet some siblings forget about each other entirely.”

Shit.

That’s right. She was going to get back to Velora’s mother with their video calling availability. But that also meant she was going to have to give Vax the…interesting news.

“Speaking of catching up on siblings…” Vex said, biting down on her lower lip.

Vax propped himself up on his elbows and raised a brow at her.

“Please don’t freak out.”

“Vex…”

“But our half-sister…”

“Vex.”

She slowly turned to face him and cringed out a bit of a grin as her voice raised by about an octave. “She wants to get to know us…”

Vax eyes went wide, and right then and there she knew things were only going to get more complicated from here on out. As if she needed more drama in her life.

Chapter End Notes

Ya’ll. Sometimes I get these days where I can’t get over how much I love Vax *ugly cries*.

On an unrelated note, if any of you ever feel like I’ve forgotten to include a content warning in the notes, be sure to let me know. It costs me nothing to go back and add it, but I know it can mean the world to others.
Chapter Summary

Last time, on "The Butterfly Effect:
Vex finally admits to Vax that she lost her job, and he takes it remarkably well.
However, she also tells him that their half-sister wants to talk to them...

Chapter Notes

No content warnings this chapter.

Hello all, and sorry I’ve taken this long to post things (Though I did post a new chapter of Edge of Chaos if you don’t follow that. Same world, more Percy boi). If you do follow my other social media, you will know that I had to deal with...a lot: Finishing grad school + Camp Fire + existential dread = I can’t even.

Oh, and I also left for Europe for a bit...

But that’s neither here nor there...I’m back!

But before we get started, I would like to show you all a few changes I’ve made in past chapters. As you all probably know by now, this is a big project and I occasionally go back and make changes, some bigger than others. As long as they are short, I post them here in the notes. But in this case...I added a truck-load of new world-building info, and said additions have been posted in this blog for your own enjoyment:

Tumblr link

If you just wanna re-read the chapters with major additions, then read: Chapter 3, Chapter 14, and Chapter 17.

P.S. If you are newer and read the story for the first time within this two month, you have probably (maybe double check) already read chapters 3, 14, and 17 with these amendments, though the change in 17 is newer.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Dogs have it so fucking easy”, Vax thought, sitting on the bookshelf his sister used as her headboard. He’d spent the last twenty fucking minutes waiting for Vex to set up their Scryer account, which they hadn’t used for God’s know how long... All he knew was that their father’s wife only knew how to use Scryer, so fuck them right?

Though it wasn’t all that bad. At least he had his furry nephew to look after. Trinket always had this adorably expectant look on his face, as if he were waiting for something -- anything to happen. Must have been nice to be that fucking bored in life. Vax would have traded in his right foot if it meant he could be bored for a month...
Not that he could ever resent Trinket in any way. He was his wonderfully stinky, fuzzy, rowdy nephew after all. Terribly well behaved... considering the temperament of his mother. He often did this thing where he’d put his front paws on the windowsill, and when he’d see something that tickled his fancy he’d shimmy back and for a little, maybe wag his tail, and occasionally bark. Fucking adorable. Most interesting to Trinket were apparently the ravens that chilled on the tree right outside their window like they fucking owned the thing: a single lonely natural remnant of an otherwise butt-ugly part of town. Still, if Trinket enjoyed the view, then who was he to complain? Maybe, just maybe, if he thought a little bit more like a dog, he’d live with a little less stress.

Then again, dog’s also didn’t have to pay rent. Or at least not the way humans did. A domestic animal’s most valuable currency was their cuteness, though Vax would be lying if he tried to claim that he didn’t feel at least a little safer with a 200-pound dog as a roommate. Yet despite a dog’s self-imposed duty to protect, they still lived the good life in Vax’s very private opinion: free lodging, food, medicine. Not to mention all the free belly rubs; Vax wasn’t embarrassed to admit that he’d often fantasize being a domestic animal.

Oh, and he certainly couldn’t forget the fact that animals had no fucking way of knowing whether they had long lost relatives or not. If separated young, they lived their brief, simple little lives blissfully ignorant of the existence of their other littermates. No need to know who your sperm donor was boning...

“Please don’t be dramatic about this.”

Vax jerked his head back and gave his sister a furrowed look, so suddenly attacked when he was all too busy obsessing over his father’s taste in women. But really now? Her, accusing him of being the dramatic one? Grated... she was as correct as Trinket’s shits were big, but that didn’t justify her need to be an asshole about it. He had been really nice to her after all...what with all the job drama. Of course, leave it to Vex to forget about people’s kindness in a matter of hours.

Vex pouted her lips in reaction to her brother’s sour expression, letting out a sigh as she turned toward her laptop screen to type in their Scryer password. “I’m just saying...”

“What in the Nine fucking Hells makes you think I’m being dramatic right now?”

“You’re making that face,” Vex said as she wrinkled her nose to imitate him.

“And since when has “No Brooding Allowed” become a law in this household?”

“Since I said so.”

“That’s fucked up Vex’ahlia.”

“Look,” she stopped typing and turned to glare at him. “I just want to make sure you’re not psyching yourself out or some shit. It’s not like you’re going skydiving. You’re going to have a lovely conversation with your little sister.”

“Maybe it would be easier if she wasn’t our half-sister.”

Vex rested her face in her hands. “Oh gods...You’re already starting.”

Vax rubbed his eyes with his thumb and index finger. “Can you just leave me in peace for two fucking seconds?”

She perked up, her face inquisitive as if she’d just realized something. “And what does that have anything to do with it?”
“What?”

“The half-sister thing.”

Vax bit down on his lower lip and stared up at the ceiling fan, trying to find words that would allow him to sound a little less like a jaded asshole. “Okay, I expressed myself poorly.” He closed his eyes for a brief moment, breathing in through his nostrils, before staring intently at his sister as he gestured at himself. “Maybe I just don’t know if I’ll be able to contain myself around the woman our father—”

“Vax,” Vex interrupted, pressing her finger against his lips. “Devanna was polite in her email. And she explicitly said that she does not want to pressure us. She seemed to be very understanding of our situation. That’s worth something, isn’t it?”

He didn’t want to admit that his sister was starting to win him over. But it didn’t change the fact that he felt like he was going to fucking piss himself.

He took his sister’s hand and slowly lowered it from his mouth. “Maybe…”

Now, it wasn’t that he didn’t trust Devanna…

… Who was he kidding? Of course he didn’t fucking trust her. Sure, maybe Vex sang her praises, and yes, even he recognized the irony of disliking a woman simply because she had married their father when their very own mother had supposedly loved the motherfucker. “Supposedly”, because no woman as good as Elaina Jones could have ever actually loved a man as shitty as Syldor Vessar. In fact, Vax was pretty fucking sure it was just a lie their mother had once told them to make them feel better about themselves. In hindsight, the fact that their father just left her to die in Byroden was evidence enough that she was trying to protect them from the cruel truths of the world: That sometimes mommies and daddies had children even when they didn’t love each other very much.

Not that he could be absolutely certain. To this day, the shitshow known as “Elaina and Slydor’s Relationship” was still a mystery, though Vax had no time to obsess over the past flirtations of his parents. He had to focus his attention on the task at hand, which involved speaking to another one of their father’s unfortunate spawn, albeit more legitimate and seemingly better adjusted than him and his sister…except for the fact that she wanted to talk to them, of all people. She idolized them, allegedly. The poor girl, so delusional at such a young age…

“‘You know...’ Vax recrossed his legs. “If we did this after dinner we might all be a little less hangry.”

Vex groaned, rolling her eyes. “The only hangry person here is you. Besides, putting this off simply isn’t an option. It’s already late for Velora; she’ll be going to bed soon.”

“Best not delay her then…”

Vex made as if she were about to strangle Vax, but she held back behind gritted teeth. “Could you please not make this more difficult than it has to be? I’m texting Devanna to let her know that we’re ready. So you better be.”

Vax crossed his arms and muttered a low “fine” to himself, staring out the window with abject indignation. He’d play his twin’s little family reunion game, but he didn’t have to fucking like it.

As they waited to get a reply on Vex’s phone, Vax crawled down from the bookshelf and crossed his arms on the windowsill next to Trinket. “See that billboard?”
Trinket cocked his head and whimpered a little.

“Yeah see? That one,” he said, pointing at the oversized billboard lit up in blue and purple neon. “It’s advertising the brand new “Ring of the RAM”; kind of like this portable temporary storage device that you can wear like a ring. Neat huh?

Tail thumping, Trinket’s tongue rolled out of his mouth and he gave Vax one of his biggest doggy smiles.

“Oh yeah, sure. But it’s a little less neat when you realize it costs 800 goldies.”

Trinket barked, though it was more likely because one of the ravens perched on their tree had just flown away, though Vax liked to pretend he understood for his own sanity.

“I know buddy. Expensive. So then, why the fuck are they advertising it here, in a neighborhood where we can barely afford a night out at Pho King?”

Vax waited for a response, but Trinket seemed far too invested in the vacant branch the raven had once claimed.

“That’s a great question. You see, we live in a world where the hyper-rich have fallen completely out of touch with us peasants. They have no notion of what we can afford and what we can’t afford. Why the fuck would I ever buy something that costs more than my rent?”

Trinket growled, as if angered by his little monologue. Maybe Vax was finally breaking through to him? Or maybe he was just annoyed at the new raven who had just taken the vacant spot on the branch.

“Oh wait, it gets worse,” Vax said, pointing back out the window and reading off the sign. “Start your Platinum Prints plan now! Only 40 GP a month,” he mocked in a forced radio voice. “You probably can’t read the fine print underneath but I’ve got twenty-twenty vision. It says that interest fees do apply. Which means that you’re going to be paying four fucking goldies a month for what I suspect is at least two years. Two years Trinket. But trust me, people do it here. Sell their fucking soul to those devils. And they don’t even understand how much they’re being bled dry.”

“You boys done commiserating over there?” Vex scoffed. “She just texted back telling me they’re ready. You are ready, yes?”

“Yeah yeah…” Vax leaned in and stage whispered at Trinket. “We’ll pick up our conversation later…"

The twins took their sweet time adjusting stray hairs, checking out each other’s nostrils, and adjusting their shirts. They knew about first impressions all too well: Pull it off, and you could get away with just about anything. Fuck it up, and you could kiss that freedom goodbye.

Only, Vex seemed to take first impressions a little too seriously, and frankly, it was one of the few things that really pissed him the fuck off. She always went way out of her way to please people she didn’t know, oftentimes at the expense of the people she did know...and money, and her own self-respect. Not that Vax could really blame her. She’d had a rough few years in Syngorn that forcefully shaped her into this weird hybrid between a selfless rebel and a selfish control-freak. It wasn’t all that long ago when she threw a fit after he’d threatened to go to the Cloudtop Club in a Hawaiian shirt.

And now she was doing it again: imposing her will on the behavior of others just so she could gain some brownie points from someone she barely knew, even if it was secretly eating her up inside. He could tell. He’d have to be blind to not notice all that nervous fidgeting that she would never admit
she was doing: lip licking, eye rubbing, and that thing where she stretched as if she were preparing for a swimming competition or some shit. Though, to be completely fair, the only reason he even recognized her nervous tells was because he did the same exact fucking things.

Vax recrossed his legs and leaned in a little closer to the camera so it didn’t cut off his forehead, checking his teeth and nostrils one last time before clapping his hands and rubbing them together. “Ready when you are Stubby….”

“Of course,” she said, biting her lower lip as she carefully edged the cursor toward the green call button.

Vax closed his eyes and swore under his breath. At last, the moment of judgment was upon them: Today was the day he’d finally lose his shit in front of a little girl, and then he’d live the rest of his life feeling like an even bigger piece shit.

Or...maybe not.

Maybe Vex was right. Maybe he was just blowing things out of proportion. Maybe Syngorn natives really could be more than just bigoted snobs. Surely their little half-sister was too young to be an asshole just yet.

Stretching his neck from side to side, he took a deep, soothing breath as he waited for the moment of truth.

And waited.

And waited until the lack of oxygen started to make him feel a little queasy.

Unsure as to whether he’d accidentally been sucked into a time vortex, he opened one eye and glanced at the screen, only to realize that the mouse cursor was still hovered over the fucking button, with Vex staring at the damn thing like a deer in headlights.

He let out a deep sigh, exhaling his anxiety as he prepared to break the incredibly heartbreaking news. “Oi Stubby…”

“What?” Vex snapped, closing her eyes.

“You do realize you need to press the button, right?”

“Oh course I do,” she said, exhaling a deep groan. He’d bet his lucky stars she sensed his judgment. “I just... got distracted, that’s all.”

Typical. It was so on-brand for Vex to accuse him of something that she was actually experiencing herself. “Projecting” is what those psychology articles called it, though he often wondered if it was a more common practice among twins.

“Like I said before, we could just wait until after dinner if you want.”

Vex clicked her tongue, shaking her head at the prospect. “We can’t.”

“Then say something came up. Come up with one of your brilliant excuses and we can do this again when-”

“Vax,” she snapped, before taking a deep breath and speaking a little more softly. “I'm not asking you to convince me out of this right now.”
Despite the fact that he could go on a whole other tangent reminding his sister that she was a creature with free will and the power to choose, Vax figured it would be counterproductive to the cause — which was, in this case, to get this fucking family reunion over with so he could finally get some food in his belly and pass the fuck out.

“Stubby…” Vax sighed, rubbing his sister on the shoulder as he leaned in closer. “I know how hard it can be to talk to someone new when you’ve worked yourself up for so long.”

She snorted at the obvious remark. “Fucking nerve-wracking.”

“Building up all those expectations, taking every possible failure into account…With each passing second, it becomes harder and harder.”

“Too true...” she muttered, smirking a little.

He smiled back at her, “Too true indeed. Which is why I’ve decided to rip off the bandaid and press the button for you.”

Vex’s eyes went as wide as saucers as she snapped her gaze toward the rotating button with the text “Scrying Now…” pulsing underneath.

“Shit!” Vex blurted out, shoving Vax with her shoulder. “Move over, you’re taking up the whole screen.”

“Maybe if you weren’t such a fucking nerd your head wouldn’t need so much fucking screen space!”

“Vax, I swear to fucking Go-”

In a split second, a pair of fuzzy pixels apparated on Vex’s laptop, rapidly materializing into the faces of two smiling individuals. He’d have to thank the internet Gods with a blood sacrifice for granting them a decent internet connection that evening.

Vax and Vex immediately put on their best smiles and waved simultaneously, Vax’s voice going a little higher, and Vex’s going a little lower. It was uncanny, really, how different they made themselves sound when they were speaking to a stranger.

“Heyyyy!” They all said in chorus.

Vax recognized the room on the other side of the screen as their old home-office, and already... that shit was weirding him out. Nothing seemed to have really changed; the leather-bound books were all still chilling on the bookshelf, lonely and untouched, as were the awards, and the many Vessar family heirlooms that neither of them would ever inherit. He should have stolen them when he had the chance...

Then again, had he stolen all that preppy shit, he probably wouldn’t be here chatting to a woman sitting in the very same leather chair the twins had often used to speed down hallways when their father wasn’t looking; the same blonde woman he remembered seeing at the Couldtop Center: tall, thin, well dressed, and flaunting that typical, forced graceful demeanor of someone who was holding something back: fear, judgment, regret? Who fucking knew?

All Vax knew for certain was that there was a bright-eyed, brown-haired little girl sitting in her lap who looked a lot more like Vex and Vax than felt comfortable. This was all getting too real a little too quickly.
Though clearly not for their half-sister.

In an instant, the little girl’s eyes lit up like firecrackers, shaking her mother with excitement. “Oh my gosh, you were right.” She squeaked. “They look identical!”

“Sup”, Vax and Vex said in unison as they both lifted a pair of fingers.

Velora covered her mouth as she tried to conceal her enormous smile, that was missing a few teeth. “Wait…Vax is the boy one right?”

Impressive, though to be fair, she had a fifty-fifty chance of getting that one right.

“Yes, that’s right. I’m Vax.”

“And I’m Vex.”

Velora giggled as she leaned forward in her chair.

“Vax’ildan and Vex’ahlia honey, see;” Devanna clarified, pointing at the screen.

“And I’m Velora, your amazing half-sister.” She lifted her chin to the air and smirked at the universe. “I’m glad you two are also amazing.”

“Must run in the family,” Vex said with a grin, though Vax could smell the subtle sarcasm from a mile away.

Among all the silly, family-friendly laughter, it didn’t take long for a certain fuzzy nephew to feel left out. Like an awkward photobomb, Trinket lifted his head from behind the two twins, before nuzzling his way between the two of them.

“Oh my,” Devanna gasped, mildly startled by the surprise appearance.

“PUPPY!”

Vex snorted, giving Trinket all the pets. “How could I forget about Trinket.”

Barking at the mention of his name, he began to lick Vax and Vex with unnecessary aggression, because gods forbid they pay attention to anything besides him.

“She’s so cuuuute.”

“Actually,” Vex said, wincing at the excessive amount of tongue in her eye. “Trinket is a boy.”

Velora covered her mouth, turning all sorts of shades of red.

“Oh no, it’s fine dear,” she said rather quickly, trying to fend off the impending mountain of fur. “He’s quite used to it.”

“Well he’s super cute and fluffy and mommy can we-”

“Not until middle school sweetie,” Devanna cautioned.

Velora threw her head back and groaned to the sky, in full frustrated Vex mode. The likeness was uncanny, really. It kind of reminded Vax of the time Vex had asked father for a dog. Only if he remembered correctly, father had completely disallowed it. Perhaps...he’d grown a little bit laxer, or maybe he just liked Velora a lot more…
Trinket barked as he tried to wiggle his way between the two of them, his bear paws flailing about as he grew increasingly rowdy. It was too bad his attempts were a physical impossibility on Vex’s twin bed or she probably would have even allowed it.


After a couple of ashamed whimpers, Trinket sort-of obeyed his strict mother and hopped off the bed, making it just as far as the middle of the floor before settling down, determined to keep-up his stubborn streak.

“Ugh...fine,” Vex said with a huff, tossing her braid over her shoulder. “Do what you want.”

“Your hair is so long!”

“It is indeed,” Vex confirmed. “In fact, you’ve reminded me that I should probably cut it soon.”

“No!” Velora shouted, leaning in on the desk like a boss at a meeting. “Leave it long so you can show it off.”

Vax wasn’t entirely sure if he liked Velora or not, but she sure was enthusiastic. Of that, he could be certain.

“Mommy, can you braid my hair like Vex?”

“Of course sweetie. But sit still.”

“Oh darling,” Vex gasped, making a dramatic pose in the camera and showcasing her voluptuous braid. “You like it that much?”

The little Vessar mirrored Vex’s movements, right down to the grin and signature wink. “I love it.”

“Sit still Velora. You don’t want me yanking your hair out.”

She bit down on her lower lip, trying her best to contain the devilish smile on her lips. Though the moment didn’t last long.

“Vax.”

Shit. She wanted to talk to him now.

Vax’s eyes went wide, trying to make it clear that she had his attention. “Wassup?”

Velora stared at him bashfully, her grin growing wider as she spoke. “I like your…” She pointed at the piercing on his eyebrow, clearly aware of the social scrutiny of such an accessory.

“Ah f-” Vax covered the corner of his face with his palm. “F-fudge...muffins.”

Vex of course, having the humor of a twelve year-old and thriving off of other's suffering, couldn’t help but cackle at his desperate attempt to mask his innate vulgarity, though Vax truly didn’t know what the fuck he was supposed to do with himself. He’d forgotten just how boring Syngorians were about... everything. God’s forbid you look different. Some places wouldn’t even hire you if you got so much as a third hole in your ear.

But at least Velora seemed entertained, utterly oblivious to the almost-swearing, and even more oblivious to the can of worms she’d opened. Or at least, so he thought.
“Not until you’re done with high school Velora…” Devanna said, not breaking her composure as she continued to braid Velora’s hair.

“But mom! That’s like in… forereeeever…”

Vax turned to look at Vex, but she was already staring him down with that “told-you-so” look on her face, before glancing back at Velora with a smirk. “It’ll go faster than you think dear.”

So what if her mother was a little laxer than your average Syngornian? It sure didn’t change the fact that Vax was still fighting to resist the urge to blurt out that he’d had his face pierced since he was fifteen. Still, the last thing he wanted to do was get on Devanna’s bad side. Or Vex’s.

“Go on,” Devanna said as she flipped Velora’s braid over her shoulder. “Show off your braid to your siblings-”

Before Devanna could even finish her sentence, she was immediately subject to the wrath of a six year-old wielding the weapon known as a fresh braid. As foretold by the laws of hairodynamics, Velora’s crazed head whipping resulted in a full braid-eye collision in Devanna’s face, causing her to flinch back.

Vex covered her mouth with both hands, though Devanna’s reaction was far less angry and more on the lines of… amused? She was laughing. Actually laughing. Father would have lost his shit on Vex, and then probably also lost his shit on Vax for good measure. What the hell was wrong with this woman? Was she really from Syngorn or did she come from that same weird dimension Marry Poppins was from?

“Careful dear,” Vex cautioned with a smile, “Might just blind someone.”

“I’ve made a habit of staying at least two feet away from Vex’ahlia at all times,” Vax said, pointing at the clear lack of space between them. “This right here is a rare exception.” He, of course, thought he was being fucking hilarious, but Vex wasn’t all too thrilled, eager to show her dissatisfaction with a quick pinch on Vax’s thigh, conveniently out of the view of the webcam. Still, Vax resisted through the pain with a winced grin, determined to not give her any satisfaction. “She’s dangerous. I’ve lost count of how many times it’s happened to me…”

“Noted,” Devanna said as she wiped a tear from her eye with a smile, likely unaware of any behind-the-scenes shenanigans. “And I’m sure Velora will be more careful, won’t you now?”

The little gremlin stuck her tongue out at her mother, but a second stern look teased a quick “sorry mommy” out of her, followed by an immediate giggle as she resettled herself on her mother’s lap, though once again, her composure was short lived.

“Oh my gosh!” Velora gasped, pointing at the camera.

“What?” The twins asked in unison.

Now what…?

“Your hand. Does it hurt?”

Vex glanced down at her own wrapped-up hand and smirked in realization. “Oh, not really dear. Don’t worry about it.”

“How did it happen?”
A nervous laugh escaped from Vex’s lips as she cooked up the best excuse she could muster. “I fell really really hard.”

It wasn’t a lie, technically speaking...

Velora’s eyes lit up, as if reminded by something incredibly important. “You know, I once fell really hard while I was on my dragon bike, and it hurt really really bad. Like sooo bad. But father got me these Mulan bandaids and um- Wait, I’ll show you.” Without hesitation, she hopped off her mother’s lap, but not before yelling, “Don’t leave!” just for good measure...

Devanna looked at the camera and exchanged a knowing smile with Vex, speaking lowly, “I’ll be sure to tell her about the accident. I just wanted to make sure she met you two first so she realized you were alright.”

“By all means, we understand completely,” Vex said, smiling back at her. “And thank you so much for taking the time to speak to us. She truly is darling.”

“Real rowdy.” Vax smirked. “Hate to admit it but she sort of reminds me of me as a kid.”

“I’d be proud if she turned out to be half as clever as you two.”

Vax couldn’t help but quirk his head at the odd remark. Frankly, he couldn’t tell if she was complimenting them or giving them shit. It was so hard to tell behind that sly little smile of hers: so kind and unphased, as if she’d been practicing it for months; unless of course, she really was a decent human being.

“I wouldn’t really say we’re clever,” Vex began, glancing down at her hands.

“No need to be humble around me. Your father has told me many stories; how you once built a solar-powered purifier for your middle-school science project.”

Vex smirked at the memory. “Oh yeah, that’s right. I almost forgot all about that. It feels like such a long time ago.”

“And Vax, I recall you doing some sort of website…”

“Oh sh…shillings…” Vax rested his face in his palm. “God Tracker.”

“Yes!” She clapped. “I remember it having a funny name like that.”

Frankly, the name was the only clever thing about it. It was bullshit, really; nothing more than this stupid little website that used an algorithm to automatically collect, organize, and display information from various mega companies and organizations like the Bahamut Foundation, P.E.L.O.R, The Ravens, I.O.U.N, Asmodeus & Co, and a bunch of others. It sounded cool in theory, but it was more akin to plagiarism than rocket science, stealing info from news sources and social media to track all the boring shit he knew would impress his teachers: Revenues, losses, public statements… Nothing that you couldn’t learn on your own with a few web searches.

Really though...Did father truly have nothing better to say about his son than his 8th grade economics project? At least Vex’s had real-world applications. Then again, Syl dor didn’t exactly know better. Maybe he’d be a little less proud if he knew the website had started off as a half-baked attempt to hack into the companies’ websites. Needless to say, he didn’t get very far…

“Oh wow... Vex said with a sly hum, “Whatever happened to that website? I remember following it for a few weeks at least.”
“No clue…” Vax groaned, slouching under the cloud that was gradually forming over his head. “And I rather not think about it anymore.”

“Here they are!” Velora abruptly shouted, popping into view and shoving the box of bandaids way too close to the camera.

“That’s lovely sweetie,” Vex said. “Though perhaps...if you pulled the box just a little bit farther away...”

Velora listened to Vex’s advice, displaying the box of Mulan bandaids like makeup in a make-up guru video. Vax wouldn’t put it past six year-olds to watch that sort of thing in this day and age. Back in his day six year-olds played with sticks and stones and discarded industrial waste.

“Ah, much better,” Vex said. “They’re so pretty.”

“Mulan is hardcore,” Vax smirked.

“Daddy says Mulan is a good role model.”

He sighed, refraining from saying much else. Alas, Syldor couldn’t be wrong about everything.

“Mommy, mommy.”

“Yes?”

“Can we send Vex some band-aids?”

“Did you ask Vex if she wanted some band-aids?”

“No.” She wrinkled her nose. “But she’s hurt.”

“You should still ask.”

Velora puffed her cheeks with air and reflected for a moment, before turning to look at Vex. “Would you like some band-aids?”

“They’re very lovely,” Vex said with another big smile. “If you’d like to send me a few you can. They may not help my hand but I’m sure we’ll need them eventually.”

Velora looked fucking heartbroken. “Why won’t they help?”

Devanna did her best to diffuse the situation without getting into the nitty-gritty, so to say... “Because Vex’s injury is a little different. Band-aids aren’t enough.”

“Oh…” Velora sadness endured, glancing up at the camera. “But you might need them, someday?”

“Someday, I’m sure,” Vex said, shrugging with another little smile.

Velora’s frown quickly flipped upside down, her sense of purpose re-kindle. “Okay. I’ll send you some band-aids then.”

“You want to write her a nice little letter as well?” Devanna suggested. “We could mail them along with that.”

Velora rolled her eyes with a huff. “That sounds like a lot of work...I just want to send her the bandaids! What if she falls again?”
“We’ll see,” Devanna said with a chuckle, adjusting Velora’s stray strands of hair in that motherly fashion that... saddened Vax little more than it probably should have. “Vex’ahlia, could you e-mail me your mailing address when you can?”

“Yes, of course.”

She simply smiled, caressing Velora with a level of adoration Vax hadn’t felt in a long, long time. Fuck, why was this getting to him?

“Have you two had dinner yet?” Devanna asked, glancing into the camera.

“Not yet,” Vax said maybe a little too quickly. He really was starving his fucking face off. Would explain why he was feeling so shitty. Yes, clearly, that was it. There was no other reasonable explanation as to why he’d ever have any sort of mommy issues...

Devanna turned to look at Velora again, her eyes suggesting a new tone of urgency. “We should probably let them go then.”

“Aw c’mooooon. Just a little longer mommy.”

“You need to get ready for bed little monster,” she said, booping Velora on the nose.

“They aren’t going to bed yet,” Velora whined, pointing at the twins with indignation.

Vex bit down on her lower lip, unsure as to whether she wanted to intervene or not. Though she didn't hesitate for long. “Yes, but we need to eat so we can become big and strong. And that way my hand will heal even faster.”

“And getting enough sleep will make you grow big and strong too,” Vax ad libbed.

“That’s right,” Devanna confirmed with a sly wink toward the camera. “You want to be able to ride the bike aunty Jen’s got you, don’t you?”

“Oh fudge-muffins! You’re right!” Velora gasped, turning back to look at Vax and Vex with a panicked expression. “I need to go to bed. But we’ll talk another time.”

“Hurry then!” Vex said with matched enthusiasm. “Can’t miss one more minute of dream time.”

Velora blew a dozen kisses to the camera, and the twins did the same, though before they could do much else, the feed was cut short, likely the result of an overzealous little sister determined to grow up as soon as possible. If only she knew…

With the video conference over, the room felt awfully quiet, making the unspoken tension between the twins bubble over. Vax turned to look at Vex, and Vex turned back to look at Vax, and for a solid ten seconds, they stared at each other, curious to see who’d break first.

“See?” Vex stated, only half-annoyed. ”Wasn’t that bad, was it? Devanna is lovely and Velora is absolutely darling.”

He hated to admit it, but Velora had been a fucking delight to talk to. Granted, she was six. To be honest he didn’t think six year-olds were even capable of being anything but darling. Though from what he saw, she was also witty as all hell. God’s willing, she’d grow up to be more like her mother and less like their father.

“She’s a brat,” Vax finally said with a grin, though his smug expression didn’t last two seconds.
In an instant, his moment of pettiness was cut short by a powerful shove that caused him to fall off the bed, head first. Trinket was of course already on the floor ready to meet him, and in a flash of karmic retribution, his face was instantly covered in smelly slobber.

“Fucking hell…”

Chapter End Notes

Can you all tell I used Grammarly this time? *sweats*

Hope you enjoyed this chapter...which, by the way, is made of about 15 pools of sweat and tears, 7 rage-quits, and 4 instances of me questioning whether I am proud of this being my only true writing legacy... I swear I have been working on this chapter on-and-off for 4 months...

Let's just hope the the magic is finally back. I think it is? I can't tell... Maybe I need to go look for a glass orb under the sea and vore it so I can get a level-up or something.
Best Deal

Chapter Summary

Last Time, on the Butterfly Effect: The twins decide to videochat with Velora and her mother Devanna before dinner. Although skeptical, Vax ends up finding the conversation to be quite enjoyable, as does Vex.

Chapter Notes

No Content Warnings this chapter.
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A chapter where Vex goes on a quest to do what she does best.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

In the eyes of those who had the choice to eat whatever their little hearts desired, the dinner that Vax and Vex had made probably didn’t seem like much.

But to them, it was heavenly. With Vax working the knives and Vex using the gift of fire, they cooked up their prized Ashari produce and had themselves a real meal:

Lentils and rice...with a side of sliced cabbage, of course.

Greedily stored in the pantry by the pound as if they were peasants waiting for the next dragon attack, brown rice and lentils was something the twins could always rely on when things got difficult. Seasoned with dried herbs and spices, boiled lentils and brown rice was a cheap, healthy, and tasty; two dietary staples that the twins never hesitated to purchase from the monthly Ashari markets. It took a lot of anxiety off the twins’ backs knowing that they always had at least a two-months supply of food stored, just in case.

Vex had gotten used to living frugally when they were running away from Syngorn, which was saying a lot, considering she had far more expensive tastes than she ever liked to admit. It only took a few nights of hunger pains to realize that she never wanted to feel like that ever again, even it if meant going to ludicrous lengths to get the prices she wanted to pay. Nowadays, being resourceful or, as her friends liked to call it -- “cheap”, came second nature to her. Conscientious buying made her happy; so much so that she not only enjoyed doing it for other people, but she virtually required it. It kept her serene; it kept her busy; it kept her sane...

Which was exactly why she was going to buy Vax a new phone whether he wanted one or not, and for the best deal, too.

And by best, she meant it: The best quality for the best price. Because Vax deserved the best, at all times, regardless of whether he thought he deserved the best or not. There was just... one tiny little problem; a kink in the otherwise perfect plan, so to say:

She really needed someone to go with her.
Not that she necessarily wanted the company while going on such a venture. In fact, she would have been perfectly happy, if not happier, working alone, because at least she wouldn’t have a bunch of thin-skins trying to tell her that she was being too “mean” to a vendor.

The issue was more along the lines of safety, an issue that she obsessed over dinner, while she brushed her teeth, while she walked Trinket, while she watched videos later that night, and all through the night as she tried to lull herself to sleep...

In order for Vex to get the “best deal”, she was going to have to partake in a little something known as bartering, solely because the twins’ current assets lied in two piles: the untouchable gold prints stored away in their bank account, reserved for official, on-the-books transactions like rent and bills...And then they had Vex’s trinket pile.

No, not the pile where Trinket kept all his chew-toys from when he was a puppy.

This trinket pile was something that Vex had been working on since she was a teen, back when she discovered that if she held onto something for enough time, she’d eventually find someone who wanted it, be it jewelry, or vintage buttons, or limited edition shoelaces, or anything in between. It was stuff that had value, but only if you really looked around. Of course, there were websites like the “Bay of Gifs” that helped you sell stuff by making gifs of your merch. But nothing compared to the instant gratification of getting the money slapped in your hand after a sweaty price debate. It’s something that simply didn’t happen the same way online. Digital winks held no sway over the real deal.

Now, as luck would have it, she’d been holding on to a bunch of Gameboy games she’s “salvaged” from a couple of assholes who didn’t deserve them. They were old, a little dinged-up from use, but definitely originals, according to Vax’s keen eye for fifty year-old Pokemon games.

When she first got a hold of them, she held onto those glittery little Pokemon games with enthusiastic greed, staking them in neat little piles along with the rest of the trinkets, ogling over them when no one else was looking, because owning things that other people found valuable made her happy, even if she didn’t care for them herself. They didn’t even own a Gameboy. Few did anymore. And yet, that rarity was exactly what made these games such a novelty. She’d bet her lucky stars there was at least someone who was willing to exchange those games for a new phone, and she’d bet even more lucky stars that it was someone like App-vender Noja.

Needless to say, bartering truly did feel like the only viable option given their current financial situation. Trouble was, places that actually partook in the fine art of bartering generally kept to themselves in the darker, sketchier places of the city because... well, turns out, tax collectors weren’t exactly the biggest fans of receiptless transactions. But Vex sure was, and she was willing to go to great lengths to get them the best deals they could muster, even if it meant risking getting mugged or robbed in the process.

Now usually, Vex could skirt around this minor inconvenience by bringing Trinket along; lowlives would think twice before messing with a tiny Midlander and her 200-pound dog. Unfortunately, that same virtue came as a bit of an obstacle when combined with her broken wrist. Handling Trinket was very much a two-hand situation, especially when Westruun required a dog of his magnitude to wear a muzzle on public transportation; she would need help taking it off if she was going to actually intimidate any pickpockets.

However, given that Vax and Grog were at work, and Tiberius in school, and Pike in the hospital, and Keyleth away with her Ashari family, and Scanlan resting his shoulder like a dramatic infirm, she begrudgingly accepted the fact that she, once again, realistically only had one option...
“Good morning darling,” Vex said with a sunny smile, leaning over the arm of the couch as she stared at Percy upside-down.

As Percy’s eyes slowly blinked open and focused on Vex, he grumbled something under his breath and pulled the blanket over his head, before fully turning over with a grunt.

Vex rolled her eyes before plastering the smile back on her face. “It’s ten o’clock,” she singsonged. “Which means you’ve been sleeping for twelve hours. Don’t you think it would be a good idea to get up…?” She leaned in and whispered, her voice nearly a purr, “Maybe get a little exercise?”

Percy’s voice cracked from beneath the blankets, his body shifting slightly. “Maybe…?”

“Excellent!” Vex exclaimed, ripping the blanket away from over his face and skipping to the kitchen to prepare some leftovers. “Time to get up then. You and I are going on a little adventure.”

Percy sat up with a cringe as every bone in his body cracked and propped. “And where are we going exactly…?”

“Old Tradesmeet,” she said, opening the fridge.

Percy grumbled, rubbing his eyes with his thumb and index finger. “Sweet Pelor…”

“What?” Vex said with a challenging smile, grabbing the lentils and closing the fridge with her hip. “You afraid of a little shopping?”

“In Old Tradesmeet?” He asked rhetorically, stretching out his arms and neck. “Isn’t exactly a walk in the park.”

“And that, my dear Percy, is why I need to bring you with me,” she grinned, before morphing into a slouched position as she pouted theatrically. “I’m but an injured damsel in distress in need of protecting.” She popped the leftovers in the microwave and rested her hand on her forehead. “Whatever shall I do?”

Percy snorted, looking away from the scene and clearing his throat a little. “Guess you’re not going then. Can’t have you wondering about all injured and what have you.”

“Percy!” she shouted, slamming the microwave door a little louder than was polite.

“I’m kidding. I’m kidding...” Percy said as he crossed his arms on the back of the couch, nestling his face in his arms and huffing dejectedly.

Vex wasn’t entirely sure whether he was stretching or hiding his face from the shame of his bad joke. Neither would save him from the fact that he was going with her whether he liked it or not. He needed to get blood flowing in his legs or he was going to get a fucking clot. If Keyleth could take him on walks when he was in his weakened state, then so could she. Though, the notion of putting him on a leash and forcing him to walk on all fours wasn’t necessarily the image she wanted in her head first thing the morning, considering the subject was currently in the room...

Percy muttered something into the couch, so muffled that she could barely tell if it was an insult or not. She furrowed her brow as she shouted slightly, “What?”

“Why ?” Percy shouted back, his voice still almost completely muffled.
Vex wrinkled her nose as she opened the microwave to check on the lentils. “I need to get Vax a new phone. He can’t be wandering around with no means of communication.”

Percy lifted his face from his arms, resting his chin on his hands to look at her. “People used to do it all the time.”

Vex rolled her eyes as she rested the bowl on a counter to get a spoon. This one-hand cooking thing was really starting to irritate her. “For once, could you maybe not try to debate every single word that comes out of my mouth?”

Percy hummed, pretending he was genuinely considering it. “It’s the cost that comes with dragging me along for all of your ridiculous escapades.”

“This isn’t ridiculous,” she squeaked, stirring the lentils aggressively before tossing them back in the microwave. “Is my desire for Vax to have a working phone too much to ask?”

There was a long pause as Vex patiently, though stubbornly, waited for a reply. To be fair, she had just woken him up from his twelve-hour nap, so it was fair to assume that anyone would be grumpy after being woken up from what she could only assume was some form of alien hibernation.

“No…” He sighed, rubbing his eye before putting on his glasses. “I suppose it’s not.”

“Excellent,” Vex said as she pulled the lentils back out of the microwave before marching over and putting them in front of Percy. “Eat. We have a lot of work to do.”

“But…” It was no use. Vex had already strut to the bathroom to get ready, utterly pleased with her victory. “Remind me to bring the umbrella, by the way.” she shouted, looking for her brush and comb. “Forecasts predict some light rain.”

She truly was done with the conversation for the time being. Besides, she needed to let him eat so he’d actually have the energy to braid her hair...

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Vex didn’t really know why Percy liked driving so much. She’d more than once mentioned her favorable opinion toward using public transportation, though he’d never once entertained it as a genuine possibility.

In fact, so much was his natural drive toward personal vehicles that he even went out of his way to pay for all of the household’s fuel, even though Vax used the car in equal measure. Part of her believed that it wasn’t so much his love of driving that got him behind the wheel, but the absolute fear of public transportation. It made more than enough sense: they did, after all, find him hitchhiking on the side of the fucking road. Who the Nine Hells hitch-hiked in the Midlands if not someone who dreaded the idea of having to use a bus or train? If she had to slap it with another one of her theories, she’d say he was a wanted criminal, on the run for doing something wild. Would certainly explain the jitters.

Still, she felt no true need to complain. The sky had been threatening to breach since sunrise, and she wasn’t about to get wet right before her shopping venture. Besides, the drive through town was unique that morning, showcasing the stunning display of Westruun’s sunny skyline in the foreground of a dark, storm-cloud canvas.

If solely judged on their aesthetic appearance, few would realize that Old and New Tradesmeet were part of the same district. Although fifteen minutes apart, the differences between the two areas were stark. Organized in systematic semi-circles on the north-western edge of town, the brand-new,
concrete residential apartment buildings where Grog, Pike, and Wilhand lived contrasted starkly against the winding stony walkways of Old Tradesmeet, with its cobblestone roads and ruined ancient churches now repurposed as marketplace centers and street-food vendors.

Most of Old Tradesmeet’s inhabitants had lived in the neighborhood for generations, following the traditions of the many merchants and artisans who came before them.

And yet, despite the constant business and high foot traffic, most living in Old Tradesmeet were barely scraping by, resorting to petty crime and gang activity to pay their ever-increasing rent and tax rates. She didn’t blame them, really. She imagined people were willing to do a lot worse before losing the family business to the local government, though that wasn’t great news for the rest of Westruun’s population. Now granted, it wasn’t guerilla warfare, but the narrow streets and quiet alleys were the stalking grounds of quick pickpockets who were more than happy to relieve shoppers of their newly bought merchandise or cash.

So no. Of course she wasn’t just dragging Percy along because she subconsciously wanted to walk him on a leash. It was a means of having a bit more peace of mind. The last thing she needed was more unnecessary stress in her life. Besides, Trinket was in a desperate need of a proper walk as well; he’d grown rather bored of the apartment’s raven-infested tree.

“Thank you for coming with me,” Vex said, staring out the car window with a sigh. “I know you didn’t want to come.”

“Oh hush you,” Percy said, ending his sigh with a soft smile. “I needed to get some fresh air anyway.” He glanced to the side as he gave room to a nearby cyclist. “Besides, the food in Old Tradesmeet is fantastic. We could grab something to go before we head home.”

“We have plenty of rice and lentils.”

Percy snorted, looking in the rear-view mirror as he turned down the main promenade. “Vex, no offense to your lovely cooking, but I think we need some variety in the house to boost the morale.” He turned to look at her briefly and smiled. “Don’t worry, it’s my treat.”

She could have gotten mad for the not-so-subtle insult to her cooking, but she didn't have time to be petty: shopping was afoot.

“You sure?” she asked, just to be polite.

“Of course,” he answered, stopping at the light rail crossing that divided the Residential Ward from Old Tradesmeet. From there, Vex could already see the janky metallic apartments jutting out from brick and stone.

“If you say so,” she snorted, leaning back in her chair.

“Oh, speaking of which…” Percy said, reaching into his pocket to pull out ten gold-prints before handing them to Vex. “Here”.

She wrinkled her brow at the bill before glancing back up at him. “Isn’t this the money I gave you for cigarettes?”

“It is.” He cleared his throat as he adjusted his glasses. “I’m cutting back.”

Vex cocked her head, a sly grin spreading on her lips. “Really now?”

“Gods...don’t sound so surprised,” he said, smirking back. “It’s not that weird.”
Ever amused, Vex shrugged as she looked away, sighing deeply. Change felt so strange to her, though perhaps it wasn’t so much due to the change itself, rather how quickly it had happened. It was only two weeks ago after all, that they’d scammed grumpy old Derrel into giving up a rare car part for Percy’s literal pocket change; how they’d pretended they were cousins; how he’d called her Vexy for the first time… So yes, it was weird, seeing how much they had both changed in so little time. To be honest, she wasn’t sure if they’d grown closer together or farther apart. But whatever had happened, she was okay with it. Strangely enough.

“The money is better spent on chicken skewers and veggie-kebabs anyway,” Percy finally said, sounding rather pleased with himself.

Her eyes followed the fast moving tram, her smirk ever-present. “No need to convince me, darling.”

With that, they both waited for the final car of the light-rail train to roll on by, opening the way into the most southern end of the Tradesmeet district.

Nowadays, the crumbling brick buildings that were once great forges, wood shops, glass shops, jewelers, blacksmiths, tailors, painters, had all been repurposed and subdivided into individual storefronts. Some still were glass shops and jewelers and blacksmiths, but now there were also 3D printers, and mechanics, and tattoo artists, and drone repair shops... not to mention all the other janky modern additions that had been added to the ancient structures, turning the otherwise two-story brick and stone ruins into five or six-story architectural monstrosities.

But they had to squeeze in the apartments somehow; otherwise, Old Tradesmeet merchants would have to live elsewhere, which equated to more travel time, which ate away at the number of hours they could be open, which in turn harmed the bottom line. One would think that such factors wouldn’t matter, but even the most lucrative of small businesses struggled to make ends meet. It was too bad Westruun needed the income, otherwise life would be a lot easier. Not producing a military of their own meant the city-state relied on a lot of hired power, which in turn meant that those who lived in the city had to pay up, one way or another.

Vex was certain somebody was fucking up in the government spending department. The mere notion that some snooty old fart was balancing the books had her seething, mainly because she knew for a fact that if she were in charge, they’d all have flying cars by now.

So intense were her musings on the matter that it took her a moment to realize that they had almost arrived at their destination. The car was now quietly humming outside the large multi-tiered parking structure as they patiently waited for the ticket-machine to spit out their parking validation. Vex’s drifting gaze settled on Percy’s fingers, which he’d been drumming on the steering wheel as he waited for the machine to process Vex’s card. She’d be nervous too, considering their financial situation, if it weren’t for the fact that she was already way too preoccupied staring at his fingers... So bony and long, so calloused and burned, yet so dreadfully alluring in their graceful movements. Even they, however, much like the rest of Percy, seemed to tell a hidden story; one that she was only now noticing.

Apart from the usual cuts and calluses, his right hand had a few additional peculiarities: it seemed as though the nail on his pinky had virtually no bed, and was of a darker color than the rest. The other nail -- on his ring finger -- grew curved and a little crooked, it too darker than the rest. It seemed like some sort of injury, though the uncertainty made her a little nervous to ask.
“Percy?”

He turned back to look at her, and she immediately diverted her gaze so she wasn’t caught gawking. She was already regretting calling his attention, but now she just had to know.

“I’m sorry if this is a personal question.”

Grabbing the freshly printed ticket, he turned to look at her with those blue eyes of his, dropping the ticket on her lap with a smirk. "You're forgiven.”

He said it with so much confidence, so much trust in his cheeks, that she couldn’t help but feel reassured. Besides, they’d shared many personal moments with each other; surely this was a simple matter by comparison.

She cracked an innocent smile, showing no indication of disdain or disgust. “What happened to your fingers?”

Percy glanced down at his hand before clicking his tongue and quickly looking away.

Trinket whimpered a little, lowering his head onto the seat and staring up at Percy with intensity.

Shit.

Vex swore under her breath, closing her eyes. Had she really already overstepped? They were doing so well. Surely she couldn’t have actually insulted him with such a benign question?

No. Perhaps he was simply checking his mirror before driving down into the underground parking lot. Yes. That had to be it.

Only, he was silent for much longer than just a quick look in the mirror. For longer still, his eyes focused forward, driving down the narrow parking tunnels that spiraled into the depths below. Though his expression was mostly hidden by the poor lighting, an occasional ray of neon light would cause his face to flare up in greens or blues, revealing a deep frown, and narrowed eyes.

She felt like she needed to say something, but before she could translate her thoughts into words, he spoke up. Finally.

“Right...” he said, drumming his fingers once before growing a big smirk on his face. “Someone slammed a car door on my fingers. Lost both my nails.” A little nervous laugh escaped his tight lips, accompanied by a quick shrug. “They’ve grown back funny ever since.”

His mouth looked heavy, as if the smile itself caused him discomfort, or even pain.

She tried to smile away her suspicious expression. “Do they hurt?”

Percy simply let out a long drawn-out sigh as he turned left down a more narrow tunnel intended for smaller vehicles, taking his time before finally replying. “Not really. No.”

“Would you like me to give you a manicure?” Vex smiled. “You know, give them a little massage, maybe file them a bit.”

Even in the light of Percy’s sudden laughter, there was still some nervousness hidden somewhere deep within his core; maybe even resentment, if she reached far enough.

“I don’t really like people touching my nails,” he said flatly. It didn’t match his supposedly cheerful demeanor. At all.
Vex adjusted herself in her seat with a pensive hum as she tried to conceal the fact that she felt just a little mortified. “Suit yourself,” she finally said, closing her eyes and privately cringing as they finally found a parking space on the fifth subterranean floor of the garage.

There was definitely something he wasn’t telling her, though she wasn’t going to press him any further, no matter how much it hurt her curious soul. His reluctance to tell her, even after all they’d been through, made his secrets all the more tantalizing, but also...a little frightening.

She stepped out of the car and glanced up at Percy, who gestured the umbrella at her with a quick smirk to let her know he was grabbing it.

He was acting fine now, even if it was just that: an act. Still, it didn’t mean she didn’t appreciate his attempts to behave as if he hadn’t been insulted. If anything, it was almost a little sweet, and certainly not something she’d want to interrupt with more unnecessary personal questions that she’d probably end up regretting. They were deep in the Tradesmeet now, and she needed him focused and on high alert. The last thing she needed was for Percy’s mysterious bouts of moodiness to interfere with her mission:

To get Vax the best deal.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Vex. She is so much more patient with Percy then I would ever be…
Cancer Stick

Chapter Summary

Last time, on the Butterfly Effect: Vex convinces Percy to go shopping with her so she can feel safer in Old Tradesmeet and get him out of the house for a few hours. While Percy is driving them there, Vex notices a nail injury and asks him about it, though his emotional reaction is not positive. He seems to shake off his sore mood rather quickly, though it is clear to Vex that there is something more going on.

Chapter Notes

No content warnings this chapter, but be sure to read the end notes for an update.

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Let me just start by warning you all that Percy is the type of guy who would argue with you on the internet for the sake of arguing. Now that we have established that, put on your favourite Lofi-Mix and let's get this show on the road.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A light sprinkling of rain greeted the faces of Trinket, Vex, and Percy as they stepped out of the stuffy parking garage and into the open air, where the delicious smells of fried foods and hot soups lifted their noses and set all three of them in a northerly direction.

There were no cars allowed in Old Tradesmeet, or at least none who didn’t already belong to shop owners or delivery-persons. It was a choice the people of the district had voted on long ago, finding that the lack of cars not only reduced the number of vehicle-related accidents, but it allowed more room for the myriad of market stalls and shoppers that populated the streets.

At eleven o’clock, Old Tradesmeet was already full of shoppers. While some strolled at a leisurely pace to browse the stalls and windows, others were deep in their stride, traveling with purpose toward whatever business venture awaited them; others still could be seen chatting-up vendors in more or less friendly fashions, causing Vex’s excitement levels to slowly rise. In fact, the whole atmosphere was pretty much doing it for her; bartering foreplay, really.

Even on a gloomy 1st of Cuesar like the one Vex had chosen for her little venture, where the clouds loomed over them in swirling grays above them, Old Tradesmeet felt colorful, and alive. The various tents and awnings painted the lower portions of the streets in vivid colors, with neon and LED twinkling in between like fairy lights.

The stone buildings that defined the foundation of the district lead way to a shanty town above, with buildings varying in material from metal sheeting to hard plastics, flaunting their new geometric shapes above the veteran cobblestone streets below. Connecting the buildings were varying pipes and an occasional bridge. Above them still, a latticework of dangling cables and lights of varying sizes connecting the rows of buildings on either side, breaking up the sky above into a mosaic of clouds.
Vex felt like a lot of her time was spent glancing up as she tried to imagine what it was like living in those conditions. Many of the neighborhood’s citizens had done everything in their power to stay in the same home their families had lived in for generations, before modern wars displaced them... A lot of unnecessary debates on the issue went on until the the late 60s, when Westruun finally decided to return the district to its residents, but with a steep property tax, and very little money invested in infrastructure.

After such a bad deal, it wasn’t surprising to see so many of the district invite friends and relatives to live with them, all cramped up in those tiny apartments just make ends meet. Though to be honest, it didn’t feel all that unfamiliar.

To their left, a man could be spotted reaching out of a window drag in some bedsheet that had been hung to dry. Further down, a couple of people were chatting with each other from facing windows. She turned to look at two other individuals precariously balanced on a ladder as they painted the trim of one building in bright purple and green, while the other two holding the ladder below took turns smoking from a joint. It was an atmosphere that reminded her a bit of home, in all honesty. Byroden was like this, once.

Vex hummed away the unpleasant memory as she led the group with confidence, enjoying the delicate droplets as they glanced off her cheeks and nose, still not quite strong enough to warrant the use of their umbrella, though just heavy enough to give the air that misty feel.

She felt drawn toward every window and awning, though she did her best to keep the party’s trajectory on a sure path toward her electronic store of choice. Nevertheless, she couldn’t help but lose her gase to all the beautiful merch, so purposefully displayed for her own personal viewing pleasure; or at least, that’s how she liked to imagine it. Whenever she walked in markets her immediate instinct was to pretend everything had been set up just for her; that merchants were determined to do anything and everything to impress her -- the Lady of Westruun -- currently browsing for the perfect product:

Those handmade boots? Cute, but were they enough to appeal to her expensive tastes more so than that cashmere sweater with a forest design knitted into its very fabric? Perhaps the handcrafted hemp purses were more down her alley, or maybe even the custom studded leather belts.

The practice had helped her feel a little less bitter about the fact that she couldn’t afford any of it, though it wasn’t always the easiest thought exercise. Pretending she was too good for it all could get rather tiring when she was constantly resisting her desires. She couldn’t help but occasionally slow down when something caught her eye; something she truly wanted: A pretty handcrafted pendant, or a hairpin, or earrings…

Shiny things got to her more than the rest, so much so that even Percy had caught wind of her desires.

“Did you want to go inside?”

Vex blinked as she snapped out of her thoughts, staring down at semi-precious stone necklace resting on a dusty pillow behind a store-front window.

“No, it’s fine,” she said, clicking her tongue before looking away. “We should probably keep going.”

He took no time to wait for a rebuttal before walking away, without so much as a “You sure?”

He could have at least tried to coax her into checking out the store... She was right on the edge of...
being convinced. But alas, Percy wasn’t necessarily the best shopping buddy. Keyleth would have immediately jumped on the opportunity to check out the mysteries inside, even if it was just to please Vex, because she was good at reading people that way. Hell, even Scanlan was more excitable than Percy, or at least, that’s how it felt, given his current attitude. It was a similar impatient behaviour that made Grog such a bore to shop with.

Still, she knew deep inside that it was probably for the best. She couldn’t afford to feed into her impulses. Not when her pockets were mostly retro video game cartridges and a couple of crumpled Gold Prints she’d found in her raincoat.

They continued down their chosen path, eyes wandering from stall to stall as Trinket occasionally meandered off the path to sniff a stray piece of trash or dropped food item. One merchant walked up to hand Percy a pamphlet, though watching him automatically refuse it with no second thought prompted Vex to run up and snatch it from the merchant’s hands with a quick wink, before catching up to her stubborn walking partner with a tense jaw.

“You can’t just refuse these sorts of things,” she hissed, waving the pamphlet in his general direction. “They may have coupons!”

Percy stuffed one of his hands into his leather jacket pocket while he swung the umbrella back and forth in the other. “I don’t need to buy anything.”

“But what if it has something you do want to buy,” she said, glancing down at the twenty-percent-off coupon for...custom-designed refurbished radios, before rolling her eyes and stuffing it in her pocket.

“Unless they are handing out coupons for cigarettes or toilet paper, I think I’ll be quite alright.”

She scanned his face with a raised brow, showcasing both transparent disappointment and confusion. “I thought you were cutting back?”

He shrugged. “We don’t have a bidet in the apartment, so sadly, no.”

She wrinkled her brow at him. “You know what I meant…”

Percy removed his glasses to wipe away the moisture that had gradually settled on the lenses, giving away that he knew exactly what she was referring to with the smallest of smirks. “Cutting back doesn’t mean quitting.” He pressed the glasses back onto his face, his nostrils flaring as he restored his frown. “I just don’t want to waste such a large percentage of your funds on my bad habit.”

His level of grumpiness on the issue was already making Vex reluctant to remind him that a good sum of the money they currently possessed was his, but when a tiny toy drone settled on Percy’s arm -- causing him to yelp and shake it off like a blood-sucking stirge -- any ounce of guilt she had left was smothered by uncontrollable laughter.

Percy however, wasn’t as amused. If anything, he only seemed to be walking faster, whether it be to get away from the snickering drone merchants, or from her

“You don’t even know where you’re going,” she barked, as did Trinket.

“Sure I do,” he shouted back, glancing at her for just a moment before continuing his search, “Phones right?” He perked up, scanning the surroundings as he spoke. “How about…” She watched his eyes trail down a side street before promptly turning in a seemingly arbitrary direction.

As she turned the corner to follow suit, her eyes went wide and she clumsily went for Percy’s arm, nearly fucking-up her wrist in the process as she wrapped her arm around his before pulling him
back onto the main thoroughfare with all her weight.

“Nope! Not that one darling,” she squeaked, forcing a toothy smile.

“It says quality phones right on the bloody sign!” His voice was so strained it sounded like it was going to crack, though his frustration soon morphed to discomfort as he grasped his side, “I think you fucked up my ribs.”

She wanted to feel bad for his injury, but given the situation, she felt rather incapable. “Sorry darling, but we do not go anywhere near Quall-ity Wares.” A little nervous smile spread on her lips. “We’re going to Noja’s instead.”

Percy let out a deep, drawn-out sigh before speaking, sarcasm lacing every word. “Go on then. Enlighten me with what I assume will be a riveting explanation.”

Vex pursed her lips and tightened her arm around his in an attempt to maybe remind him that he was being terrible, though he didn’t seem all that phased.

“Be careful,” he said. “You shouldn’t be straining that injury of yours.”

She’d pinch him, but her not fucked-up hand was currently busy trying to keep Trinket from pouncing on anything or anyone. “We don’t go because Quall and his assistant are pricks.”

“How so?” he asked, quirking a brow.

“Gods…” She rolled her eyes as she parted from Percy so she could let Trinket piss on a wall. “Let’s just say a deal didn’t go as planned.”

“Oh no you don’t,” he said, stuffing his hand back into his pocket. “Now you’ve got me curious. At least have the decency to finish your story.”

Vex rubbed her eyes for a moment, letting out a bit of a groan as she waited for Trinket to figure out which spot of dog piss he wanted to cover with his own. “So we got into a bit of a conversation with Drez while I was bargaining-”

“I don’t know who that is.”

She glanced up just as Trinket finished marking his territory, “Drez Vina, Quall’s moronic Syngornian assistant. They always think they’re sooo clever…”

“How very typical,” he said, only half-humoring her.

“Well, one thing lead to another and he found out we were staying on Eskil’s property. He then told us that if we could hack into Eskil’s WiFi and get some info for Quall, he’d give us fifty percent off any purchase.”

Percy shook his face into a grimace, as if the information were a shot of something harsh. “Wait, what?”

“I know right?” Vex exclaimed, walking back over before continuing their stroll. “Quall sells televisions. We could have gotten half off a fucking television.”

He stared up at the clouds and sighed with the smallest of smiles. “My question was more along the lines of electronic stores trying to hack elderly landlords but sure, I will concede to the fact that fifty percent off any purchase does sound like an extraordinary deal.”
“Well we didn’t do it!” she exclaimed, before clearing her throat for a moment. “We just...agreed to it.” She raised a finger to the sky. “But we did feel bad about it.

"Aha..."

"Almost immediately!" Vex squeaked. "In fact, we felt so bad about it that we told Eskil right away."

“How very gracious of you.”

She hummed, reminishing the rewards of their good deed. “He was so grateful that he gave us a couple of Feywild Tech Festival day passes he’d gotten in the mail and said we could have them, which was fucking convenient because we’d been having a little bit of trouble with Grog’s health and the doctors in Westruun are worthless.”

“An innovator's heaven,” Percy added, though his words were cold, hinting at just a touch of resentment. “Must have had excellent doctors showcasing their best...” He stared down at the glossy cobblestone as he avoided a puddle.

Vex narrowed her eyes as she studied his reaction. "They did, yes."

Percy waited for quite some time before speaking up, raising his chin to the sky as he took in a deep breath of stormy, ionized air. "I’ve always wanted to go.”

Vex figured she'd clarify things just to make him feel a little better. “We didn’t all end up going anyway. We only had two tickets so we just sent in Grog and Pike so they could get in touch with the doctors.” She snorted, recollecting that strange, pre-emon times. “Pike thinks the doctor had the hots for Grog.”

“How’d she come to that conclusion?”

“I don’t know. I guess they’d wandered off on their own for a bit, and when Pike finally found them again they were eating ice-cream and looking at each other all googly-eyed.”

“Right, because when two people go on a walk together with the intent of purchasing goods it means that they are secretly into each other. Flawless logic.”

Vex rolled her eyes, knowing exactly what he was referring to, though...unwilling to take the bait.

“By all means, try your luck and ask Grog yourself. It wasn’t even that long ago.” She smirked at the memory. “In fact, it was on our way back that we picked-up your grumpy ass.”

Percy rolled his eyes, before swinging the umbrella over his shoulder and walking a little more swiftly.

“Well you asked!” Vex shouted, chasing after him.

Percy did not slow down until he reached the corner of the central square, where a forest of tents greeted them in flashy lights and shouting street vendors. Knowing him, he probably would have kept speeding through the crowd, had the sky not decided to finally open up on them, pouring gallons of water on the city square. It was quite the deluge, though few shoppers were dissuaded by the weather. Instead, like anemones in the sea, a myriad of umbrellas of all colors and sizes bloomed before them, prompting Percy to do the same.
It was the soft-pink colored umbrella Vax had “acquired” from a house party he wasn’t invited to, though it was hard for Vex to be completely mad at him for doing it, considering it was both an incredibly practical item, and cute as fuck. It even had little cherry blossom petals on it, which matched Percy’s lovely snow-white hair. That said, it certainly didn’t make walking any easier. In fact, it actually made moving forward rather awkward, with everyone insisting that their umbrella was somehow more important than theirs. Still, at least it slowed Percy down a bit. In fact, if anything, the heavy rain seemed to put him at ease.

After a lot of waiting around in front of fruit stalls and not a lot of actual walking, it soon occurred to Vex that things would probably be far easier if they traveled down the backroads. Besides, she knew them well, and the walk would be far more peaceful.

Wrapping her arm around his once more, she gave him just enough time to notice she’d grabbed him before pulling him down the nearest side road.

“What in the gods-.” He shouted, before immediately interrupting himself, as if stunned by the stark contrast between the crowded plaza and the quiet little street before him.

“What?” she said, a grin spreading on her face as she anticipated his realization.

“No, I see your point,” he finally said, strolling beside her. “This is far less chaotic.”

“I know.” She lifted her chin ever so slightly. “Don’t get me wrong. If I were by myself and it wasn’t raining I’d be all over that market. But the people...gods. I can’t stand it when everyone’s bumping into each other. I swear, it feels like tourism in Westruun has gotten worse...”

“You can never have too much tourism in a city.”

Vex huffed a strand of hair out of her face. “Well in that case, you clearly haven’t lived in a city where there is too much tourism.”

He seemed to want to say something in direct response, but his lips sealed before the thought could escape. He looked away, though he seemed almost a little defeated. “That’s debatable...”

She wasn’t sure what was more irritating: Percy’s ability to avoid anything that would disprove his argument, or the fact that she still didn’t quite understand where he was from, though she knew she wasn’t gonna get it out of him anytime soon.

“Oh sure, everything is debatable,” she finally said, huffing out a small laugh.

Percy closed his eyes and sighed. “Tourists bring income, and income helps the city grow. It creates jobs, brings in foreign money, and it encourages friendly relations among the citizens-”

“You don’t think I know that?” Vex smirked, looking forward with a raised chin. “I just think they ruin the view.”

The tranquil little street she’d selected was narrow in size but rather vertical, with wires and lights dangling above them from wooden balconies and metal scaffolding. A couple of people could be seen doing business, but otherwise, the street was peacefully alive, breathing out warm soup vapors from tiny hole-in-the-wall diners, and steam from nearby workshops. Lanterns and neon illuminated the street at ground level, causing the wet cobblestone to glitter with pinks and yellows.

“Pity,” Percy said, after a long while of walking in relative peace.

Vex quirked a brow at him, confused by the remark. “What?”
He scanned his surroundings with a bit of a frown. “I find it odd that you think tourists ruin the view when all you have to do is look at what locals have done to the place. All this history has been tainted by so much modern junk. I’m shocked the city didn’t try to keep it pristine.”

Vex blinked for a moment as she tried to process the odd and rather pompous remark. Referring to the houses of merchants as “modern junk” wasn’t exactly the kindest thing to say, nor did the description of the ruins as “pristine” make much sense either.

These weren’t perfectly preserved historic monuments: they were pieces of wall holding up nothing, and stony archways leading nowhere, and lonely columns standing with no real purpose. It wasn’t even until a few decades after the war -- when the city got tired of the empty, crumbling district -- that Westruun decided finally to open the area up as both residential and business property again.

“There wasn’t really anything to keep pristine in the first place,” Vex snorted. “Most of this district was just a bunch of rubble before people started reclaiming it.”

Percy shrugged, adjusting the umbrella above them. “The ruins could have been restored.”

“And the laziest.”

“Seriously Percy?”

“What?” He seemed genuinely defensive of his beliefs on the matter. “They could have easily built apartments someplace else and turned this into…”

“A place where rich people can take selfies?” she teased, raising a brow.

“A park. A memorial.”

She let out a small sigh, growing tired of the conversation. “Look, you know I’m the first person to say that Westruun hasn’t got a clue of what it’s doing half the time. Hells, if I were running the place I would have made it an animal sanctuary or something.” She traded a quick glance with him before gazing up at the tall, metal structures above them. “But the people who’d been displaced by the war needed room for more housing, and Westruun hasn’t expanded its border in decades…”

Percy fell quiet as he delicately spun the umbrella in his fingers, eyes forward as he reflected.

Vex shrugged, looking forward as well. “So yeah, I get what you’re saying, but your idea is still terrible,” A grin widened on her lips. “Nothing more than a touristy money-grab because you’re obsessed with tourists.”

Percy threw his head back and groaned, “I’m not obsessed with tourists.”

Vex tried to hold in her laughter, but she simply couldn’t help it. He could get so irritated by the most trivial things. She couldn’t tell if she was laughing because she was funny or because it was just that sad.

Letting out a sigh, his expression mellowed and he stared down at the wet cobblestone underneath his feet. “I’m just...used to smaller cities. Cities where there is actual room for parks and intelligently designed public spaces. Cities where travelers are welcome and relationships are forged.”

There was so much sudden melancholy in his eyes. Vex figured he probably felt bad for being so argumentative, but he sure did seem genuinely nostalgic about this dream city of his; though to be
fair, what he was describing did sound quite lovely.

“I think we all want that, to an extent.” Her smile shrunk to a saddened smirk. “I’m sure there a lot of people who’d prefer slightly better living conditions.” She shrugged, looking up at the shanty town above her. “But alas, this is what they were given. Sometimes you just have to make due...I suppose.”

Percy remained rather quiet, though the reason behind it felt less like a sign of calm approval, and more of a case of him shutting up because he didn’t want to keep up the conversation.

Which she respected...to an extent.

Agreeing to disagree could have been the most diplomatic solution, had Percy decided to drop his sour mood in the nearest bin. Alas, he seemed insistent on keeping the behaviour up, albeit in a rather muted and invasive manner.

To make matters worse, the cause of such irritation was a bit of a mystery. There was a whole plethora of reasons that could explain the behaviour, be it the rain, or the question about his nails while they were driving over, or the fact that she’d woken him from his hibernation, forced him to braid her hair, and dragged him out on her shopping venture...

Frankly, his stubborn streak kind of reminded her of the time he got in a bit of a fight with Vax about capitalism back up at the Cloudtop before they ultimately bonded over Cybersecurity vigilante justice. Back then, she too had gotten irritated with his behaviour, so much show that it had left a bad taste in her mouth, that is, until she finally found the time to speak to him while he was out on the Cloudtop’s balcony smo-

She rolled her eyes and mouthed a quick, “of course.”

It was so on brand for Percy to do that incredibly ridiculous, albeit admirable thing where people tried to quit all of their vices at once: drugs, cigarettes, sex...Fuck, he’d even skipped on coffee that morning. Gods only knew what else he was depriving himself of as “punishment” for his behaviour: Chocolate? Mastrubation?

Despite the fact that she actually supported the “quitting cold turkey” strategy, even she believed this was going overboard, and she sure as the Nine Hells wasn’t going to suffer through it, no matter how selfish it was on her part. Besides, she’d read enough addiction forums to know that going cold turkey wasn’t exactly the most effective strategy if coupled with other stressors. It could cause anger, depression, hunger, and other nasty little symptoms that he certainly didn’t need in his life. It was for that reason, and that reason only that she was now willing to do something absolutely terrible.

Vex’s eyes drifted toward a man who looked like he was taking a cigarette break underneath the awning of a hardware store, sporting an air of absentmindedness in his eyes that could only indicate high levels of abject boredom.

And it was perfect.

“Give me a moment,” Vex said, slapping the leash into Percy’s hand before breaking off.

“What now?”

But Vex would not humor him with a response. Her target was in her sights, and she needed to focus.

As she approached the man, she leaned her hip against an old concert poster and sighed deeply,
running her fingers through her bangs before allowing them to trail down her scarf, where she loosened it a little, showcasing her neck with a sensual stretch. “My idiot cousin dropped my cigarettes into a puddle…” she purred, licking her lips. “You wouldn’t happen to…”

The man’s eyes went wide, as if caught off guard by the request, “Ye-ah, sure,” he stammered, fumbling for his cigarette box before handing one to her.

“Thank you,” she said, trading a quick smirk with him as she held the cigarette lightly pressed between her finger-tips. This was already going far better than she would have ever expected. She figured she’d milk him for all he had.

“Have a light?” she asked.

He nodded once, reaching for his pocket as she popped the cigarette into her mouth. It wasn’t an unfamiliar sensation; she recalled long drunken nights walking around with one of Tessa’s cigarettes pressed between her lips as they skipped around Syngorn causing mayhem. She only smoked when she was drunk back then, and she certainly didn’t do it now, no matter how much she surrounded herself with bad influences...

As the shop-keep held up the lighter, Vex leaned in, allowing a small peek of cleavage to show from her unzipped jacket, certainly not forgetting to pucker her lips way more than was necessary. She watched the man’s hands shake as he struggled to light it for her, raising his hands to shield it from the wind.

Upon ignition, she tried her best to hold in a cough as she exhaled a thin stream of smoke, before letting out a suggestive moan. “That hits the spot…” She said, giving him one more sultry look as uncurled her hands into a begging gesture. “Spare one for the road?”

He didn’t seem to question her as he pulled out another cigarette, smiling under his mustache. “Don’t get a lot of company on days like these.”

“I can only imagine…” She said with a sweet smile, desperately trying to hide that she could feel cold sweat rolling down her neck. She needed to get out of this as smoothly as-

“Vex?”

She rolled her eyes and turned to glare at Percy with a look of frustration, though a better idea soon dawned on her and her smile was restored, prompting her to turn toward the sucker once more.

“Sorry about that,” she said, leaning in with a whisper as she accepted the cigarette that he’d just drawn from the box, “He’s got a bit of diarrhea and we’re trying to get everything done as soon as possible, you know?”

Both Percy and the shopkeeper’s expressions were disgusted and confused in equal measure.

“That’s uh-unfortunate,” the shopkeep said, clearly stunned by the sudden sharing of T.M.I.

“I know right?” She threw her head back for dramatic effect, before tossing a strand of hair out of her face. “But thank you, really…” she said, looking up at him with smirk. “You’re a lifesaver.”

Confusion still painting his expression, the shopkeep sighed, running a hand through his thinning hair. “I try?”

“And succeed…” She trailed off, tucking the cigarette behind her ear and giving him the sauciest of winks, before getting the fuck out of dodge -- lest he try to doing something ridiculous like ask for
her number or some shit. Walking away with a bit of a sway in her stride, she snatched Trinket’s leash from Percy’s hand with an air of importance and led them away with great haste, the mission all but complete.

The silence following the incident was expected, though still dreafully hilarious to Vex. She could feel Percy staring at her with that dumbfounded look on his face as she lightly puffed away at the cigarette to keep it lit, the other still neatly tucked behind the ear with the feather tattoo underneath it.

“Diarrhea?”

Vex nearly spit out the cigarette laughing, before coughing out some smoke and handing the cigarette to Percy, unsure whether the tears in her eyes were caused by the smoke or the uncontrolled demi-nervous laughter. “I really don’t know how you do it darling, but here’s your fucking cancer stick.”

“Why-”

“I’m really not in the mood to explain the full extent of my logic on this one Percy...” She took the cigarette from her mouth and lifted it to his face. "Here. One for now, the other for when you behave..."

He quirked a brow at the cigarette she was now shaking in front of his face. “You owe me at least a semblance of an explanation.”

“I was just sick and tired of your attitude. Figured it might be smart to do some triage in terms of picking what you want to cut out of your life...” She looked up and fluttered her eyelashes at him. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

After a long, drawn-out pause timed by the length of his sigh, he gingerly plucked the lit cigarette from her fingers before smoking it, taking his sweet time to exhale before finally speaking. “You’re paying for my cancer treatments.”

She felt like trash; albeit a victorious pile of trash, but trash nonetheless. “When I become rich and powerful I will pay for anything your little heart desires...”

Though as confident as her smile seemed, she knew that giving cigarettes to an addict would go straight onto the list of reasons proving why she thought she was a bad person... just as soon as she managed to buy this goddamn phone for her brother. It was a goal that was but minutes away, it seemed, now that she could spot the familiar spire of antennae peeking out from a gap in the apartments, a sure sign that App Vender Noja was but a few blocks away.

Chapter End Notes

You have no idea how hard it has been to write ever since my brother gifted me a drawing tablet. I suddenly have a million things that I’ve always wanted to draw banging the sides of my skull. AND THEN news about the Briarwood Arc Show came out, and like...now every day just feels like one big euphoric blur.

Anyway, all this being said, I have a modest project proposal...

With the news of the soon to be animated Briarwood Arc, I’ve gotten in a bit of a
mood... For the past 2 years, I’ve been outlining a fic that I would like to start publishing, possibly soon, but it’s a little bit... different than my usual Modern/Cyberpunk AU:

Immaigne what might have happened had Vox Machina NOT found Percy.

It is intended to be part of yet another side project known as “Quantum Theory”, which is sort of long-form creative essay proving that no, Vox Machina’s canon adventures were not the darkest timeline for Exandria, as the cast often joke. Though this one might very well be.

It’s a far shorter story than my current Chaos Theory AU (Thank the gods), but it’s also WAY darker. One would say it’s sort of an “Evil” Percy character study, inspired by my belief that Percy started out as True Neutral and could have swung both ways (lol, innuendos all around). He could have turned evil or good depending on who he was around. I’ve already written a lot of vignettes, and it has been fascinating to see Evil-aligned Percy seem so fucking similar to Ripley.

Point being, it’s creepy, and I love it, and I wanna write a fic about it because I have a secret love for horror and I have #BriarwoodFever. (Please help me start the hashtag about this warm fuzzy feeling the community is feeling toward the impending Briarwood arc.)

Anyway... the reason why I hesitate is that it isn’t a very “nice” fic.

You know me. I don’t romanticise things, nor do I sanitize them, but this fic will go on a whole other level: There will be violence, there will be sudden canon-breaking major character deaths, there will be skippable, albeit potentially triggering sexual scenarios, and there will be a LOT of angst.

So yeah, I’d love to hear your thoughts. I’ll still continue working on my usual monster fic, OF COURSE, but BriarwoodFever has got me real bad and we aren’t getting to that part of the story in my fic for a whiiiiile. I’ll even write more of the Percy POV fic if it means I can get a little closer to the #BestVillains.

(Posting the proposal un Tumblr and Twitter too so feel free to share your thoughts here, there, or via ravens...)
Deep Resonance

Chapter Summary

Last time, on "The Butterfly Effect": Vex and Percy travel through Old Tradesmeet, avoiding autumn showers and discussing city planning. Part way, Vex manages to get a couple of cigarettes off of a gullible shopkeep and offers one to Percy to keep him well behaved as they make their way to "App-Vendor Noja's" electronic store.

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings in endnotes.

Due to my inability to keep things brief, not “a lot” happens this chapter, as this is essentially part 1 of 2. I plan on releasing the second part in a couple of days at most so you all don’t lose the momentum of things. (Also it will keep the text file smaller and easier to work with.)

Oh and also...spicyness ahead? I mean, not really, but maybe sit down if you’re prone to Perc’ahlia Fever like me.

With that being said, put on some of this lo-fi if you want, and enjoy. More to come.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was hard to imagine Westruun's cityscape without its signature antenna spires, jutting out of each neighborhood like calm and vigilant watchers. In fact, so prominent was their visual presence that Vex seldom thought much about them unless she was right up and personal with one...

It was half-miraculous that it all still held together: A tangle of wires and tubes and structural components that fully invested in the vertical space available, a strategy that was precariously unusual, though structurally sound, at least according to city regulation.

Their existence was something that Vax had attempted to explain to Vex on more than one occasion, though her stubborn mind sometimes resisted the weird takes and typical “Vaxisims”.

Still, she had understood the general gist of things, even if she could never care as much as he did. He had basically turned it into another one of his weird holy oaths; a memorized speech, really. Sometimes it sounded like he was possessed, which was both incredibly annoying but also strangely comforting in the oddest of times.

But mostly annoying.

She puffed up her chest and shimmied her shoulders in an attempt to imitate Vax’s dramatic hand gestures as she poorly emulated his voice, “Like I’ve told you the last one-hundred times Stubby: the only reason you successfully convinced me to move to this urban Hellhole in the first place was because those antennae called my name and I answered back. What they represent is real and true to
humanity. And you never fucking forget that!”

Vex pointed ominously toward the tower before stopping in her tracks with a raised chin. Vax had harbored a tendency for the dramatic ever since he was like...three, so of course, his opinions on urban law were just as dramatic as anything else in his life, though not entirely delusional.

Percy pinched his brows as he exhaled a lungful of cigarette smoke to one side, eyes squinting through his spectacles. “Your twin doesn’t seem to think too highly of places does he?”

“You’re only now realizing he hates everything and everyone?”

Percy hummed to himself, though he didn’t say anything else.

“What?”

He quickly raised the cigarette to his mouth and inhaled, smirking with that same polite smile she’d coined the customer service smile; essentially his universal sign for “You know nothing.”

She wouldn’t pry though. He’d speak up eventually. It was just a matter of time, and that time came soon enough; he had a tendency to be chatty when he had questions.

“So…” Percy’s smoky breath formed into a pleasantly round plume as it rose, breaking against the creaky sign hanging above their heads which dripped dirty rainwater from its bright neon corners into the milky puddles below.

Vex stared down at the ground and smirked, admiring the reflection that the “App-Vendor NOJA” sign created in the rippling puddles before her. “Yes darling?”

He quirked his brow, though he did not glance in her direction. “This Noja person...He works here? Or also lives here? I mean what’s going on…” He sort of gestured with an expression of mild, though imaginable level of concern. “...here.”

“Oh, right,” she snorted dismissively. “I forget you’re new.”

Percy’s brow furrowed at her remark, prompting a small pit to form in her chest. There she was... being mean again for the sole purpose of building more walls around herself.

Not that it probably mattered, considering that her vampire-like friend seemed -- for the most part -- generally unmoved by her mouth-words this time around. In fact, if anything, his smile made her nearly flip an emotional one-eighty, so to say...

“I know,” Percy said, glancing up at the sky with that gaunt, sealed-lip smirk of his that revealed the many wrinkles and small dimples that rarely ever saw the light of day.

The pit that had so quickly formed in Vex’s stomach dissolved just as quickly as it had formed, its remnants scattering across the rest of her body in the form of a much warmer alternative, helping her find comfort as she continued to stare up at the wild, wild thing above them.

“But yeah.” She hummed, smiling. “Noja is... unusual. But I think you’ll like him.”

Percy’s lips parted, smoke fleeing through his sigh as he closely scrutinized the chaotic mess above. Vex could already tell he wasn’t terribly impressed with the setup, unless his boredom was a sign of ignorance, of course. It was hard to say whether Percy knew everything about other cities... or
nothing at all; a difficult man to read when it came to things like this.

Not that she gave a rat's ass. It didn’t matter what the little devil thought. She knew this was the best place to barter in town, and frankly, she found it a little insulting that he didn’t have more faith in her.

“Anyway,” she squeaked, staring up at the tower with a smile that practically broke cloud cover. “This is it.”

Percy simply stared, likely still stuck in what she had proudly coined his scrutinizing setting. The manipulating, and hurting settings were still cooling down from their last uses.

Vex tried to keep her smile strong. “The shop, I mean.”

“I figured, it’s just…”

Vex deflated only slightly, “Yes?”

“This whole thing is the shop?”

She nodded with puckered lips.

“The entire thing?” he insisted, making direct eye contact with her as he gestured his hands in a vertical fashion that not only threw Vex entirely off teeter, but it caused her to spontaneously combust into a fit of laughter that was surely a result of her running on very little food, and very little relaxation, and very very little sleep.

Percy’s mild frustration showed as he rubbed his eyes underneath his glasses, “I don’t understand how you manage to cling to high-school humor so readily.”

She wiped a tear from her eye, though it could have also been a raindrop. “Does it bring you back?”

“A little…” His jaw clenched a couple of times and he scratched his head. “Don’t know how I feel about it.”

“Don’t worry,” she groaned, remembering mean girls and terrible guys. “High-school was practically a district of the Hells for me too.”

“I hold the book Lord of the Flies in very high regard. Groupthink horrifies me.”

“I can’t tell whether that book was an insult to children or an insult to little rich boys.”

“I’m inclined to believe it was probably a bit of both…”

“But murder? Really?” She’d always questioned the book in terms of accuracy. “A high-school aged protagonists would have made more sense to me…”

“I think I disagree. Humans turn to chaos remarkably quickly. In fact, I’m of the opinion that the High-School Never-Ends mentality goes in all directions of spacetime, if we really wanna get into the nitty-gritty of it…"

She really didn’t. The last thing she needed to hear right now was talk of wibbly-wobbly timey-wimey stuff when she was currently trying to avoid topics that involved any semblance of emotional investment, given the day’s track record. “Real-talk”, as Vax often called it, was just going to have to
wait another time.

Besides, such talks were a bit of a coin toss when it came to Percy anyway. In fact, so bad were his unpredictable reactions to things that Vax often liked to joke about the white hair being a possible culprit; a bit of a mean spirited Game of Thrones joke blaming Percy’s mercurial nature on some weird genetic bullshit, which was why she tried to not humor Vax’s particularly cruel nerd jokes all too frequently.

“Oh come now Percy,” her voice deepened, gaining a bit of resonance as she playfully swatted at him with the end of Trinket’s leash. “Constantly stranding yourself in these weird philosophical places…”

As he instinctually glanced down where she’d irritated him, she dove into his field of vision, resting her head on his shoulder and fluttering her eyelashes up at him. “Finish up that cigarette and let’s go see what secrets we can get our hands on. He always hides the good stuff. Makes me fucking obsessed with this place…”

“I’m glad.”

Vex’s eyes widened and her jaw clenched as she pivoted around to see none other than Noja himself, standing right behind her with his signature, circular green goggles glistening from behind a tangle of red hair.

“Not a fan of philosophy?” he asked, brow raised as he adjusted his grip on a box of bizarre gadgets he held close to his chest, his key card pinched between his pinky and ring finger.

“Oh no no no…” Vex stuttered, smiling nervously. “Philosophy is great. Useful too.”

It was embarrassing -- yes, though she wasn’t as mortified as she probably would have been had her relationship with Noja been a bit less favorable.

Noja briefly tilted his head toward the sky before trading a small smile with Vex and Percy. “Well c’mon now. No need to wait on the next storm to check out the secrets you were so terribly excited about.”

He then ducked around the two, narrowly avoiding a gargantuan droplet of water before stopping in front of the tiny entrance, where he promptly swiped his card, leaned into his Face-Scan, and used his skinny little butt to push the door open as he ushered them inside with a nod.

Following Noja, Vex allowed Trinket to go ahead of her before glancing back at Percy, both to make sure he wasn’t taking too long to put out his cigarette, but mostly to humor the side of her that low-key worried he was going to get kidnapped and brought back to the prisons of Baator he’d so narrowly escaped. (Oh yes, her theories had gotten her this far, sadly).

As Vex entered the space, the smell of ozone and burnt stake filled her nostrils like a space-themed amusement park ride. Only, she knew it was the smell of mechanisms in motion, just a little deeper down the hall…

In front of her, Trinket ambled through the space relatively unhindered, though he definitely looked more like a pipe cleaner than a dog in that short narrow hallway lined with metal, and plexiglass, and other materials she didn’t care to investigate at the moment.

“Apologies if I left you waiting,” Noja said, heading down the dimly neon-lit corridor which rose at
a slight, though relatively-accessible incline. “Left for two minutes to go pick up some parts.”

“We were admiring the spire anyway,” she reassured, glancing over at an old poster in the tall hallway advertising a new mini-drone she could never afford. “Really wasn’t a problem.”

Noja twisted around with a slight grin as he spoke, not even bothering to look where his fingers were falling as he entered his passcode to the second door. “Guess I miscalculated the probability of somebody showing up with the weather like this.”

“Oh well...you know us,” she hummed, trading a little nervous chuckle as she scratched the side of her head. “Always beating the odds.”

“So I heard,” Noja answered, opening the sliding door with a light beep before slipping into the room.

Vex quirked a brow, stopping dead in her tracks so suddenly that she nearly got herself stabbed by the umbrella Percy was holding right behind her.

“Oh fuck, sorry...” he muttered, though Vex was far too preoccupied with the new hints Noja had conveniently dropped to give a fuck.

“I’m sorry, what?” she asked, shouting to make sure Noja could hear her from the other room.

“Sorr-”

“Not you Percy.”

“My bad!” Noja’s voice echoed off the metallic surfaces of the next chamber. “Seen would be the more precise term in this case. Spotted a story or two about you all on MeSage. Nothing major though...”

There was literally nothing anyone could say at this point that would ease the huntress inside Vex’ahlia. She could already feel herself being instinctively drawn to her phone, as if compelled by a supernatural singularity of curiosity. The internet was one of her favored terrains, after all.

“What’s wrong?” Percy asked, looming over her shoulder like her own personal unwarranted Slenderman.

“Nothing’s wrong,” Vex said an octave higher than was normal, before glancing up from her phone once more. “Oi, Noja!”

After a few seconds, Noja answered back, his voice a little further this time, “What?”

“Do you follow me on MeSage?”

Trinket Barked twice, presumably eager to join in on the conversation as he sat his butt down on Vex’s feet.

“No,” Noja answered back. “But the #VoxMachina tag gave me a pretty good picture...”

A cold chill rolled down Vex’s back as her fingers scrambled to find the MeSage app on her screen, taking absolutely no note of Percy’s impatient need to squeeze past her. It certainly wasn’t her problem he was only now realizing that he actually wanted to go shopping.
“You don’t think we could maybe do this at home?” Percy asked, though his mild insistence did nothing but fuel Vex’s playful indignation, which often bubbled to the surface when she was short on sleep and calories.

“Impatient, are we?” she hummed, hoping he didn’t see her smirk.

“I’m not the one who can’t wait one hour to learn whether or not we are infamous across the lands yet. The internet is basically forever after all…” He pressed his glasses onto his nose. “Unless of course your internet is run by the government in which case, ha...nevermind. But I think you get my point, right? I mean we’re standing in the middle of a bloody hallway…”

His mild insistence wasn’t necessarily rubbing her a bad way, but it was most certainly rubbing her in... a way.

She tilted her head so she could get a good hard look at him, a move that was perhaps a tad more intimidating than she intended, though surprisingly effective in the most fabulous of ways.

“Or not…” Percy quickly course-corrected, raising his hands in the air with a brand of submission that felt only a tad more feigned, but adequate enough. In fact, it kind of excited her to see him so quick to please her, even if it felt mildly disingenuous.

“I’ll be just a moment,” she said. “I just want to see what Noja is going on about.”

He was only half-pretending that he wasn’t terribly intrigued by the possibility of being famous as he casually peeked over her shoulder. “Of course. Seems like an entirely reasonable thing to do in a dank dark hallway that looks taken straight out of a scene from Alien.”

In any other situation, such snark would have prompted the most savage of comebacks, Hells, had it been Vax, they’d already be kicking and scratching each other by now. But because it was Percy, it was obvious that the laws of logic did not apply here. He had this strange power over her, and not one that he was even maliciously controlling; that would be giving him far too much credit, and it certainly would not be giving her enough of it.

One could argue that he was quite proficient at making her feel terrible about her stubborn streaks, but not by merit of what came out of his mouth, but because it was coming out of his mouth. And, considering half of the stuff he said was quite frankly -- bullshit -- she wasn’t exactly pleased by the reality of her emotions on the matter. Though, in the same vein, she almost felt ashamed to admit that she... kind of liked his bizarre, pseudo-manipulations, deliberate or otherwise.

Not that being cognizant of those technicalities necessarily helped her combat them.

Her voice was confident, but her brain had no idea of where she wanted to go with her rebuttal this time around, “Percy, please don’t take this the wrong way but-”

Like the most delicate of curious devils, she felt his chin rest on her shoulder, and where his stubbled skin made contact with fabric, a familiar jolt of energy pumped through her body, reminding her of how bad the condition of her emotional boundaries truly was.

“So what are we looking at here?” He asked, his voice soft but terribly close, and the smell of his leather jacket and cigarette habit closter still. “Hm, that’s good, they haven’t published any pictures.”

Until now, she’d never truly internalized just how badly she craved proof that Percy was capable of
physical affection; the things she was willing to do for it…the way her body reacted when he finally delivered. And yet, even that little self-admission drove her nearly mad.

“Well um,” She swallowed once, trying to seem completely unmoved by the avalanche of emotions running down her body. “Let me see… just a second.” Many of her nightmares involved overthinking, which was maddening in its own right considering it seemed to be her day-job too: a fate she could not escape, no matter how badly her insides burned like a furnace craving...wood.

Trust too much? Or trust too little?

“I don’t see any pictures,” he said.

She released a deep sigh of frustration, trying her best not to hyperfocus on all possible shapes their bodies could create with his chin resting there; so delicate yet so present.

“I suppose we could do this another time.” Her eyes turned to glance at him, a small smirk escaping her lips. “I get the feeling you’re growing a little bored.”

He hummed away any chance of a real answer as his attention seemed mildly lost to the content on her screen, the deep resonance of his voice triggering a warm chill to curl down her spine and down to own personal “underdark”, to put it lightly. Her breath hitched ever so slightly and she bit the inside of her cheek as she tried her best keep her wits about her in public, if she could even call it that anymore. It wouldn’t have been the first time she’d felt turned on in seemingly arbitrary spaces, though it was probably the first time she’d felt like this while Percy was...so close.

Not that it meant anything. There was no evidence to indicate that he hadn’t simply grown equally entranced by the grim little aura on her screen; logically, it made sense. Not to mention, she leaned on him all the time and he never seemed to treat it as anything more than that, considering he was a decent human being who didn’t get emotionally attached to anything with a pulse.

“Maybe...” Percy finally said, his voice so soft it was almost a whisper as he curled that playful little tone of his into something that felt dangerously exhilarating.

Vex felt a single bead of sweat roll down her cleavage before it got lost in her sweater, a bodily sign that did nothing but validate the hunger in her core that desperately wanted her to grab his face while he was still in reach so she could finally-

“Kids.”

Both Vex’ahlia and Percy glanced up at Noja like mating deer in the headlights.

“You coming in?” He quirked a brow, “Or do you need a minute to shake off the rain?”

“Gods no,” Vex said far too loudly than was subtle. “We’re fine and quite dry.”

“Quite dry,” Percy chimed in, as he sort of lifted the umbrella and shook it with one of his snub little smirks. “I made sure of it.”

The irony was not lost on her, but she would not humor it either; it was a funny coincidence that would die along with the rest of her feelings, smothered underneath the hearty pile of capitalistic desire that she’d built to suffocate anything she didn’t want to think about, including her more... basic turmoils.
“Shopping time” Vex squeaked, nudging Trinket forward as she made her way through the second door, utterly ignoring anything but what was directly in front of her, for her own sanity...

***

A deep breath preceded Vex’ahlia’s entry into Noja’s shop, where her dark eyes scanned the familiar, softly lit interior for any new goodies among the quirky flickering reds, the soft constant blues, and volatile pulsing purples of the dimly lit, though oddly welcoming interior. The spire proper had been designed to be incredibly breathable, with metal and rubber grates as floors, allowing Vex to narrowly see the shapes of the various rooms above before they were lost in the visual web.

Octagonal in shape, the room’s walls were lined with cabinets and metal paneling. At its center rose a spiraling, transparent resin staircase, leading into glowing darkness that hid so much more than Noja ever showed to the public. He wasn’t exactly the most forthcoming when it came to showcasing his prototypes out or fear of theft or misuse, though Vex only hoped he’d trust her soon. The whole room spoke in deep hums and soft buzzing as his machines worked and processed at a peaceful though diligent pace, occasionally tickling Vex’s senses and chilling her spine.

“Care for anything? Water? A lemon drop?” Noja asked, organizing the various bobbles he’d been carrying into their designated compartments.

“No thank you.” Vex smiled as she spoke, trying not to make her wandering gaze too obvious as her eyes met with her own curious image visible on Noja’s security footage feedback, showcased on a curved screen right above her head.

Noja’s simply nodded, his left fingers twisting small gears on his goggles behind errant strands of red hair, while he simultaneously swiped back and forth on his phone with his right hand in a manner that almost seemed ritualistic.

Vex was already well aware of Noja’s natural blindness, and strived to be cooperative to show just how trustworthy she could be -- though she couldn’t say the same about Percy, who was already in autopilot, drawn into the center of the room like a moth to a floodlight…

Now -- to Percy’s credit -- Noja was a bit of a veteran when it came to selling his wares, so it was no surprise he’d been charmed; the machines around the stairs were by far the most popular: The newest and sharpest 3D Printers, Holographic Displays, and a collection of his more successful cybernetic inventions. You’d have to be part Fey to even stand a chance at resisting the stuff.

“The others?” Noja, asked, seeming all but unamused by Percy’s curiosity.

Vex’s blinked to notice that Noja was looking at her expectantly. She could only imagine he was referring to the gang. “It feels like they’re everywhere but where I am most of the time…” she said, sighing with a sad little smile.

“Pity,” Noja remarked, sounding relatively unmoved by her oversharing. “Was hoping to commission some help from Grog. I need someone to do some heavy lifting up the stairs. I’d pay him well.”

“I’ll be sure to let him know,” she said, smiling only slightly now. “Though honestly, I wouldn’t get your hopes up about seeing any of them anytime soon. Everybody is a bit scattered or...just busy.” She scratched the side of her neck as she forced a smile, “I guess a near-death experience does that to people, I suppose...”
“Except for that one?” Noja noted, nodding toward Percy’s distracted form.

Vex furrowed her brow, feeling so many conflicting emotions at once that she couldn’t be bothered to unbox them all now: she had business to do, people to talk to, deep confusing thoughts to ignore...at least until an even rainier day.

“And this one!” Vex protested, rubbing Trinket’s scruffy neck, maintaining a smile to hide her mild though ever-present irritation toward the distraction Percy was causing, both to her and to Noja -- apparently.

“I apologize,” Noja said, smiling back. “Hard to forget you two aren’t molecularly bound like that one poor girl in that old show…” He snapped his fingers as he glanced toward the ceiling. “I’m blanking on the name.”

“Fullmetal Alchemist,” Percy piped up, turning to look at Noja.

“Ah yes!” he exclaimed, clapping his hands together before drifting over to stand beside Percy, who was currently studying what appeared to be a bottom jaw-bone rising out of the ivory white resin of one of the 3D printers, likely commissioned by some medical institution.

“You know, um…” she lifted a finger in an attempt to get the attention she so desperately needed to distract herself from it all. “Speaking of mutant animal companions…”

Alas, no one seemed to be listening to her at this point. Percy was rather singularly minded, and she most certainly couldn’t compete with Noja’s natural business instincts, currently honed in on Percy like a missile. That was her fault for showing her cards too soon. Her desperation was showing, and Noja knew she wasn’t going anywhere. Hells, even Trinket seemed all too nose-amused to give her the time of day. It seemed as though her handful of vintage video games -- that did little but remind her of the series of tragedies that had lead her to possess them -- were going to have to wait. It was just her luck...

Chapter End Notes

CW: Mild sexual references.

I swear, dialing up the sexual tension between Percy and Vex is like dealing with one of those terrible showers that has two settings "Cold...and HOT." There is basically no in-between.
Chapter Summary

Last time, on The Butterfly Effect: Vex and Percy encounter Noja while there admiring his store, and they are lead inside. While passing through the various security measures, Noja makes an off-hand comment on the growing fame of Vox Machina, compelling Vex to stop in the middle of a narrow hallway to check social media, blocking Percy's way, and resulting in some playful shenanigans.

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings in End Notes:

More shopping shenanigans ahead. So many more persuasion checks, so little time...

(In case you happened to read chapter 49 before May 28th, 2019, go back, read after the *** in chapter 49, and THEN read this chapter.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It wasn’t that Vex didn’t support Noja and Percy’s adorable magnetism toward each other...

In fact -- if anything -- she exalted any attempt to get Percy away from her general proximity so she could finally purge away any damp feelings she harbored toward the fool. The issue rested more in the fact that they’d started chatting away before she had managed to successfully barter away her dusty vintage video-games for the motherfucking phone she intended to bring back her beloved twin on a bed of gilded satin, if only she could get away with it.

“Ah yes...The Carbon M3,” Noja stated, taking a spot next to Percy as he observed the resin 3D printer slowly draw the synthetic jawbone out of the fluid. “Third edition of its kind. Digital Light Synthesis Technology.”

“I recognized it, yes.”

Noja hummed, seeming curious. “You seem to be perplexed by something.”

He was likely hoping to gauge Percy’s knowledge before pursuing a sales pitch, meaning things could only get more interesting from here on out.

Vex sat down on a nearby stool, resting her head on her good set of knuckles as she watched the show, musing over the series of events that had brought her to this ridiculousness. Keyleth called this sort of bullshit “karma”, but that was, yet again, something that Vex brain could not handle right now. In fact, frankly, it almost felt like she was getting a bit of a headache.

“I’m just surprised, I suppose,” Percy answered, looking somewhat bashful. “How do you manage to get all of your tech to work on its own so efficiently? There is a lot going on in here.”
Noja smirked slightly as he spoke. “Limited A.I. for the most part; programmed by myself or acquired.” He gestured toward the various machines. “Saves me a lot of time when they fix their own problems.”

It was in that moment that Percy cracked another one of his customer service smiles that Vex could spot from a mile away. “Definitely not a route I would have taken,” he said. “But I respect the sentiment.”

“No you don’t,” she quietly muttered to herself with a smirk as she pet Trinket, who had finally decided to join her in her misery after doing his rounds around the store.

Noja simply hummed at Percy’s response -- a valid reaction to such polite contrarianism, considering Noja was practically an A.I. pioneer whom, consequently, thought rather highly of the practice, as did most people of science...

In fact, it was a bit surprising to see Percy take such a peculiar stance on the matter. He never would have struck her as a traditionalist when it came to his programming, considering the fear of A.I. was something that only dead people in history books ever complained about anymore. Then again, if there were ever a time to strengthen her vampire theory, this would be it…

“I had no idea Westruun had anything like this,” Percy continued, likely trying to stray from his insult, intentional or otherwise. “I thought stuff like this was confined to conventions and festivals.”

“And you wouldn’t be mistaken for the most part,” Noja confirmed, glancing upward where the resin staircase spiraled upward into the spire. “Few cities allow this level of creative freedom because they’re paranoid as the Nine Hells.” He turned and half smirked at Percy. “Justifiably so…”

“Freedom?” Percy smiled back, showing only a little nervousness. “I’m a bit new here. Forgive my ignorance.”

Noja seemed eager to nerd-out on a person who could only be aptly described as a proper noob, his expression patient and welcoming. “Freelance work. Most city-states can even seem to figure out how to decriminalize large scale tech-innovation, but Westruun and a few other locations have it figured out.”

“I don’t really know much of other cities policies as of late,” Percy said, maintaining his charming composure. “I’m a couple of years behind on my reading.”

Noja wandered over to one of the flat-screens and used his fingers to zoom in on what was a map of Tal’Dorei. “Emon has some liberties. Kymal has something a little different but...eh... comparable for all intents and purposes. And then of course, you’ve got Syngorn keeping all their research nestled behind that ridiculous paywall, keeping their stuff constantly on the move under the Feywild Tech-Festival Banner.”

“Oh, it’s nice to know what’s out here,” Percy said, adjusting his glasses as he squinted at the screen. “Though I’d be more curious to hear about Westruun’s specific policies.”

“There really isn’t much to it.” Noja shrugged, zooming in on Westruun, though his fingers drifted across the area surrounding its state lines. “You see, in a rather innocent attempt to encourage more Midlanders to chose Westruun as their new home during the Midlander City-Rush during the 80s, the city ruled that any trusted citizen had the freedom to partake in any creative project that was architecturally sturdy and approved by certified inspectors within her walls. Over time, Westruun wove in contracts and job opportunities, and now we have all this.”
Noja wasn’t making this shit up. When they brought it up in high-school history it was probably one of the only things Vax bothered to actually study because it was culturally relevant to their lives, and to this day he still didn’t really shut up about it.

Though be fair, it was pretty cool. The lack of limitations had resulted in a massive blooming of projects all across the cityscape, ranging from Satellite Clusters, to “smart” house add-ons, to retractable helicopter pads, to gorgeous LED statues. And then, of course, there were the antennae… In some areas of Old Tradesmeet they were so thick they looked like monumental pine trees peeking out from the city, granting the otherwise rather uniform skyline the occasional spire of glittering metal and beeping lights.

“Ergo,” Noja continued, smirking at Percy. “So long as the government centers don’t think you’re building weapons of mass destruction, nearly everything is free-game: Spy drones, photosensitive paint, sex dolls. The sky’s the limit, really.”

“Sweet Pelor…”

“Oh, I know.” Noja glanced up where the stairs vanished into the void. “Not only did they severely underestimated the technological prowess of your average Midlander, but they completely ignored how quickly such loopholes spread on the free web…” He chuckled slightly. “I’ve been here since my teens, so I feel more like a Citizen than a Midlander, but the pride is still there. Westruun did well with the policy…despite little issues here in there.”

Percy almost seemed humbled by the concepts being brought up, though the smugness didn’t really vanish off his face. “Even the best-intended city-state shenanigans usually end up in utter chaos.”

“Diplomatic altercations at best, civil war in the worst of cases.” Noja agreed, quirking a curious brow at him. “You’ve studied?”

“I dabble,” Percy smirked. “And I’ve dabbled in some tangible app making myself, though I suppose my approach is less…” He hesitated to find her word. “Mainstream.”

Noja shrugged. “No shame in being a hobbyist. Private endeavors can be just as rewarding. It’s where most of us start anyway.”

Percy briefly glanced back at Vex as he spoke, “Guess I found the right city then.”

His sudden eye contact threw her off, undoubtedly -- though any attempt at considering its implications did nothing but exhaust her fried brain. He’d already unintentionally done quite a number on her in the hallway and she definitely needed to keep her thoughts about him fully grounded and to a minimum, if her panties were to ever dry.

“Depends entirely on where you came from.” Noja crossed his arms, scrutinizing him.

Percy, without a moment of hesitation, responded to the question with another forced smile. “The Turst Fields are nothing but farms in comparison.”

Noja leaned in and pat him on a shoulder with a grin. “Welcome then, and I hope you discover Westruun to be less boring than you probably think.”

Percy grinned nervously, looking back at the 3D printer as if it were some sort of safety blanket. “Boring isn’t always bad…”

For a moment, they both stood staring at the various machines as if they were showcasing the most interesting porn they’d ever watched, if you could call watching a bone rise out of creepy white fluid
“porn”.

It was a promising silence; the type that would have probably given Vex an opening into the discussion had she not wasted her time thinking about what type of porn Percy enjoyed. Alas, little satisfactions like those never lasted long when there were two nerds in the room.

“Do those glasses have built-in magnifying properties?” Percy asked rather suddenly.

Vex huffed, almost amused by his presumptuousness, though she figured he’d learn soon enough.

“They do. Though I am cheating slightly.” Noja smirked, reaching up to twist the frames with a click, which allowed him to remove one of the lenses before handing it to Percy, revealing a vacuous glow within. “They’re actually cybernetic optic replacements, so they do a little extra than your standard enhancements.

“Apologies for my intrusion,” Percy said, his morbid curiosity hidden rather poorly as he leaned in quite conspicuously.

“No intrusion. I find it flattering that you have such a keen and curious eye for detail.”

“I try,” Percy smirked, handing back the lens and waiting for Noja to click it back into place.

“I try,” Vex mouthed in a mocking manner, accompanied by an exaggerated eye-roll she instantly regretted, finding that it did nothing but worsen her headache. She’d even dare to say she felt a bit faint, though she imagined it had something to do with the fact that they had walked in the rain for nearly an hour. Not to mention she was absolutely starving. She sure did hope for Percy’s sake that he remembered his offer to buy them food when this was all over.

“You perhaps interested in purchasing an enhancement for your eye-ware?” Noja asked, rubbing his chin. “Or perhaps some contact lenses…”

“I um-” Percy turned to glance at Vex like a child in a grocery store anxiously waiting for his parent to come back to the cashier. “I’m afraid I don’t have a single Copper Print in my name. I’m technically with her…” He pointed in her general direction; a wise decision, really.

Noja furrowed his brow for just an instant, before humming away his brief hesitation with a sly grin which implied a semblance of deeper understanding. “Of course you would be,” he said rather matter of factly, before turning to look at Vex’ahlia, hands clasped.

Now, she wasn’t exactly sure what he was thinking behind that expression of his, but it was most certainly embarrassing, and probably incorrect.

“Forgive me Vex’ahlia,” he exclaimed, cocking his head slightly. “Your new friend intrigues me.”

She wrinkled her nose as she forced a smile, “He has that effect on a lot of people.”

It was difficult to say whether her sudden headrush was a result of her standing up too quickly, or whether it was perhaps the euphoria felt from finally receiving the attention and respect she deserved as a loyal customer... Though, she wouldn’t arrange any grudges until after he’d offered her some sort of a price.

Noja took a seat on top of a nearby desk, his lanky legs still finding purchase on the floor as he crossed his arms, expectantly. “What do you have for me?”

Vex’s cheeks were rosy and round as she maintained the smile, daintily fishing around for one of the
larger cartridges, which Vax explained to be a sign that it was one of the older Pokémon games. She figured she’d start out strong by handing him the yellow one with the cute little cat-mouse-rabbit thing on its cover.

Noja hunched over as he examined the yellow little cartridge, twisting his lenses and lifting the game into the light like a jeweler. She got the sense that he was likely perceiving a lot more than any of them could see with their average vision, though she wasn’t going to waste her time imagining the unimaginable.

Instead, she seized the opportunity to organize all the other cartridges into a neat little grid pattern before him, biting down on her lower lip as she awaited his verdict. She wanted to showcase the games in some sort of logical order, though she soon realized that it would not be as simple as following the colors of the rainbow, given the overview Vax had given her on the occult history of these things...

In her exhaustion, she could barely even remember all the details, but it had something to do with the “red game” and the “blue game” being sort of like... identical twins, save for a couple of minor differences that were supposedly enough to irritate people into purchasing both -- unless you were in Syngorn in the 90s in which case there was no blue but a “green game” instead... which sometimes caused people to collect all three. And yet, despite all that nonsense, the dynamic still sort of made sense until Vax brought up the infamous “yellow game”, which apparently fucked everything up by being a more complete combination of both twins...(or freaky triplets), thus obliterating the notion that you needed to purchase both red and blue (or green) to “collect all the Pokémon”, whatever that meant...

Of course, when Vex tried pointing out the poor business practice of essentially warning people to wait for the third more complete release when new twin-games came out, Vax swore on his life that 90s kids were still impatient enough to pick one of the twin releases, and then still buy the third “combo” game when it came out, doing so for years until the company switched business models about a decade later when their audience started to wise up. It was a real shitshow if she wanted to put it crassly, not that knowing any of the lore would necessarily matter in the grand scheme of things. All she could hope for at this point was that the games she’d acquired weren’t fakes, or she’d likely not survive the tragic irony and embarrassment of it all...

“Well, this one is fake.”

As if she’d just been shot, Vex grasped for her chest and nearly stumbled backward as she wheezed for air, though the whole situation would have been far worse had Percy not been right there to catch her with his... surprisingly strong grip. Gods only knew how long he’d been standing there waiting for the perfect opportunity to seem like the hero when she knew very well that he was more akin to a... sexy anti-hero? She’d say villain, but she wasn’t exactly sure what that made her if that were the case.

“Good grief, I was kidding,” Noja reassured, though his standard state of expressionless boredom did not waver. She was starting to get a distinct impression that they were not the strangest people he frequented, a thought both unusual and a tad frightening.

“Why…” Vex wheezed as she hoisted herself up with Percy’s arm as a convenient scaffold, questioning her own life choices, and his life choices, and really just choices in general.

“Because sometimes I like to entertain the idea of making jokes,” Noja remarked. “Though time and time again they prove to be nothing more than a nuisance, it seems.” He shrugged, appearing almost more validated than embarrassed by the backfire. “I must say though, quite the relics you’ve stumbled upon. Where did you acquire them?”
Vex gave Percy a quick side-eye before composing herself, a big smile still included in the facade. “Someone who didn’t know what to do with them, of course.”

“I don’t blame them.” Noja’s brow raised significantly as his fingers slid across his tablet. “They’re a bit of a novelty item. Hard to find someone who cares for the original cartridges unless they’re collectors. But they’re worth a lot to those who do seek to fill their fancy glass cases.”

Vex could already tell where the conversation was going, but she couldn’t give up now; not after they’d gotten this far. “Saw that very same one being sold online for hundreds of goldies. Seems valuable.”

“Right, of course.” Noja nodded, though his tone sounded more patronizing than understanding. “Trust me when I say I’ve seen it all when it comes to pawning off historic tech. Though -- again -- in most cases these things are no more than fun items people like to own just so they can say they do, what with modern emulators fulfilling their original purpose.”

It would have explained why the assholes she’d stolen them from were so keen on hoarding them; bragging rights...if anything. “So you’re saying there’s a chance,” she winked. She would not go down without a fight.

“I... can't say.” He lifted his hands as he shrugged. “It’s just one of those things that come in and out of style.”

“I propose barter, not cash.” She didn’t want to see desperate at this point, but he knew she was anyway, so why hide it? “I promise accepting these will not set you back.”

Noja’s let out a deep sigh as he scratched the side of his scruffy chin, his lips pursing as he reflected. “Given your patronship, know that I am considering the transaction, though I simply cannot guarantee I will be giving you a value you expect.”

“But surely you may consider an agreeable price once you consider the fact that this isn’t just one game…” She waved her hand across the other multi-colored cartridges with a bit of a flourish. “...But an entire set.” Vex winked once more, maintaining her smile as she sighed through her nostrils.

Noja paused a moment, reflecting as he scanned the other games displayed. “What would you be asking for them?”

It was now or never, really. “My brother needs a new phone. He’s living without one now.”

Noja hummed slightly, though it was clear he was still hesitant on the matter, likely due to the fact that he deemed her patronship important enough to humor the exchange. It was more of a matter of showing him that there was more value to this than simply maintaining what he considered to be a good business relationship.

“She has a very good point.” Percy suddenly spoke up, confident in his words “It’s one thing to offer a single cartridge to one individual who happens to be filling a collection. It’s another beast entirely to offer a fully functioning collection. Might not find a buyer immediately, but when you do…”

Waiting for a response almost felt as tense as asking for one, though Percy had driven her point home so terribly well: She wasn’t just offering a couple of games to possibly fill a collection, but one ripe and ready for the taking. Still, the silence between the soft beeps and whirrs, and the steady thumping of Trinket’s tail on a nearby floor vent wasn’t exactly reassuring.

In fact, she could barely tell whether Noja was even looking at them at this point, the direction of his
stare currently somewhere between the two of them. However, it didn’t take long for his cards to ultimately show as she witnessed his mouth curl upward ever so slightly.

“I’m...going to see what the general market value for this is on IdentiFi real quick…” he said, gradually turning toward one of his nearby computers. “Since you’ve given me quite the collection, I imagine I could give you a little more for the set.”

Vex closed her eyes and hissed a little “yes” underneath her breath. In fact, the victory felt so assured that she probably would have done a little dance, had she not had the good sense to glance up and remind herself of her conspicuously visible image in the security monitors.

“That sounds like an excellent deal to me,” she simply replied, though her attention was already enraptured by the screens above.

She’d never truly internalized how different she and Percy looked from one another until she could compare them side by side in this more objective format, so to say: Him, thin and lanky; her, thicc and stubby. His hair, light and fluffy; hers, dark and glossy. His skin, pale and sickly; and hers, tan and...also pretty damn sickly now that she was giving herself a real hard look.

“Pretty sharp image definition,” Percy said, suddenly behind her once again.

She genuinely could not grasp why he kept on creeping up on her like that, though even in her irritation, she barely had the reaction time to give a shit before the screen suddenly flickered, and then immediately pixelated to a tenth of its original definition value right before their very eyes.

All heads in the room perked-up as the originally purple ambient glow suddenly shifted to a deep red as most of the lights in the room shifted in color and rhythm; now slow, but deliberate; like a heart-beat.

“That…” Percy piped up, sounding way more chipper than seemed entirely appropriate. “...doesn’t seem normal.”

“It isn’t,” Noja muttered, his fingers tracing on one of his tablets as he glanced around, brow furrowed.

The machines that were once running abruptly paused their cycles before sounding out in a discordant chorus that was almost surreal: “WiFi lost. Attempting to reconnect”.

The intrigue did not leave Noja’s expression as he spoke up to what seemed like the air around him. “Abjurist, troubleshoot please.”

“Working on it now, Noja,” a deep male voice answered back, causing both Vex and Percy to flinch a little closer to each other in the face of the unfamiliar voice.

“According to my analysis, data packets are being corrupted. The corruption seems to be occurring in the Link layer and occurs during transit.”

Given the rapidity of the voice’s response, it quickly dawned on Vex that it was most likely one of Noja’s A.I. with a state-of-the-art voice package, though it certainly didn’t make what it said any less confusing.

Vex stepped on her toes so she could whisper in Percy’s ear, “What does that mean?”

“Could mean a lot of things…”
“My thoughts exactly,” Noja chimed in, before speaking up a little louder. “Abjurist. Could you predict and elaborate the cause of this malfunction?”

There was another pause, only this one was a bit longer, though still surprisingly brief.

“The cause is most probably a failure in the local telecom infrastructure, specifically the network switches. However, damaging packets in this manner is -- with a high probability -- deliberate, and not a random malfunction. A single malfunctioning switch can be routed around. However, global hardware failure does not appear to be the problem here. The packets get lost in the network because their destination is corrupted, but traffic is still moving.”

“That’s weird,” Percy chimed in, though Vex couldn’t necessarily tell whether he was referring to the A.I. proper, or what the computer was saying.

“And this widespread too…” Noja muttered. “Half the city is out.”

Vex quirked a brow, feeling irritated by her inability to understand what the Hells was going on. “Mind translating in a Common we can all understand?” she scoffed.

Percy sighed, looking almost annoyed by the question, though not terribly concerned. “The WiFi signal is being diverted somehow. City-wide. Could be a hacker...I suppose.”

“That is very bad news for us if that’s the case,” Noja butted in, now pacing as he moved from computer screen to computer screen, as if searching for something specific in a frenzied manner that felt entirely out of character.

Vex glanced down on her phone only to find that not even her data was working anymore, an ominous sign to say the least, even within the context of her general lack of technical knowledge. Still, her relative ignorance didn’t imply she still didn’t want to know what the fuck was happening so she could at the very least asses whether this was a “contact all your loved ones” sort of bad, or a “let’s wait and see if this fixes itself” sort of bad...

“Um…” Vex muttered, trying to speak up as he eyes darted across the pulsing red lights. “Could you define “very bad” for me please?” Both Percy and Noja turned to look at Vex, which prompted her to smile nervously at both. “You know...for logistical reasons.”

Noja adjusted the lenses of his spectacles as he answered. “For someone to pull this off they would firstly need access to I.O.U.N.’s Cobalt network.”

Vex scrunched her nose, “So an inside job?”

“Perhaps…” Percy nodded, adjusting his glasses in near imitation to Noja’s mannerisms. Birds of a feather, in a lot of ways.

“But if it wasn’t,” Noja added, “Then, whoever it was, they knew the IPs of all major switches on the metropolitan area network on this side of town.”

“And that is...unusual?” Vex asked.

“For your average citizen, yes, but then again, I have access too,” Noja remarked, typing away on one of his computers. “It isn’t entirely out of the ordinary, especially for those of us with…” He paused for a moment, before nodding slightly. “Specific monitoring permits.”

“Does this sort of activity seem familiar?” Percy asked, leaning in to look at Noja’s work, rather brazenly.
“I’ve been working with Cobalt for a long time and I have never seen anything like this,” he replied, looking almost a little forlorn, though unperturbed by Percy’s curiosity per se. “I sure hope this whole debacle doesn’t get my backdoor patched. I’d hate to revert back to an older system if this all goes to the Nine Hells and back.”

“And there is no way to stop this?” Vex asked, feeling more anxious by the minute. “I mean, if you know the cause, can’t you stop it from happening?”

“Oh, it’s already happening,” Percy confirmed, turning back to look at Vex as she approached them both. “It’s more of a matter of “how long” it continues happening, and how much damage occurs before it’s taken care of…”

“Which is exactly why I would like to get this resolved before lunch if at all possible,” Noja said, his focus, rather singular. “My eye-ware relies on WiFi to grant me advanced vision, but without it, I am reduced to what feels like a shitty factory reset. It’s irritating, to say the least.”

Even Trinket seemed perturbed in the face of the energy in the air; worried humans set off all his alarm bells, which saddened Vex to no end, considering she could barely console herself at the moment.

“I can only imagine,” Vex said, taking a stance beside Percy. Out of habit, or perhaps even subconscious desire, she nearly leaned her head on his arm, before resisting the temptation and distracting her senses with the softness of Trinket’s fur between her fingers instead.

“I could try to help if you talked me through your thinking,” Percy spoke up, glancing at the screen. Noja scratched the side of his head for a moment, and then his shoulder, before rubbing his entire jaw with a tense hand. “To get enough access to the switches to gain this level of control, our hacker would need to be on the Cobalt’s secure network.”

“No, or a hacked version of the corporation’s VPN client,” Percy added.

“That actually sounds just about right,” Noja said with pleased conviction, speaking up a little louder. “Abjurist. Is there any evidence that the interference could be traced back to a VPN?”

There was a brief pause and a lull in the general buzzing of the machinary before it picked up again. “Affirmative.”

Noja quirked his head, smirking at what seemed like a little victory on his end. “Clever, but it’s what’s going to get them caught.”

Percy leaned in, narrowing his eyes as he adjusted his glasses. “Do you have access to the Cobalt logs to trace the VPN?”

“I do, but given the complexity of this job I don’t know how easy it will be to pinpointing the exact location, even with my Abjurist Wizard.”

“I can try.”

Percy glanced at the air, whistling an impressed little tune that hinted a healthy dose of appreciation in the face of the A.I.s performance. The probability that Percy was the type of guy to fancy robots felt higher than ever, though she wouldn’t exactly blame him even if that were the case, considering the notion of having a vibrator that could also partake in heartfelt and helpful pillow-talk was definitely up there on her list of wild pipe-dreams.
“Abjurist, attempt that,” Noja spoke up once more. “Try to narrow down the location and live-feed your findings on screen 4.”

In an instant, a satellite image of the city was displayed on the screen, a red overlay slowly changing to green in sections; presumably some form of an advanced process of elimination, or at least something that looked like it.

As her eyes scanned the gradual narrowing of the various locations, Percy leaned in and spoke softly in her direction, “A VPN hides your location from the wider internet, but since this attack did reach I.O.U.N.’s native client, it’s traceable in theory. In theory, Cobalt should keep logs of where people connect from, which can be a bit of a mess to sort through.”

“But it can be done.”

“It’s only a matter of time really.”

“So what we’re doing now, we can assume Cobalt is doing this too?”

“Well yes.” He cocked his head slightly. “Unless Westruun’s infrastructure and business practices are as inefficient as you claim them to be, in which case we may be quite a bit faster. Sucks for the hacker either way though, now that they’ve got the vigilante team Vox Machina on their tail...”

“Please don’t ever say that again...”

Percy’s brief snort devolved into a full, hearty laugh, shaking his head with a deep satisfied sigh. “I make no promises.”

With that, the group sat in silence as the waited for the sexy computer voice to do its job. Vex had expected it to be as quick as everything else it had done so far, but this was taking a lot longer. Fifteen minutes in, and it still felt like only about half of the map at been ruled out. Having that kind of idle time felt dangerous to Vex, especially when she had nothing to distract herself but the people in the room, currently far too preoccupied staring at rolling screens of code to give her the time of day.

Yet even among the glowing red lights around them and panicked energy in the air, for a moment Vex felt absolutely enraptured by the nerd standing beside her, his visage a stunning work of art in the crimson lighting; it was almost enough to make her forget just how much of a liability he could be to her mental health on any given day...

"Oh wait," Percy spoke up suddenly. "Looks like it's speeding up. I think it's caught something."

“Ah yes. The location has been narrowed quite a bit,” Noja confirmed, the confidence in his voice shaking Vex from her trance-like state. “Looks like the...Residential Ward, off Second Street, in...” He pointed at the screen “this area here...?”

It only too a the briefest of looks for Vex’s scrutinizing eyes to grow wide and horrified, the blood in her extremities rushing to her gut as she grasped for her phone. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Bloody Hell...”

“Yeah...” She muttered, unsure if the red she was now seeing was the lighting or the anger in her soul.

“You don’t think your-”
“I will personally kill him if he had something to do with this…” Vex growled, jaw clenched as she typed in a message to send to Grog faster than she could even think.

Vex: Is Vax at work?

Chapter End Notes

CW: Mild references to arousal.

This was a really fun chapter to write, but also... GAHHH.

It took forever... because I knew how important a lot of the stuff mentioned here would be later on.

As much as it blows my mind to admit it, every lore and tech element mentioned here, even if in passing, is relevant to plot elements in the future, so getting this right was crucial. As I may have mentioned before, this first "book" is setting things up so that the world makes sense by the time we get to the Kraghammer arc. I need to make sure the foundation I put down is solid so that that "jenga" tower doesn't come crashing down when things start getting complicated.

But also, as a side-note for fellow tech-wizards out there, here is a link to the website the 3D printer mentioned in this chapter. I didn't make it up (Though I did call it the M3, since we currently only have the M2): https://www.carbon3d.com/

I also want to give special thanks to one of my long-time reader MapleCFreter for helping me with the technical lingo of this chapter when dealing with the internet drama. I legitimately copy-pasted some of the conversations we had and inserted them into the dialogue, so I genuinely can't thank them enough.

I also want to use this an opportunity to remind you all that if any of you notice something that isn't factually correct or doesn't make sense, and you happen to know this because it's your field of study, personal experience, etc, please let me know. I will always opt for accuracy when possible, even if it makes story elements more complex on my end.

ALSO, and this is important: If at any point, you notice I may have forgotten to include content warnings for things that you know to be problematic to people, let me know. Don't feel ashamed to say, "Hey, I think you should include this CW for this specific chapter." I won't get annoyed.
Chapter Summary

Last time, on the Butterfly Effect: After Percy and App-Vender Noja chat for a long while, Vex tries to barter her old videogames for a cell-phone. However, before she can make the transaction, there is a cyber attack on the city of Westruun. After figuring out the source to be none other than their own apartment, she immediately scrambles to text Grog -- who should be at work with Vax -- fearing the worst.

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings for this chapter are in the endnotes.

Get ready for a deceivingly deep depiction of Grog’s perspective on his work life. The first half is very stream of consciousness, which isn’t something you’d probably expect from Grog, but I wanted to experiment so here we are.

Also, due to the topics brought up in this chapter, I strongly recommend you go down into the content warnings, as the chapter explores topics surrounding ableism, trans issues, anxiety, prejudice, abuse of authority, body dysmorphia, and more. I honestly can’t even list them all. I was not kidding when I said this chapter gets weirdly deep.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Grog didn’t know how to properly explain why Pike was so important to him. He had come up with a pretty good way of talking about it like a week ago, but his memory wasn’t exactly...relatable. Nope. Reliable.

But he knew she was. And for a fuck-ton of reasons too.

Grog plopped down on the edge of the Big Mart roof, finding a dry spot underneath one of the big-black solar panel thingies. He was glad it had stopped raining, but even if it did start-up again he had a feeling this place would still stay dry because that was a thing he’d noticed working there all those years.

He released a loud burp to leave some room for his lunch before unzipping his gym bag, staring at its content for a hot-minute. He had to be strategic here...

Eventually, he made the super intelligent decision to pull the sandwich out of the bag first, and then the beer, just because he had a feeling the bottle would sort of bend the sub-sandwich in a really painful way that would remind him way too much of that one time that big lady fell on his trunk while riding him.

Grog’s attention was suddenly drawn to the big swirly-metal-fan-thingy to his left for a hot-minute because it was making a funny sound but... false alarm. He stared back out into the distance with a bit of a snort.
At least the lady had been nice about it. She let him cry on her titties for a whole extra hour while he told her about how nobody ever believed he was a genius because nobody ever had the patience to fucking listen to him long enough to find out. She didn’t even end up charging him for all the crying, so that was nice.

Staring down at his peanut butter and ham sandwich, he sighed deeply, realizing that he was probably going to have to spend more money on lady favors until he had Pike to talk to again. Few of his friends really had the patience to talk to him these days anyway...

“Pike,” he blurted out, thinking about what he would say to Pike when she woke up.

But then he paused. And he thought. And thought. And thought some more.

Problem was, he wasn’t exactly very good at coming up with planned speeches, mostly because they usually made him feel shitty when he forgot what he’d planned. In fact, he wasn’t very good with words in general.

Not bad.

Just... not good.

And it wasn’t just the long words that gave him trouble. Even the short ones could be weirdly complicated. Fucking cruel if you asked him.

Like the word “stupid”, for example.

Pike always liked to say he wasn’t stupid, so he figured he wasn’t. But she’d also warned him that people would call him stupid a bunch.

Which made sense. It was an insult, which was something that Grog was actually proficient in: You picked something you didn’t like, and flung it in the direction of an asshole of your choosing. It made total sense: People thought poorly of stupid people. People thought Grog was an asshole. People called him stupid: Piece of pie.

It didn’t really both him. All it really did was prove how stupid they were, thinking he couldn’t think because he was a slow thinker. The thing that actually pissed him off was that he did kind of wish he thought a bit faster...just so they’d shut the fuck up already. If they had a brain like Grog’s they’d understand how brilliant he was, managing to pull words out of his mouth at all. Words had a funny way of getting lost in his brain when he felt strongly about shit. It was basically alphabet-soup up in there.

Not to mention that the people around him didn’t exactly make it any fucking easier. Words like stupid, and smart, and right, and wrong, and hurt, and help -- they all got thrown around like it was nobody’s business, but did anyone really know what they meant? Fuck if he knew?

Pike always tried to remind him that words were not perfect, because words were created by things that change, but that words also sort of changed, but then were also sometimes...forced to stay the same?

His face visibly crunched up as he reflected.

Also apparently sometimes, instead of coming up with new words, people sometimes liked to just borrow or straight up steal already existing words to mean different shit without telling everybody, like they expected everyone to be fucking mind readers. And that didn’t even include all the words with double, or triple, or fourcle meanings…which all existed because a bunch of assholes couldn’t
fucking agree on shit.

He chewed more angrily.

Also, apparently, if you strung enough words together (especially the fourcle ones) you could…

Grog glanced down at the last word-of-the-day Pike had prepared for him before the...thing.

"*Justify*": To make things sound right.

With the right word-strings and fourcles you could “justify” really fucked-up shit by making it sound really cool. But then apparently big long word-strings could also help convince people to do the right thing, so it was sort of a toss-up. It sort of depended on whether or not you were an asshole...

It was practically word magic, and it was unfair, and he wanted to be able to do it too.

Only...maybe not really. Even word magic could backfire. Which made sense. No one liked a liar, but especially not Grog. Whoever came up with the system was a moron, and Grog had a feeling it was someone like Percy...

He angrily squeezed his hands around the baguette, picturing it as Percy's neck for just a fraction of a second before feeling really bad when he saw all the peanut butter squeeze out the front.

It was shitty because Percy didn’t *really*...do anything. Yet.

He just -- well... Grog got these weird feelings sometimes; icky feelings about people, like their boss at the Mig Mart, or the annoying security guards who kept on trying to ask Vax weird questions, or guys on the bus holding ladies arms too hard, or other people from Grog’s past he didn’t really wanna remember too hard.

Pike told him those stray feelings about Percy were probably just leftovers from his old brain, or maybe the sign that his feeling brain was picking something up that the logic brain wasn’t putting together, but she never really seemed to agree with his worries, which was...okay?

He sighed, pressing the peanut butter back into the sandwich with his thumb and muttering a low “sorry Percy” before taking another bite out of his sandwich.

Days like those he missed Pike more than ever. She was always real good at explaining things in a way that made sense to other people. It was like her fucking superpower.

In fact, for a long time after Grog’s accident, Pike was pretty much the only person who talked to him for the first few months, because she didn’t get frustrated when all he could say at the time was “yes” and “no”. He remembered it perfectly, but he didn’t really understand why or how it happened, or how he got better, which worried him because if the same thing happened to Pike he wouldn’t know what to do...

All he knew was that Pike had him figured out better than anyone, to the point where the things she said actually helped him think by himself when there was nobody else around to tell him what to do, which was something that nobody could do better than Pike.

Scanlan had him kind-of figured-out, but not really... He trusted him to do stuff, which was nice, but he sure did piss him off when he couldn’t get the hint that Pike wasn’t into him. Pike always told Grog to ignore Scanlan when it came to that kind of thing, but it still rubbed him the wrong way sometimes, even if he was one of his best friends.
Anyway, then you had Tiberius who didn’t seem to really try at all. He’d flat out act like Grog wasn’t even there most of the time, never including him in any intelligent discussion. Not that Grog really understood most of what came out of Tiberius’ mouth anyway, but he could at least pretend he believed Grog could understand it.

Keyleth was sort of confusing too, mostly because she was a lot like him in many ways, but also super different and it was hard to find the line sometimes. Also, she was one of those people who could be all friendly with him one moment get all high-pitched and frustrated at him in a blink of an eye. He figured it was because she wasn’t exactly good with words, which... sort of made sense because it happened to him a lot too, but it made communicating with her hard. He wanted to talk to her, he really did, but she didn’t seem to have the patience for him, and frankly, he didn’t either.

Vax was -- for the most part -- pretty fucking bad at explaining anything to anyone. It wasn’t even that he was intentionally keeping things from them like fucking Percy. He just seemed to never have the patience to give anyone but Vex the time of day. Which was like...whatever, it didn’t really bother him. He was still okay-ish to be around...but only because he tended to agree with Grog when it came to roasting certain people, like Percy.

Vex? She was cool and really smart but also just... confusing. Lot of mixed signals going on there. Didn’t help that she had like the perfect titties so his brain always got super busy when she was around. Also, he always worried about her because she kept on doing really dangerous stuff and not really thinking about herself or her titties like, at all. Frankly, he’d sort of lost a little bit of respect for her judge of character ever since she’d started acting all friendly with Percy. Grog knew she was doing it for a good cause, sure, but it still seemed super dangerous and dumb.

See, Grog was smart, and that day at the Cloudtop hotel, he knew Vex wasn’t just asking Grog questions about Percy for no reason. He’d thought about it a lot that evening and... he knew she was asking him all those weird questions about Percy because she knew he was some kind of serial killer.

Grog was so worried about it that he’d even brought it up to Pike because it felt so out-of-character for Vex to trust someone so fucked up. But then Pike was all like “Grog that’s fucked up,” so he never really brought it up again...

As for Percy.

Well yeah. He hated his guts. And he felt bad about it too because Keyleth, Pike, and Tiberius all seemed to really like him. Still, he knew there was something up, and it only took him a couple of nights out with Percy to figure it out.

See, Percy was always trying to impress people, which was like, whatever. The problem was the way he tried to impress people, which was super fucked-up and usually hurt someone else in the process. It wasn’t super obvious when Percy was sober, but when he was drunk, fuck, he straight up laughed at other people’s suffering, always causing problems and keeping secrets and telling lies right in front of them, like that one time at the pub. He seemed so fucking pleased with himself after tricking poor Sophy into thinking Boid had forgotten their drinks just so they could get another round for free. It was stupid, and mean, and Pike didn’t even seem to give a shit. She just said they’d leave Sophy and Boid an extra big tip that night and they all laughed it off, which fucking sucked because Percy’s big stupid laugh sounded like a rabid duck.

Whatever, Pike was probably right about Grog not being nice, and he probably wouldn’t make a big deal about it even if he didn’t like a single inch on him. Besides, as Pike always said... “Just because you could squeeze someone like a tube of toothpaste doesn’t mean you should, even if they are terrible. That’s up to the authorities to decide.”
It would have been a simple thing to remember if Vax didn’t come in and fuck shit up with this edgy logic, saying shit like: “You can’t trust any figure of authority Grog!”

Which...also sort of made sense. Grog’s old family had a bunch of big bad figures of authority who always used their fucking word-magic on him to…”justify” bad things so they could hurt people to make themselves feel good. The word-strings had worked on him even before he lost the ability to remember word-strings, because word-strings work on everyone. They just always seemed to work easier on him, even before he got worse at it...and he got a feeling Percy was the type of guy who liked taking advantage of people like him.

He just didn’t have a way to prove it yet.

***

Despite all the thinking, Grog felt like his meal had still been mostly satisfying, and quick too, judging from the wrist-watch Wilhand had lent him that showed the time in blue glowy numbers. The old one Grog used to own had gotten a little smashed during the...thing -- which was a total bummer because it had been this group gift thingy, and it even talked to him to remind him to do stuff.

Wilhand had told him this new one could still sort-of do that, but Wilhand was too old to figure it out, and Pike was asleep, and Grog was just too…

He closed his eyes and swallowed away any bubbling feelings with some cold beer. They weren’t technically allowed to drink at work, but their boss only ever gave Vax shit for breaking company rules, so he lucked out from that aspect.

He released a satisfied burp as he wiped his mouth with his closed fist, wondering what other things he could think about. He’d spotted the blue truck drive into the underground parking lot which usually meant that he had about twenty more minutes before he had to start heading back to work.

Pike usually gave him words of the day they could practice using in sentences to “build paths in his brain” or some shit, but of course, he couldn’t really...do that now. Besides, he’d gone over the word “justify” enough times to never forget it, which was impressive, even for him.

Also, apparently nobody else seemed to want to help him but Wiland, who wasn’t very good at it at all, mostly because he gave him kind of boring words, though if someone were to ask Grog why Wilhand’s word choices were boring, he couldn’t explain it anyway.

Shit was difficult without Pike. He really did worry he’d fuck something up real bad while she was sleeping, and that she’d wake up and be disappointed in him, which was really the last thing he wanted. He’d worked too hard to get where he was now, and few knew that as well as Pike did.

He couldn’t really remember the logic that his old family had used to…make him believe that hurting certain people was okay, but he definitely remembers the feelings, and he remembered not giving a shit. He didn’t do it because he wanted to. He did it because he thought he was being helpful. And the mere fact that his brain could...like... go back to that if he wasn’t careful really scared him. And not a lot of things scared Grog. The possibility that he could one day be convinced to hurt someone who didn’t deserve it fucked him up real bad, and the fact that all of his friends acted like they expected it to happen did nothing but make him mad.

He worried that the only reason the gang even kept him around was because Pike was good at explaining the way Grog thought to other people. He could tell. He could tell by the way people reacted when she spoke. He wasn’t great at words but he knew feelings. He understood when
something she was saying or doing made other people like him more, or understand him more. He could even tell when the words didn’t help.

It was the same for everything. He could feel when what he said hurt someone, or when someone said or did something that hurt him. He could also tell when he said or did something that helped someone, and when someone said or did something that helped him, or did something that helped themselves. Pike told him that if he was ever stuck, he needed to pick the solution that would make both him and the other person both feel good, though it was easier said than fun.

Unless it was sex. Sex was fun, and easy to figure out too.

“Clits before Dicks,” he muttered. That’s all there really was too it, at least according to Pike’s understanding of things. He used to say “Ladies First” but Pike had explained to him one drunken night at Pho King that “Clits before Dicks” was more accurate, even though apparently even that was, according to her, way too simple.

She was too drunk to explain it at the time, but apparently “anatomy” was a lot more complicated and less organized than people liked to pretend it was, which scared Grog just a bit because he was worried he’d fuck shit up. He for-sure didn’t wanna seem like an idiot and embarrass himself. He wanted to be impressive. He wanted to be the ultimate god of pleasure. If there were three-boobed women ladies out there, or three-balled ladies, or three-armed ladies, he needed to know at least like…a day ahead of time so he could come up with a solid game plan that would make everyone happy.

He’d ask Pike more about it but…well yeah.

His eyes drifted toward the big mountain that kind of looked like a perky titty, and he pouted slightly. Ghost…Shadow? Cat Shadow? Whatever; it was a terrible name for a mountain that looked like a perky titty.

As he shoved the last bit of his sandwich into his mouth, he released a deep sigh which was definitely more of a burp. All this thinking about sex was making him hungry, and he hadn’t brought another sandwich so he was just gonna have to settle with the beer. Lucky for him he could get away with drinking on the job. He kind of wished Vax could do the same because shit would be so much more fun if they could both work a little tipsy.

Not that he could do anything about it. He felt like shit at work was already difficult enough without going out of his way to do stuff that would annoy his boss. Every day was a new challenge that sort of hurt his brain, even though Pike always said it meant it was making his brain bigger. He’d trust her, but he didn’t have to like it.

Ever since Vax had started working with Grog at the Big Mart things had gone to shit, and honestly, he did not know how, or why, or what he needed to do to make it stop.

To help Grog feel less confused about the sudden change in his work environment, Pike had explained to him during one of her awkward crying wine-nights that he needed to treat Vax a bit like a stray cat: How he was really good at judging danger, and that even though he did have claws, there were still a lot of things that wanted to mess with him. She said that he often felt alone, and scared, and irritated for a lot of the similar reasons that Grog felt alone and scared and irritated: being judged because of what he looked like and where he came from.

She always tried to remind Grog to keep Vax close and to listen to what he said because if he was asking something of Grog, it meant he really needed the help.
And so, he did. He took care of Vax like a stray cat, which basically involved ignoring him until he needed something, which was...weirdly often to be honest.

It was like the guy was a magnet for trouble, which was annoying because it really fucked up their whole work dynamic if he was being super honest about it.

Their boss was always trying to find reasons to fire Vax, which sucked because Vax was actually kind of a good work partner when he wasn’t being a total asshole. Like, there was that one time their boss accused Vax of not being strong enough to work there, which was bullshit because Grog actually watched him work and yeh -- sure -- he was wiry as fuck but at least he wasn’t as bad as Chad, who didn’t even do anything. Then there was the time he accused Vax of smoking pot at work when it was so obviously Chad. And then of course there was the time he almost got fired for trying to fix the lock on the stall in the dude’s bathroom, which was so unfair because -- one -- he was pretty sure it was Chad who’d broken it in the first place, and -- two -- because Grog hated being walked-in-on while shitting. Not to mention all the times that one security guy kept on checking Vax’s pockets for drugs like every other day. Vax always looked so pale and irritated afterward, so Grog usually tried to sort-of follow Vax around at work so he was never alone just in case shit went down. He even started giving the guard dirty glares, which worked really well, so he sort of just kept on doing that and things eventually got better in that aspect, because Grog was smart at this shit. Nobody was fucking with his stray cat.

Nowadays, Vax and him usually did their own thing during lunch, but even then Grog sometimes got a little nervous when he didn’t know where he was because he worried shit was gonna go down, and Grog wouldn’t be there to stop it, and it would disappoint Pike. It made work interesting, sure, but it also made work feel like...work.

Before Vax, shit was work was easy: You lifted things, ate, shat, lifted more things, went home.

But now there was drama, and stress, and the smell of anger in the air; not to mention the fact that he now had to do what Vax said and do what his boss said, which was fine, only sometimes what Vax wanted and what the boss wanted were different, and then sometimes, on really random occasions, the things Vax wanted made no sense at all.

One dumb but confusing example was when Vax got all offended about being called a pussy. It had all started when him and Grog were arguing about taking another shift or some shit and Vax decided to walk away from the argument because he was obviously losing. Grog blurted out the insult to get him back into the game, and honestly, it spun Vax around real fast, which was cool, but also real scary because he got real angry at him for a couple of seconds and honestly it looked like he was gonna kick him in the nuts.

But then he sort of...chilled for a second and calmly explained that he rather Grog use the word “cat” instead, because Vax was apparently really allergic to the other word.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know,” was all Grog remembered saying at the time, though he did run to Pike right after the fact ‘cause fuck if he knew whether Vax was gonna die of his allergy or not? Grog had never heard of “word allergies” before, but they sounded scary, and Pike seemed pretty fucking sure they were a real thing and that it was very mature of him to stop using the word around Vax, even though it still didn’t make a lot of sense. Grog had watched a lot of Tom and Jerry on YouTube and they used the word pussycat all the time, so how Vax could be bothered by one word that meant cat and not the other was sort of going over his head. At the time, Pike had told him Vax didn’t really owe him an explanation but that he would probably still give him one eventually. But since then, it had been a year, and still nothing...

It didn’t really bother Grog too much, but it definitely bugged him enough to put it on the list of
things he thought about during lunch. A lot of the times it didn’t really feel fair to Grog, considering Vax insulted him pretty frequently. Some days it really made him wanna use the word more just to piss him off, especially when Vax was being a dick, but knew better. It felt cheap.

Grog flinched, realizing that Vax was now staring at him, leaning up against the swirly fan thingy with a weird look on his face. It was like he’d appeared out of fucking nowhere. The fucking freak.

“What?” Vax asked, looking all snub with his arms crossed and his cool samurai bun looking all perfect and badass. Kind of pissed Grog off because his own hair grew all patchy and nasty so he usually just shaved it all off. Having a bun was just one of those things he could never pull off...

He burped, narrowing his eyes at Vax. “You been standing there the ‘ole time?”

“Dude, you’ve been staring at me for like the past ten seconds. I seriously thought you saw me.”

“I don’t fucking know! It’s like you’re invisible sometimes.”

Vax laughed, though his laugh was a little bit mean sounding. “Or maybe you’re just not paying enough attention.”

It was hard to really tell when Vax was “telling him what to do”, when he was being sarcastic but not using the really obvious tone to show he was being sarcastic, or when he was just straight-up being a dick. If it wasn’t for Pike telling him otherwise, he’d assume Vax was being difficult on purpose. It kind of reminded him of his old family at times, but he had to constantly remind himself that it was probably because Vax also came from a shitty family...or shitty familiesss. He’d jumped from place to place, a bit like Grog, in a way.

Still, even with the common backgrounds, Vax still rubbed him the wrong way sometimes, mostly because he was this tiny ball of anger that made Grog feel super nervous because he could freak out at any moment.

In fact, apart from his size and his good hair, the only real difference Grog could see between him and Vax was that Grog made his anger come out in loud noises and big movements like a dog, while Vax snuck away like a cat…

Grog waved his hands around as he spoke. “You know? You could just be like... yo Grog! Wassup? You enjoy your sandwich?” He took an aggressive swig from his beer before wiping his mouth with a burp. “Not sure why you gotta stand there all quiet and creepy like it’s your fucking job.”

Vax quirked a brow, snorting out a bit of a laugh. “Sorry. Really thought you saw me the bud.”

Grog wanted to be more annoyed at Vax, but he felt like he could only be annoyed at himself for not paying more attention. He kind of wanted to admit to Vax that it made him feel a bit vulnerable when he did that, but he didn’t want to come off as even more of an idiot.

“No yeah, I saw you,” Grog said, trying to sound confided as he lifted his chin the way Vex often did when she was being smart. “I was just testing you.”

Vax kind-of pressed his tongue into the side of his cheek, nodding a few times before speaking, “Right, sure...Anyway, move over,” he said, ambling over.

Grog furrowed his brow. “Why?”

He nudged Grog’s shoulder with his hip. “Because I wanna sit next to you. Move over.”
Grog begrudgingly moved over, but only because he knew cats didn’t like rain and it looked like it was gonna rain. He wasn’t gonna hoard the dry spot. Sharing was caring, after all.

“You look like you’re thinking about something big man,” Vax said, plopping down next to him, cross-legged.

Boi, where to start....

He knew he’d been thinking about a lot that day, but none of it really felt relevant to Vax. It was hard coming up with things to talk about because they didn’t really hang out much besides work, so he figured...he’d bring up work.

“Yeah like,” Grog started, furrowing his brow. “I was thinking if... like what if we both just started using the girls’ bathroom when gotta take a shit?”

Vax snorted out a laugh, shaking his head as if Grog had said something that was intentionally supposed to be funny, which was annoying because he wasn’t trying to be funny at all. It had taken him like three lunch breaks to come up with that.

“No like, really. There ain’t even any other girls ‘ere except for Carol and she’s real cool and you know she probably wouldn't give a shit. All three of us taking long shits together; be like a shitting party.”

Vax rubbed his eye as he smiled. “You know, as much as I appreciate the out-of-the-box thinking Grog, I’m pretty fucking sure that’s exactly what Fuckface wants us to do.”

“Then we should do it.”

“No...because then we’d get in trouble if we got caught in the lady’s room.”

Grog thought for a moment, sipping his beer and poking his lips with the mouth of the bottle a few times. “So... what you’re saying is that it’s a trap.”

“Yes!” Vax said, looking pleased as he pointed finger guns at Grog. “Exactly. It is a trap, which is why it won’t work.”

“But you're always saying ‘ow we gotta,” he raised his fingers to make air quotes. “Stick it to the Man.”

“Yes, that is true Grog.”

“So like, if ‘e knows we know it’s a trap, why not piss ‘im off by falling for the trap anyway? Wouldn’t it be perfect? It’s unexpected.”

Vax rested his face in his hands and slowly pulled his skin downward before shaking his head. “First off...I think you’re giving our boss way too much credit here. Second of all,” Vax raised his finger with a big smile, shaking it like a teacher telling him off. “You gotta remember that we don’t do what the Man wants us to do.” He reached over and wrapped his arm around Grog’s shoulders, running his hand across the distant skyline. “We do something that is always just slightly different than what the Man wants us to do, without getting ourselves fired, arrested, or killed in the process.”

“Um…”

“It’s a fine balancing act...sort of like walking a tightrope but without a safety net with man-eating alligators on one end and eternal happiness on the other.” He turned to look at Grog, poking him in
the head. “Does that make sense?”

Vax had said a lot of words in a very brief period of time. He wished he’d slow down every once-in-a-while, but Grog had a feeling that’s just how he talked sometimes. “But how did the alligators…?”

“Okay yes, in hindsight, that was a bit of a sloppy example, but you get the idea, right?”

Grog really could not tell if Vax was mocking him or really giving him a life lesson, because it mostly sounded like a really good idea except for the walking on the tightrope without a safety net part. Like, why?

“So…am I also on the rope in this lesson or is it just you?”

Vax blinked at him a few times, looking suddenly confused for some reason. “I mean, you don’t have to be on the rope-”

“So why you are on it?”

“Because I have to. I don’t get a choice.”

“That doesn’t make any fucking sense.”

“I know it doesn’t.”

“And why no net? No offense but this is stupid.”

Vax rubbed his eyes with his thumb and pointing-finger. “Grog, I swear I did not think this through all that muc-”

“But what if I, like, walked underneath you while you walked across just in case you fall?”

Vax paused for a moment, scrunching up his face at Grog, then looking at the sky, then tilting his head and scratching it for a second, “I can’t tell if that is the smartest or sweetest thing you ever unintentionally said.”

Grog furrowed his brow. “Unintentionally?”

“Look, don’t think about it too hard big man.”

“But-”

“No really. It’s not that deep.” Vax stared down at his own feet and flicked a little fleck of paint off the building. “Just a dumb example.”

Grog’s shoulders fell slightly, feeling like this was one of those cases where Vax had gotten impatient with him again. He probably didn’t like the plan, which sucked, but surely he could come up with something better if he had like another moment to think about it.

He took another swig of his beer to lube up the brain real good before talking again. “So… what if we like…ripped-off the bathrooms signs and put a sticker of a person shitting on one door, and one pissing on the other door.”

Vax glanced up at him, his smile looking a little more genuine. “As hilarious as that sounds, I don’t know if Carol would enjoy using the urinal or not…”

“We should ask ‘er-”
“Nope!” Vax said, filling his cheeks with air before deflating like a balloon. “That is a terrible idea too, Grog. Never ever do that.”

Grog huffed, scrunching up his nose. This was harder than he thought. And what was even more frustrating was that none of this would even be a conversation if their boss just let Vax fix the mother-fucking lock.

“What if…” Grog felt like he was starting to sweat thinking about this so hard. “What if...we just tell Carol to use the stall with the broken lock if she doesn’t wanna use the urinal?”

Vax looked like he was laughing, but there was something about his smile that seemed almost a bit annoyed. “You can’t just throw Carol under the bus like that Grog. Pretty sure she wouldn’t like being walked in on while she was pissing either.” He let out a very deep sigh, patting Grog on the back twice. “But good try.”

That sounded a bit more sincere, but honestly, with Vax it was always hard to tell.

In fact, this whole thing felt really stupid to Grog. He kind-of wanted to write a complaint to his boss, but he wouldn’t really even know where to start since he didn’t actually have an email... Pike usually did all that shit for him.

“Fuck,” Grog shouted, kicking the side of the building with his heel, “Why is this so ‘ard?”

“Because you were born in the wrong place at the wrong time buddy,” Vax said, not really making eye-contact, and looking almost defeated for some reason. “Sorry. Happens to the best of us.”

It didn’t feel right. None of it did.

“No,” Grog snapped, tightening his grip around his beer, which made Vax go all wide-eyed and pale. In retro-pecks, maybe he was being a little bit intense, so he let his shoulders and head drop a little, looking away. “It’s because fucking O’Marley doesn’t wanna pay you to fix that stupid lock. Cheap fuck. Dumbass is making life ‘ard for all of us, including fucking Carol.”

When Grog turned to look at Vax again, he was singing from his nostrils, a sad smile on his face. “You know Grog...talking to you feels like such a breath of fresh air sometimes, you know that right?”

Sarcasm? Not sarcasm…? Hard to tell with that one.

“If you say so…”

The wind picked up on the roof and Grog could smell the storm in the air. He nudged Vax with his elbow and offered him the second beer he always liked to bring just in case, but he refused with a little wave of his hand.

“Nah, I don’t need security giving me shit for smelling like booze.” He let out a very deep sigh; sort of like one of Percy’s sighs, but less annoying. “But thank you.”

Fucking hell. He couldn’t even share his ale with Vax without his work making it a fucking issue. It was no wonder Vax hated talking about this shit. Fucking morons. He’d curb-stomp every last one of them if it meant he could share a beer with a friend again. Still, he knew Pike wouldn’t approve of that either, even if it made Vax smile when he brought it up. He only wished there were other things they could talk about that didn’t involve fantasizing about killing morons.

Grog kind-of wanted to talk about Pike to be honest, though it did make him sad thinking about it…
Then again, maybe it was better to talk about stuff that made Grog sad than discussing stuff that made Vax angry. Pike always said that feeling sad was better than feeling angry anyway.

He’d try.

“So um…” He opened the second beer against the side of the roof and took a few hearty gulps before setting it down. “I don’t know what I wanna say to Pike.”

Vax furrowed his brow. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, when she wakes up.” His eyes darted toward his gym bag for a moment. He knew her blue scarf was still in there. He wanted to be ready to give it to her the moment she woke up even if he was at work when it happened. “I don’t know what I wanna tell ‘er.”

Vax shrugged, bobbing his crossed knees up and down for a second. “Tell her how you feel.”

“But I don’t know how I’m gonna feel,” Grog exclaimed, suddenly feeling all stupid and teary-eyed.

“Well um…” Vax chewed the inside of his cheek, straightening his back as he stared into the distance. “Why don’t you just wait, and then improvise when the time comes?”

“You mean like, make shit up?”

“Yeh.”

“But I wanna impress her.”

Vax laughed, his expression soft, and kinder than usual. “Some of the most impressive things that have ever been said have been improvised.”

It was weird. He wasn’t sure if it was his face, or how he said it, but it made Grog feel a little funny inside. But not a bad type of funny. Just funny; kind of a similar feeling he got when he made a cat purr: It meant he was doing something right. He only wished he knew what, exactly.

“I really do wanna be impressive,” Grog said, his voice meek. It was almost embarrassing to admit.

Vax stared down at his feet and looked a little more bashful as he spoke, “Well, I mean -- I think you already are.” His smile changed to a bit of a sour expression. “But what would I know? I’m just a quiet creepy guy who likes to stare at you while you eat.”

Aaaand there it was again. The standard Vax snark. Him and his sister both had it. Must have been a family thing.

“Eh, whatever, I don’t care,” Grog said, pursing his lips. “I could kill you in six seconds if wanted to.”

Vax didn’t move, or even flinch, really. He just stared right at him and grinned at him for a long while before slowly resting his hand on his shoulder. “Same Grog.”

“But I won’t!” Grog exclaimed.

“Me neither.”

“Because-”

“Pike would get mad at you,” Vax interrupted, because Grog was pretty sure Vax did not know how
to not be a dick for longer than ten seconds.

Grog stared down at his half-finished bottle of beer, trying to hold back the sudden anger that was bubbling up. “Well yeah sure...but mostly because I think work would be pretty fucking boring without you.”

That seemed to do it. After a quick snort, Vax’s warm smile was back, though he seemed a little distracted at this point, looking into the distance as a soft rumble of thunder filled the silence.

“That’s all,” Grog said, quickly pressing the beer against his lips so he didn’t have to talk anymore.

There was another long pause between them as a visible bolt of lightning cracked across the sky just beyond Westruun’s dam, lighting up the sky and Grass-Shadow Titty-Mountain, and both their faces, making Vax’s hair go all wooshy wooshy.

Grog wasn’t entirely sure if Vax was okay with him at this point, or just being quiet because he didn’t have anything nice to say, but for the sake of making sure shit wasn’t getting competitive between them again, Grog thought it wise to offer his second gift just so he could calm the kitty down a little more, just in case.

“Oh, you know what? I almost forgot,” Grog lied as he reached into his gym bag. “Scanlan told me that you guys were like, not super stocked up on food these days cause of Keyleth going away, so um…”

“Really?”

“Yeh.”

Vax looked a little confused, but Grog wasn’t going to invest too much brain power into it.

“Yeh so um…” Grog began looking through his bag, worried that he may have forgotten to pack it. He could tell Vax was trying to peek over his shoulder, but he wouldn’t let himself be distracted by the curious little fuck. “Ah, ‘ere we go!” He finally exclaimed, pulling out an unnecessarily large, unnecessarily heavy-duty, unopened jar of peanut butter, which he held up like some prized trophy.

“That’s um…” Vax muttered.

“You’re not allergic are you?”

“Oh no, no,” Vax said, awkwardly accepting the jar which was just about as big as his head. “Thank you Grog. That’s... very generous of you.”

“Right,” Grog said, chin high as he poked Vax’s shoulder. “Cause you’re a scrawny little shit and you need your protein so O’Marley will stop being a little bitch.”

Vax smirked, looking almost a little sad in this very “oh this isn’t really gonna help me” sort of way, which made Grog feel stupid again. He honestly did not know what he was supposed to do. It’s honestly why he was more of a dog person.

“I mean if you don’t want it you can take it back-.”

“No no..this is really nice actually. Thank you,” Vax said, sort of nestling the jar between his crossed legs.

“I’d give you more but, you know…”
“Yeh yeh…” Vax sighed, staring down at his feet for a long while, like he was lost in his brain again or some shit.

The two of them didn’t say much else to each-other as they stared out into the city, though it didn’t really bother Grog too much because he figured Vax would have just left if he didn’t wanna be around him. He had legs.

In fact, he seemed to wait just long enough for Grog to finish his beer before he suddenly stood up, patting Grog on the nape of his neck.

“C’mon big man,” Vax said, nodding toward the little service door, “I don’t want you getting struck by lightning.”

“That would be bad.”

“Yeh.”

Shoving all his trash back into his gym bag, Grog stood up with a grunt just in time to notice something weird in the corner of his eye.

Something... not right.

He turned to face the city, only to notice that Vax was already doing the same, his eyes all serious as he watched various lights suddenly go off in the city, some fizzling out entirely, others blinking red.

“What the fuck...” Grog muttered, his hand tightening around his gym bag.

Vax’s eyes followed a flock of ravens as they flew up and over them before heading out into the neighborhoods, causing him to make that same expression he made when he knew something was up.

“You know?” He sounded weirdly chipper. “I think I’m done with work for today. We should go; take his big baby home,” he said, spanking the side of the jar of peanut butter.

Grog wasn’t sure whether he agreed one hundred percent, but seeing Vax look so confident about it made him feel a solid... almost one-hundred percent more sure about it.

“Yeh, fuck this joint. Let’s go clock out

Chapter End Notes

CW: mention of sex, mention of genitals, allusion to unintentional ableist behaviour, allusion to transphobic boss, allusions to public frisking and humiliation, allusions to workplace harassment, allusion to ex-convict discrimination.

CW Extended:

Although not intentionally transphobic, Grog doesn’t know Vax is trans, nor does he fully understand how common trans people actually are. For this reason, he sees the world from this very “clueless” lens, which leads to some complicated conversations. This is exacerbated by the fact that Vax is intentionally hiding he is trans from Grog for personal reasons that are not related to Grog, but that will not be explored in this
A secondary thread is that the people around Grog at this point in time don’t really understand his disability yet, and so they don’t seem to have the patience or energy to give him what he needs to help him navigate the world, and they assume he can take care of himself better than he really can.

If the topics in this chapter are something you don’t necessarily feel ready to read (Being Pride Month), the next chapter after this is written in such a way that you can skip this chapter entirely and it will not be confusing at all. I want to make sure everyone has a chance to enjoy this story.

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This deceivingly deep chapter is what happens when you write from Grog’s POV. Writing from the perspective of someone who doesn’t “know things” but still really wants to be a good person was a wild trip. It was also just rough having to dumb myself down because the topics brought up are not easy to write as an “ignorant” person. In fact, it’s a fucking miracle that Grog is so “good” in this chapter. And not to take any credit away from him, because he’s a good boi, but we all know Pike did miracles on this guy.

Overall, I feel content with how it turned out, though I still wonder if I tagged things correctly. I went through a lot of drafts before finally picking this one. I was an intense process, but overall, I found the experience a rewarding way of exploring the issues from a different perspective.

I think the main issue with Grog is that he has no real concept of how common trans and intersex people are, or how their issues relate to the rest of the world. This combined with the fact that it is more difficult for Grog to make connections between abstract and concrete concepts, it is frankly a miracle that Grog is so good at navigating these issues despite his background.

I do plan on developing this sub-plot further, and if all goes according to plan, Vax and Grog should be on the same page sometime between the Briarwood arc and the Chroma conclave arc. It’s a bit of a slow burn, I know, but I mean...what do you all fucking expect? This is Chaos Theory 2042. Everything is a slow burn.

Happy Pride Month, and don’t forget to love each other, like Vax and Grog.
Chapter Summary

Last time, on The Butterfly Effect: While having lunch on the roof of the Big Mart, Grog spends some time reflecting over how much Pike means to him, and then he and Vax have a chat. However, just as they are about to go back to work, they notice something odd happening in the city and they decide to clock-out early.

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings for this chapter in endnotes.

And now we're back to Vex's POV.

Before reading this fic, please check out this YouTube video if you do not know what I’m referring to when I say “Confused John Travolta” meme, because in this fic we reference everything from literature to old memes. But you all know this by now, don’t you?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Percy drove up to the driveway that lead to their grungy apartment complex, the last person Vex expected to see strolling down the parking lot was Scanlan Shorthalt.

With his signature coarse dark-brown ponytail loosely tied at the nape of his neck, and his leopard print arm-brace in full view, he held what looked like a purple puffy jacket over his shoulder. He seemed to have stopped in his tracks, hand outstretched in a lazy fashion as he stared around looking a bit lost, his mannerisms mildly reminiscent of that confused John Travolta meme. In the distance, she could see what looked like Grog’s truck at the back of the lot, which didn’t necessarily make her feel better about any of this.

Percy cleared his throat before speaking up. “Remember that Confused John Travolta meme?” His voice cracked slightly as he tried to break what had probably been at least five minutes of dead silence between them.

It would have been an understatement to claim that tensions were high in the car, considering Vex had just had a ten-minute-long emotional breakdown ripe with colorful swearing and spiteful insults thrown in all directions, narrowly grazing Percy a few times but most of them flying in the direction of one incredibly stupid, stupid, STUPID twin brother.

Her eyes narrowed as she stared Scanlan down from head to toe, searching for any evidence of culpability. “Funny. I was just thinking about that meme.”

“Great minds,” he squeaked. The caution in his voice was more than a little apparent.

She appreciated the attempts, though she knew nothing would spare her from the raging headache,
raging hormones, and well...general rage really. “Well could your great mind get me closer to Scanlan so I can give him a piece of my great mind?”

“I could park and-”

“Nope,” she snapped, albeit with enough grace to hopefully cover up any anger directed in his direction. “Put me right in front of him.”

A deep sigh accompanied a resigned smile as he put his foot on the gas, taking them into a sharp U-turn before stopping right in front of Scanlan, causing him to visibly flinch.

“Happy?” Percy asked.

“Quite…” she muttered, her attention far too transfixed on that snub little fuck to feel shaken by Percy's dramatic display.

As she furiously attempted to click herself free from the restraint, Percy reached down to help her, grazing her fingers slightly as he pressed the release button for her, using a bit more force.

“I think I’m going to have to add this to the list of things I need to fix around here,” he confessed, beaming a nervous smile.

There was little Vex could do but stare holes into his eyes he stared right back at her, and she stared at him, and he stared back at her until finally, Percy wisely broke the silence.

“Door’s unlocked, by the way…”

Vex started to laugh in what could only be a nervous fit, her eyes scrunched up to hold back what felt like literal tears of stress.

“I’m sure it will be fin-”

“Don’t” Vex snapped as she lifted a finger in his direction, before taking a moment to breathe and recompose herself. “Please don’t bring him up until we are one-thousand percent certain it wasn’t him because I am this close to getting an actual heart attack and I don’t think I can deal with that right now.”

“I know CPR-”

“Percy,” she gasped, throwing her head back and staring up at the roof of soft, slightly tattered ceiling if their black sedan, wondering whether Percy enjoyed the sound of her pained moans.

“Right um…” He sort of drummed his fingers on the steering wheel before perking up. “Oh, Scanlan is waving at us by the way”. The smirk he tossed her way was less polite and more on the lines of “Please just get out of the fucking car” kind of smile.

Vex was more than ready to oblige. Opening the door with a bit of a growl, she kicked the door open and stumbled out into the parking lot, where her snarling, gasping form made eye contact with Scanlan. Inspired by Trinket’s valiant barks from the car’s rear window, she immediately sprinted forward, looking a tad rabid.

Scanlan’s expression went from happy, to confused, to mortified as Vex stopped inches from his face, grabbing him by his good arm and pulling him close, nearly causing him to drop his sunglasses onto the pavement.
“Where’s Vax?” she gasped, her smile forced, eye twitching.

“Holy shit woman... what have you two been doing to each other? You look like you just ran a marathon.”

Vex furrowed her brow and shot a pair of panicked eyes in Percy’s direction before turning back to look at Scanlan, “What? No! Scanlan, answer me.”

He winced slightly. “Remind me of the question again-”

Vex’s nostrils flared as her hand got tighter around Scanlan’s arm.

“Oi! Argh! Ow-ow-ow-ow…”

“Short…” Her grip tightened around his soft tissue like a vice.

“Halt…”

“What?”

“Where is my twin brother you mangy little perv!”

“Oh...um.” He lifted a finger, smirking through his pained grimace. “Oh okay, I THIIINK I know what’s going on here.”

“Do you though? Do you?”

“You think Vax did this, don’t you?” His pained grin stayed wide and beaming as he pointed around. “This whole internet-going-out conundrum? That’s cute. But there’s no way. This is some straight up wizard shit.”

“Oh. So now you suddenly know things?” Vex sneered.

“I mean…” Scanlan’s voice cracked. “You’re just...Vex could you please let go of my arm?”

Vex huffed as she retracted her grasp, feeling half mortified that she was acting like her father, and half irate that Scanlan was making her act like her father. She pursed her lips as she straightened her scarf and raised her chin, trying to gain back a modicum of dignity. “And where is my brother now?”

He glanced around briefly. “Pretty sure he went upstairs with Grog and a massive jar of peanut butter.” He waved his hand at her. “Not that I judge or anything, but please... spare me the details.”

Vex blinked for a moment, processing the information in awkward silence just long enough to come to the conclusion that Scanlan was either genuinely as confused about the situation as they were, or...he was being Scanlan.

“Scanlan, I swear to every fucking god in this universe and the next, if you know Vax did something and you’re not telling me…”

Scanlan bit down on his lower lip, a small bead of sweat rolling down his temple. “Could you like...define this something you keep on bringing up because this conversation is feeling really vague right now and-”

“Gah!” Vex shouted, looking like she was going to drop to her knees any second and scream.

“Look Vex, I’m sorry. If I had the answers to your insane questions I’d give them to you.” He seemed desperate to appease her, though whether he was actually trying was up for debate. “I swear,
sometimes you can be a liiiittle bit intense. You haven’t been like, you know…” He closed one of his nostrils with his index finger and made an inhaling sound.

As much as Vex wanted to strangle Scanlan right then and there, she knew that would only feed his ridiculous characterization of her, which was entirely unfounded anyway because she totally had the impulse control of someone who hadn’t been snorting lines of coke off of someone’s rock-hard abs.

“I think Percy’s rubbing off on you.”

Nevermind. She had absolutely zero impulse control.

She immediately grabbed Scanlan by his collar right before he yelped-out in a pitch so pitiful that it reminded her that she was being an absolute moron; and in front of Percy too, who was just now strolling up to join them, hands in his pockets and acting like he hadn’t just witnessed the entire scene...

“Oh, hello Scanlan. Fancy seeing you here.”

Scanlan’s suspect eyes glared at them both, brow quirked, smile even wider now. “No offense intended… but I’m getting this weird feeling you two are acting just a TIIINY bit insane. Ergo, as the only responsible adult currently capable of interfering right now, I insist you two consider spending more time apart because I feel like you are a terrible influence on each other.”

Percy released a single loud “HA” before going quiet once more.

“See?” Scanlan said, pointing at him wide-eyed. “Like a couple of villains preparing to tie me up and throw me into the back of your seedy black car. Like, seriously, what the fuck is that pile of junk? No wonder you guys are always so miserable…”

Percy simply let out a deep, exasperated sigh as he slowly crossed his arms, staring down at Scanlan as his glasses reflected the light of the sunset.

Vex’s bloodshot eyes burrowed into Scanlan’s face, her hand still tensed in a claw as her massive hound joined her side, the condensation of Trinket’s breath now drifting toward Scanlan’s nostrils.

“I mean… the visual.” Scanlan swallowed once, curling his upper lip at Trinket’s poignant breath. “I wish you two could see it from my perspective. If I didn’t know any better I’d say you two joined a dark cult or some shit.”

“Shopping, Shorthalt,” Percy said, deadpan. “We’ve been shopping.”

There was a brief pause before Scanlan nodded, scrunching up his nose at them. “Ah yeah, that would do it…”

Vex rubbed her eyes with her thumb and index finger. “Why are you here Scanlan?”

“I asked Grog to give me a ride to your place.”


“You gonna kill me if I don’t tell you?”

Without hesitation, Percy gave Scanlan one of the best passive-aggressive smiles Vex had ever seen. “I suppose it’s fair to say that I would feel a tiny bit more inclined to kill you if it really boiled down to it. Does that sound like an adequate threat to you, Scanlan?”
It was almost calming to see Percy so composed in the face of such abject idiocy; perhaps even a little bit sexy, though she feared she was far too tense to feel anything but rage in her veins.

“Okay okay, sheesh…” Scanlan scoffed. “Talk about being dramatic.”

Vex leaned in, staring daggers into his soul. “If you don’t start talking right now I’ll show you the real meaning of dramatic."

Scanlan interposed a shaky hand between them as he spoke, words quick but his grin as confident as ever. “I was home! Just like, you know...doing my thing, jamming solo…” He did a little shimmy with a wink.

“Gross.”

“What’s gross about that?” Percy asked rather innocently, seemingly unreceptive or unbothered by the wanking reference.

“Anyway,” Scanlan continued, “Around like...I don’t know, lunch? Is that when it all started happening?”

“Sounds about right,” Percy confirmed.

“Right. Well, around lunch I noticed something was amiss in our blessed city.” He rested his hand on his heart. “So -- of course -- being a well-traveled man of the world, I hit up some of my little unseen servants to see what was up. Babes immediately went to work while I warmed up with Bibgy and listened to some ol’ DJ Future Foster, and once that was all taken care of, I did some of my Signature Scanlan Magic and bam,” he snapped his fingers and pointed at Graystone Apartments with a flourished finger gun, “I came to the conclusion that I should probably check things out on this side of town.”

There was a long pause among them; one that endured far longer than was probably even realistic: A garbage truck drove by and picked up the trash, some couple walked by with a stroller talking about world domination, a black cat crossed their path…

“There is... so much to unpack there…” Percy muttered, before pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Who’s Bigby?” He squeaked, searching for answers from Vex.

“His bong,” she groaned.

Percy seemed to process the information just long enough to realize just how absurd this all sounded. “Dare I ask for that second cigarette?”

The request was entirely warranted, given the circumstances, though even as she handed him the cigarette she’d been keeping tucked behind her ear, she couldn't help but tense her jaw forward as her mind wrestled with all the shit that Scanlan had just dumped on them. It was hard to say for sure, but Vex could narrow down that he was either trolling them, high, or some kind of secret badass that liked to hide his talents from the world so he could spend more time on his music...

Yeah, he was probably high.

She closed her eyes and waved her hand in a dismissive manner. “Honestly, as much as I want to feed into the riddle that is your life Scanlan, I think it’s best we all ignore the words that just came out of your mouth so we can figure out what the fuck is going on because my head is killing me and I think I am going to actually implode.”
“Oh, well that’s no good,” Scanlan said, looking theatrically concerned. “Want me to go ask for some water from your landlord? You look a little sweaty and it’s like six degrees Celsius out here.”

Vex narrowed her eyes at him, her patience thinning to a razor-sharp point. “Scanlan…”

“What? He’s right there,” Scanlan remarked innocently, nodding behind them. “Looks like he’s trying to catch some rays or some shit.”

Vex and Percy both turned to notice none other than Eskil Ryndarien, carrying himself with his typically ornery demeanor as he dragged what looked like a foldable metal chair out of his apartment before finding a spot in the middle of the singular grassy knoll in front of his office, plopping down on the chair with crossed arms, and committing himself to stare in a singular distant direction.

“Poor man…” Vex muttered, deflating only slightly. “Can’t imagine him having much of anything to use as entertainment but the internet.”

“Want me to grab him a book from upstairs or something?” Percy asked.

“Nah,” Vex huffed, waving her hand dismissively. “I don’t care that much. He’s kind of a douche. Old man could benefit from taking a step outside to admire the flowers Keyleth so painstakingly planted for him.”

“You know Stubby, I couldn’t agree more.”

“Fuck,” Vex flinched, spinning around, her hair standing on end, “Vax! What the-”

Grog was there too, his eyes currently narrowed on Percy.

“You-” Vex sneered, pointing at Grog. “You didn’t answer my text!”

“Oh shit” Grog blurted out, reaching for his phone and staring at the screen for a good ten seconds. “Is… Vax… with you?” He muttered, reading off the text before turning to look at Vax, looking a little perplexed. “Were you with me when she sent me this?”

“When was it sent?” Vax asked, crossing his arms as he leaned in to look at Grog’s phone.

Vex seemed almost taken aback Vex’s frustration, though his surprise was soon followed by cautious and carefully delivered words. “Sister dearest… I can tell from your increasingly wrinkling face that you think I have something to do with this and I want you to know that it wasn’t me.”

She took a step back, arms wide, “What do you mean it wasn’t me?”

“Told you…” Scanlan snorted.

Vex’s eyes grew large as she spoke loudly, “Then who the fuck-”

Vax immediately slapped his hand on her mouth before pointing a singular pinky-finger in Eskil’s general direction.

She slapped his hand away, jaw agape. “Shut the fuck up.”

“No, really.”

“Actually Vex,” Percy remarked, sounding rather chipper, “given our current track record when it
comes to this sort of thing, this makes perfect sense.”

“No it doesn’t,” she protested, stomping her foot like a child and feeling immediately embarrassed by her tantrum.

“The fuck you doing ‘ere anyway?” Grog suddenly blurted out, eyes trained on Percy once more. Percy blinked up at Grog, looking significantly more perplexed than before. “I... sleep here?”

“Wut?”

“Grog, you’ve dropped me off here like, six times in the brief time I’ve known you.”

“Oh,” his heavy brow dipped even lower. “I just thought you really liked that bus-stop.”

“It’s true. He sleeps on the couch,” Vax confirmed, smiling up at Grog and counting on his fingers. “He does the dishes, vacuums, cleans the bathroom, walks Trinket every once in a while; kind of like having a hot maid, only he pays us.”

Grog glanced down at Percy, looking suddenly validated and snorting slightly. “Bitch.”

Even in the face of such roasting, Percy’s jaw dropped only briefly before closing again, as if he were consciously choosing to accept the labels for simplicity's sake. Vex still didn’t exactly know where all of this outward animosity was coming from, though she imagined it had something to do with the fact that half of the city’s fucking internet was out.

“Listen though, enough about Percy,” Vax whispered, smiling nervously. “I am not making this shit up. I used the info Scanlan found and sure enough, it’s coming from his apartment,” he said, still glancing in Eskil’s direction.

Vex racked at her own face with her fingers, her voice strained beyond recognition. “How does this keep happening to us...?”

“When shit hits the fan it takes forever to clean it up...” Grog muttered, crossing his arms.

Vex wrinkled her nose at Grog, “Did you just come up with that?”

Vax perked up, “I know right? He’s been saying smart shit all day.”

Grog smirked, as if wholly impressed with himself.

“No, but seriously Vex,” her twin insisted, taking a slightly more serious stance as he rested his hand on her shoulder. “We need to talk to him. I don’t think he knows what’s going on. We should warn him.”

“You know...” Scanlan hummed. “You guys should really consider changing neighborhoods.”

“Not in the mood Shorthalt,” Vax cautioned as he started heading in Eskil’s direction.

Vex really didn’t want to do any of this right now, but she didn’t feel like she had much of a choice anymore, yet again...

Scanlan adjusted the jacket on his shoulder, huffing slightly as he watched the scene unfold. “Do the twins strike you as a little... feral today?”

“It’s been a long day...” Percy replied, finally lighting his cigarette.
Meanwhile, the twins made their way over, with their smiles and guards both on the highest settings, as if it weren’t already stressful enough speaking to their landlord when they weren’t in the middle of a small city-wide crisis.

“Bit of a rainy day, isn’t Mr. Ryndarien?” Vax started off, trying to seem unassuming as he stopped in front of the seated old man.

Eskil narrowed his eyes at the two of them and shook a wrinkled crooked finger in their general direction. “Oh... don’t you two come here acting all sly and stupid. You know what’s up.”

The twins glanced at each other in equally matched confusion before Vax found the composure to speak up. “I mean...the internet is out. Fuck if we know why.”

“Vax,” Vex hissed, slapping his arm. “He’s still our landlord.”

“Bah, stop acting so dim-witted,” Eskil grumbled, waving his pale hand in their general direction. “It doesn’t work on me. There’s no use beating around the bush.”

“The fuck is he talking about...?” Vax muttered under his breath.

Vex blinked for a moment before lifting a finger as she spoke, her voice higher than usual as she tried to mask her deep-set irritation. “See... I still don’t really know whether we’re talking about the same bush here.”

Vax built on Vex’s trepidation. “Yeah um-” He seemed hesitant to bring it up, but they were too deep now. “According to us this whole mess is coming from your apartment.”

“Of course it is,” Eskil said rather matter-of-factly. “I’m the one doing it.”

Both twins jaws dropped as they gawked at the reality before them.

Vax cleared his ear with his pinky, leaning in. “I’m sorry could you repeat that?”

“I’m the one doing it.”

Her twin looked like he was about to go into hysterics, while Vex felt the burning need to yeet the first thing she could get her hands on to the nearest moon. “You’re the one draining the internet from half the fucking city?”

“I am diverting it so that the worm doesn’t spread...”

“No, wait, what is this about a worm?” Vax asked, as if he knew what the fuck Eskil was going on about.

“As if it even matters.” He muttered a few profanities under his breath. “None of them are gonna invest the time to rule out it wasn’t me. Fucking city hates people like me. No respect for its elders! Always keen on finding a scapegoat for their poor security systems...”

“I mean no disrespect.” Vax laughed nervously. “But are you absolutely certain you know what you’re talking about because this would require-”

“Oh what now?” Eskil wrinkled his eyes at Vax from behind thick spectacles. “Because you think I’m a senile old man who doesn’t know how computers work?”

“Ha...okay no, that is not what I meant-”
“Sure it was,” Eskil snapped, narrowing his eyes at Vax. “Boy, when I was your age I was taking out so many corrupt computer systems I was given a medal of honor! Back in my day people were made of different stuff, war-hardened, filled with determination, raised by those who were in turn raised by those who still remember the Divergence! A full century they say, maybe more, lost to written record! Those were hard times indeed, but you can thank my generation for giving you delinquents a place to call home and a better standard of living than I ever had! Hells, my great-grandfather didn’t even have a documented birthda-”

“Eskil…” Vex said, rubbing her eyes.

“Mr. Ryndarien!”

“Mr. Ryndarien…” She caught herself. “We really don’t need a history lesson right now,” Vex begged.

Now, to be entirely fair, Vex didn’t entirely blame Eskil for his resentment. He had a bit of a point. The Divergence really was shitty. In history class, she remembered it being referred to as “The Lost Century” or the “Second Dark Age”, a period of time that started in the 1940s and lasted for approximately a century, give or take…In reality, historians didn’t have the slightest clue as to how much time had actually passed. Some argued a single century, while some more extreme voices argued as many as ten.

The international community had done a pretty impressive job at enforcing their “forgive and forget” policy, where all countries embraced and imposed a hard calendar reset to 1940s -- which was -- according to popular historical knowledge, “an adequate representation of moral and cultural progress that had been achieved during that time period.” Furthermore, research on the subject was highly regulated, given that the calendar reset was part of the peace agreement that ended the war in the first place. “Wiping the slate” was really the only version of history certain parties involved like Batoor and the various independent entities involved were willing to accept, and although the decision is unanimously unpopular and deeply disrespectful to those who had lived and died during said “Lost Century”, it seemed like a price the world was willing to pay for peace.

“Oh, but no need to worry about me,” Eskil huffed, shrugging. “I commend you all for your quick wits and ample free time, though I hate to inform you that it’s wasted. Just as you found me, security in Westruun will find me soon enough as well, and that will be the end of that. You all might want to start looking for a new place. Things aren’t looking good.”

Vex would have loved to know whether Eskil was being serious about any of this or not, considering the roof over their heads was on the line, but frankly, he was a bit hard to read under all that vitriol and wrinkled skin.

“Look, we get that you’re upset,” Vax tried to explain, his own patience withering. “But we just want to understand what the fuck you’re talking about.”

“Well go on then!” Eskil shouted. “Check it out, door’s open…I even got the award somewhere…think it’s on the bookcase next to the vitamin box...or something…” Eskil trailed off, his words turning to low grumbles as he crumpled lower into his chair.

Vex and Vax looked at each other for no longer than two seconds before racing over to Eskil’s apartment and bursting through the door, followed by a very excited Trinket who seemed rather keen on revisiting his sometimes-home.

It seemed normal, at first: The layout was familiar, though there were many more bookcases, a futon that was still opened as a bed, and a dining table that was pushed up against the window, covered in
all sorts of junk like denture liquid bottles, inhalers, individually wrapped candy and magazines from the 2020s... She’d even managed to spot the medal of honor next to the pills.

“Well, this feels pretty standard,” Vax huffed, crossing his arms and looking slightly dejected. “Pretty sure the old coot is insane.”

“Wait…” Vex’s eyes narrowed as she studied the sheets and pillows on the futon. “Why does he sleep out here?”

Another shared glance between the twins had them soon rushing down the hallway where they immediately found what they assumed to be the bedroom, the door already partially ajar.

“Is this weird?” Vex asked as she hovered her hand over the door.

“Yes,” Vax said as he pushed the door open for her.

In an instant, their questions felt immediately answered...if not by breeding a whole new army of questions in the process.

“Holy…” Vex muttered

“...Fuck,” Vax concluded, staring at the scene wide-eyed for a long while before slowly resting his hand on Vex's shoulder. “You should... probably go grab the others.”

Chapter End Notes

CW: Allusions to cocaine use, physical aggressiveness. (Vex toward Scanlan).
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I can’t help but feel like Percy and Vex are always inches away from becoming the next evil power couple. They aren’t even a thing yet and they’ve already got and Bonny and Clide thing going on. Scanlan clearly already ships them. (Grog apparently doesn’t but I think he’ll get over it eventually).

Vax has also been particularly sassy toward Percy lately, which is standard, of course. I’m sure it’s not coming from anything specific…

Also, since I suspect some of you may ask:

Yep, the “Divergence” was essentially a global war that started out with the technological equivalent of WWII, but that over the generations devolved into events so heinous and horrific that the international community promised to “forgive and forget”. You could compare it to a second Dark Age of sorts, but the leftover remnants of that war still haunt Exandria to this day. This isn’t the last you’re going to hear about the Divergence of course, but don’t expect to learn a huge amount either. Just know that this lore goes deep, just as it does in canon. (C1 and C2 still haven't given us all the answers, so this is fun fun fun!)
Unseen Servant

Chapter Summary

Vex and Percy arrive home only to find Scanlan being suspicious and Vax conspicuously uninvolved in the mysterious internet outing. Soon enough though, they discover the culprit to be none other than their Landlord Eskil Ryndarien.

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings for this chapter are in the End Notes.

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I kind of impulse posted this so if you happen to find any typos, just let me know if you happen to leave a comment. Otherwise, enjoy...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Up until relatively recently, Vex had always looked up to city-states as these beacons of order among the chaos. However, recent events had progressively revealed her assumptions to be nothing more than ill-conceived fantasies built on a shoddy foundation of poorly placed optimism and good city-state PR. People were still people, whether you threw them in the wilderness with a pile of scrap metal and couple of guns, or whether you dressed them up all nice and propped them up in glass towers.

Of course, she could tolerate being in the wrong place at the wrong time once, but two times? Their last tussle with city-state drama had put them all in the hospital so the notion of getting involved in other people’s drama again seemed...foolish, to put it kindly.

If anything, she would have loved to just let Westruun deal with its bullshit in its own time, but given the fact that the whole cyber incident was conspicuously centered around their landlord, there was a bit of a vested interest...

Though seemingly the same dimensions as her and Vax’s own bedroom, the sheer size of the whirring, dusty computer servers lining the walls of Eskil’s bedroom made the place seem less like living space and more like a submarine bunker, complete with black-out curtains, worn spray-painted labels with numbers and letters that didn’t mean much to her, and a large, old-school computer monitor that was currently scrolling through endless lines of data.

Pacing back and forth like a trapped tiger in a cage, Vex desperately tried to wrangle her emotions as she waited for Scanlan to gather what information he could. He seemed absolutely convinced that he knew exactly what he needed to say to get Eskil cooperating, even though she herself had tried for almost ten minutes. He didn’t seem one bit keen on getting them wrapped up in his business, which was fair...all things considered.

“Why did it have to be our landlord,” Vex finally spoke-up, feeling her thoughts finally escape from of her lips through clenched teeth.
Leaned up against one of the massive dark-metal servers, Percy glanced up, as if shaken out of his daze. “Pardon?”

She continued to pace back and forth as she spoke. “This was the only damn place we could find that allowed a dog the size of Trinket without imposing an extra deposit.” She stared up at the ceiling fan and groaned. “And he was so lax with the rent too…”

Percy snorted, his attention drifting toward the large screen that was shining white light on piles of notebooks, used tissues, and old tupperware containers filled with enough collective cough-drops to start a small pharmacy. “You’re speaking as though he’s already been arrested”.

“Well I legitimately doubt Scanlan will be getting anything from him.”

“Why not?” Grog asked, swiveling back and forth on a rolling desk chair that looked right on the brink of collapsing underneath him.

She stopped in her tracks. “What is he gonna tell him?” She feigned a groveling pose. “Oh please Mr. Ryndarian, waste your last few hours of freedom outlining exactly how you fucked yourself so that we, a random group of unprofessional hooligans, can magically fix it for you without getting ourselves arrested or maimed in the process.”

“Yeh.”

Vex’s groan rapidly devolved into a roar as she raked her fingers through her hair, realizing the gravity of the situation all at once and far too quickly.

“You should really give Shorthalt little more credit,” Vax interjected, sitting on the desk with his arms crossed. “He’s a good talker.”

“So? Even if he does manage to get Eskil to explain his reasoning, unless we have the means to work with the information he gives us, we’re fucked.”

Vax stretched his neck from side to side as he spoke. “The way I see it, we’re fucked if we sit back and let Eskil get arrested and we’re fucked if we get caught. So obviously, the ideal solution would be to solve Eskil’s problem.”

“Of course that would be ideal, but we don’t live in a world of ideals.”

“Not with that attitude.”

Her narrowed eyes systematically darted between Vax, Grog, and Percy. “If we can’t find evidence to Eskil’s supposed innocence, we’re not only fucked out of our landlord, but we will have to deal with the accusation of working as accomplices.”

“We’ll jump ship before it comes to that,” Vax tried to reassure her, but to no avail.

“Right, because our timing was so on point last time something like this happened.”

A moment of silence bloomed under the sound of the whirring of fans and buzzing of lights, as if the parallel had only now entered the forefront of everyone’s minds. Getting so closely involved in situations like this didn’t have the happiest of endings in their experience, and she wasn’t sure if she could handle any more friends in hospitals.
“Oh, I’m sorry,” Vex finally spoke up, sarcasm coating every word. “You’re right. Go right ahead. Play vigilante’s all you want. We are “Vox Machina” after all,” she quoted rather mockingly. “Got a reputation to uphold…”

Once more, no one seemed to have much to say in response to her sudden bout of pessimism at first, though it didn’t take long for the social justice rogue to pitch in his two cents on the matter.

“I hear you Vex,” Vax said, arms crossed and expression muted. “But think about it. If this truly is something bigger than the internet being shut down, the city has an obligation to know, so that’s a card we can play.” He lifted two fingers. “And secondly, I wanna fucking know what’s going on too. I mean this shit is wild Vex’aahlia. Eskil seems pretty convinced they’re gonna sweep this under the rug and that doesn’t sit well with me at all…”

Vex’s tone shifted from angry to almost pleading. “I have been thinking about it Vax. I truly have; and trust me, none of this sits well with me either. It’s sketchy, and unfair, and all sort of fucked up...But do you genuinely believe we can do anything about this?”

“What else are we gonna do? Drag out lawn chairs and wait for an innocent man to get locked up?”

“Of course not, but why willingly put ourselves in a situation like this again? They rammed a fucking truck into a crowd to try to kill us, all because we got involved in shit that didn’t concern us.” She couldn’t help but nervously smirk, lowering her voice. “I mean sure, we got treated like kings after the fact but...”

A sadness flashed Grog’s eyes which in turn managed to fill Vex with simultaneous melancholy and validation. There was no doubt that it felt wrong to ignore the needs of a man who, albeit terrible in attitude, had an objective generosity that was much harder to ignore than properly quantify; he’d given them Feywild Tech Tickets to help get Grog a much-needed heart exam, he’d accepted to watch Trinket on more than one occasion, and he’d even helped them out with rent. His flexibility knew no bounds, and if he was suddenly gone, they could kiss their relatively stable living situation goodbye.

And yet...nothing could wipe the memory of the blood on the pavement. People were in hospitals because of their meddling; dead, because of their meddling.

“I promise we’ll duck out before things get dicey,” Vax finally said, though his thoughts could not be fully articulated before the whole room perked up at the familiar sound of a long-drawn-out syren.

“Fuck,” Vex hissed as she glanced out the window, spotting large lights on top of the spires flashing yellow in the distance as the synthetic wail echoed through the districts.

“Yellow alert already?” Vax said, standing from the desk and peeking out the curtain as well, cheek to cheek with his sister.

After a good long scan, Vex glanced aggressively shut the curtain before glancing around wide-eyed. “What the fuck is taking Scanlan so long,” she shouted, before immediately covering her mouth as she spotted Scanlan walk through the door.

“Speak of the devil…” Percy muttered.

“Can’t rush brilliance,” Scanlan declared rather nonchalantly, staring at his phone as he typed something. “You have any idea how long it takes to convince and old man these days? I had to make him tea and listen to him rant on and on and on...on how his great grandfather attached a giant
satellite to a monster truck to chase after a falling piece of a space station back during the Divergence, and all before we’d even made it through the door. You wouldn’t believe how fucking slow he is at carring that metal chair. Old people, I swear…”

“Time’s ticking Shorthalt,” Vax insisted, tapping an invisible watch on his wrist.

Scanlan strolled over to the computer screen, plopping his phone down on the desk as he fished around in his jacket pockets. “Yeah, yeah...hold your horses. Just organizing my shit.”

“Details Scanlan,” Vax clapped. “We need details.”

Scanlan however, did not seem to heed Vax’s request, and instead took his sweet time pulling a long cable out of his leopard print sling like a very sad magic trick at a kid’s birthday party.

“Not sure if you’ve noticed Scanlan,” Vex sneered, pointing out the window. “But the whole city is practically screaming at us.”

He clicked his tongue as he winced slightly, as if he’d accidentally pulled something in his neck. “How many times do I have to say that you can’t rush perfection?”

“We don’t even know what you’re doing!” Vex shouted, clearly peeved.

“Telling you isn’t going to speed any of this up,” he said, plugging the cable into his phone on one end, and the main computer on another.

Percy couldn’t help but contain a spiteful little snort, a mood that Vex shared twofold.

“What?” Scanlan asked, looking confused at first, but soon allowing that wide grin to curl off his lips once more.

“You genuinely expect us to believe you have this figured out?” Percy said. “That you’ve suddenly saved the city after making an old man some tea?”

“Now now, I didn’t say that,” Scanlan said, shaking his finger at Percy in a scolding manner. “I just think my voice is a bit of a commodity and that regurgitating what Eskil told me is just a waste of precious time…”

“Really?”

Vax clicked his tongue. “C’mon Shorthalt…now you’re just being difficult.”

“Indeed,” Percy chimed in. “Surely if you’re that brilliant you can humor us with your newly found wisdom.”

“Oh?” Scanlan paused what he was doing for a moment. “I thought you guys were in a rush to save your landlord. But hey, maybe I was just mistaken...”

“Why are you like this?” Vex whined, stomping her foot.

Scanlan simply snorted at the remark, and Vex could tell from a mile away that he was recalling something specific.

“Scanlan, you’re being ridiculous-”
“Fukin’ ell. Get over yourselves and let Scanlan do his thing,” Grog said rather suddenly, his irritation echoing in the small space.

Vex sealed her lips shut, though her irritation did not go unnoticed.

“We have nothing against him Big-man,” Vax said, trying to ease the rising tension. “We just want the guarantee that he isn’t gonna make things worse.”

“I mean…” Scanlan shrugged as he typed in a few things on the keypad. “I personally don’t think there is anything that is much worse than having my backdoor patched. I need my backdoor. It’s given me countless hours of joy…”

Percy jerked a little, blinking as he adjusted his glasses, “I genuinely cannot tell if you’re referencing tech or…”

“Now why on earth would your mind go there Percy?” Scanlan asked, a touch of irony painting his words as he wiggled his brows him.

Percy’s ears and cheeks grew redder in an instant he stumbled over his own tongue, “Well I, um-”

“Of course it’s a fucking tech-referance you skinny little freak. Though… I like your thinking.” Scanlan said, giving him a sly wink.

Percy looked as though he’d just gracefully contained a small gag, before turning to whisper in Vex’s direction, “I’m starting to get the distinct impression that Scanlan may actually know what he’s talking about…”

“That is literally what I’ve been saying this whole time,” Scanlan reclaimed, seeming more amused than anything else. “Not my fault you nerds can’t accept the fact that someone as handsome and popular as myself could harbor the potential to wield the raw power of abject mathematics to create new realms of existence…”

There was a pretty resonant sigh in the room, though to be honest, Vex was kind of all for having Scanlan figure this shit out so they could all go home and despair over their miserable existences while watching retro animal documentaries and eating peanut butter out of a giant jar...

“You know what? I don’t even care anymore,” she said, throwing her hands in the air. “By all means Scanlan. Do your worst.”

“I would if you all would give me a fucking hand…” Scanlan said, fumbling for something in his jacket pocket that nearly fell from his hand.

“What-” Vax exclaimed as he dove down to catch whatever had escaped Scanlan’s grasp, before staring at it confused.

“Shit, thanks…” Scanlan said, wiping a bit of sweat from his brow.

“What’s this?” Vax asked, lifting what looked like looked like little more than a USB, if not a little more on the bulkier side.

“An Unseen Servant.”

“Oh dear god…” Vex groaned, rubbing her tired eyes. “Not this nonsense again.”
“This doesn’t look like nonsense…” Vax muttered, brow quirked as he examined the device.

“Oh, give me that,” Scanlan barked, snatching the USB from Vax’s hands and plugging it into the computer without a second thought.

Everyone gasped as the screen went completely blue.

“Scanlan!” Vex squeaked, standing up on her feet.

“No no, it’s fine. It’s just the UI.”

Suddenly, a tiny little stick figure walked up onto the screen and knocked, as if it were a tiny person stuck on the inside.

Scanlan scrambled for the headset currently tossed in a box of antique CDs before raising the microphone to his lips. “Hi Derrel.”

The little stick figure waved, and everyone else in the room went deathly quiet.

“Remember that signal we found?”

It lifted a tiny thumbs-up on its little stick figure hands.

“Think you could figure out what pattern its trying to interfere with?”

The stick figure started to walk away, and it walked, and walked, and walked until it was nothing but a tiny white speck on the otherwise blue screen.

“This might take a while,” Scanlan said, casually against the table as he stared at his fingernails.

Percy blinked at Scanlan, “How long have you been able to do this?”

“Oh I’ve had Derrel since ‘32 but he’s gone through a few versions.”

“No I mean…” Percy rested his face in his hands. “Where were you when the Cloudtop shit was going on?”

“Doing lines of cocaine off of a hooker after my really successful show.”

“Damn right he was,” Grog said.

Percy looked like he was gonna interject again, but his expression then recomposed once more, “Actually, that’s entirely reasonable…”

“It is, considering you all just bailed on me after the show,” Scanlan said, lifting his chin. “And although I fully respect your communal decision to spare me when serious shit goes down because you all acknowledge that I am a very very busy man, I’ve said it once and I’ll say it again: I am the only responsible adult here.

Vex let out a single mocking laugh.

“We would have hunted you the fuck down if we knew you knew this shit,” Vax sneered.
“Look... I get that you’re all super excited about my mad hacking skillz, but I’m but a humble musician with a very specific skill set.” He pat the monitor like a dog. “Derrel here is great but he’s only good in some situations.” He dejectedly waved a hand in Vax’s direction. “I mean sure, your shit works too. In fact I’d say you’re way less predictable than Derrel here cause you’re a person and he’s...Derrel.”

“How long is this gonna take Shorthalt?” Vax closed his eyes. “Because every minute that goes by we are one second closer to Westruun’s authorities breaking into this joint with us in it. We could help.”

Scanlan laughed a little cruelly, “I don’t have time to school you on AI right now.”

“Anyone can talk to a machine,” Percy scoffed.

“Not one I programmed from scratch you lanky gremlin,” Scanlan snapped back, his satisfaction already achieved.

Percy expression grew significantly irritated, though he maintained his composure under his wrinkled brow.

“Besides...Derrel only responds to my commands.”

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There wasn’t much else the group could do but wait as the distant siren in the background gradually morphed into a hypnotic rhythm that made Vex uneasy enough to speak-up after nearly ten minutes of waiting.

“Surely you can tell us what... Derrel is doing in non-fancy-tech terms, yes?”

Scanlan wrinkled his nose as he reflected. “Oh sure I can try. But can’t guarantee this one is gonna get it,” he said, pointing at Grog who was picking something out of his teeth, completely zoned out of the conversation.

Vex simply smiled, trying to not crack or budge from her composure, as her need to get somebody talking to distract her from that incessant siren was far too great. Besides, Vax was irritating, Percy was still a little too sexy, and Grog was...doing gods know what.

“So basically...” Scanlan cleared his throat a little. “Eskil figured out that our network, and every device on said network, has been compromised by this worm, which so sort of like a virus but not really. This one, in particular, seems to be designed to covertly gather information.”

“Bit like the Couldtop bug?” Vax asked.

“Oh no no. Way bigger and way smarter. We’re talking something clever that knows its in enemy territory. It spreads itself by infecting wifi sources like routers and modems. When it infects a router it removes the security, making it free to use.” He hummed a moment. “It's like the infected routers are flowers and the phones and laptops are bees, spreading the worm like its polin.

“Shit...” Vex hissed, fully realizing the implications in one fell swoop.
“Yeah…” Scanlan smirked nervously. “And judging from what Eskil told me, it seems as though the worm has been propagating itself throughout the neighbourhood over the last few days. And its weird too because this isn’t a good model for your average spyware or crypto mining botnet. If it was something like that, a geographic area wouldn’t matter much. So my wild guess is that whoever did this is trying to hack something specific. Or do something specific…”

“Cobalt Reserve perhaps?” Vex suggested.

“Now that would take ages,” Scanlan said.

Vax recrossed his arms. “I mean, spreading out works, no matter what they’re looking for. If I were trying to pull something like this I’d wanna infect a few public wifi spots like coffee shops, maybe set up a few open routers of my own. Of course, the more infected devices there were the faster the spread. Something like this is exponential…”

“Exponential yes, but it doesn’t make it much easier to identify unless the circumstances are just right.” Scanlan said. “Whatever virus the worm was implanting, it hasn’t shown itself yet, and now its past its ability to propagate. It’s impressive Eskil noticed it.”

“Maybe one of his devices got infected,” Percy chimed in. “Though I can’t imagine a man like this using public wifi…”

“He may have been keeping an eye-out.” Vax said. “I mean look at this fucking set-up.”

“Maybe he believed this worm thing was almost at its target…” Vex suggested. “Maybe he wanted to stop it from sending communication back to its boss.”

“Either way, shutting down the entire internet is an effective way of stopping its spread…Gotta give your landlord some credit.”

“Bit flashy…” Percy hummed.

“But effective,” Scanlan added, lifting a finger. “Especially if you’re on a time crunch.”

“You still ‘aven’t told us what Derrel does,” Grog chimed in, glancing up from the thumb he’d been chewing on for nearly five minutes.

Scanlan smiled, gesturing wildly. “He’s basically gonna try to trap the virus and takes it apart to see its insides, ideally tricking it into activating and revealing its secrets.”

There was a long pause before Grog shrugged, unmoved. “Don’t sound too complicated to me…”

“Reverse engineering,” Percy smirked. “Your little toy can do all that?”

Scanlan narrowed his eyes at Percy and smirked. “Of course it can Perseus.”

Vex wanted to interject to point out that Scanlan was being an idiot again, but she nearly squealed as she felt her phone vibrate in her hand just as she was checking the time for the one-hundredth time.

Tiberius:  “I noticed a bunch of Guard vehicles headed toward our part of town. Is everything alright? Sincerely, Tiberius Stormwind.”

“Fuck-shit-balls.” Vex shook the phone like it had greatly insulted her before shouting one last time,
“FUCK!”

“What?” Everyone asked in chorus, clearly startled by her little outburst.

Teeth clenched, she leaned in to stare Scanlan down, shaking her phone’s screen in his face. “We need to hurry this up... now.”

“Okay okay...sheesh.” Scanlan groaned as he lifted the headset to his face once more. “Derrel, what you got for us buddy…”

In the same fashion as it had done before, the small white pixel on the screen expanded into a marching stick figure which slapped a new pop-up window onto the screen with what looked like lines of text. Scanlan’s eyes narrowed as he leaned in and read the unnecessarily tiny writing, before turning to look at the others.

“Looks like it’s gotten us two options so far. We can either have Derrel trick the virus into sending a message and track that message back to its source, or...it can invest all of its resources looking through the code to find distinctive markers that would inform us of its origin.”

“Which ever’s quickest Scanlan,” Vex ushered, snapping her fingers. “We have very little time.”

“Sure would be great if it were that simple. But sure...whatever, I'll see what I can do, you ungrateful little buggers.” Scanlan chewed the inside of his cheek as he lifted the microphone up against his lips once more. “Derr-”

“Freeze! Hands where I can see them!”

Never had Vex witnessed an entire room simultaneously raise their hands so quickly, save for poor Scanlan, who was now screaming at the top of his lungs as an I.O.U.N. Guard ripped him from the keyboard and dragged him out the door, soon making room for more guards to rush in and apprehend them, one by one...

Chapter End Notes

CW: Mention of cocaine.

Sam doing his little hacker skit at the beginning of last week’s CR episode was solid gold. Granted I had this already planned and mostly written out months ago but seeing Sam do his magic was just the inspiration I needed to wrap this baby up. Of course, special thanks to my usual tech guru who helped with a ton of the dialogue and technical stuff.

End Notes

Thank you for reading so far. Follow me on social media for a lot of extra and related content
like fan art, essays, and D&D homebrew:

Twitter @Scarecrowlover
deviantART scarecrowlover.deviantart.com
Tumlr The Scarecrowlover on Tumblr
Youtube The Scarecrowlover on YouTube. This is where I keep the character playlists.

Feel free to contact me in all places if you ever wanna chat, have any questions, or requests.

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Thank you for reading! Constructive criticism is both encouraged and appreciated because I haven't finished writing and I don't know where I want to go with the story. And when I say I appreciate con-crit, I actually mean it. I am a grad student who has taken quite a few creative writing classes with very hard professors, so no suggestion you make will upset me. As a testament to this, I actually re-wrote an entire chapter thanks to the advice of one of my readers, so keep that in mind. If I agree with your advice, I will definitely make changes.

If you finish reading this, may I suggest the other story in the series, "Edge of Chaos", which is Percy's backstory in this same Modern Universe setting. Sort of like a prequel I guess? Mind you, this fic will be getting priority for now, but I will update the other one more frequently once I finish this one.

NEWS: If you've completely run out of Modern AU content, then I strongly suggest you go check out The Taryon Darrington Queer Society, a modern AU by wibbelkind. I've been helping her come up with ideas and I've read rough drafts and I'll tell you right now...that story is FABULOUS. So definitely go check it out.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!