So It Goes: First Contact

by TGP

Summary

UNSG Moreau had not been a science fiction fan before getting involved in politics. He is even less of one now that real live aliens have contacted Earth.

Otherwise known as a bunch of non-game humans suddenly have to deal with Trolls.

Notes

This is entirely AmberInsanity's fault.
“Connection established,” the radio tech, Lt. Mason, says but when they try to make contact, what comes through is a rush of angry sounding clicks, growls, and something Secretary-General Jermaine Moreau is pretty sure must be language of some kind but they can’t make heads nor tails of it. He looks to the group of linguists they dragged in to help but they’re as clueless as he is by the dawning look of horror on their faces.

Sighing, Jermaine waits until their is a pause in the noise and then asks, “Pardon, but can you speak English? Parlez-vous français?”

There’s a pause and then another short burst of noise, but this sounds almost confused. Then comes an unmistakable string of cussing. Jermaine is sure that if he could understand it, he’d be blushing or laughing, one of the two. It slows down and there’s more talking but he’s pretty sure it’s not directed at him because it sounds almost like more than one speaker- No. Definitely more than one. There’s a different cadence in the second voice, lower and with less growing, more clicks, and much slowly pronunciations. The head linguist, Sarah, is making notes as fast as she can in some kind of shorthand Woodward can’t actually read, but there are a couple weird looking doodles in the mix. The others are writing away as well and comparing notes to one another.

Minutes pass as Jermaine waits, figuring the aliens are up to something-

“Transmission coming through,” Mason announces. “It's from them. Receiving… Got it. Uh, I think this is some kind of program- yeah, they sent a readme in English, how nice of them. It looks like an add-on. The coding is a little weird but it seems to be mostly compatible. It’s a translator.”

“Can we look through the code without it taking hours? I don’t want to suddenly lose all our systems if it turns out to be an alien bug.”

Mason starts tapping, going through it line by line slowly. It takes less time than Jermaine imagined it would and the aliens keep chatting to each other as they wait. There seems to be a third one now. The voice is lighter, a little more bouncy. Lots of clicking, weird moaning undertone.

“Had to make a few adjustments,” Mason says finally, “but it’ll work. It’s a simple speech-to-text mechanism and they also sent a vocabulary database of about 1500 words to go with it.”

“That sounds like a lot,” Sarah says, frowning a little, “but that’s something like a third or fourth grader. Enough for the beginning communication but we’ll have to learn more through trial and error. Any grammar notes?”

“Not really, ma’am.”

Jermaine doesn’t like that but he gives the tech a nod to try it. They isolate his station as much as possible first, just to make sure nothing will spread to the rest of them if this doesn’t turn out to be a goodwill token after all. The plugin loads and calibrates into their text communications so that it can print out translations as they come in.

Abruptly, the screen begins to fill up as it picks up the current babbling, first in the alien glyphs and then in English, even separating it out with some kind of call sign for the individuals.
“Hello?” Jermaine tries. The connection goes quiet but they’ve still got a steady link, so…

“My name is Jermaine Moreau of the United Nations. I’ve been chosen to start first contact—” He pauses as the program spits out another bunch of skips and then:

“Dave,” gets carefully enunciated over the line before another spatter of growls comes out:

“Uh, my name is David,” one of the linguists says and sounds kind of like he wishes he hadn’t.

“Uh, my name is David,” one of the linguists says and sounds kind of like he wishes he hadn’t.
TA: “Dave” WHERE ??

Same question but a lot less angry and annoyed. Progress, Jermaine hopes.

“We don’t know who you mean. Dave is a common name in a lot of the world—”

CG: “DAVE” COMMON NEGATIVE —- COMPETENT NEGATIVE GENITAL ORGAN —- —-

AA: SIT —- IMPORTANT TALK(CONTINUOUS) NOW

TA: ROMANCE NOW NEGATIVE

Romance?! Jermaine gives Sarah a sharp look that she completely ignores but Mason looks as surprised and confused as he is.

“Why did they even include ‘genital organ’ in the limited lexicon?!’” one of the linguists hisses out with annoyance.

TA: I(PLURAL) “DAVE” NEED —- STUPID

CG: YOU(EQUAL) FORNICATE

AA: I(EQUAL) YOU(PLURAL) KILL SLOW

Jermaine covers his eyes a moment. It’s like listening to his kids.

“Can we—”

TA: “DAVE” NEED STUPID WORD NEGATIVE TRANSLATE

“Please tell me I am not the only one who thinks that means this ‘Dave’ person can translate better than the program,” Jermaine says, giving the others a glance.

Sarah looks thoughtful but shrugs. “It’s worth a try.”

“Okay,” Jermaine sighs. “Do you know Dave’s surname? What country he lives in?”

CG: “DAVE STRIDER” YOU(EQUAL) LOCATION SEND

TA: I(SUPERIOR) KNOW —- —- JUVENILE —-

“Transmission received,” Mason reports. “It’s a set of coordinates. Tracking… United States, southeast Texas. City of Houston. Looks like… an apartment complex?”

“Someone get a line to the US Ambassador. We need to find out if there’s a Dave Strider living in there.”

CG: “DAVE” HERE WHEN ??

“As soon as possible,” Jermaine promises.

CG: THANKS —- —-

Twelve hours later, two men in very nice suits and very official paperwork show up at Jeff Egbert’s house to talk about very important, life or death, government business with a sixteen year
old boy who keeps laughing at them while the other *seven* kids make bad puns.

Chapter End Notes

Also I super don't know how the UN works so like I made Loxie do some vague research and then used my IMAGINATION. And like... bullshit my way through.

Also I am only a hobbyist linguist by which I mean language is fucking cool and also really weird and idiomatic.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

THIS IS STILL NOT A SEQUEL DAMN IT.

So I actually got this anon prompt before I wrote the first bit and it uh kinda worked for this: (if you're taking them! If not feel free to ignore): the trolls and kids meting for the first time in the So It Goes universe

Also I am definitely not a french dude and have absolutely no idea how to write the inner monologue of a french dude so while Jermaine is definitely still a french dude, his inner monologue probably ends up coming across VERY midwestern American dude and I am so sorry.

Jermaine does not know what he’s should have expected from Dave Strider but this is certainly not it. Dave is a lanky teenage boy wearing sunglasses inside for some ungodly reason. He’s got his hands stuffed deep into his jean pockets and looks like he could not be less impressed with their set up. Behind him is a tall man Jermaine assumes must be Mr. Jeff Egbert, the boy’s guardian for the last several months.

“Good to meet you both,” Jermaine says as he holds out a hand to shake. Dave gives it a dubious glance but Egbert takes hold of it with a surprisingly firm grip.

“Sir,” Egbert greets politely with a nod. “Thank you for inviting us.”

“Yo,” Dave mutters, shrugging one shoulder.

“Mr. Strider, I was saddened to hear about the passing of your older brother.”

Dave blinks at him in blank silence and Egbert takes hold of his shoulder.

“It has been a trying time but Dave has been recovering well. Haven’t you, Dave?” Egbert says as he gives the slim shoulder a squeeze.

“Right. Yeah. Totally.”

Jermaine tries not to think about just how utterly ridiculous things feel now. He makes a sweeping gesture towards the translation station (and immediately gets one of those ridiculous American earworms stuck in his head of course, even if those weren’t even the right words) where they have the logs of past conversations with the aliens ready for Dave’s perusal. He gives it one look and then starts snickering.

Jermaine guesses it is pretty ridiculous considering how many words they’re missing, but…

“He did think of me,” Dave mutters, so quiet Jermaine almost misses it.

“While we are unsure how you came to be able to read the aliens’ language,” and this is something everyone really wants to know but it can wait, “it would benefit our entire world if you would assist with the translations.”
“Sure. I got this. Turn it on.”

Jermaine lifts a brow. “Pardon?”

“Dude, I want to talk to Karkat. Turn on the feed. Let me get my bro on.”

Jermaine looks at Egbert because this makes so little sense. How could he know that whichever alien he must have had contact with - *how did this happen?!* - would be one of those contacting them now? He seems rather sure so Jermaine sets off the beacon he’d set up a day ago so that the aliens would know when Dave Strider had been found. It takes several minutes and then Mason gives the notice that the transmission has begun.

There is an immediate flutter of clicks and growls before the translator picks it up.

**CG:** “**DAVE**” ??

“Yeah, man,” Dave says easily even before the translator has finished. “Took you guys long enough. Did you make a wrong turn at Jupiter?”

**CG:** “**DAVE**” !! **STUPID** **LOVE(RED) MINE** ---- **YOU(EQUAL) FORNICATE STUPID**

**STUPID STUPID** ---- **YOU(EQUAL) FORNICATE** ---- **GENITAL ORGAN**

What the ever loving hell. Jermaine glares at the words like they might make some kind of sense that *isn’t* the plot for a young adult novel and they just won’t. He has no idea what the significance of Love(red) is verses Love(black) or Love(pink) or even Love(gray). None of Sarah’s team had been able to make heads or tails of it.

Dave grins like he knows a secret and damned if he doesn’t. “Oh my god, dude, you should see what Sollux’s shitty translator keeps spitting out over here. You guys totally spooked the shit out of all the big guys with the big guns.”

Jermaine winces and then covers his eyes. He had no idea what to think about this. At least now they have names for two of the aliens even if they don’t know which one is which other than Jermaine assuming CG must be Karkat.

**TA:** **YOU(EQUAL)** “**STRIDER**” **FORNICATE** **YOU(EQUAL) OBJECT DO** ----

“It’s not even making sentences. Like, I didn’t even realize how fucking weird your grammar structure is,” Dave complains. “It’s not even putting in all the word meanings. And it keeps censoring your cuss words.”

The boy knows enough of their language to see know their coarse language. If Jermaine were not under so much stress, he *might* be fascinated by this process. Sarah’s group have filed in by now and they’re taking notes, looking about ready to burst if he doesn’t let them start asking questions soon.

**TA:** **I(EQUAL) TIME NEGATIVE** ---- ----

**CG:** ---- **GENITAL ORGAN** **YOU(EQUAL) SLEEP**

**TA:** **I(SUPERIOR) SLEEP** WHEN **I(EQUAL) DEAD**

“Hardcore, man.” Dave says, shaking his head. “Hey, is Terezi around?”

**CG:** **UNCERTAIN** **I(INFERIOR) YOU(SUPERIOR) GET**
Dave frowns at that, reading over the words with his brows furrowed. Jermaine isn’t sure why but maybe Terezi is AA.

“How many of them are there?” he asks Dave quietly to keep it from broadcasting.

“Oh, who knows, dude. The whole crew might not have skipped over the lake to see us,” Dave says and he still looks bothered, but he turns to the conn. again and asks, “How many of you jerks actually showed up, anyway?”

Jermaine stares at him with horror but the aliens don’t seem to care.

TA: I(PLURAL) TWELVE YOU(PLURAL) SIX NONPERSONAL JUVENILE YOU(PLURAL, SUPERIOR) TWO ADULT

“Oh shit.”

“Dave,” Egbert says sharply and Dave rolls his eyes but he’s gone completely tense. This isn’t a joke anymore but Jermaine has no idea why.

“They harshing your mellow?” Dave asks instead of saying anything useful.

TA: BORING — — KILL — — FORNICATE — —

“I am pretty sure Softouch wouldn’t appreciate that but hey, maybe she’s into that and she’ll—” Dave pauses and then snorts as he reads the screen. “We so have to fix this translator. This is pathetic, man. It looks like a kinky snuff fantasy. I thought you were like the tech genius or something.”

TA: YOU(EQUAL) FORNICATE TIME NEGATIVE

“Yeah, sure—” He stops when another set of growling clicks start. “Hey, Rezi. Sup, guuuurl?”

GC: ADMIRABLE JUVENILE I(PLURAL) AGAIN MEET

Not AA, but at least they know how many there are now. Twenty individuals apparently. It’s not exactly an invasion force, so that would soothe a few worries. Unless the aliens are technologically advanced enough not to need a huge invasion force. Jermaine adds that to his mental list of questions for the boy once he’s done with the meet and greet.

Dave keeps chatting with the alien called “Terezi” with interjections from “Karkat” and “Sollux”. None of it is particularly important so Jermaine pulls back to check on Sarah. Half her notebook is already filled and her team keep muttering amongst themselves.

“Are you getting any further with the language?”

Sarah makes a pinched expression. “It’s nothing like anything I’ve studies but I think we’re nailing down the basic grammar… except I don’t think we have the vocal cords to actually speak it.”

“That does not surprise me,” Jermaine admits because he might have tried to mimic the strange pitched trills and growls without much success. Jermaine had enough trouble with English and it at least has the same basis, even if it is an absolute abomination.

“It’s not just that.” Sarah taps at her notes, like looking at them might help him understand. “There seems to be a secondary component. That boy, Dave, mentioned some word meanings being lost. I think there’s a subvocal aspect to the language that the translator isn’t picking up. Something that
puts different layers of meaning on what they’re saying. This language is *really* sophisticated. How did a *sixteen year old kid* learn it, much less fluently? And the aliens are having no problem understanding him when before, only AA seemed to be able to do it.”

Jermaine looks back to Dave joking around with the aliens like they’re his best friends. He barely looks at the translation screen except to laugh about it. Without a doubt, he knows the language. The aliens don’t seem to be having AA translate for them right now, either, which is even more strange. There’s a story there and he is determined to get to the bottom of it now that they know the aliens aren’t going to bomb them from above for not being able to produce their pet human.

He has the whole world to think about, after all.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

It.. it's still not... a sequel *sob*

Used some prompts:

ANON said: are you going to write the rosemary/davekat reunions and/or the troll + humans reunion? :3

ANON said: please may we have a So It Goes rosemary/davekat reunion??? thank you

ANON said: oh my god i loved those ficlets with the trolls + Dave and tbh anything else written about that would be amazing! (like maybe kanaya’s reunion with rose? :DD)

ANON said: So when are rose and kanaya going to flirt shamelessly while the government officials (and adult trolls) look on in dismay?

ANON said: idk if ur taking prompts (if not ignore this sorry!!) but… is there any rosekan on the horizon? does rose get to talk to her alien gf through sollux’s shitty translator?

the-multifandom-memelord said: Omgomgomg could you please do a rosemary either over the phone like dave and karkat were or maybe when the trolls land?

Jermaine stares at the blond girl Jeff Egbert brought with himself and Dave the second day. She’s got a face that screams knowing things and a barely controlled urgency that makes him want to help her, even though he doesn’t know what with.

“Miss Lalonde,” he greets after a quick glance at her ID tag. He takes her hand politely and her smile widens. “I’m afraid I don’t understand your presence-”

“Somehow, it does not surprise me that my brother failed to mention that I, too, can understand the Trolls.”

Jermaine blinks and beside her, Dave is smirking like he’d planned this. The kid did his best to annoy them the day before with his nonsensical and meandering answers to any question they asked. If Rose can do the same job with less annoyance, Jermaine is more than happy to let her try. Still.

“Pardon, but trolls?” he can’t help asking.

Rose’s brows lift and she gives her brother a sideways look. “You didn’t even tell them that much?”

“I am a free spirit. Can’t keep me down,” Dave deadpans back and Rose just shakes her head while Egbert seems just faintly exasperated.
“That is what they call themselves,” Rose says primly. “Trolls.”

And isn’t that a strange word to use. Jermaine wonders idly if it means something completely different to the aliens. It’s also a little strange considering how few vowel sounds the aliens seem to use, but... These two kids are his best chance at a successful first contact, as unfortunate as that may be, and he needs to trust them.

At least Rose. He’s getting the feeling that Dave is trying to prank them.

“Very well. Mr. Strider, Dr. Bradshaw would like to speak to you about the translation, if you don’t mind. Miss Lalonde, please follow me.”

Sarah appears out of nowhere to lead Dave over to the corner her group has taken over since they don’t want to miss out on any chance to overhear the alien babble. It’s an absolute mess of papers, laptops, and people, but Jermaine does his very best to ignore it, even when they sometimes let out whoops of joy at figuring out some tiny detail or another.

Egbert shares a look with Rose before he moves off to follow Dave, apparently deciding that he is the one that needs looking after. Rose doesn’t seem surprised by it so Jermaine trusts his judgement with his own children, even if the information he has now indicates he’s only adopted them some few months before. *Eight children* and only one his own. It took all sorts but Jermaine had enough trouble with his two, much less eight.

Rose waits patiently as they send out the beacon signal so the aliens- he supposes he will need to start calling them Trolls even if it makes him feel as if he’s insulting them- can contact them. There always seems to be a delay at first but Jermaine is sure it has to do with making sure the technologies remain compatible. He would *love* to get a good look at that technology! Interstellar travel over great distances and not having it take decades or hundreds of years... Yes. He wants to look at that *very much*.

The connection clicks on and then there is a spill of familiar angry clicks Jermaine associates with the alien known as Karkat.

**CG: “DAVE” ??**

“I’m afraid not today,” Rose says smoothly, smiling with fondness. And that is probably the strangest thing about all of this, just how genuinely friendly the kids are with these aliens. “I promise to drag him over here a little later, but I’d like to point out that it’s *my* turn for an emotional reunion.”

**CG: “ROSE” GREETING I(EQUAL) YOU(EQUAL) ---- HAPPY ALIVE BE(CONTINUOUS) ---- !!**

She makes a delicate snorting sound. “I can see what Dave meant by ridiculous translation protocols. Karkat, I am also pleased to hear that you are alive. I have been lead to believe that all twelve of you are in attendance?”

**CG: ---- TWELVE ALL ---- ----**

“Oh, it is *very* funny what words aren’t coming through. You have no idea.”

**CG: I(EQUAL) BE(CONTINUOUS) TRY**

They continue to playfully babble while Jermaine instead finds himself catching on one thing. The Trolls had not been sure their human contacts were alive and it seemed as if the children also had
had some doubt of it. That implies more history that they still haven’t willingly revealed. Dave had been particularly shut mouth about how they’d met at all and even Egbert, though impeccably polite by American standards, had sidestepped every attempt to find out more. If it weren’t for the fact that they needed these kids for the translations and to ease First Contact, Jermaine would seriously consider more rash methods of getting what he wants.

He is not above threatening when the safety of the entire world rests in his hands.

“-talk to Kanaya? If she would like to,” Rose says, pulling him from his darker thoughts. And that’s a new name, but honestly they’ve only spoke with five of the trolls so far and not even either of the “adults”, for whatever the aliens use the term for.

CG: YOU(EQUAL) SMALL TIME WAIT

“Excellent.”

Barely a minute later, there’s a new spill of language and the translator spits out:

GA: “ROSE” LOVE(RED) !! I(EQUAL) HAPPY !

Jermaine didn’t realize just how tensed up Rose had been until she’s suddenly gone lax and has to grab hold of the station to steady herself. There’s a mistiness to her eyes and the smile that breaks over her face is absolutely adoring.

“Kanaya,” she breathes and... that is a little much for a friend. He’s had some very close friendships before but there is a much different feeling to that sort of relationship than what he’s sensing here... which is of course ridiculous. These are aliens. And teenagers... Oh dear lord. That just makes it seem more probable that he’s stumbled into the middle of an inter-species love story.

GA: “ROSE” CONCERN ?? WELLBEING ??

“I’m all right, I assure you.” Her voice is a little thick and she reaches up to daintily dab at her eyes. “I’ve missed you.”

Whistful, sincere, utterly embarrassing and slightly horrifying to listen to.

GA: I(EQUAL) YOU(SUPERIOR) MISS(CONTINUOUS) I(EQUAL) YOU(SUPERIOR) WANT AGAIN HOLD(CONTINUOUS)

Rose smiles wider and seems about two seconds from crying, so Jermaine clears his throat. She glances at him and then laughs a little.

“My apologies, Mr. Moreau. Kanaya, perhaps we will continue this in private once you’ve landed?”

GA: HUMAN(ADULT) BE(CONTINUOUS) WAIT !! LOVE(RED) NOW MANNER(PLURAL) LATER !!

Which just gets Rose giggling and Jermaine looks heavenward because he’s pretty sure his greatest fears have been realized. This is a young adult novel and he’s just met the love sick protagonists.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

It... it might be a sequel.

Used these prompts:

kalicofox asked: If you're still doing point of view prompts, what happens while the linguists are talking to Dave? How're they taking his general bullshittery? And/or, how do the other kids get introduced to the situation (brought in on it, I mean.) Is it just like, a slow invasion of the communication station?

ANON asks: i am having a stroke i love your ‘so it goes’ universe so much. please could you write more of it, like with continuing the transmissions and their translations improving, or just more with the officials trying to figure out what’s going on? (I LOVE Jermaine and Sarah so muuuch first contact fics are my true love)

Sarah leads Dave and Mr. Egbert over to the tables her team has taken over to keep from disrupting the current transmission. Their binders and papers are spread haphazardly over every surface and both Mohamed and Adanna look up from their scribbling only when Sarah clears her throat.

“You remember David?” she says and then guides Dave to a chair. “He-”

“It’s just Dave,” the kid grumbles with a scowl, glaring up at her. “Like it’s always been Dave. Why do you adults always try to change my name? Primo job on the depersonalization there.”

Sarah looks at him in horror and he glares back at her, most of his expression hidden by his large sunglasses he insists on wearing inside. His mouth is tight and unamused. “I- I didn’t m-

“Dave,” Mr. Egbert says sternly, “Stop antagonizing the government workers. We’re here to help, remember?”

And that is when Sarah realizes that Dave isn’t scowling- he’s trying not to laugh at her. She gives him a glare and he drops the whole act. She hears a giggle and doesn’t bother turning to give Adanna a dirty look.

“If you’re finished,” Sarah mutters, shoving papers out of the way from in front of Dave. She gets the binder they’d put together just for him and flips it to the first page, a formatted print out of the last two communications with the aliens. It’s pretty swanky, if she says so herself. The alien script is printed first with plenty of space under for notes, then the translator’s dubious addition. They even have the human responses after so that they can keep up with it all. “Why don’t you tell me what this says?”

Dave shrugs a shoulder and then leans forward to get a good look at the script. “‘It’s been a fucking half hour’-”

“Dave L Strider,” Mr. Egbert says sharply with an annoyance Sarah feels because they don’t need any elaboration here, they just need to know what it says-
“That’s what it says!” Dave defends and then he points at a group of symbols and continues, “This means fuck. The profanity one because it’s about mammals. The other one is a totally different word. And this means it’s actually fucking. Because verb tenses are a thing.”

Sarah looks at the symbols and tries to decide how far she actually believes him, but... That is a lot of detail for a lie.

“Mr. Egbert, please let him translate as closely to the text as possible,” she decides finally. “We want to get this as close as possible so we can upgrade the translator and facilitate better communication with the aliens. Dave, if you would.”

He doesn’t look that happy but he nods and then Dave smirks at the binder. “It’s been a fucking half hour. When do we know this mess even works?” And this symbol here means that was a question and then Sollux says, ‘It’s not my problem. Stop yelling already.’ This word means the one before it is negative and this ‘now’ means he thinks it’s gone on way longer than it should. Then Karkat just starts cussing a lot...”

Despite the prank at the beginning, Sarah is genuinely surprised by how hard Dave actually works at this. He takes the time to fill in every word, teaches them how to distinguish sentence groups and suffix additions, explains context for odd word usage (she stops him before he can explain genital organ, but apparently it’s very common for the aliens to throw it into their insults and there are two main kinds) and even starts getting into the pronoun structure. There are some twenty or more different pronouns, each distinct and with its own connotation. There are two roots, which Dave designates as “me and not me” respectfully, and every pronoun uses a root and various suffixes. There are even a couple gendered suffixes (Dave signifies these as “dude and way more dangerous dude”) but apparently not everyone uses them, or even most of the time-

“They must have a sophisticated social ranking system to need all this,” Adanna says thoughtfully, tapping her pen on her lip.

“Yeah, I guess,” Dave mutters, shrugging, and then goes on to the next line before they can ponder that further. He continues one word at a time until he hits one he can’t translate. It comes out in the alien language, except lacking the growling undertone.

“This is stupid,” Dave says, his finger under the grouping of letters that appears to be JUVENILE. “Okay, so we don’t have a word for that. It’s like... not baby, but toddler. Secondary childhood stage or something. Larva? Yeah, larva works. I mean, they’re like bug people and shit.”

Abruptly, Mohamed slams his hands on the top of the table, startling all of them as he hisses out, “They’re Formics?!”

Sarah stares at him because what. She hasn’t seen Mohamed look so angrily frightened before, not even when someone dropped an empty stock pot in the commissary and half the diners hit the deck like they thought a bomb had gone off. In hindsight, she knows exactly why that happened and it is a very uncomfortable and sad statement, but-

“In deference to Orson Scott Card,” Adanna says with amused brightness, “I doubt we facing an Ender’s Game situation. Right, Dave?”

“I literally have no idea what you’re talking about.”

But now that has Sarah narrowing her eyes at the two of them. “You’re talking scifi, aren’t you? You’re talking scifi when we are literally trying to have a successful first contact with aliens.”

Mohamed breaks under her gaze, slumping back in his chair with a lazy smile. “You cannot fault
“I **can**,” Sarah shoots back at him but it only makes him smile wider. She rolls her eyes and pointedly turns back to the binder. “Let’s keep going.”

She notes down the bug thing. The biology team are going to go batty for it, she’s sure.

They continue on until lunch gets delivered, and then they’re done with the first conversation and getting into the second one when there’s another word that Dave can’t translate.

“Are you kidding me,” he snarls as his finger presses against the translation of LOVE(RED).

“We noticed three others like it, with different colors,” Adanna explains. “The words seem completely different so we weren’t sure if it was a malfunction or-”

“It’s not. Karkat’s just incapable of saying *boyfriend* like a normal person,” Dave grumbles with open irritation- wait what? “He always uses these big, stupid words for stuff instead.”

There is a moment of silence. Then Mohamed tentatively says, “I am not completely familiar with the current slang popular with American teenagers these days. Did you mean...?”

Dave looks right at him. “I’m the yin to his yang, dude. The peanut butter to his jelly. The chicken to his waffles-”

“Dave,” Mr. Egbert sighs out and the brat just shrugs.

“We know each other biblically,” Dave finishes with absolutely no hint of shame, smugness radiating from every inch of him.

Mr. Egbert covers his face with his hands.

Sarah kind of wants to. She blinks a little, the pit of her stomach churning with embarrassment and also a kind of disgusted horror at the very idea. She thinks it might be a joke but something tells her it isn’t.

She needs a drink. Instead, she calls for Jermaine so he can share the ridiculousness with her.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Ended up using this prompt for this bit: ANON asks: If your taking requests: Jermaine figuring out that Dave and Karkat are dating?

Thanks to kalicofox for linking me to a page of French idioms.

When David comes to fetch him, Jermaine is almost glad for it. He has tried several times to rally Rose into actually asking the aliens what he very much needs to know and the alien Kanaya refuses him every time so it can continue gushing out lovesick filth over their very official airways that are being recorded. He is going to have to turn over both the recordings and the transcripts to the general public of one hundred and ninety-three countries (at the least!) and they won’t stop flirting.

This is why he refused to have more children after the twins, even though Léa had wanted to fill the house with them for some ungodly reason. Children are infuriating and Jermaine has absolutely no idea how anyone has the patience for them, even his saintly wife.

David stares at Rose a moment before he steps closer to Jermaine. “I have no idea what happened because I just got here but Sarah wants you over there and I think that kid broke Mohamed.”

Broke- Jermaine frowns because Mohamed may have a little trouble knowing the correct gravity to give a situation but he’d seemed made of fairly stern stuff. Jermaine knows his background; he’d have to be fairly steady. As always, his problems keep getting caused by teenagers. Jermaine leaves David to supervise Lalonde and heads over to the makeshift Den of Linguistics grimly.

The words coming out of Mohamed’s mouth are high pitched and sound a little like some kind of prayer intermixed with lyrical cursing, but Arabic generally sounds like that to him so he could be entirely wrong. The look on his face argues for it this time in any case. Beside him, Sarah’s Barbadian appointment (A something- Adra? Adina? Something,) is being very quiet, sitting with a thoughtful look on her face that Jermaine does not like at all. Dave Strider seems as pleased with himself as it’s possible while his guardian continues to hold his head like he’s grieving. In all that, Sarah just looks distinctly done. It is a sentiment Jermaine can get behind wholeheartedly most of the time.

“Would someone like to explain to me what’s wrong?” he asks, his voice as dry as the Saharan.

Sarah looks up at him. She has the eyes of one who has seen more than they ever wanted. He is expecting much worse out of her than, “Dave claims to have been involved with the alien named Karkat.”

Jermaine frowns. “I thought that was understood-”

“Carnally.”

What. He looks at Dave who stares back with all the satisfaction of a cat after a dish of milk (at least until it gets violent diarrhea.) “Carnally.”
“The aliens are also apparently insects,” Sarah adds in the least helpful way possible because Jermaine’s immediate mental image is of a six foot tall roach. His gall rises at the very idea.

“Carnally. With sentient alien insects.”

“With frequency,” Dave purrs out smugly.

Jermaine pinches between his brows. He doesn’t have a headache even though he probably should. Okay. The aliens can apparently be sexually interested in humans. It doesn’t mean the aliens are sexually compatible to humans- this is veering too close into someone else’s territory. His zoology background aside, Jermaine is here in management and diplomatic capacity. “Just how long ago did the aliens first visit?”

Dave considers the question thoughtfully, or at least he doesn’t seem quite as flippant. “I guess technically they’ve never been here.”

“Excuse me? Then how did you-”

“Not here here,” Dave corrects and Jermaine is getting considerably more irritated with him by the second. “But Karkat and me ran around my dream bubble memories of it a lot when we didn’t want to hang with the others.”

Jermaine glares at him. Dave stares back like what he said made any sense whatsoever. “Dream bubbles.”

“Yeah. I could call up any memory I wanted. Keep up, dude; don’t let me leave you behind.”

“You’re telling me that you met these aliens in your dreams, learned their language, taught them your own-”

“Nah, that’s just one of my sparkly magic powers. I can understand any language and anyone can understand me.”

His head hurts now. Jermaine glares at the kid, waiting for him to wilt and give up the lie but Dave stares back at him without even a gram of hesitance. And Egbert isn’t calling him on this, either. He looks terrible embarrassed but not because he thinks any of this is a lie. Jermaine’s eyes narrow as he regards them both.

“Tu te payes ma poire?” he growls out finally but Dave just snorts.

“Dude, just because I understand the words doesn’t mean I’ve got any idea what it means,” Dave says, shaking his head. “The hell would I want with your pears?”

“Hal tatakallam al-lughah al-‘arabiyyah?” Mohamed asks abruptly before Jermaine can answer. He’s still a little pitchy and like he’s had a bad shock but he looks less like he’s about to combust.

“Not really,” Dave says. “They mostly stick with French and German in the shithole known as the American Educational System.”

Egbert sighs, like he’s giving up on keeping Dave civilized. Jermaine is trying to figure out how exactly this ability of Dave’s works when Sarah suddenly sits up straighter in her chair.

“You understand the words but idioms are translated without the secondary meanings?” she asks and by her tone, it’s more a confirmation than anything else.

Dave shrugs. “I guess so?”
Sarah nods and scribbles something down. “The alien language is different. You do understand a lot of the secondary, idiomatic meanings. You’ve explained a lot of them to us.”

“Yeah, cause I spent like three years with them. You pick things up.”

Three years?! Jermaine flashes back to the history he’d been given with Dave Strider’s briefing. There had been absolutely no mention of any disappearances- but Dave claimed that his interactions with the Trolls had been in dreams. That didn’t necessitate that he would be missing at all.

And why would aliens even choose to communicate with humans through dreams? Where did Dave’s language ability even come from? And why-

“Sir?!”

Jermaine twists to see David skidding to a stop a few feet from him. His face is pale, his eyes wide with excitement and something Jermaine is uncomfortably sure is fear.

“What’s wrong?” he asks immediately and David swallows before he can answer.

“There’s a new alien on the line. It calls itself Soft-Touch and Rose says it’s an adult.”
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Used the prompt: ANON: I wanna see Ironclaw AND SOFTTOUCH talking to Jermaine and co. SO BAD plz????

It... Okay. It's a goddamn sequel, but you folks brought it on yourself if it doesn't end up finished due to my general inability to finish sequels/series.

Finally! Except that doesn’t explain the way David looks like he’s about to throw up or the way Dave suddenly gets up out of his chair and starts back towards the communication console. Jermaine has a very, very bad feeling about this. He glances across the main hub where Dave has stopped next to Rose. She grabs his hand and he doesn’t shake her off. Their bodies are rigid and squared, like they’re readying themselves to fight a war and Jermaine has absolutely the worst feeling about this now.

“Sir, I think we should be very, very careful with this alien,” David says, pitching his voice softer between them. “There’s something wrong with it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you ever watch horror movies?” David swallows again and takes a shaky breath as Jermaine nods because hell if he knows why but one of his kids likes them. “That feeling, the tension before the monster actually shows on screen? That’s how Soft-Touch’s voice makes me feel.”

Jermaine frowns, ready to call him on the theatrics, but while he’s only paid a small amount of attention on David, the only real complaint he’d had about him is David’s tendency to complain. Something inside Jermaine goes tight and cautious. He tells David to stay with the other linguists and sees Sarah tug the poor man down into a chair so she can tend to him. Good; Jermaine has never been good at that.

He goes to the communication station. Rose and Dave glance at him and then return their gaze to the translator screen.

ST: GREETING SMALL IDIOT FOREIGN

ST: YOU(INFERIOR) NEGATIVE ---- YOU(EQUAL) CALL(CONTINUOUS) NOW ----

ST: ---- ---- ----

ST: I(SUPERIOR) KIN(PLURAL) ---- CONSUME !! ---- ---- NOW ---- ----

YOU(INFERIOR) OBJECT REGRET !

ST: ---- WAIT(CONTINUOUS) NEGATIVE FORNICATE(MATERNAL)

Well. This is going onto a great start. He frowns as he tries to figure out just what he’s missed. “Kanaya” had still been chatting Rose up until the new troll, who he assumed to be “Soft-Touch” came online.
“What happened?” he asks the teenagers, pitching his voice to keep things between them.

“Adults are different,” Rose says and there’s no ounce of amusement on her face now. Dave’s, either. “We’ve only met one, but...”

Her gaze drops and Dave picks up, “Ten to one she’s a cultist. The other trolls don’t talk that way.”

“Cultist?” This is sounding worse by the second. And another Troll the children have given feminine pronouns for. Interesting. It seems to be a fairly even split.

“There is a… difficult religion that some Trolls ascribe to,” Rose says. “We’ve only met one practitioner. It… didn’t go well.”

“Understatement much,” Dave mutters under his breath.

Wonderful. As if Jermaine didn’t have enough to worry about, now he’s also got a religious fanatic he’ll have to keep from offending. At least now he’ll have the chance to speak with someone of authority.

He turns to the transmitter and takes a breath.

“My name is Jermaine Moreau with the United Na-”

A sudden spit of hissing cuts him short and suddenly he knows exactly what David meant. His skin crawls and his chest clenches around his lungs as the animal part of his brain demands he run. He doesn’t, made of sterner stuff than that, but Jermaine suddenly has absolutely no doubt that Soft-Touch is the most dangerous thing he’s ever known. It takes him several seconds to remember to look for the translation.

ST: NOW POSITIVE SMALL FOREIGN MEAL --- --- STUPID

“She’s pissed you made her wait,” Dave translates, his jaw tighter. “Also she threatened to eat you if you annoy her.”

Jermaine immediately turns to stare at the boy. “Trolls eat people?”

“Not usually,” Rose corrects without looking away from the translation readout. “They would rather simply kill you.”

His heart quickens but he’s rather sure that has more to do with the low, purring growl that echos from the comm. He shakes himself. This is behavior unbecoming the Secretary-General of the United Nations and he will not tolerate it.

“Miss Soft Touch, I must request that you do not eat any of us. This is a peaceful meeting and threatening anyone is not at all needed-”

ST: STUPID ANIMAL(MAMMAL) SOUND ---- ---- YOU(INFERIOR) I(PLURAL, SUPERIOR) TALK(CONTINUOUS) ---- ADORABLE ---- ---- LAST MEAL CONSUME ---- ---- ---- ----

“She can’t understand you,” Rose says and Jermaine knows there’s more but finds he’d really rather not know.

ST: FORNICATE(MATERNAL) ---- ---- YOU(INFERIOR) TALK(CONTINUOUS) ---- -- STUPID ANIMAL(MAMMAL) SOUND ---- ---- STUPID !!
“Excuse me,” Jermaine tries but they ignore him with louder snarls that itch worse along his skin.

Abruptly, Jermaine’s knees weaken as the force of the horror feeling intensifies. The translater isn’t even getting anything anymore as the transmission turns into nothing but a twist of growling and hissing that apparently don’t mean anything. Jermaine has to grab the edge of the console to steady himself because it hurts to breathe.

He’s vaguely aware of the others around him having similar problems. One woman cowers under her desk, arms wrapped tight around herself as a man hits the floor with his hands covering his neck protectively, like he thinks the whole building is going to come down around them. They aren’t isolated but in the midst of it all, Dave and Rose stand by unaffected.

“Chucklevoodoos,” Dave says before Jermaine can ask. Not that it makes any sense but-

He realizes the growling and feeling of doom has negated only when his head suddenly clears and he takes in a full breath for the first time since the adult alien spoke. He looks at the translation screen. There’s not much there, a mishmash of words between Soft-Touch and TC, another new Troll they haven’t spoken to yet but mostly blank spaces with occasional interruptions by Karkat that make nearly as little sense. At the end, it’s the one Dave had identified as Terezi.

It’s sad that although knowing this troll to be a juvenile, Jermaine is ridiculously relieved that she has been apparently chosen as the spokesperson. Terezi, at least, seems to understand humans well enough for him to communicate with her, even if she seems to prefer Dave.

“Thank you,” he tells her with absolute sincerity. “I’m not sure how I offended Miss Soft Touch, but…”

He pauses as she lets out a sound he is pretty sure must be the Troll version of laughter.

“Seriously, Softouch is a title,” Dave says like Jermaine has missed something very important. And he says the words a little strangely in a way that seems very deliberate. Jermaine isn’t sure why. “And Trolls don’t do the whole polite prefix thing.”

Terezi’s still laughing here and there. It’s still not exceedingly pleasant to listen to but it doesn’t grate as much as the adult’s voice did. Jermaine gives the translation readout a hard look.

“Soft-Touch isn’t in charge-”
“Softouch,” Rose corrects with the same deliberate tone. She looks at him from the corner of her eye and although he’s almost two feet taller, somehow she’s still looking down at him. “Troll titles are important, Mr. Moreau. They’re earned. If she has one, you need to be respectful of it.”

This is very true and he is doing his best to understand their culture enough to not insult them, but it is galling to hear it from a sixteen year old girl. Especially when she mutely lifts a hand and Dave high fives her without a bit of his expression changing.

“She’s totally not going to actually eat you guys, right?” Dave asks.

**GC: YOU(SUPERIOR) ---- ---- BITE BEFORE**

“Damn.”
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Used the prompts:

ANON asked: for the prompty thing: everybody discovering that the trolls aren’t as different as previously imagined, (ie giant roach) but still pretty frickin weird

moonaff said: So… how long will it take for one of the researchers to ask, say, Rose, what these aliens look like or maybe draw a picture?

Stuff happens! Except not really because this is a talking story. Also, I do know that International Sign language has a different syntax than English but I went ahead and wrote it as if it did not to make it easier to understand Theodora. Also because I can’t sign and wouldn’t be able to write the syntax believably.

Yui has been waiting for this moment for three days. After what the grapevine calls a disastrous communication with one of the adult trolls on the space ship, UNSG Moreau ordered that they get some priority on finding out exactly what the aliens are, what they can do, which means now it’s Yui’s turn to get a kid to answer questions.

She is ready. There’s no way Strider or Lalonde will pull one over on her! She’s made of sterner stuff than those softy wordsmiths.

“You may wish to smile with fewer teeth. We don’t want to scare the children,” Henok says from the table, flipping through a few notations they’d gotten from the floor team about possible biological traits. The list consists of: bugs, possibly pinchers, definitely vocal cords, and occasionally sleeps with humans. And isn’t that just fascinating! Slightly terrifying but also neat!

Yui does her best to curb her enthusiasm. She’s just so excited. First people to study aliens!

She knocks on the table and Theodora looks up from her own papers with a blink.

“Did you check the recording equipment?” Yui asks once Theodora’s focused on her mouth.

-Ready to go- she signs back with an indulgent grin at the way Yui is almost bouncing.

There’s a sudden rap at the door and then a man from the front desk pops his head in. “Are you ready for her?”

So they have Lalonde? Good! She seemed ever so much less likely to spin them tales than Strider, from the stories Yui has heard. “Yes! Send her in.”

The kid that comes in is all smiles with a bounce in her step and Yui thought Lalonde was supposed to be a blond? This girl’s got dark hair down to her backside and big round glasses that mirror Theodora’s for how much of her face they take up. She’s cute, a flutter of ruffled skirts and an Einstein t-shirt that makes Yui instantly find her that much more adorable.

“Hello!” Yui greet, reaching out to take her hand. “I’m Dr. Yui Saito, head of the biology team.
This is Dr. Henok Desta and Dr. Theodora Popescu. It’s good to meet you!”

“Jade Harley,” the girl returns with the sweetest grin and- Wait, what?”

“Are you like the other two?” Henok murmurs curiously as Jade bounces to the table.

“Oh yes! We all are,” Jade says cheerfully. “You mean the language thing, right? We’re all able to do it.”

Theodora shares a look Yui’s way as Yui settles at the table as well and Yui asks for her, “All of you? How many is that?”

This could have far reaching consequences-

“Oh, just eight. There weren’t a lot of us involved,” Jade smooths over, like she’s just caught on to their worry. She straightens in her seat, clasping her hands in front of her as she looks at them all brightly in turn. “So! I’m supposed to tell you about the trolls, I think?”

Yui glances to Henok and Theodora, wondering if they’re as rattled as she is, but Theodora just looks excited and Henok never emotes much at all so Yui never knows what he’s thinking.

“Why don’t we start with what we’ve been told by Mr. Strider,” Yui decides. “We’ve been led to believe the aliens are insects?”

“Well, sort of,” Jade muses with a shrug of one shoulder. “I mean, they’re definitely bugs but they’re also definitely have mammalian traits.”

Henok starts scribbling madly which is good because Yui is abruptly too excited to do so. “What sort of traits?”

“Well, they bleed like us,” Jade says. “They’ve got a heart and circulatory system like us. Same for lungs. I guess it could be reptilian now that I’m thinking about it, since they don’t do the live young thing- Oh- Yes, they regulate their own internal temperature. That’s why I figure more mammalian.”

Theodora blinks a little mid sign from having been sending a question Yui’s way.

“Ah, so you know sign language,” Henok observes.

“Well, not really. I can’t use it myself but I understand any language. Sign language is no different!”

“How is it the eight of you can do that?” Yui asks, even if it is derailing things a bit. “Did the aliens do that to you?”

“No, but it’s kind of complicated to explain and I don’t think we have enough time for that and the biology stuff,” Jade says smoothly. Yui has to admit, she has a point and that is a smooth dodge about something she’s not willing to talk about yet. Curious, worrying, but… Well. They really don’t have the amount of time Yui would like.

“Right…”

“What do the aliens look like?” Henok asks.

“Gray humans, honestly,” Jade says. “With horns and very sharp teeth.”

The three biologists share looks because that certainly doesn’t sound anything like an insect and
Yui is suddenly very sure the kid is trying to get one over on them.

*Gray humans with horns* - Theodora signs with a sarcastic flourish and Jade gives her a guileless look.

“Striped like candy corn!”

Yui pinches the bridge of her nose. Why was she not expecting that this child would be as irreverent over the situation as the other two?

“Miss Harley, this is a very urgent matter,” Henok says with little amusement. “Please maintain a sense of decorum and be as honest with us as possible.”

“I’m not trying to prank you.” Jade’s gone serious, looking at each of them in turn. “That’s what they look like as kids. Their skin is a light gray in color and it feels different, smoother than ours almost like a flexible shell. They’re bipedal with four limbs and human like heads, hands, and feet with roughly the same proportions and the same heights. They have soft spines on their heads that mimic human hair with a ton of styling gel and no body hair. They have unique horn sets that differentiate each individual but are always striped red, orange, and yellow.”

Henok, bless him, has noted down everything Jade’s said while Yui considers just what kind of convergent evolution would bring about humanoid *insects* when she can think of no evolutionary reason why that would have benefit the species more than another configuration. Perhaps a sexual selection component...

*If they’re so close to our mammalian standards, why do you think they’re insects?* - Theodora asks and Yui is actually a little embarrassed that she didn’t think of that first.

“Well, they only look like that after the first pupation,” Jade says, regaining some of her brightness. “Before that, they’re grubs laid by the Mother Grub. I’ve only seen pictures of grubs but they look pretty buggy to me!”

Mother Grub? Abruptly, Yui starts thinking in terms of colony insects around a queen and wonders if the individuals they’re meeting are all genetically males centered around a single female queen, or if perhaps there are a number of non-breeding females waiting for their chance to be queen, and what kind of social system could be set up for that sort of thing in a sentient species, if there were multiple colonies and multiple queens or a singular queen running the whole outfit, but how would that even *work* at the species level and-

Pupation. Wait. “You called it the first pupation. Is there a second?”

“Yes. When they get to adulthood, they pupate again.” Jade hesitates a bit. “I’ve only ever met one adult. They’re shaped the same as the kids, but… They’re a lot different. Or at least she was.”

“Different how?” Henok coaches her.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Used the prompts:

strawberrysizedkittens asked: Hi! If your still taking requests, Jermaine finding out who is in charge of the ship?

moonaf asked: So when is Jermaine going to learn about Jade and what she said? Hopefully soon (if off-screen)? I feel really bad for him.

“Psychic powers,” Jermaine says flatly.

“Of a sort,” Yui tells him, mangling the papers in her hands. “Thankfully, they apparently cannot read our minds but Miss Harley did say that at least one of the aliens on the ship can compel people to do what she wants.”

That is objectively terrifying. Jermaine considers the effect that the alien Softouch had had on them just with the sound of it’s voice and his frown deepens. “Is there anything we can do to nullify the effect?”

“Miss Harley didn’t know of any,” Yui admits. “Of the expected crew, she warned that at least one has the ability to communicate with animals, two appear to be telekinetic, one can commune with the dead, and two others have something she called ‘chucklevoodoos’. I believe they are some kind of fear mongering ability, such as what was observed before.”

Jermaine crosses his arms and considers this. The idea of these kind of abilities outside of silly television shows disturbs him deeply. They’ll have no way to block the effects, no way to protect themselves at least in the short run. They’ll be at the alien’s mercy if they let them land.

“Continue working with Miss Harley. I want as much concrete information about the Trolls as possible.”

Yui gives him a quick, shallow bow and then hurries back to her team. Jermaine watches her go and then reaches up to rub his head. Why couldn’t this have been simple? He tugs his phone out of his pocket and checks the last message his wife sent.

/Lucas’s team won the debate! I’m making tarte tartin for the children, but I promise I’ll save you some, love./

He lets her love brace him, much as he still, to this day, doesn’t understand why she chose him. Bolstered, Jermaine turns back to the communications hub to do everything he can to keep both his family and his planet safe.

“Sir,” Lt. Mason greets as he gets close. “Lalonde has been speaking with the alien known as Kanaya while you were gone but we’ve just been told the leader of the expedition is coming.”

Finally. “Do we have a name?”
“Ironclaw, sir. Lalonde says he’s the other adult on board.”

Jermaine would hope so. He glances to Rose and she pauses mid word to look back before giving him a small, enigmatic smile. She’s an odd child but not entirely unpleasant. Jermaine prefers her to Strider, at any rate. There’s a running line of messages on the screen in front of her, fewer blank spots after the Linguistics team spent most of the night inputting every new word they’d learned from Strider the last few days. It makes it easier for Jermaine to see just how smitten the alien is with Rose and how ridiculously they are wasting valuable time flirting. Even if they aren’t giant roaches (and thank god for that information) it’s still rather disturbing to consider interspecies relationships.

**GA:** THIS ANNOY(CONTINUOUS) BE(CONTINUOUS) !! I(EQUAL) YOU(SUPERIOR) LOVE(RED) SOON ---- SEE(CONTINUOUS) ----

“Yes, darling. I’m sure they’ll allow us time together once you’ve landed.”

Jermaine has absolutely no plan at all of risking the children’s lives if the aliens decide to turn against them despite the outpouring of love he’s witnessing, but he supposes there could be ways to make it safe for all parties. He will have to confer with the military attache on a good plan for it. Somehow, he doubts the children will listen if he tells them to stay put.

**GA:** ---- COMPUTER CHANGE(CONTINUOUS) I(EQUAL) SOON RETURN YOU(SUPERIOR) (YOU EQUAL) BE(PRESENT) NOW TALK(CONTINUOUS)

“My breath is bated, waiting for you, but by all means allow them through,” Rose murmurs demurely and it only sounds half sarcastic. She turns back to Jermaine as the radio chatter goes quiet. The connection is still active but muted. “Sollux has been working on a translator for their side so that Captain Ironclaw can communicate with minimal assistance.”

Jermaine nods, accepting that. He’s not sure what to expect from Ironclaw considering how badly things went with Softouch, but he is not a man to run from confrontation. Besides, Rose doesn’t seem at all worried about this the way she had been before.

“Have you been told much of Ironclaw?”

“He is very old and very fair minded, according to Kanaya,” Rose says with a thoughtful look. “She says that he is very strict about the state of the ship but hasn’t tried to maim anyone, which is a step above Softouch.”

How sad it is that not maiming is apparently a standard for these aliens. He worries, not for the first time, about how violent they seem to be.

The transmission clicks and burbles for a moment before familiar troll speech comes through. It’s low in pitch with a gravelly quality and less clicking than any of the others.

**IC:** GREETINGS I(EQUAL) BE(PRESENT) ---- I(PLURAL EQUAL) PEACE COME(PRESENT)

Well, that’s nice of him. “Hello. I am Jermaine Moreau of the United Nations. Thank you for speaking with me. We also hope to keep this a peaceful meeting.”

There’s a pause, a few clicks that the translator doesn’t pick up, then,

**IC:** I(PLURAL EQUAL) YOU(EQUAL) THANKS(GRACIOUS) IMPERIOUS CONDESCENSION GREETINGS SEND(CONTINUOUS) EMPRESS(SUPERIOR)
“What?” Jermaine murmurs under his breath at the same moment that Rose goes tense and still next to him.

“Thereir empress welcomes us to the rest of the universe,” Rose says quietly. “She’s called the Condesce for short.”

He does not like the sound of that, no matter how polite Ironclaw is being. Titles had reasons behind them and he did not at all like what must have brought about Imperious Condescension.

“I didn’t know she was still alive but I suppose it makes sense considering everyone else is.” Rose’s voice has gone worryingly soft. Her face is a mask of control. He’ll get to the bottom of the history between these children and the aliens but now is not the time. Looking back to the screen, he realizes he’s missed something.

“My apologies, I was conferring with my colleagues,” he says quickly to smooth over the wait. He squints a little at the words, figuring through the meaning of the out of place order. He’s fairly sure Ironclaw is welcoming him and considering the word tags that keep being picked up, he seems to be fairly polite as well. At least more than most of the juvenile Trolls and Softouch.

And that is exactly what he is not sure about. He’s also not sure how long he could stave things off even if he did. They do have lodging built and ready for the aliens if they do land but now that he’s been given the estimates of size for the adult aliens, he’s not sure they will be suitable. It would be awful if this contact went sour simply because the ambassadors had to duck their heads.

Besides which, he’s not sure he wants a bunch of psychic aliens on Earth in the first place.

“We are still preparing lodging for your party,” Jermaine explains quickly, “but rest assured, we welcome you to our corner of space.”

Thank goodnes at least one of the Trolls is reasonable.

“You won’t be able to put it off for long,” Rose reminds him.

“I know,” Jermaine agrees grimly.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Sorry about the break there! I did 8 full days in a row at the new job to get on my new schedule so I was too wiped to write. Hopefully this makes up for it!! I should be updating sometime between wed-fri each week now. :)

Prompt used from ANON: john gets to talk to someone, since he's the only beta kid who hasn't yet.

“Sir! Stop! Sir, you can’t just-”

“LEEEEEEROY JENKINS!”

Jermaine looks up from his notes just as a boy he doesn’t know comes careening into communications room with three marines racing after him. Somehow, the kid manages to outstrip them with barely any effort and crosses the bulk of the room in seconds before plowing right into Dave standing at Jermaine’s side. Both boys topple to the floor as the soldiers skid to a stop, panting with angry embarrassment.

“Sir,” one of them says, straightening up to salute him. “Apologies, he snuck through the check point and-”

“It’s all right,” Jermaine says as he observes the laughing boy. Dave looks less amused and rubs the back of his head. “I think I know to whom he belongs.”

“John Quincy Egbert,” snarls a voice nearby right on cue and the boy scrambles up to his feet to march over and face it.

Jermaine dismisses the soldiers back to their stations, promising to send the boy back for proper entry procedure as Mr. Egbert dresses the boy (whom Jermaine assumes must be the biological child considering their visual similarities) down. For his part, John seems only a little shamed. Actually, barely at all. He shares a similar look that Jermaine’s kids do when he's told them to stop doing something they see nothing wrong with. He sees a familiar exasperation on Mr. Egbert’s face that he expects graces his own in these situations.

After a minute or so of harsh whispering, Mr. Egbert marches John over to them.

“Sorry, Dave,” he mutters like the whole thing is an inconvenience. “Sorry, Mr. Moreau.”

“What evs,” Dave says with a shrug. “I’ll just have to kick your ass later at home.”

Mr. Egbert twitches. “Language.”

Dave gives him a look Jermaine can’t quite decipher because when he isn’t obviously antagonizing people, Dave is rather hard to read.

“It’s all right. Next time, you will need to check in properly with security.” Jermaine silently congratulates himself for not chucking the boy out by his ears the way he feels he should. “John,
was it? What’s so important that you felt the need to rush in here like that?”

“Oh, uh.” Pink rises up just a little on the apples of John’s cheeks. “I just wanted to talk to the Trolls. Dave and Rose keep hogging.”

“Hey, we voted fair and square, man,” Dave argues. “Not my fault that no one thinks you’ve got the right personality for interspecies negotiations.”

And now Jermaine is a little worried about how awful John must be if Dave rates higher on the scale.

“How’s on the phone today, anyway?” John asks, looking at the translation screen. “Oh hey, Aradia!!”

AA: ---- GREETING !!

“Oh man, can you believe how bad this translator is? Go tell Sollux he’s really bad at this.”

TA: YOU(INFERIOR) FORNICATE

“Oh, hi! Sorry, I’ve been over this with Karkat already. I am not a homosexual!”

Jermaine takes a slow, calming breath. He will not kill the annoyingly enthusiastic child. But at least this does confirm what they’d suspected about all of Mr. Egbert’s children having the same ability to understand the aliens.

AA: ---- COMFORT !! YOU(EQUAL) BETTER KNOW(PRESENT)

TA: AGREEMENT

AA: GOOD !

“I suppose this is all right this time,” Jermaine mutters mostly to himself but Mr. Egbert sighs next to him in a put upon manner. Dave just nabs a chair none of the technicians are using and sits back to watch.

John laughs a bit at something that seems to be a dirty joke and then blinks suddenly, like he’s just realized something. “Oh, hey, Aradia! You’re god tier too, right?”

*God tier?!* What on earth-

AA: POSITIVE !!

“So how come these guys don’t understand you?”

There is silence on the line and Jermaine himself is rather confused. “Mr. Egbert, why on earth would we-”

“Duh,” John says, rolling his eyes. “It’s why they understand us, so it should go the other way around, too.”

He will not throttle the cheeky child. He will *not.* “We have been unable to understand any of the alien speech-”

There is a quiet clearing of a throat. Lt. Mason pinks a little as Jermaine turns his stare onto him.
“So, I just want to say that I figured I was just recognizing the sounds to the translator input,” Lt. Mason says in a very diplomatic fashion. He doesn’t quite shrink the longer Jermaine looks at him, but he does stay very intentionally still. “Sometimes I can understand it but not with all the aliens. Double A- I mean, Aradia, I usually get what she’s saying.”

“Next time you spontaneously develop an ability that might aid in this endeavor, you will inform me immediately,” Jermaine informs him coldly.

*That* makes Lt. Mason shrink and he lets out a quiet, “Yes, sir.”

Jermaine watches him a moment later and then turns back to John. “Now then. Are you implying that any of us should be able to understand at least the Troll named Aradia, or only a select few?”

“Uh. It should be anyone. That’s kind of how it works.”

Jermaine nods and turns to the translator. He purses his lips tight, considers just how embarrassed he’s going to feel if this doesn’t work, and how much worse it will be if it *does*.

“Miss Aradia, if you would provide a demonstration?” he asks, keeping his eyes away from the translation screen. There is a slight pause and then comes a series of aliens words... except the harder he listens, the more he realizes he *understands*.

“Um, I guess so! I don’t know what to say but is this working? Hopefully! It will be so much easier this way!!”

By god. This changes everything.
Used the prompt from ANON: Hi there, I'm not sure if someone has asked this or it's already been explained but could you write a short thing about the UN realizing that the kids are also godtier and thats how they understand and many asking how that happened?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jermaine does not waste time. He quickly establishes answers to the questions they hadn’t been able to get through either side’s translation yet, irons out specific needs for the Trolls’ lodging on earth (they will need to change some things because apparently one of the adults is over eight feet tall,) and also gets a list of the “godtier” Trolls that they will be able to somehow understand. There are only five of them and none are adults. Jermaine doesn’t like it but this is still better than nothing. Aradia seems happy enough to act as a translator and if he’s lucky, the other juveniles will be as accommodating.

The conversation ends as Aradia goes to report to Ironclaw with a promise to check back shortly and Jermaine turns to Mr. Egbert and the children. He regards them for a few moments, considering the best way to breach the subject, and then decides enough is enough and he wants answers now. Delicacy is for another time.

“You will explain to me what ‘godtier’ means and how it happened to you immediately,” he tells them. “I have been more than understanding about your secrecy to this point but it is time to set it aside for the greater good. Had I known of this possibility sooner, negotiations would have progressed far more quickly and easily than they have so far. You have knowingly impeded our progress and endangered our planet. I will not have it any longer. Explain. Now.”

Dave’s expression doesn’t change but John just stares at him like he is absolutely flabbergasted anyone asked.

“See, I would,” John says, “but we kind of decided not to.”

Jermaine’s eyes narrow and he is not happy at all that this seems to have no effect on either boy. “I’m uninterested in what you have decided. This is a matter of world security and a possible case of alien manipulation and experimentation on children. You will explain this to me immediately.”

“Yeah, except nope.”

“John,” Mr. Egbert says sternly but he seems to be getting more uncomfortable. “Mr. Moreau, I fail to see-”

“You fail to understand why I might be concerned with something called ‘godtier’?” Jermaine interrupts testily because honestly. Has he no sense at all? “Something that has apparently altered the brain of your own child to effectively make him a universal translator? Something that very likely has had other effects as well? Do you not realize the implications of such a feat?”

Mr. Egbert’s mouth goes tight and pinched. All three glance at one another and then Dave turns to lock eyes with Jermaine, stubbornly holding his ground.
“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” he says with a particular inflection that leads Jermaine to believe there is a joke he’s missing here. This is no time for jokes and Jermaine’s patience has run completely out.

“You don’t seem to understand your position,” Jermaine says and then gestures for the security personnel stationed at each doorway to approach as Lt. Mason rises to stand at his side in support. “It is my duty to unearth any threat to this planet and squelch it before there is loss of life. I take this duty very serious. Your reservations do not interest me in the least. You will give me this information or you will be detained. Do you understand?”

John and Mr. Egbert start stammering something but Jermaine ignores them and keeps his attention on Dave, unwilling to back down. Dave doesn’t look away, barely moves at all. Jermaine almost sees the way he carefully calculates his own odds. It is a confrontation he had been hoping to avoid, but-

“You can try,” Dave says abruptly, throwing it out like a gauntlet, and then just as abruptly he is not there. Neither are John or Mr. Egbert. They’re not anywhere in the room.

Things almost dissolve into chaos before Jermaine gets security on a full sweep of the facility. He also sends word to detain all of the Egbert children at their hotel. There is no sign of Dave, John, or Mr. Egbert in the building and when they pull up the security footage, all they see is the three of them standing there one second and gone the next. No flash, no blur, just missing figures in the next frame. No sightings of them afterward.

It’s nearly an hour later when a report comes back that not only were they not able to detain any of the Egbert children but that there were several injuries while trying and it appeared that at least one of the children had some kind of levitation ability, another was said to have shrunk and enlarged several objects during the escape, and several of them had been armed.

There is no time to handle the situation before an urgent message comes through from the Trolls.

“Uh, hello?” says a troll they haven’t spoken to before but who must be on the godtier list because they don’t end up needing the translator for it. “I’ve got some, uh, some news to give?”

“Yes, of course. Please do.” The situation is entirely out of his control and showing no sign of stopping the spiral into absolute madness, but what more could go wrong?

“Sending coordinates.”

Wait, what? “Excuse me?”

“Coordinates received,” Lt. Mason says. “Tracking... Central United States, state of Kansas, Edwards county, south of the city of Kinsley.”

“Excuse me, but why have you directed our attention to these coordinates?” Jermaine asks with a sinking feeling.

“We’re, uh, gonna land there.”

Damn it. He hates being right sometimes. “We have not yet given permission to land. Your accommodations have not been completed nor would this be the correct area for you to land. We need time to get everything ready for your arrival and then we will coordinate for an appropriate site-”

“I understand that this is, um, a little sudden, but... Captain Ironclaw says were landing
Jermaine had thought Ironclaw was levelheaded and patient. He was apparently wrong about that. “I can’t authorize this. Please, we need more time to—”

“Sorry, it’s orders directly from the Empress. She, um. She thinks we’re taking too long so... We’re landing tomorrow at the end of the first quarter rotation. Okay, bye.”

“Wait, don’t—”

The line goes dead. There is absolute silence for nearly a minute. Then Jermaine lets out a slow, quiet sigh.

“Mason, send word back. Continue looking for the children and have your government get a task force ready to intercept the aliens. The priority is keeping the civilians away from harm and keeping anyone from starting an altercation with the aliens.”

He can’t stop this from happening but he can damn well keep it manageable.

Chapter End Notes

So you could say things have gone pear-shaped.
FINALLY. Last week I was too exhausted to write but this bit is at least a little wordier than usual XD

Used the prompts:

anonymous said: For your so it goes fic, how about when the trolls all actually get on the planet and reunite with the kids?
ANON said: How about Jermaine and Sarah first seeing a troll?

Jermaine didn’t expect the ship to be so large. The information they’d gathered is accurate but while he’d known the dimensions, it still takes his breath away to watch the behemoth thing lower to the ground. It isn’t aerodynamic at all and seems like it wasn’t designed with any consideration for a planet’s condition. He has no idea how it manages to move so smoothly in atmosphere and no landing gear descends to assist it. The NASA consultants he’d spoken to earlier in the day had had serious concerns about the tiered design, lack of apparent heat shielding, and multiple sharp protrusions, but the Trolls didn’t seem to have any problems on their way down. Jermaine feels a hint of gusts from the landing but none of the heat he would have expected. Of course, the landing is almost soundless as well. He has no idea how the thing propels itself as it settles with its flat belly right on the ground.

Light doesn’t glint off the surface. It seems like metal but painted with a matte red finish that appears to absorb any light hitting it. There is a flatness to it that seems unreal and makes Jermaine a little uncomfortable while he studies it. The main structure spans half a kilometer long but only a few hundred meters wide. It’s as tall as wide along the back half, looking to be separated into several decks with each decorated in sharp protrusions that look like claws, or perhaps bayonets. The front comes to a sharp point with more protrusions. There are no windows he can see but a large symbol is painted in white along the nose. It looks like the stylized head of a trident. The whole ship resembles a weapon more than transportation.

“Everyone’s in position, sir. Awaiting further orders,” Lt. Mason advises as he stops next to Jermaine and stares at the ship with palpable unease. He’s got the same look on his face that the engineering consultants had when they first got clear structural information on the craft and Jermaine belatedly remembers Lt. Mason’s background before going military. He’s not surprised that anyone who’d studied any amount of aerospace engineering had doubts about the ridiculous thing. Jermaine doesn’t have but the most basic of understanding and even he’s bothered by it. Of course, he’s far more bothered by how menacing it looks because he’s very sure that was intentional.

“Is the general still sulking?” Jermaine asks since despite the troops gathered and waiting around the area, he hasn’t spied that particular pain in his rear end since the craft entered atmosphere.

“That’d be the reason I’m the one coordinating with you, sir.” Lt. Mason’s voice is dry but still professional. It reminds Jermaine why he likes him. Most of the Americans are a chore to be around. Even Sarah gets on his nerves here and there.

If Jermaine had his way, only his own people would be here, but he has to work within the
confines of certain agreements and he can’t exactly tell the Americans not to be hyper aware of an alien spacecraft on their own soil. Their presence is only the barest comfort. Still, at least they were far enough back to hopefully not begin an inter-species conflict before Jermaine can get a handle on this. He thinks maybe he’s a little testy but he didn’t exactly have much time to sleep last night or even on the flight here. There were so many preparations they had to speed through. Damn the aliens for their impatience!

The tension in the air ramps up higher as a seam forms near the front of the ship and then a long swath of it swings open and down to rest on the ground. Jermaine sees a few bright, unnervingly purple lights through the opening before a large, dark form fills most of it. He wonders at first why the bright sunlight doesn’t seem to be penetrating the opening before the form steps forward and he realizes that it is covered in black from head to toe except for bright purple markings. The alien looks tall and lean from this distance. Humanoid, as Jade had reported. Brightly colored horns raise up in sharp lines, curving slightly at the ends and with abruptly thicker bases.

As it descends to the ground and starts towards Jermaine’s position, he starts seeing more details and realizes that it isn’t just wearing black; it also is black: pitch colored skin that picks up the light slightly wrong, ringlets of curly hair swept back from an almost human face only to cascade down its back nearly to its knees. Two spots of bright, glowing purple signify the eyes and Jermaine is suddenly very relieved for at least that familiarity because the alien doesn’t move quite right, as if the joints worked slightly differently, the underlying skeletal structure fit together just slightly off.

A second alien follows, much shorter but with a more broad, sturdy structure that denoted visible strength. This one is dressed in tan and brown with markings in an olive green. Its hair is cropped short and tidy around its shorter, flat looking horns. It also moves just slightly wrong but there’s a more confident smoothness to it that reads like age. Thick, jagged, olive lines mark the left side of it’s face, crossing through an eye that shines red instead of the green like the other one. If he had to guess, Jermaine would figure them for scars.

It clicks something at the taller one before both pause. They’re still several meters away and Jermaine shifts his weight to go out to meet them halfway when another string of alien language comes out of the shorter one back towards the ship. Abruptly, a gaggle of aliens come out but these ones are different. Their skin is a much lighter gray and there is a youthfulness to their features, the way they rush down the plank and up past the larger black ones. Jermaine counts some twelve in all and pins them as the juveniles that knew the human children. They have a variety of clothing and horn shapes but he notices each seems to have their own significant color. He’s not sure why.

One of them shoves its way to the front and walks arrogantly to within a meter of where Jermaine is standing. The juvenile is short in stature and dressed in baggy clothes, hair short and tiny horns barely visible nestled in the messy locks. It gathers itself up, hands going to rest on its hips arrogantly, before giving a suddenly spill of alien language. Immediately, Jermaine knows this isn’t one of the mysterious “godtier” juveniles because he doesn’t understand a word. He’s at least comforted that the juveniles’ eyes don’t glow but instead are a solid black on a strangely yellow background.

“Good day,” Jermaine says, giving it a polite nod. He intends more but another juvenile bounces up beside the first with a wide smile on it’s- her, becomes abruptly apparent for anatomical similarities to humans- red lips.

“Hello!” she says cheerfully and while Jermaine knows he’s actually hearing the alien language, the word comes through easily to his mind. He even recognizes this one as Aradia. “Come on, Karkat. You know they don’t understand you right now!”

Karkat bristles in entirely the same way Jermaine would expect from a human child but he lets
himself examine Aradia instead. Her hair is long, her horns twisting, and... It appears that her eyelashes are as red as her lips. He wonders if this is a gender marker but as the other Trolls approach, he sees others that appear female as far as he can tell and decides not.

“I am Jermaine Moreau, Secretary-General of the United Nations,” he introduces politely as both stare up at him, the others beginning to gather up behind them. There are only two juveniles he isn’t taller than and half of them seem confused by the sounds coming out of his mouth. “It’s good to meet you in person, even if this was a tad rushed.”

“Well the, uh. The Empress doesn’t like waiting, so...” comes from another juvenile, this one with a mohawk and a brown marking on his shirt. It’s- Jermaine supposes any without feminine gender markers are probably male. *His* horns are the largest of the juveniles, thick and bulging out like a bull. By the cadence, Jermaine recognizes him as Tavros.

“Is she with you?” Jermaine asks, glancing up to where the two other trolls, who must be the adults, stand waiting. The taller one fidgets in place but the other stares back at him with unnerving intensity.

“Are you kidding me?” another juvenile scoffs, flicking long hair over its- her?- shoulder. “She’s got things to do, empires to crush into dust.”

That... does not sound very encouraging. Jermaine senses another uptick in tension from the soldiers close enough to hear and hopes that was some kind of joke, or at least youthful exaggeration. He has the uncomfortable feeling it’s not.

“I see. Then I assume those two are Captain Ironclaw and Softouch?”

“Yes, they-” Aradia cuts off as Karkat lets out a sudden rush of alien speech. Jermaine blinks at him and then realizes one of the words is familiar.

He’s asking for Dave.
The alien named Karkat has not stopped angrily ranting but Aradia isn’t translating for him anymore and none of the other “godtier” trolls have picked up in her stead. The moment Jermaine admitted that they hadn’t brought Dave Strider with them to this meeting, Karkat had begun yelling. The other Trolls didn’t seem surprised by this and Jermaine catches a very familiar look of exasperation on several of their faces. Apparently, this is normal.

All Jermaine had gotten out of it was the knowledge that Karkat thought them supremely badly organized and inconsiderate. He tries to ignore the irony.

The two adults have stayed back the whole time but the taller of the two keeps giggling at random and its voice burbles with an undercurrent that reminds him of nails rubbing against broken glass. Neither makes any attempt to close the distance between them and Jermaine himself. He’s not sure why. The dynamics in these aliens continue to confuse him. Surely Ironclaw and Softouch are the ones he should be working with but he’s barely spoken to either and they seem in no hurry to change that. And he still hasn’t been introduced to “Chief Ambassassin Vantas” that sent the original message, but he is steadily losing the expectation of ever meeting them. Every attempt he’s made to steer past the juveniles to the adults has been thwarted by increasingly angry snarling and demands for Dave.

“Are you done yet? Your stupid boyfriend is not going to show,” one of the aliens grumbles in Karkat’s direction, but he is still madly snarling and clicking incoherently. Another juvenile, one that is nearly a foot taller than Jermaine himself, stands near by Karkat and just stares at him like it - he? - wants to get involved but isn’t entirely sure how. Jermaine has a mirrored feeling of being unsure how exactly to salvage this when Karkat is still yelling.

At least it’s gone on long enough and been ridiculous enough that the tension has gone down fairly far with the military.

“How often is he even taking a breath?” Lt. Mason mutters under his breath. As Jermaine isn’t even entirely sure they have lungs, he is in no position to speculate on how Karkat has managed this long with so few pauses.

“Has Sarah sent word of her arrival yet?” Jermaine asks him instead, trying to keep on task even if his head is starting to ache.

“ETA ten minutes last check, sir,” Lt. Mason reports dutifully. “The team’s plane only landed half an hour ago.”

And Jermaine would have been on a delayed flight right along with them if he hadn’t bullied his way onto military transport instead. He’d simply refused to be late for the first sight of the aliens.

A yelp suddenly pipes up from the ship that has all of the aliens suddenly going on alert. Even Karkat cuts himself off mid screech to jerk around and look back at the opening. Another troll stumbles out of the ship and goes immediately to the shorter adult. Jermaine can’t understand
anything it says but he reads distress clearly on its odd, blue cracked face. Before either adult can say anything, another troll races out the door with a shout and that is when all hell breaks loose.

Jermaine has no idea how they got there but abruptly teenagers start streaming out of the ship along with another couple trolls. The juveniles in front of him start hollering and race back to meet them. Jermaine recognizes Dave Strider in the mix only a moment before Karkat barrels into him and knocks him to the ground. He only catches short glimpses between the other bodies but Karkat appears to be trying to burrow right into Dave’s laughing body. There is a shout of “Rose!” and he finds out that teenage trolls apparently have similar expressions of gratuitous affection as teenage humans do. The juveniles and the human children crowd around in loud chaos while the other trolls, who seem to be near adults, crowd around the two adults in distressed confusion.

There are more human children than he’d met but Jermaine is entirely sure all of them belong to Mr. Egbert. He finds himself thinking less than charitable thoughts.

In the middle of it, a dark haired girl with startling green eyes meets his gaze. By vague description, he’s fairly sure this is Jade Harley. She looks distinctly less energetic than Yui had described her, her face pale and something ill in her expression. She straightens herself, pursing her lips, and makes an exaggerated gesture with both hands.

The humans and juvenile trolls abruptly disappear as if they had never been there in the first place, just as Dave, John, and Mr. Egbert had before.

Jermaine stares for a moment even as he hears sudden shouts of confusion and shock from the soldiers around them, even a stream of cursing from Lt. Mason. Jermaine looks around but there’s no sign of them anywhere.

Still surrounded by its crew, the shorter adult troll sighs heavily and reaches up to rub its forehead in a very human gesture of exasperation. Muttering something to the semi-adults, it steps away from them and starts marching towards Jermaine with a certain amount of wary stubbornness. It stops a few paces away and gives Jermaine a hard look over while Jermaine does his own.

The alien is several inches shorter than Jermaine himself but likely a good fifteen kilograms heavier considering the width of its shoulders and solidness of its body. Jermaine is fairly sure this one is male and the one named Ironclaw. He has a face that reminds Jermaine of old soldiers and the same kind of intensity. Close up, the solid brightness of his eyes and scars is even more disturbing, as is the lack of any visible nose. Ironclaw appears carved from stone, sturdy and solid in every way.

Lifting one clawed hand, Ironclaw gestures towards his chest and gives out a very deliberate spill of alien language. Even if Jermaine can’t understand it and has absolutely no chance of replicating it, he still understands the meaning behind it and responds in kind, giving his own name. Ironclaw nods gravely and then holds out his hand. Though intimidated by the thick, sharp look of those claws, Jermaine still reaches out his own. He isn’t sure why he’s so surprised when Ironclaw merely clasps his hand in one firm shake before releasing. The moment is so bizarrely human standard he wants to laugh.

The taller adult - Softouch, he assumes, considering how entirely off putting it seems - shouts out a query that makes Ironclaw grimace before he throws an absent order over his shoulder. There’s a snort of laughter and then Softouch shuffles the semi-adults back into the ship with sharp snars and louder clicks, gnashing its - her worryingly large teeth at them.

Jermaine takes the moment to turn back to Lt. Mason, who has at least by now stopped cursing and gives him an expectant look. “I want efforts to locate the Egberts doubled. It should be easier
now that they are apparently transporting twelve aliens with them.”

“Sir.” Lt. Mason turns to relay the order just as Jermaine spots a group of harried people being marched towards them. Well, at least having the linguists around might mean the whole situation isn’t a complete loss.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

No prompt this time, just Sarah being Sarah XD

The first thing Sarah says when she shows up is, "What the hell have you done now?"

"Absolutely nothing," Jermaine responds with slight offense, though he's got enough dignity not to show it much. Sarah just has a lot of experience dealing with people trying to bullshit her. She rolls her eyes and looks at the only alien outside of the massively ridiculous ship. He stares right back, looking tough and serious and altogether without an ounce of humor. She hopes that's not entirely true.

Sarah does a thorough visual examination first, gets slightly amused by the fact that she's barely an inch shorter than him, and then decides she's dawdled long enough.

"Hello, I'm Sarah," she says finally, then twists towards Jermaine to add, "Do they do handshakes?"

"He initiated one before you got here so it seems to be a cultural match."

Sarah nods and then offers her hand without an ounce of fear. The alien watches a moment before he takes it. His claws look thick and sharp but he doesn't scratch her at all as they do a quick shake and release. He's got a good grip. Reminds her of her dad, rest his soul.

The alien gives his name, all rough noises and a couple clicks. She can't replicate it but she can at least match it to the audio she's been listening to almost non stop since the first transmission. Ironclaw sounds a little different in person, his voice deeper and fuller with an odd rumbling resonance under it. Sarah drags out her main notebook, the one where she's got the language character notes, and flips over to a page where she'd painstakingly written out what few sentences the team managed to cobble together. No doubt, they're painfully simplistic because the alien grammar only makes sense half the time and they didn't get enough from Dave to master it, but she hopes to get the right idea across. They didn't have time to write out a proper greeting, proof it, or practice pronouncing what of it they could, but Sarah blames that more on how insistent the aliens had been on landing.

As she holds out the notebook and points to the top line, written with Troll characters and then in English, she reads out, "It's nice to meet you."

Ironclaw is kind enough not to laugh at her. Actually, he just looks at the words curiously for a few moments before verbalizing them. Sarah misses about half of it but she picks out sound bits that she recognizes, associations with the symbols, and counts it as a win. When Ironclaw draws out a thin stick from a fold of his tunic, Sarah relinquishes the notebook to him so he can scribble a few corrections. She's somewhat gratified that he only seems to be adding things, a symbol here or there, an arrow to move one word to the end of the line. He studies it a little longer, then points at one word and mutters something.

"You," she replies, pointing to him, and he gives her a glance before scribbling in a different set of symbols there and- Oh. It's one of the other pronoun add-ons. She must have gotten the wrong
one there or- No, she'd been careful and used the most respectful singular pronoun form Dave had confirmed for them but Ironclaw had shifted it to a mid-range respect level. *Interesting.* She's curious why when they've already confirmed he's the leader of the expedition. Of course, there had been mentions of an Empress, so maybe the more respectful form was reserved for her? Oh, but that could mean-

Jermaine clears his throat. "I think it may be better to take this to the tent the Americans have so generously set up for us. You'd have room to spread out your paperwork and perhaps a little privacy."

"You know, someday you're going to have to stop saying American like a bad word," Sarah shoots back at him and doesn't bother to look at his face because she knows him well enough to know what it'll look like. As amusing as it would be, she's far more interested in the notations Ironclaw is still making. He's moved to a free page and is making careful notes. Sarah can't wait until she's got enough of this language down to read them.

Mohamed and Adanna are bent over the table in the tent when they come in but straighten up the second they recognize the alien. Waving them off before either can do anything unimportant like telling the alien how happy they are to meet him (Adanna is almost vibrating but Mohamed keeps his cool fairly well, the dear boy), Sarah leads Ironclaw over and starts thumbing through the transcripts they'd managed before the Trolls arrived (and before the kids disappeared somehow) until she finds Ironclaw's. She spreads that pages out triumphantly and Ironclaw leans over to read curiously. He obviously recognizes the alien characters they'd gotten from the translator, even if it is missing things the translator didn't quite catch. He holds out his pen, glancing to her for the okay, and then starts filling in the blanks when she nods.

They don't talk much for the first while. Ironclaw dutifully fills in alien script to the blank spots from the translator. When he's finished with his transcript, he flips back to the first page and then runs one finger along the English underneath the first few lines. He squints at it, eyes glowing a little brighter with concentration, then makes a quiet noise Sarah takes for a question.

"That's- Oh. 'Ironclaw’,” she reads out and he tilts his head a bit, considering that. “The kids translated it that way, something about-"

“Ahrn krra,” the alien tries out quietly, something in his chest clicking halfway through. He scowls, considers the transcript, then tries again, “Ahron kraw."

He’s having the same kind of trouble with the l sound as she’d expect from a Chinese or Japanese speaker and she tries to remember hearing anything like it in the recordings. She can’t and wouldn’t it just figure that there’d be an unknown sound in the translation of his name.

A gentle correction startles her and she looks back to Mohamed who’s stepped up closer to carefully go over the sound, exaggerating the tongue movement to help model. Thankfully Ironclaw doesn’t look offended. He studies the way Mohamed moves, his own mouth twitching to figure out how to reproduce the sound. It takes several tries and then comes a clear, “Ironclaw.”

The alien doesn’t quite smile but there is a sort of pride on his face anyway. Then he points to another word and they start again. By the time night falls and one of the younger aliens comes out to fetch him, Ironclaw’s trudged through the entire transcript and several more, learning enough words to tell them in no uncertain terms that they’re friendly and not planning on destroying the earth for their Empress, even if it’s not nearly enough for more complex communication yet.

Jermaine looks pleased in that stick up the ass way when she tells him. Sarah figures it’s good enough that no one got maimed on day one.
Ironclaw is very intelligent - and he’s done this before. By the second day, he’s figured out enough about English to make himself a quick phonetic cheat sheet in order to read it on his vocabulary cheat sheet (which works great until they hit one of the many oddities of the hellish clusterfuck that is English, but at least it helps the rest of them figure out a bit better how to read the alien script, too) and has figured out how to reproduce all of the sounds foreign to him. His vocabulary has grown to roughly two hundred random words that he pronounces with intent preciseness and his deliberate experimentation with grammar gets better on every attempt.

Ironclaw has not only done this before; he is good at assimilating new language quickly, even one with as fragmented, piecemeal a linguistic origin as this one.

Adanna has no idea what to think about that. It’s no wonder Ironclaw was chosen to make this contact but Adanna has to wonder if it might backfire on them later. She’s seen far less important skill use result in far worse consequences. As a matter of course, Adanna tends to find intelligent people to be a lot more frightening in the long run. She’s glad at least that Ironclaw also seems non-violent and as intent on peace as they are. His claws are ridiculously sharp and his teeth look like serrated knives but he’s made absolutely no threat displays. It’s a comfort, as much as anything can be. He acts almost human, honestly.

In some ways, this would be easier in a combat situation. Fewer things needed for communication. Adanna’s had to hash out rough pidgins before with people who didn’t speak anything she knew well during evacuations and fleeing combat areas, and the thing of it becomes less ‘how do we communicate understandably’ so much as ‘how do we make sure everyone knows what bomb means’. Right now, there’s no time crunch but negotiation means needing to get pretty complex ideas across and since they can’t actually reproduce the Troll language, the onus of learning how to communicate is squarely on Ironclaw’s shoulders. He seems game enough for it but that does mean they’re going to be doing a lot of groundwork before anything can get going.

Adanna wishes the kids hadn’t disappeared. Every hour, Jermaine looks more twitchy and it’s terrible for his blood pressure. She’s pretty sure his wife won’t send any more of that delicious apple treat if he has a heart attack and dies.

The third day is spent mostly on targeted vocabulary acquisition. It’s hindered only a bit by how little Ironclaw still knows but he’s quick to pick up with modeling, drawings, and careful building off what they’d already figured out. Ironclaw’s starting to form simple but complete sentences, even if he does keep getting distressed by the pronouns for some reason. He seems to find the lack of them frustrating but is adapting all right to them. The insistence on correct pronouns is absolutely fascinating. They’d already figured there’s some kind of caste system that’s important enough to be integrated heavily in their language and it’s fascinating that even though Ironclaw is the captain of the ship, he keeps insisting on more respectful pronouns for Softouch and another, new pronoun for Chief Ambassassin Vantas, who they still haven’t located. All Ironclaw has been able to get across is that Vantas isn’t on the ship so he must have disappeared with the children. But that’s just even more confusing because there should only be two adults...
It’s strange. The whole situation is strange. Adanna tries not to think about that and instead keeps taking notes while Sarah and Mohamed continue working to broaden Ironclaw’s vocabulary. The things he catches onto quickly are just as important as the phonetic difficulties for considering how the Trolls’ language works because if this is familiar enough a concept then this should follow and...

Near lunch, a semi-adult from the ship brings Ironclaw a meal. There’s a strange comfort that it at least looks like a bunch of meal bars wrapped in some kind of plastic like sheeting and stamped with alien lettering, even if they found out yesterday that the sheeting is just as edible as the rest. They’d already sent one of the bars for analysis yesterday so they could figure out if they can feed these people. Ironclaw downs them with only a few glints of terrifying teeth because he is polite and trying very hard not to be threatening.

And that is perhaps the strangest thing about him. Adanna supposes she’s seen too many monster movies but having read over the threat displays from Softouch and having seen the way Softouch interacts with the other aliens, she keeps feeling like his behavior is strange for Trolls. The semi-adults haven’t left the ship much so she hasn’t had much time to observe them, but she’s pretty sure she’s right. They treat both Ironclaw and Softouch with pretty heavy deference, like they expect retaliation for things they haven’t even done. Adanna’s not a sociologist (that’s Noe’s headache) but when you start out life as a tiny boy begging to wear your sister’s dresses, you figure out how to read the people around you for threats pretty quickly. The semi-adults, at least most of them, are pretty much terrified of both Ironclaw and Softouch, though a couple of them seem to be stubbornly soldiering on to hide it and are a lot worse with Softouch. She seems to enjoy it. Ironclaw just gives them the same blank look as he does the humans.

This worries her. If Ironclaw isn’t playing straight with them, if he’s hiding some well of violence… It’s not her job to speculate on this but she can’t help getting antsy. They need this to go well if what she’d overheard from the engineers is right. She keeps from shivering. The amount of worry they’d had discussing possible weapons systems they thought they’d detected through the scans… She can’t say the ship looks harmless in person.

Still. When Adanna looks up from her notes and watches the patient way Ironclaw listens and converses with Sarah and Mohamed, the intensity he’s putting into figuring out the language and getting good, solid communication between them, the way he’s so careful not to flash his teeth much and keeps his hands on his knees if he isn’t writing or drawing something…

She wants to trust his intentions. She wants so very badly. She is terrified that she’s going to be disappointed.
Chapter 15

Yui isn't really expecting the bounty of a real live Troll to be handed over to her team for even the lightest examination. It does mean carting them out into the middle of nowhere with the rest but she figures this is a small price to pay for getting face to face with aliens!

The alien does not understand anything they say so they model everything they need her to do. She's remarkably patient with them, sitting pliant and still while they give her a visual examination and have her flex her limbs and fingers and face. Theodora notes the obvious internal skeleton and tougher, almost shell like skin, but Yui is going gaga for the way these pivot joints are formed! It's just subtly different from human norm, just enough not quite right that it makes her shiver in the best ways. It's absolutely fascinating, the tiny differences from what she would expect from humans.

Instead of the green and red eyes of Captain Ironclaw, this Troll's sclera are solid yellow with bright brown irises and human like pupils. They even shrink and grow the same way human pupils do in reaction to light. Definitely not compound, no sign of ocelli eyes either. She's not sure why Trolls would have evolved that way considering they came from insects, but she's not about to deny what she's seeing. (She'd also really like to get to examine one of the adults considering the change in their eyes and what on Earth caused that evolution? Or, rather, not on Earth.)

The alien's face is remarkably human like except for the lack of a nose. Yui figured out quick that the Trolls do have a sense of smell because this Troll was very unhappy with some of the items she, Henok, and Theodora brought, face scrunches and everything, but she's not entirely sure how it works yet. Perhaps their horns work as sensory organs? Or perhaps some kind of olfactory sensilla in the mouth or some other part of their bodies...

Yui does not ask the very obviously uncomfortable sentient being to disrobe for her curiosity even though she really really wants to know things. She supposes it's Henok's good example keeping her on the straight and narrow. Or perhaps that she'd have to model it for the alien to understand and that is definitely not happening.

The alien keeps looking at them with something that looks like exasperation and Yui marvels again at how human that is. The Trolls have a high amount of intricate muscle groups in their faces, likely on par with humans, and there seems to be some kind of consistent universal constant when it comes to expressing certain things. Though, Yui really wants to know how they manage the flashy eye thing. This Troll hasn't done it yet but she saw Ironclaw do it and that is fascinating. She wonders if it comes with age or perhaps the second molting- oh and that reminds her, she is going to have to ask about that. She's not even sure if this Troll is post-second molt or not.

Yui reminds herself again that she is not allowed to get the Troll to strip down. She is allowed x-rays and other tests in the future, if the negotiations go well enough to move to a more sterile facility. Right now, she's allowed to take a tissue sample from the Troll's mouth (and has to marvel at the thick, sharp, powerful teeth in it because wow, those are intimidating), a surface sample from her hand, and a blood sample. That brings a bit of a problem. The Troll's skin is so thick that
Yui can't find a vein. She examines both elbows, wrists, and throat, and still can't manage to find one. She starts wondering if they even have veins. *Earth* insects don't but she doesn't want to risk possibly injuring their new friend by guessing wrong.

"Henok, can you-" Yui starts and then stops when the Troll reaches out and takes the syringe delicately in her hands. She rolls it over a bit, considering, and then gives Yui a look she takes as confusion. "It's for blood. Uh-"

Theodora steps up and pushes her sleeve high on her arm to expose her elbow. Smiling, she gestures to her inner arm and skin thin enough to see the ghost of pale blue lines under it as well as on her wrist. The Troll considers that, lips parting as something makes a connection. She hands the syringe and tubing back and then considers herself. She seems to understand, at least enough to know what they want to do if not why, and then she brings down one sharp claw into her inner arm and slices into her own flesh.

At first, the sudden wellspring of sludgy brown confuses Yui and then she realizes it's *blood*. It's not a sterile sample, they'll have to figure out the circulatory system for a better sample later, but Yui takes the offer. She fills two vials and then caps and seals them, handing them over to Henok to stare at for a bit before they're tucked into the biohazard container with the other samples. Yui doesn't know if the blood might be somehow poisonous, so she doesn't help patch the alien up. She just hands over a compress and bandages. She can't risk rubbing alcohol when they don't know if that might be poisonous to Trolls.

The Troll takes to this without a hint that she finds any of it odd. She cleans herself up primly, holds the compress in place, and bandages herself up like a pro. She barely seems to have felt it, stoic and patient. Like she's dealt with far worse before. Yui really doesn't like that.

"Thoughts?" Henok says once he's finished packing the samples away.

"It's thicker than human blood, and that color- some kind of oxidation response, maybe?" Yui muses as the Troll sits patiently not understanding a word but realizing she's not being addressed. "I don't know why I was expecting something more like hemolymph."

"Don't discount it yet," he warns but Yui isn't going to. There's no telling what they might find in those vials. Alien biology, alien possibilities. She's so excited she could burst and must be emoting it because Theodora gives a little snort of amusement.

And then abruptly there is a yell from outside their tent and the Troll jumps from her seat to rush out. Yui's a step after her and then she goes dead still as a sudden rush of something cold and absolutely terrifying rolls over her. Her lungs clench, her knees buckle. She's on the ground in the doorway before she knows it because something is going to get her- gnashing teeth and claws and she's already dead but her body hasn't figured it out yet-

And then it's gone but it stays in her skin, sunk into her bones. Yui stares blindly ahead as she sucks in one labored breath at a time. A body collapses against her back, wrapping thin arms around her and Yui realizes she's crying and she can't make it stop. There's a voice, quiet and saying words she can't understand but they're familiar, like a little prayer, and she finds that they start calming the thundering beat of her heart. She begins coming out of the sudden panic, seeing what's around her, when there’s a shot and then a second one and more indistinct yelling.

Theodora's still huddled against Yui's back, shaking and sniffing and non-responsive. Henok's on his knees and has a hand on both their shoulders. He meets her wet eyes, his own still a little too wide, not near as settled as his voice. Together, they look towards the alien ship and there is the tall figure of Softouch, leaned over two much shorter figures with another- Ironclaw? - set between them. The Troll that had been with them didn't get too much farther than the tent but she
managed to stay on her feet and looks itching to go interfere while survival instinct keeps her feet planted where she is.

Chucklevoodoos, Yui remembers abruptly but these effects had been so much worse than what had been described to her before. Whatever the chucklevoodoos actually were, they had so much more potent in person. She quickly rethinks her position on it simply being an auditory effect. There is something far worse going on here.

There’s unease in the ranks of soldiers and she abruptly remembers someone took a shot. The aliens don’t seem injured but there’s a greenish splash of color on the back of Ironclaw’s arm. Did someone have a paintball gun?! It’s almost ridiculous enough to laugh at if she weren’t still shaking from the terror blast.

She doesn’t think she can stand yet so she doesn’t try. Theodora's stopped crying but her grip hasn't loosened at all. Henok isn't speaking English yet, still muttering prayers under his breath with a hint of shock in his low voice. Yui's pretty sure she's in shock as well. Instead of thinking about it, she concentrates on the scene before her.

Ironclaw's talking to Softouch, still and strong while she gestures violently and then turns on her heel to march back into the ship. There's another wave of fear that courses over them but it's so much weaker that it only gets Yui shivering. Left behind, Ironclaw turns onto the other two with him. One looks to be a Troll but the other has blond hair and their skin isn't gray or black. They're too far away for Yui to read Ironclaw's expression but his body language drips with annoyance. And… He’s letting one of his arms hang limp, the one with the paintball hit. It strikes her as strange but she’s still so shaken she can’t figure out why.

Jermaine approaches the lot of them and then Yui's being tugged up to her feet along with Theodora as Henok corrals them back into their tent. It isn't any protection from the rattling in her bones but she feels a little safer closed away. Theodora just latches onto Henok the moment he eases her off Yui and he just sighs and sits down, letting her drape against him as she continues to shiver.

Well this has been a sucky day She looks at the biohazard box and their messy stacks of notes. Worth it.
Jermaine is furious. And mortified, apprehensive, mystified, slightly terrified, but mostly furious.

Some trigger happy fool shot at the hellishly technologically advanced alien ambassador. He does not trust himself to have civil or productive words with their commander. He makes Lt. Mason do it for him while he goes to try and make sure this hasn't caused an interstellar war.

The terror wave is still effecting him, making his bones rattle in his skin and his breathing catch and random intervals, but Jermaine forces himself to exude the confidence and strength that he doesn't feel. If he clenches his hands, they won't shake and he takes that notion to heart for the rest of him.

There are two smaller figures beside Ironclaw- Jermaine isn't sure if he's relieved or not to recognize Dave Strider's bright blond hair and sunglasses but he's more confident in his exasperation in seeing Karkat. If there is one thing he doesn't need, it's a loud alien that complains in long winded rants he can't even understand. He has no idea how they got here but he'll take the translation break he's being given.

"-bandages or something, man," Dave is saying when he gets close enough to understand their words. "I mean, I know you got the whole 'Nam vet esthetic going on here but that's like hella unsanitary."

Ironclaw mutters something and Karkat's peering at his green coated arm- and why the hell did someone shoot the ambassador with paint- Jermaine almost trips over his feet as he realizes it's not. The thick green fluid is soaking slowly along Ironclaw's sleeve. It- that's blood. Someone actually shot the alien ambassador.

He must have made a noise because all three of them turn to look at them. It's only a slight comfort that Ironclaw doesn't look angry (but perhaps there is some kind of alien cue that Jermaine isn't noticing yet.)

"Oh hey," Dave says, stuffing his hands into his pockets. "Can we get a first aid kit out here? Ironclaw's being all Rambo and saying he's like totally fine just slowly bleeding out but I'm kinda over it."

Karkat starts snarling something but Ironclaw sets a wide hand on his shoulder and says something that soothes him back to a grumble. Jermaine finds his attention drawn to the tenseness that flows through Karkat's body at the touch and wonders what that means, but then he shakes it off and calls for a medic. They can't take an alien to a full hospital and no one had the foresight to set up a field station here (something Jermaine is going to remedy) so they'll have to make do.

The two trolls and one teenager follow him back to the linguistics tent because it is the closest and Jermaine wants them out of the open right now. He kicks out Sarah's team and clears a space on
the table for the medic’s supplies. The medic barely bats an eye at treating an alien rather than a human. She makes Ironclaw sit down and elevates the arm, tugging his sleeve out of the way. His black skin is covered in green blood but the wound seems to have slowed to a dribble. The medic cleans him up and examines the wound with careful fingers.

"Straight through and clean, no fragments. No swelling yet," she mumbles to herself as Ironclaw watches, his expression unchanging as if he simply doesn't feel it. She shoves a bottle of antiseptic into his hand and he grips reflexively without any trouble. "Good, muscle damage seems to be minimal if any - not that I know anything about the anatomy, I'm not a miracle worker here - Is there a doctor on board?"

It takes Jermaine a moment to realize she's addressing him and by then, Dave takes up for him.

"Trolls don't really do much death prevention," he says blandly, "but sure. Yo, Ironclaw, you got a troll doctor?"

Ironclaw's unscarred brow quirks upward as he replies and that just has Dave rolling his eyes so hard that his entire head moves.

"Figures."

The medic snorts and goes back to examining the slowly oozing wound. "I could stitch it but these guys clot pretty fast. Not feeling any fracturing- definitely bone in there or something like it but we won't know for sure without x-rays. Didn't seem to nick an artery if they even have them. I'll bandage it up; you'll just have to keep watch for anything out of the ordinary."

She directs that to Ironclaw, who nods as if he understands any of it (and considering how quickly he's been assimilating the language, there's a good bet he's understanding more than they think) and then gets him bandaged. She complains about being unsure about possible infection, not having access to reliable medical data about the aliens, the way Ironclaw’s blood gets sticky and tacky on her gloves as it dries, still as bright dry as it had been wet. That is perhaps one of the most disturbing parts of it all.

When she's finished and left, Ironclaw is as calm as ever. He rolls his ruined sleeve back down over his arm and stands up, as if completely unaffected by his wounding. He doesn't seem dizzy or disoriented, eyes as clear and bright as before.

"Mr. Strider, please translate if you would," Jermaine murmurs as Ironclaw’s gaze slides back to him. "On behalf of the United Nations, you have my utmost apologies for the actions of my people. We did not intend to harm you in any way-"

Ironclaw lifts a hand to silence him (and Dave, who had been parroting his words with surprising seriousness). For a moment, he is quiet as he considers his words, brows furrowing, and then he says very carefully, "Yes. Bad no. O... Okay? Yes. Okay."

He switches back to the alien language and Dave translates that as, "It's cool. He is the most zen motherfucker, it is him."

Ironclaw gives him a dirty look. Dave just stares back. "Dude, can you tell me I'm wrong?"

"No," Ironclaw says with a soft sigh. It is at that moment that Karkat speaks up and Ironclaw inclines his head towards him respectfully. That strikes Jermaine a little odd but not until Karkat puffs up and twists to face Jermaine fully. He spouts off a long winded and very proud proclamation that Jermaine doesn't understand a word of but that has Dave's cheeks going pink with restrained mirth. At the end of it, Karkat sets his hands on his hips and stares at Jermaine like
he's waiting for something.

Dave doesn't let him stew for too long. There's a sense of laughter in his bland voice as he translates, "Chief Ambassassin Vantas would like to apologize for his absence in the beginning of these interactions but he had to go cuddle his ultra cool boyfriend for a while first-"

Karkat jerks and snarls at him while Ironclaw looks very amused.

"What, of course I translated clearly, that is exactly what you said," Dave insists while Karkat smacks his face with a clicking growl.

"Then Chief Ambassassin Vantas will be joining us?" Jermaine asks to head off the brewing argument and then Dave looks at him like he's either very slow or very stupid. It rankles.

"You know, I think he will. I mean, it's only like he's standing right the fuck in front of you."

Jermaine blinks. He looks at Karkat, who still seems entirely embarrassed to even know Dave exists. He looks at Ironclaw, amused but showing no sign of being in on any joke. He looks at Dave and then he questions his life choices.

"Trolls got last names, man," Dave says. "They're not savages."

Chief Ambassassin Karkat Vantas gives Dave a squinty glance and then turns to Jermaine, ready to go.

Jermaine gives himself a few seconds to take a breath, grabs up every ounce of self control and decorum he has - which is less than usual right now, he'll admit - and then buckles down to do his job.
Prompt: vanillacorpse asked: oh boy you have a lot of promts waiting but... , , i had one its just i would loose my shit if you wrote about Jermaine discovering just what the teens can do, like flying and time travel n shit cause ,, , man thatd be cool,,,, also i lov you som uch h,, , ???:

It’s not her specialty but Sarah is pretty good at reading body language. She kind of had to learn it, having been a pretty college girl once upon a time. Her daddy taught her how to throw a decent punch, just like her other siblings, but since she preferred not to use it, she’d gotten good at figuring out if the possibility of needing it would come up. It kept her safe and now, those same instincts are out full force.

These aliens might not move quite right or have quite the facial muscles she’d expect, but they sure emote like humans do. After Softouch’s terror wave, she’d stomped into the ship and the semi-adults had all marched out. Sarah doesn’t blame them, considering her insides are still shivering. The six of them lounge out around the door, chattering at each other. They remind her of kids waiting for a class to start, bored and aimless. Their black uniforms are all fairly the same with the same markings, but different colors. There’s one in a rusty red, three brown, a green not unlike Ironclaw, and the last has dark blue. She figures it for a standard uniform with some kind of color ranking. Makes sense the way the others defer a bit to the one in blue.

“I figure that one for leadership.” Looking back, Sarah gives a nod to Lt. Mason as he steps up with her. There’s a tightness to the corners of his mouth but considering what he’s having to do, she isn’t surprised. Jermaine should really be ashamed of himself, foisting off talking to the military leaders onto him instead of sucking it up and doing it himself.

“She’s certainly got the straight back for it,” Sarah observes neutrally.

Lt. Mason smirks a little. “Yeah, someone oughta pull out the pole stuck up her ass. Say, you think they have rectums?”

“Somehow I doubt the question has come up.” Sarah shakes her head, folding her arms across her chest as she watches two of the semi-adults, one brown and the red, start shoving each other. It’s too obviously familiar and harmless but the blue one grumbles at them and they stop, giving her exasperated looks. “Definitely an authority figure.”

“I’m not sure about that.” Both Sarah and Lt. Mason look back to see their resident sociologist finally show his pretty face (and he is pretty. If Sarah were thirty years younger, she might… Well, she’d still have been uninterested, but at least then she wouldn’t feel guilty about appreciating the scenery.) He gives them a tight smile, sweating under the high sun already and even that looks like something out of a modeling shoot the way his dark hair slides down his face until he shoves it messily back. “Look at those uniforms. They’re all identical besides the colors, but both Softouch and Ironclaw were free to wear whatever they wanted. The colors are probably significant, but I’m not reading it as militarily. Probably social.”

“Like castes?” Lt. Mason gives a little hum. “Maybe countries of origin?”
“Could be, but I’m leaning towards castes.” Noe sets his bag down and rolls his shoulders a bit. “Did they have to pick the middle of nowhere? I’m going to melt.”

“At least they didn’t set down around a major metropolitan area,” Lt. Mason grumbles. “We’re having enough trouble keeping the locals back far enough they can’t see anything. Do you know how hard it is to keep midwesterners from rubbernecking?”

Noe lifts one thick brow. “I have no idea what that term is and frankly, I’m comforted by that.”

Sarah snickers and then glances towards what had been her tent. She hasn’t heard screaming or yelling (surprising, considering that the Karkat alien is in there) but it hasn’t been long. Curiosity keeps growing stronger and stronger until—Well. She is the foremost expert on the alien language right now. They might have Dave here but surely she could be useful.

The flaps aren’t secured. That’s as good as an invitation.

“If I can interrupt,” Sarah says, peeking through the tent opening like a little kid spying on the cool teens. While she finds the whole flat footed thing to be pretty hilarious on Jermaine’s face, it’s probably not doing much to impress the aliens. Ironclaw, the saint, isn’t even smiling but there is a suspicious crinkle to the edge of his green eye. The little alien, Karkat, is still giving Dave the stink eye.

“You already have,” Jermaine mutters sourly, “but by all means, continue.”

She slips in and pats his shoulder, taking the invitation at face value because why not. At least seeing her makes Ironclaw perk up a bit, as much as he ever emotes. She figures he prefers having someone around who might be able to figure out his babble without inserting their own interpretations. Like Dave. Honestly, if all of Egbert’s children could do this job, why was he nominated in the first place?

“Before we get into the nitty gritty of all this, have we established just how you managed the disappearing act? I’m fairly sure that’s something we need to know,” Sarah asks, pinning Dave with a stare she hopes is as potent as her dad’s always was.

“We’re just that awesome?” he says, predictably brushing it off, but Sarah stares at him harder.

“So, long story but my buddy Jade has space powers.”

Sarah blinks once, slowly, to show how little she believes that. Dave doesn’t look away or wilt or so any signs of lying.

“That’s not even the weirdest power, dude,” Dave points out, like that makes anything more believable.”

Karkat grumbles something and Dave nods sagely. Sarah catches a few familiar sounds but she hadn’t listened to nearly enough of the alien speech to get it, especially when Karkat seems to be speaking a different dialect than Ironclaw does. Timeframe defined, likely. Ironclaw is obviously substantially older than Karkat.

“What is the weirdest power?” Jermaine asks. His voice is tight like he’s holding back some kind of tirade. Sarah really worries about his blood pressure sometimes.

“Tough question. Hey Karkat, what do you think is weirder: Roxy appearifying generic objects or Jane’s super strength?” Karkat narrows his eyes, jaw working, and then says a couple words that have Dave nodding again. “Oh man, you are totally right. John’s whole turning into wind thing trumps weird levels.”
Turning... into wind. Sarah slow blinks again but Dave isn’t even looking at her, much less does he seem to care how strange all this sounds.

“Do you have any of these... abilities?” Good boy, Jermaine, keeping up with things while Sarah has a void moment.

“Duh.” Dave deigns to glance Jermaine’s way, brows lifting just barely over the edge of his ridiculous sunglasses. “I control time.”

*Time?* Thing is, the utter surety of the statement makes her want to believe it.

“What other abilities does your group possess?” Jermaine’s got that harder edge to his voice now, the one that means this is getting serious. Sarah’s glad he took over because she’s still caught on time.

“Well, Rose sees the future. Jake’s got some kind of hope thing but hell if I know how it works because mostly it doesn’t. He’s got performance issues and it does happen all the time.” The kid smirks like he’s told a very good joke. “Dirk does this thing with souls but idek. It’s pretty boring.”

Karkat says something and Sarah managed to catch a couple words they’ve figured out mean “friends” and “yes/positive”.

“Oh, yeah, totally forgot them,” Dave says in a way that makes her think he really hadn’t. “Tavros talks to animals and murderclown’s got the chucklevoodooos like Softouch.”

Karkat shouts, Dave shrugs. “Yeah, okay. I’ll stop calling him that. One with the therapeutic healing process, it’s me.”

Another troll with Softouch’s terror wave. Sarah shivers a little and glances to Jermaine. The skin around his eyes is tight and his brows furrowed up, denting between them. They hadn’t really expected something so extensive and considering who the information is coming from, there’s a good chance that Dave is exaggerating but he hasn’t outright lied to them yet, as far as they know.

“You’re being very forthcoming suddenly,” Sarah observes and Dave shrugs again.

“We had a family meeting and decided it was best to come clean.” He pauses, then adds, “Well, some of us decided that and the rest just didn’t give a shit because we didn’t care in the first place so why care now. Do I care? Nah, son, it’s-”

“Quite enough.” Jermaine rubs the bridge of his nose a moment and then regards them. “I think it would be best if we concentrate on setting certain rules for more… formal meetings to take place.”

Dave looks to Karkat and Ironclaw, who both nod their agreement once he’s translated, and then the lot of them get into the nitty gritty Sarah had interrupted earlier. She’s a little surprised Jermaine didn’t probe for more information on the strange and varied powers, but something in the tightness of his shoulders and the determined set of his jaw tells her that that particular conversation is only being postponed.
They spend several hours deciding on specific rules for the first contact negotiations. Much as he seems intent on disrupting things with his inanity, Dave still dutifully translates and considering how little Karkat makes faces at him, he’s doing it fairly well. He’s still irritating but at least he’s making an effort.

Jermaine’s been taking extensive notes throughout, both on the specifics of the agreements and his observations on the two Trolls themselves. Karkat Vantas may be brash and loud spoken but he has a proud sort of sincerity to him, an earnest desire to be heard and listened to. It reminds Jermaine of several children he’d encountered over the years, all sure of their words but unsure of their status. He also observes that Karkat speaks far more than Ironclaw, who only answers when specifically addressed or to add a little to Karkat’s replies. It’s so very confusing to watch but Karkat had been introduced with the title of Chief Ambassassin (and isn’t that a charming word) while Ironclaw was called Captain. Ironclaw exuded experience and competence, absolutely no reason to be passed over for a child. Another tick of the troll society Jermaine will have to find out about later.

Most of the discussion has been benign. The Trolls have their own food stores to last them a while but are voracious omnivores and resistant to issues with every other culture’s food that they’ve tried so it’s likely they will have no problems with human foods. As far as they know, nothing about the Trolls is toxic to humans (a fact Dave agrees with by ridiculously proud personal experience). The Trolls will not have weapons on their person outside of their ship. The humans will not intrude upon the ship without strict permission and the army will in fact maintain the distance they already set up. Softouch is not to wander without Ironclaw’s escort considering her abilities to spook even the most calm of humans to abject terror but Ironclaw absolutely refuses to bar her from the proceedings entirely (though he does seem regretful of this).

They’re working out details for the first official presentation to the full UN when there’s a commotion outside. Jermaine pokes his head out the tent flap just in time to see John Egbert fully materialize out of thin air with one of the Troll juveniles, a wave of wind emanating out from them as their feet settle on the ground. For a moment, Jermaine wonders if this is part of John’s abilities or if Jade had a hand in it and then realizes the ridiculousness of his life and stops before he can get too far into speculation.

The Troll is small, thin, and her hair is cropped at her shoulders, messy around her pointed horns. She turns to face him, eyes masked by her bright red glasses, but she smirks and shoves John to get his attention. He looks up, all the guilelessness of childhood, and then waves. Jermaine does not wave back but he does gesture for them to join him.

“Sup,” Dave says as they come inside, tilting his head to one side. “Did Daddy send you in to
make sure I wasn’t fucking this up?”

The Troll giggles, high pitched and jarring. “Come on, cool kid. We both know the progenitor has better things to do.”

“Why can’t you guys just call him Dad?” John whines. Karkat mutters something disparaging and John shrugs his shoulders with ample teenage drama. “Yeah, I know you guys don’t do that, but still.”

“As amusing as this is,” Jermaine says, straightening to his full height, which the children do not react to in the least, “may I ask why the two of you are visiting?”

“Sure, you can ask.” John’s grin is obnoxious but after a moment, he adds, “Terezi has to do a thing.”

“A... thing?”

“Oh, stop worrying. It’ll be fine,” the Terezi troll says, waving her hand at him dismissively as she steps up to where Ironclaw and Karkat are sitting. Some of her bravado lessens when she meets Ironclaw’s eyes, but he simply nods to her to continue. Karkat throws a question at her like a rock and she just snickers. She reaches out to plant her hand firmly on his forehead and then starts reaching for the adult but pauses. He waits expectantly and then murmurs something quietly. Terezi seems to draw up her strength and then reaches to touch him as well.

Jermaine has no idea what she could be doing but both John and Dave seem relaxed and neither Karkat or Ironclaw look alarmed either. He’s willing to wait and see this through.

It isn’t overt. There’s no fancy light show or sudden revelation. After several minutes, Terezi lets go of both of them and them nearly falls over but Dave and John are there to catch her and help her to Karkat’s now vacated chair. Jermaine has no doubt that something has been done but he has no idea what until Ironclaw opens his mouth and perfect, unaccented English spills out.

“Vantas, go to the ship and inform Cadet Raftin that we will require meal type six-teal immediately,” he says, peering at Terezi’s paler face, and Karkat jumps up to run past Jermaine and out of the tent.

She tries to wave him off with a weak “I’m fine” but just the act of turning her head seems to make her dizzy. Ironclaw does not seem at all impressed.

She’d given him the power of tongues, or at least an understanding of English. Jermaine stares at them, at how unsurprised John and Dave are that this was at all possible, and forces himself to take a slow, calming breath. This kind of power could have overwhelming implications for humanity, could open honest communication between all groups and foster fellowships through shared language-

He is getting ahead of himself.

“Are you able to understand me?” he asks and Ironclaw looks up with a blink.

“I am.” Ironclaw blinks again and then his mouth quirks a bit at one side. “This will be so much easier. Thank you, Pyrope.”

“You’re welcome, sir.”

Ironclaw pauses and then gives her an askew look. “I’m unsure of what the current school feedings may teach but I don’t require you to defer to me regardless of your age. You are still
Terezi lifts her head enough to study his face, like she’s unsure of his truthfulness. And that is perhaps one of the most unnerving things about the Trolls. Every one of the juveniles and semi-adults seems convinced that the adults are dangerous. Ironclaw has shown no propensity for violence but the scars on his face seem to inform a violent altercation, if not a violent lifestyle. Jermaine does believe it of Softouch but Ironclaw continues to show himself as nothing but calm, collected, and rational.

And what on earth did he mean by teal? What could the word teal mean if it means Ironclaw apparently expects no undue respect from her. A social caste, perhaps? If Terezi were of more social import...

“Okay,” Terezi says finally, apparently closing the matter.

Jermaine wants to ask more but then Karkat barges his way back in, snarling about how slow Cadet Raftin is as he shoves a platter of Troll food in front of Terezi. It’s enough of a disruption that Jermaine decides to table the matter for now, but it does go into his notes.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Warning for likely very terrible science because I am totally not a biologist. Also cribbing from this theory because it's neat.

Prompt: ANON: If you're not too busy, are you still doing prompts for So It's Going? I was wondering how the first contact team is going to find out about the Hemospectrum. Is Rose going to tell them when she switches with Dave? Or are they going to let it be a surprise?

Yui has blood samples from all six of the semi-adults and Ironclaw now (she is not quite curious enough to override her terror of Softouch). They are all precisely marked with an approximation of each Troll’s name and the date of collection. She oversaw each donation herself except for Ironclaw’s so she knows this isn’t a joke.

They are four different colors. Yui has no idea how they can be the same species. The consistency isn’t even the same, though the red and brown samples are more similar to each other than any of the others to one another. The results after centrifugation are even more telling of this, so completely different in make up that she almost discounts them entirely. The ratios of blood cells to plasma to buffy layer are ridiculously varied between samples, though the three brown samples are fairly uniform. She’s not sure what to take from that just yet but she has about three pages of notes and ideas, each crazier than the next.

The red sample is the closest to what she’d expect from an earth mammal, which the aliens definitely are not. When she’d been told the aliens were insects, she expected to see something like hemolymph but she finds red blood cells of a kind and can’t wait until the full protein analysis is finished because she is ready to know everything. She sees a white blood cell equivalent she’d expected but in higher concentration than earth animals or humans even when fighting off a virulent illness. The Trolls appear to all be healthy so she can only conclude that it’s part of a very powerful immune system poised and ready to defend against any invader. The amount of germs and airborne pathogens they were likely being introduced to had to be staggering but it seemed Trolls had evolved well to handle it. She wonders if any pathogen would actually put a dent in a Troll.

It’s probably a good thing for diplomatic relations since it’d be pretty bad if their first contact event was marred by the common cold, but also a little worrisome about what kind of environment created something so hard to kill. Worse yet, it means they’re going to have to be very careful with skin-to-skin contact, despite Dave Strider’s apparently very physical relationship with the Troll Karkat, because it’s likely that pathogens carried by the Trolls could be a very serious problem to the human population. She wonders if this “godtier” thing is part of what’s protected the Egbert children thus far from any kind of dangerous contamination.

Not a comforting though. Yui shakes her head a little, trying not to think about end of the world movies her brother likes so much, and focuses on her notes.

When she turns her attention to the brown samples, that’s when things start getting weird. The cells are brown, for one, but they also stop acting just like red blood cells. Oh, they’re definitely
still oxygen carriers but… She’s not sure. There’s something else going on. About the only thing she’s pretty certain on is that there’s a hemoglobin equivalent in the red and brown samples and that there must be something else in the others.

“Hemocyanin,” Henok says suddenly, startling Yui out of her curious thoughts. “Except for the red sample, these cells all contain hemocyanin.”

“Are you sure?” Yui gets up, heading over to look at his laptop screen. “How- That’s not just hemocyanin.”

“No. The red and brown samples have both hemocyanin and hemoglobin. Ironclaw’s had trace amounts of hemoglobin but not much.”

“How does that- This makes no sense. How is this the same species?”

Henok hums quietly and then clicks up a different part of his notes. “I’m more interested in why the second green and blue samples don’t contain hemoglobin at all. And what this other protein is. I haven’t identified it yet.”

Strange enough that the Trolls had something so very easily recognized as hemoglobin and hemocyanin in the first place despite evolving on an entirely different planet. Did this mean the proteins were more or less universal for oxygen requiring species, even outside of Earth? Had they stumbled upon a fascinating constant for the evolution of life?! Her heart beat fast. She was going to write so many papers.

She takes a moment to keep herself from screeching excitedly in Henok’s ear. Thankfully, Theodora gives a sudden tap on her desk to get their attention and waves them over.

“Oh,” Henok murmurs as he squints at Theodora’s work and then signs to her, -Good job.-

Theodora beams and Yui just kind of stares at the screen. Hemerythrin; the aliens now make even less sense because between the six samples, they have three different oxygen transport proteins in different quantities and this at least explains the color differences but how had this species ever evolved such a thing in the first place?! They haven’t had enough time to run a full battery of tests on the samples but even this much is absolute lunacy. Evolution didn’t work this way- blood didn’t work this way!

“How is this one species?” Yui marvels, delighted even past her shower of confusion and the constant drone in her head that none of this could be real.

“Convergent species evolving to look the same and crossbreeding through some minimal compatibility?” Henok considers aloud, and then adds, “It makes as much sense as anything else.”

-Biological uniqueness taken to a ridiculous level-, Theodora signs almost flippantly, grinning.
-Controlled breeding to foster high variety levels and combat genetic illness?- Yui hums. “Oh maybe just the opposite. Maybe controlled breeding to create and maintain specific traits that in turn determine the protein mixes. Noe did say something about social castes visible in the behavior of the semi-adults. If they were maintaining specific breeding guidelines to keep up the colors, it would explain how they became so very specific in make up and would have informed how their society formed…”

“Except Jade Harley mentioned these ‘mother grubs’,,” Henok reminded them and that just makes both Yui and Theodora huff. It had been obvious through Jade’s descriptions that the mother grubs bore no resemblance to the Trolls at all but were essential to their breeding. “Consider: highly diverse male drones with a single queen all were biologically compatible with to maintain
both genetic uniqueness but also continue the propagation of the species by maintaining half the genome’s integrity.”

Yui’s brain goes into overdrive even as Theodora wonders, -Would that imply that the female Trolls are potential queens or non-reproductive workers?-

“It makes sense,” Yui murmurs without looking at either, staring far away as her final thesis rises to the forefront of her mind. “They could also be the result of asexual parthenogenesis while the males are from actual mating.”

-Do you think their Empress is a mother grub? - Theodora pauses, considering, then emphases, -The mother grub?-

“I would highly doubt this,” Henok murmurs after a moment of thought. “It would be exceedingly difficult for one individual queen to produce for the entire species. She is, perhaps, mother grub for a select social sect but I would find it more likely that she does not breed at all or only sparingly.”

“There must be multiple mother grubs, multiple brooding locations.” Yui tabs her fingers on the edge of her hip. “I wish the Trolls knew more English.”

Henok snorts. “I would prefer the opportunity for more than the most light examination of at least one individual.”

Theodora pats his shoulder consolingly, and then the three of them go back to their analyses, minds running circles around the possibilities they had no real way to test. At least not yet.
The juvenile trolls disappear while Karkat is in mid word. John blinks, startled, and then mutters out, “That had better not be Jade because-” before he, too, vanishes. Jermaine gives the space the three of them used to occupy a sour look. He’s only slightly mollified that Ironclaw has a touch of discomfort in his posture as well.

“Today’s meeting appears to be over,” Ironclaw says with a dry tone. Then he starts rising from his chair but pauses as Jermaine gestures for him to stay.

“There’s no reason not to continue the work ourselves now that we can understand one another,” Jermaine points out, not wanting to waste the time.

Ironclaw stares for a few quiet moments, unblinking in the odd way Jermaine has observed of him from the different meetings. He’s not sure if Trolls simply require less lubrication to their eyes or if it is some kind of intimidation tactic, but he’s noticed the semi-adults barely blinking as well.

“The Chief Ambassassin is not present,” Ironclaw murmurs at last, quiet and respectful but with a stern undertone that brooks no disagreement. “It would not be appropriate to continue without him.”

Jermaine straightens further in his seat, considering that. “Understandable. Perhaps we can discuss a few points and leave them for his decision once he’s returned.”

“…That is more suitable,” Ironclaw agrees and settles again. “Shall we continue detailing your cultural traditions for the presentation to your leaders?”

That’s what’d they’d been in the middle of when the children disappeared, but Jermaine finds himself hesitating to get right back to work. He has a golden opportunity to get some insight into the situation and he decides not to let it get away.

“Yes, of course,” he says, “but first: a question, if it wouldn’t be too rude.”

Ironclaw inclines his head to allow it and Jermaine considers the best way to ask.

“Chief Ambassassin Vantas appears to be… quite a bit younger and less experienced than you,” he begins politely. “I don’t understand why you are not leading this.”

There’s a pause and then Ironclaw’s mouth twitches on one side but Jermaine isn’t sure if it’s a suppressed smile or grimace. “The Empress wanted it that way.”

“Is Vantas her child? A family contact? An heir-” Jermaine pauses because suddenly Ironclaw just seems very, very confused only to then sigh.
“I continually forget that your race are pack mammals,” Ironclaw says with a vague sort of exasperation. “Are you aware that Humans are the only sentient mammal species we have encountered in the known universe?”

Jermaine blinks a moment. “I was not. We haven’t met any other sentient race than you.”

“This may be a good thing,” Ironclaw shakes his head a little, reaching up to rub at the base of one horn like it may be sore. “The Empress has whims I do not question. Vantas amuses her. She appears to have plans to add him to her personal flay squad or perhaps keep him around as entertainment. I have seen it before, but admit this is the first time she has been at all interested in the affairs of a juvenile in the several millennia of history still available to us.”

*Several millennia-* Jermaine pauses his own racing thoughts. It is impossible that a single Troll could live that long. Ironclaw must be speaking of the post, not the person.

Settling himself, Jermaine considers what Ironclaw has said and what he hasn’t. The way he describes the situation seems to imply some kind of haphazard nature. That isn’t comforting for the leader of a powerful and technologically advanced spacefaring species. Still, it is interesting that the Empress apparently had no doings with young Trolls. Did she take no part in raising them, too busy with her duties? Was the role of Empress an appointment by a suitable adult when the previous Empress had died and the replacement was not groomed by their predecessor?

That did make him wonder more about Vantas and just how he’d managed to become so loved by the Empress. A high ranked family line, perhaps… He didn’t realize he’d said it aloud until Ironclaw gives a sudden snort, as if what Jermaine has implied is absolutely ridiculous.

“Vantas is the lowest of us,” Ironclaw corrects but not unkindly, “a mutant. Were this any other day, he’d have been done the moment anyone knew of him. The Empress decided differently.”

“Mutant?” Vantas looked no different than the other children. He has no idea what might constitute as a mutation on him. The small horns, perhaps?

“They are not common and generally culled before first pupation.”

Jermaine’s heartbeat stalls a moment. “Culling. As selected from the general population…?”

“As removed from the breeding pool permanently.” Ironclaw studies him, considering his next words very carefully. “Mutants have short lifespans and usually lack the physical prowess the Fleet requires. Their blood is unsightly and it was decreed long ago that they be culled upon discovery after an uprising. There is little a mutant can contribute genetically.”

Jermaine wonders why he’s so surprised that bigotry exists in an alien people. It makes sense that there be some manner of it with a sentient species. Any people sufficiently advanced enough to be a cohesive group will experience something of the like. Still, a history of some uprising that had changed their politics so much… He wants to get his hands on their histories, see what shaped them, but now is not the time.

“And you are opposed to his appointment-” Jermaine begins but Ironclaw gives a short shake of his head.

“I do not dislike mutants. It is wasteful to cull them out of hand. A simple ban on their contributions to the slurry will suffice to keep the blood unmuddled.” Ironclaw leans back a bit in his chair, tipping the front legs slightly off the floor. “The Empress appears to have become more open to their presence if Vantas is any indication. My opposition of his appointment is simply that he had no training in ambassassination. I would have preferred at least a sweep to mentor him...
myself before we left for Earth but the Empress sent us immediately. As it was, I had only a handful of perigees along the way. He did not have time to cultivate a proper understanding of the position and is lesser for it.”

It sounds reasonable. Jermaine feels some of his tension uncoil. A leader with seemingly flighty continence could be spell trouble in the future but at least now he understood a little of what was going on. The Trolls very obviously worshipped their leader if they were willing to turn blind eyes on her more random decisions and continue to follow unquestioningly. If they were, by his understanding, willing to destroy “unsightly” children by her order. He’s not sure when this “first pupation” occurred but he doubted it was very long before they were born. His stomach clenches a moment. He may not like children but he could not accept the flippant way Ironclaw had discussed their deaths. Even his dislike of it had been simply due to waste, not due to any visual moralistic disagreement.

It is another culture, Jermaine reminds himself. He has no right to judge it without knowing more about them.

“You do not have to hold yourself back,” Ironclaw murmurs and Jermaine wonders just how transparent he must be at the moment. “I understand our ways must be strange and upsetting to you. It is the same for us. We monitored your broadcasts once we came into range and find your people to be… fractured and unpredictable. It will take time for our two peoples to understand one another.”

Jermaine nods, relieved that the sentiment is shared. “It will. I believe we will, someday.”

“As do I,” Ironclaw agrees and then smiles, soft with no teeth. “You were well chosen for this.”

“There are days I doubt it, but I thank you none the less.” Jermaine glances to his notes, thumbing down to where they’d left off before. “Thank you for indulging my curiosity. Let’s continue with the cultural traditions.”

It’s nearly sundown before Ironclaw goes back to his ship. Jermaine spends a while on his own, considering the new information and what it might mean for all parties involved.
Prompts:

moonaf asks: So if the humans are figuring out about the hemospectrum, at what point so they start asking where all the trolls fall and learn that 'Vantas' isn't on it?

madamehardy asks: This is kind of a silly ask, but somebody we haven’t met yet’s perspective on the kids? (Some UN observer flown in, maybe?)

The thing Noe has to keep reminding himself of is that as alien as they look, the Trolls have shown themselves to act remarkably human. And by the same token, as human as they act, they are still aliens.

Case in point: Ironclaw is careful to keep continuous, direct eye contact with whoever he’s speaking to. It is a behavior Noe has seen on every tape but he is still not sure if it’s just polite attention or some kind of intimidation tactic. Seems likely to be the former, considering Ironclaw has made no other outwardly aggressive moves, at least none Noe has recognized as such, but… Different culture. Vastly different culture.

“So, the colors on their uniforms corresponding to their blood colors, this is purposeful,” Noe restates for the sake of the recording.

Ironclaw inclines his head in a way that might seem more dangerous if his horns were front facing and gestures towards the olive green striping his clothes. “It would not be appropriate to hide one’s blood color. Not disclosing it often leads to… difficult social situations.”

Well. There’s a confirmation of blood color based social castes. Noe notes it and then asks, “Would it be rude to ask you what your social standing is?”

“No. It is obvious to other Trolls.” Ironclaw straightens himself with a rare spark of pride. “I am a mid-level olive. Average, unremarkable. Perhaps a little darker than is attractive but my past quadrants haven’t minded it.”

Interesting. And it ties in to what had been observed before, such as with the juvenile Terezi. There are some definite politeness rules built into this system of theirs and the fact that they were expected to wear their color, proclaim their caste at all times, is fascinating. Even the way Ironclaw described himself is interesting as it seems to imply what is considered normal for his caste in general.

“And your crew, are they of lower blood castes?” he asks curiously.

“Three are of higher castes,” Ironclaw corrects gently, though he rolls the word in his mouth like he’s not entirely sure the full meaning of it (and that just makes Noe wonder a little more about his sudden ability to speak English). “This is not unusual in my division. We exist somewhat removed from the bulk of the Fleet.”

The way he says it, Noe is fairly sure there is only one fleet. He wonders if this might simply be
the way the Trolls think of their species, a single entity working towards a common goal, but it seems to be more. He has no doubt that the Trolls are heavily militaristic in general. Too many tiny details in their speech and behavior point to it at least for this crew, but… Noe’s gut tells him it’s the whole species even though that seems so very foreign. Perhaps it’s just his perspective as a member of a very fragmented species.

“Then on average, higher level blood castes take command positions?”

“Cold bloods live longer,” Ironclaw says with an odd kind of casualness. “All Trolls must show they have the skill to command, take the training for it, but cold bloods tend to have more time to do so.”

There’s more to that. Noe is certain there’s more. “Are you unusual?”

“Not exceedingly so, in terms of command.” Ironclaw’s lips twitch at one side and it seems to be amusement. Careful as his words just were, it almost sounds like Ironclaw must be strange in other ways. “Softouch is more unusual, I think.”

Noe considers the way Ironclaw had described “cold bloods” and hazards a guess, “A higher blood caste that listens to you?”

“I’m not certain she really does often enough to count,” Ironclaw says and- yes, that was humor at his own expense. Good to know. Ties in to what Noe’s already observed about his character. He keeps looking for some sign that Ironclaw is playing them but so far, it’s been on the level every time.

“You mentioned that certain castes live longer,” Noe rounds back, tapping it on his notes absently. “How much longer?”

“Softouch will nearly double my own lifespan.”

Noe blinks. He studies Ironclaw’s face but this isn’t a joke. “Double…?”

“Generally.” Ironclaw hesitates a moment, then says, “Humans all have the same blood, I have been told. No biological tiers.”

“We don’t,” Noe confirms, still just a little stunned. “How much shorter would a lower caste’s life be?”

“That depends on the caste.” Ironclaw settles back in his chair a little, gathering himself. “My helmsman will have near the lifespan I have lived. Cadet Raftin may only have half that.”

With such huge differences in lifespan, Noe can see how their castes must have initially formed and then been reinforced as time went on. It’s still frankly ridiculous how much of a difference that makes but he’ll leave it to Yui’s team to figure out the biological side. He’s not stepping in that even if they paid him twice what he’s already making in consulting fees.

“How old are you?”

“I am nearing fifty-one sweeps,” Ironclaw says quietly. “It is longer than many expected me to live.”

They don’t know “sweep” as a measurement just yet but Noe is more intrigued with the second bit. “Are you long lived for your caste?”

Ironclaw blinks, slow and deliberate. “I am on the far edge of it, certainly, but it has more to do
with my personality, I think.”

“Your… calm?” For a militaristic culture, that could be considered lacking-

“Oh, no,” Ironclaw snorts and his lips quirk again, obvious enough to be a smile this time. “I have a certain reputation that is not at all relevant to this mission.”

It is very definitely a gentle but firm refusal to speak more about it but now Noe is drenched with curiosity over what this reputation could be when Ironclaw had shown himself to be nothing but calm and collected. Maybe one of the juveniles that can speak English might tell him later.

“I’d like to get back to-” Noe starts but then shouting from outside makes him pause. That doesn’t sound good. He gets up, gesturing for Ironclaw to stay, and then pokes his head out the front of the tent.

On the far side of the encampment, the rough entrance, there’s far more people than Noe would expect to see. He can barely make out Jermaine’s tall figure in the middle of it, gesturing with sharp, angry movements. An older man in a uniform’s arguing with him and there are several vehicles lined up down the road. Noe doesn’t like this but he has no say in how the camp is run. He’s a consultant, here to do a specific job.

He sits back down and tries to ignore his growing dread, but it’s not five minutes later when one of the aids is coming in to tell them that Ironclaw must return to his ship immediately and that the entire operation is on indefinite hold.

“It was going too smoothly,” Ironclaw observes before he leaves and Noe can’t help agreeing.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Prompt:
  ciiriianan asks: "Prompt for "And so it's going" -- can we have some Softouch?"

“What the- where did they come from?!?”

Mason twists around from the translations he’d been going over for the upcoming presentation to General Pain-In-His-Ass Lee (because the man had decided the entire UN team weren’t to be trusted and told him to even though this isn’t his fucking specialty and why the hell can’t Sarah do it) and looks at the monitor. Two kids, older teens, stand near the still standing UN camp (since most of the UN folks had refused to leave so far) but Mason doesn’t recognize either of them. One’s a shorter girl with dark hair and the other a tall boy with blond. And-

“What’s on his back? Some kind of pole- is that a sword?!?”

“Sit on it,” Mason orders before anyone can get the word out to the one person he really wouldn’t want to get missed up in this just yet, loyalties be damned. “I’m going.”

“We can’t just-”

“Look, I’m pretty sure those are more Egbert kids. They’ve been popping in and out for a while now and I am not starting an incident with them. I know you guys are new to the situation and haven’t seen any of the truly bizarre shit those kids can do first hand, but trust me when I say it’s not something we want to rile up.” Mason stuffs his papers back into their folder and clips it closed again. “Give me five minutes to smooth this over, give them the heads up that negotiations are halted, and then we’ll report.”

He gets a few unsure looks for it but no one moves to go against him, so Mason figures they’ll play along for now. He heads out, cursing under his breath. They haven’t seen any Egbert kids in the three days since the negotiations stopped and he kind of hoped they’d stay clear. The way things are going, the stuff he’s heard, he wouldn’t be surprised if some kind of manhunt got started to bring them in - and the juvenile trolls with them, too.

The kids are moving towards the alien ship when they spot him and stop. Mason notes the way the boy’s posture changes, his stance becoming more solid and ready. Kid’s got some kind of martial training but who knows what kind or how much and if he even needs it with the freaky powers thing. He’s still going to play this nice and easy.

“What excuse me,” he greets when he gets in range of them. “I know you probably haven’t heard but the negotiations with the aliens are kind of on hold right now and we really can’t have anyone going up to them right now.”

The kids look at one another and then back to him, then the girl takes a step forward.

“Hello, we haven’t met yet,” she says politely, smiling in a way that reaches her eyes even if it’s obvious she doesn’t mean it. “I’m Jane Crocker.”
She offers her hand and it’d be rude not to take it so he does. “Lt. Abraham Mason. Nice to meet you but you kids really need to clear out.”

“We need to see Ironclaw,” the boy insists quietly, his mouth set in an unhappy line.

“No one’s talking to Ironclaw right now. Orders from way up. We’re not allowed in the ship and they’re not allowed out.”

“It is my understanding, sir, that neither of us are members of any military or other organization,” Jane says almost sweetly and then her grip tightens to nearly bone crushing levels. Mason barely bites back a shout as he stares at their hands and then to her still smiling face. Shit, this is the one (of many?) with super strength. “We would like to do this the easy way.”

“Look-”

“I think you’d better listen to her,” the boy says.

“We have vital information to give Ironclaw,” Jane continues without letting him go or letting up on the pressure, “and would like to make sure that no one sparks a war with the Trolls.”

“Kid, that’s exactly what we’re trying to-”

“I don’t think you’re listening, bless your heart.” She’s still smiling but it’s gotten sharp, flinty, and she leans further into his space. Despite being pretty short, she’s kind of stupidly good at intimidation and wow, Mason’s not sure he can feel his fingers anymore. “We’re going to speak with Ironclaw now. We’re going to make sure the negotiations don’t get delayed. We’re going to make sure no one gets the Empress angry.”

There, that’s the first sign of something past her freakish confidence. She’s scared. She’s really scared of that. Mason swallows back a quickly formed lump in his throat. These kids know the Trolls, seem to know what they’re capable, and this one’s scared of it? Enough to risk fighting the entire US military? Even with the freaky powers no one’s explained yet? Fuck yes is he going to take that seriously.

“Just give me some time,” he tries. “Let me talk to some people, see if we can get clearance—where the hell did he go!?”

The boy isn’t at her side anymore. Mason jerks around and spots a shock of gold near the ship and then Jane gives his hand a squeeze and he feels his bones grind together. It nearly puts him to his knees before she lets go.

Everything happens very quickly. There’s a bunch of shouting and he belatedly realizes someone must have alerted the fucking general because the camp is now overrun with armed idiots who have no idea what the aliens are really like and sometimes Mason really hates his branch. His head clears quickly without Jane crushing his hand (and wow, that is going to bruise like a bitch, he can’t even close it right now) and he takes in the sword kid, who now has the sword in his hands like this is the end of some kind of samurai movie and he’s about to single handedly take down the bad guys once and for all, surrounded on three sides. The kid doesn’t look at all intimidated by the sheer amount of weapons pointed his way. Mason wants to knock some sense into him, Jesus Christ.

“Call your friend off,” he hisses at Jane, who at least has the decency to look slightly worried. “He’s going to get himself killed.”

“He won’t,” she says but she straightens her shoulders and starts walking his way. There’s a sudden redirect of some sights her way and Mason bites down on the string of swearing he’d like
to let loose as he goes after her.

“Nobody shoot,” Mason barks out and hopes to hell they actually listen to him. He’s maybe spent too much time with the UN to be credible right now. He turns to the kid, watches his face twitch a bit and figures he’s probably looking at him now. “Put the sword down.”

“Get out of the way,” he counters, grip tightening on the hilt.

“Dirk-” Jane starts with a sigh but she’s kept from saying more because someone pushes their way through the line and- Shit.

“What the hell is going on here?” General Lee snarls, zoning right in on Mason and the sword kid- Dirk, he guesses. “Who are- these are Egbert children. Why haven’t they been contained?!”

Shit, shit, shit. Dirk’s immediately on even more alert and Jane’s gone tense next to him, but Mason honestly forgot there’s still standing orders to capture the kids and they’d just been kind of ignoring them for the sake of things-

And then the alien ship door opens. Mason jerks his head up and sees a flash of purple lines before suddenly everything just-

Twists.

He’s vaguely aware of going to his knees, of the others doing the same, of weapons dropping and someone crying, but what he’s caught with is a sudden shock to his chest, all tight and gripping his heart fit to burst. He’s shaking, breath caught in his throat because his heart is pounding too fast. His body wants to run but he can’t move because it’ll see him, it’ll find him-

And then training kicks in and he’s got his weapon in hand. He can barely see but zones in on the color. The bad color, the- He has to kill it and he can barely hear his weapon fire over the blood rushing in his ears but-

There’s an electric sizzle and explosive sounds but no explosions and then the terror wave breaks. Mason’s vision clears almost immediately and he sees a last few bullets smash harmlessly against some kind of invisible force field and the air is alive with the smell of discharged powder and ozone.

The kids are gone. In the doorway, he sees Softouch on the ground, snarling and clicking and angry with Ironclaw and the blue marked semi-adult standing over her. They’re all wounded, he can see the bright spots on their bodies, but Ironclaw doesn’t seem to care. Built like a fucking shithouse is all Mason can think and he wants to laugh but he’s still shaking even as he gets himself to his feet.

He’s never freaked out like that before, not even the last time Softouch whammied them. He wants to throw up and the other guys look the same.

Ironclaw finally looks away from dressing down Softouch. He meets Mason’s eyes a moment, nods to him, and then turns to General Lee, who’s just now getting up and looks shaky and pale.

No one speaks. Then the ship door closes. The electric taste in the air doesn’t let up.

Mason is pretty sure this is going to be a huge fucking setback but hell if he knows how to fix it. General Lee turns on him like it’s somehow his fault and Mason is really not surprised that he’s being relieved of his weapon and escorted away at gunpoint.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Prompt - ANON asks: Prompt: Given that it was pretty common for Dave to run into other versions of himself in the game, how would poor Jermaine take it if he had to deal with two or more Daves because of time shenanigans?

Things may be at a standstill but that doesn’t mean Sarah’s team is idle. They haven’t left yet, despite the very pointed requests of the military and a few threats she chose to ignore, and they still have plenty of transcripts to go through. Before General Lee’s arrival, Ironclaw had given them an additional lexicon to add to the first as well as several documents from the Empress herself. There’s plenty to do.

And then Dave Strider appears out of nowhere right in the tent. She hasn’t seen him in nearly a week and has no business being used to this already but Sarah just gives him a nod. Then she pauses because the look on his face is… a little off.

“So this is going pear shaped.”

“That’s one way to describe it.” She likes the imagery.

“Yeah, so Rose can see the future and this is gonna go worse,” Dave says bluntly, mouth tight at the edges. “We’re pretty sure you all die.”

Sarah blinks. She considers that as she sets down her pencil and is very, very glad that Mohamed and Adanna are off getting some sleep right now. “You’re… pretty sure.”

“Yeah, the future isn’t like this static thing I guess. I dunno, not my department, time stays pretty constant and even when i fuck with it there are rules so, like… Eh. Anyway.” He shrugs, like it’s all a big joke, but the harried nature of his expression (or non-expression) doesn’t change. “Yeah. We’re pretty sure the whole camp is gonna be obliterated.”

Sarah’s first instinct is to laugh it off but she has seen some of what these kids can do. She does not discount the possibility of a future sight.

“You said the future isn’t static,” she latches onto. “You mean to change it.”

Dave watched her for a few seconds, inscrutable behind his glasses. “Yeah, kind of. I’m just phase one though.”

“Okay.” Sarah takes a slow, deep breath to calm her rising nerves. “What do we need to do?”

“Get the hell out of dodge.”

She’s not surprised. She just also knows that if she leaves, she likely won’t be able to come back. “I’m sorry, I’m afraid I can’t do that, Dave.”

It was supposed to be light, one of the only sci-fi jokes that have rubbed off on her through Adanna and Mohamed’s ridiculous love of the genre. The kid doesn’t lighten up at all.
“Kinda figured you’d say that,” Dave mutters, sticking his hands into his jean pockets. “Okay. So check it, here’s how it’s gonna go. Someone’ll do something phenomenally stupid and then Softouch will start killing people and then the Helmsman gets pissed off and kills more people and then the US government bombs this place with a nuke and everyone fucking dies. Will you leave now?”

“Softouch already-”

“No, that was just her getting pissy at so many idiots on her lawn. She’s like super grandpa with a shotgun right now, I guess. I dunno, Vriska said so and I guess we’re not counting her as an unreliable narrator right now, but Terezi stuck up for it so whatevs.”

Sarah narrows her eyes. “The trolls with you are in contact with the ship?”

“Kind of. Jade popped a few of them over yesterday to talk to Ironclaw since our guys won’t let any of us through.”

“Is Ironclaw still willing to go on with the peace talks, even after…”

Dave gives a roll of his eyes she can follow with the way his head rolls with it and then he gives a sigh that is not quite exasperated but swiftly approaching it. “Apparently, he’s impressed by the bullshit shock response of our warriors to get tazed with chucklevoodooos and shoot anyway.”

Well. It’s not a terrible reaction. Sort of.

“Is there a way to set up communication through your set to him?” comes from the door flap and Sarah nearly jumps out of her skin.

“Goddamn it, Jermaine, wear a bell,” she snarls as Jermaine slips through. He doesn’t even bother looking at her, setting his sights on Dave instead.

“Idek,” Dave says noncommittally, shrugging his shoulders.

“Consider it your patriotic duty.” Jermaine doesn’t even twitch at the look that gets him. “As a human being living on this planet.”

“I can breathe in space.”

Sarah glares at the kid for saying something so ridiculous (that might be actually true). Dave doesn’t even notice.

“Can Mr. Egbert?” Jermaine asks and somehow manages not to sound smug as Dave continues to stare him down.

“Touché,” he finally mutters. “Kay. I’ll talk to the fam, see what we can figure out.”

“Thank you.”

“This isn’t a promise,” Dave warns. “I signed no contracts. Can’t take me to court, won’t hold up.”

“I understand. I appreciate your cooperation.”

Dave nods but before he can disappear (however he does that,) a second Dave Strider shows up right next to him.

“Cut it short. Thugs found the warehouse,” the double says and then he’s gone as quickly as he’d
Dave’s lips press in a hard line. “Well, that’s my cue.”

“Wait-” But the kid’s already gone.

Sarah is maybe a little perturbed by how little that disturbed her. She looks at Jermaine and sees an answering feeling on his face.

“If they’re actually trying to capture those children, there will be casualties,” Jermaine predicts grimly, likely remembering the clusterfuck of when the UN tried. “And we can’t warn them without revealing that one of the children came here.”

Sarah sits back in her chair. This isn’t her thing. This is really not her thing. She’d never gotten on well with strategy games and just didn’t care about most anything military related, so she’s got no clue where to even start getting this resolved.

“Okay. What’s your call?” she asks and he sighs a little.

“Whether we warn them or not, the moment they find out what happened to their men, they’ll put us in holding,” Jermaine predicts. "It won’t matter if we had prior knowledge or not. They’ve already threatened it and they have full right to expel us from the country if they feel like it.”

“I’m a citizen,” Sarah points out and Jermaine nods.

“You are. And we’ll use that,” he says. “All they can do to you is send you back home.”

“They’ll tap my phone if they haven’t already. May have already infiltrated my computer at the university.”

“We’ll work around it. We have a duty to the world to find a way.”

Sarah rakes a hand back through her hair. “Well. It’s been a while since I participated in some good, old fashioned civil disobedience.”

(Somehow, I think it will come naturally to you.” Was that a smile she just almost saw? Oh, definitely.

“This is a little different than an AIDS march,” she points out, just to make a point. “They might try to pin me with treason.”

Jermaine’s brows furrow as he considers it. “I can’t directly petition you to expatriate. And you have family here.”

“My siblings are fine and their kids haven’t listened to a damn thing out of my mouth in years. They’ll be fine. I’ll skype them.” She gets up and tugs her shirt down from where it had rolled a bit. “Well, if I’m going to get out of the country, we’d better do this quick.”

“I’ll inform the General that we’re taking his generous offer to leave,” Jermaine says dryly and he doesn’t offer her his arm but she takes it anyway so she can pat his elbow while they walk out of the tent.

They find the others of their team that stubbornly stuck it out and start prepping to leave as Jermaine goes to talk with the General. Sarah hopes this goes smoothly. She glances at the alien ship and spies a little tell tale sparks of electricity signaling that the force field is still up.
She has no idea how this is going to go down. They manage to get permission to use a few vehicles to get all their equipment out and load them as fast as they can. Breakdown is swift and efficient. A few soldiers help, like they’re almost relieved to be rid of them.

They make it to the outer gates before some commotion starts in the center of the camp. Sarah stomps hard on the gas and floors it out. The other trucks follow her lead.

They’re not stopped. Sarah does not dare consider when their luck might run out.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

So I'm gonna be frank with you. The crap going on in my country right now is pretty scary and stupid and I agree with almost none of it. That's going to come across in the story because I need an outlet. This is not a fun chapter.

Any comments about this story being a fantasy and politics being inappropriate will be completely ignored. It's not something you can just sweep under the carpet and I'm not going to ignore the real world issues that POCs deal with when nearly all the cast of this story are POCs. That would be laughingly awful of me and insincere as a feminist. So, it's there. This is probably the most blatant chapter of it there will be but will be showing up a few mote times in the current story line. You have been warned.

Mohamed generally avoids airports when he can. Planes give him unpleasant feelings and the crowds within airports are even worse. He especially had no interest in going to the United States in the first place because there is a certain way that many Americans like to treat people that look like he does but there had been no way on Earth he’d miss out meeting real life aliens. A few nasty whispers are nothing to the prospect of xenolinguistic progress.

That is less a comfort on the trip out. One, because of the sad lack of aliens. Two, because the whispers are harder to ignore without excitement to dim his ears. They say things about Adanna, too, and that just makes him want to get rightfully angry but he knows from experience that this is a terrible idea.

Sarah apparently has no such control. “Excuse me, but are you aware that the stupid is leaking out of your mouth?!”

Mohamed kind of loves her. He’s also kind of terrified she’s going to start a riot. Adanna curls her hand in his, hanging closer than she usually prefers, and Mohamed gives her a little squeeze of solidarity. He wants to back Sarah up or maybe run away but he’s stuck still as a stone. His feet feel glued to the floor as Sarah continues dressing down a man that’s twice her size in front of a growing crowd that Mohamed’s not sure is on her side.

He wishes Jermaine would get back to their terminal right now.

There’s movement just at the edge of his vision and Mohamed flinches but it turns out to be an elderly lady with insane white curls escaping her colorful cap. She gives him a little smile, pale eyes not leaving his own, and offers an open container to him. Some kind of cookie fills it.

“They should be kosher, if that’s a worry,” she says brightly. Mohamed swallows a growing lump in his throat and takes one.

“Thank you,” he manages, his voice so tiny he barely hears it himself, but she just beams and offers one to Adanna, too.

“Where are you headed?” she asks and then proceeds to distract them for the next while with cheerful questions and little stories about a life of world traveling with her husband, “God rest his fool soul, that poor man never told me no when I wanted to see some place new.”
She eventually packs away the cookies (which were delicious) into her carry on satchel, and then says, “Well, I’ve kept here long enough. Need to get to my own terminal but I’d just kick myself if I didn’t give you folks a nice hello. May I touch your hand?”

Mohamed isn’t sure what she means to do but he holds out one of his and Adanna does the same after a moment. The woman clasps them both with a little squeeze that almost feels ritualized.

“Thank you for letting me prattle on like that. I know you young folks have better things to do.” She smiles with some self-deprecation but it almost feels like they’re being let in on a private joke. “Now don’t let those nitwits get you down. You’re worth ten of ’em. Just keep your heads held high and do the good work you’re here to do.”

“Thank you and we hope you have a safe trip home,” Adanna says when Mohamed’s too choked to do it. The woman gives them another squeeze and then toddles on her way past Sarah, patting her shoulder in passing. Sarah barely notices, too caught up in her glaring contest with some new person who got into her field of hearing. The crowd she’d amassed before is mostly gone, down to only a small handful of people, but they’re enough to keep Mohamed nervous.

He knows there are more good people in the world than those who wanted to spread pain but he feels very alone right now, even with Adanna holding his hand again.

By the time Jermaine gets back to them with the rest of the UN party, Mohamed’s wound tighter than a spring. Jermaine lifts a brow on spotting Sarah’s little staring match before he centers on Mohamed and Adanna.

“I seem to have missed something excited,” he says dryly, shaking his head a little.

“Oh, I don’t know. It doesn’t seem to be over,” Adanna murmurs. She’s not quite as warm or flippant as usual but Mohamed appreciates the attempt at normality.

“We should be boarding shortly,” Jermaine says, all business and class. Mohamed admires that about him. Jermaine wouldn’t be a total wreck just because some people said mean things about him. He’d probably be able to think up any number of responses on the spot to make the perpetrator look like an idiot. It shouldn’t but Jermaine’s presence actually makes Mohamed feel better. They have security, of course, but...

A man behind the one Sarah’s staring with says something loudly. It has a word in it that Mohamed’s more used to hearing with a modifier aimed at himself but this time, the people around them that have gone still and watchful look at Jermaine, like they figure he’s going to do something. Jermaine’s mouth has gone tight. He very noticeably does not look as Sarah starts snarling.

“It’s not worth the trouble. We have more important things to think about,” Jermaine says quietly, bringing Mohamed’s attention back to him. There’s a harder edge to it, something that commands his obedience even though Mohamed had no intention of making any trouble. (Not in this country. Not at all.)

By the time they get on the plane, Mohamed’s nerves are absolutely shot. Adanna shoves him at a seat next to a window and Mohamed melts into it. His hands are shaking. He’s not sure he can talk. Adanna stows their carry ons and sits down next to him. She hands over a ball with bright printing and he squeezes it while the other passengers settle around them.

First class means there aren’t many to crowd around them. No one here isn’t part of the UN delegation but they give Mohamed and Adanna a wide berth so he can calm down. He hears little snatches of conversations through the rush in his ears but lets the familiar voices just flow over
him. Mohamed sits and breathes and squeezes the ball.

“Conjugate être,” Adanna says suddenly and Mohamed jumps a little, looking at her sideways. She waits and then he starts fumbling through what he remembers. He’s never quite gotten the hang of French but he makes the effort. She guides him through other words spanning the languages he knows and they keep going through liftoff and into the air for a while.

They’re half way through the near fifteen hour flight to Geneva when there’s a commotion at the door to second class. Mohamed had been uneasily asleep but comes to the moment he hears distress. From the mutters he hears through the cabin, he’s not the only one.

There’s a brief scuffle at the entrance and then Dave Strider walks through looking as unruffled as ever. A flight attendant follows with him with red in her cheeks that seems to be more annoyance than embarrassment.

“Sir, you can’t-”

“It’s all right,” Yui says, yawning as she gives the flight attendant a little wave. “We know him.”

“Ma’am, he doesn’t have a-”

Yui waves at her again through another yawn, getting up to speak with her more quietly as Dave strolls further into the cabin without a care. Mohamed hears Jermaine call Dave to him quietly and then Adanna’s patting Mohamed’s arm to settle again.

“Later,” she mumbles sleepily. “That’s someone else’s headache.”

Mohamed slumps back against his pillow and pulls his thin blanket up over his shoulders again. He should be worried to see one of the Egbert kids here but instead he feels a strange sense of comfort. Things may have gone bad in the camp (and they aren’t really sure what the status there is right now) but at least the kids were still working with them. He lets this soothe him into relaxing again. There will be plenty to do when they land and he might as well sleep off the rest of the panic.

He hears the lazy sprawl of Dave’s words, unhurried and in love with how many words he could use to say very little, then Jermaine’s more restrained verses, and lets it take him the rest of the way into unconsciousness.
Chapter Notes

No prompt, none of them really fit.

As a side note for anyone confused, this is still Obama’s presidency (and he is not really behind the current snafu, that would be some movers and shakers in the obstructionist Congress and a general who is maybe working off the rails right now). Islamophobia and racism in America became noticeably more open after this November’s result but it was still pretty awful before. 2009 was not a great year in terms of either.

Okay, on with the show.

edit: ART! :D By the awesome VanillaCorpse! Go let her know how awesome it is!

Mason has been sitting for four hours alone and handcuffed to a table when the ruckus starts. The handcuffs are completely a symbol because they’d only cuffed one hand and it’s on the leg of a portable, easily toppled table. They’re banking on him being kind enough not to run. Or something. He spent the last four hours listening the the world outside the tent and making up guesses on what the sounds mean since they took away his gameboy when they tossed him in here.

So, he’s currently making up a story about some working up the courage to confess his undying love for his superior and trying not to think about how Jermaine and them left him behind as they boogied when the screaming starts. Mason doesn’t even consider not toppling the table to free himself. He doesn’t have his firearm but like hell is he going to just sit around in confinement when someone - several someones - needs his help. That’s why he’d gotten into the military in the first place.

The guy stationed to guard him is only twenty feet away when Mason hits the tent flap and then he’s catapulted into the air like a goddamn balloon, tossed back behind the tent. Mason doesn’t think about it, just grabs the gun he’d dropped, and then he’s racing over to the first amount of cover he can find. A couple boxes of supplies for the new troops isn’t much but it gives him somewhere to crouch while trying to figure out what’s going on.

He peeks around the edge and wishes he hadn’t. There’s a couple guys laying on the ground in positions he knows aren’t good, with a stillness that is pretty telling. Not much blood, but… You don’t come back from your head being turned like that. Mason grits his teeth and looks to the ship, but there’s only one Troll outside and it’s Ironclaw. It’s stupid how relieved Mason is that he’s not seeing Softouch but that goes away pretty damn quick because there are still dead guys on the ground and two more soldiers go flying in the span of ten seconds.

Ironclaw isn’t the one doing it. Mason’s sure of that because he’s got the rundown of who’s got powers and Ironclaw’s about on level with a human except for probably a higher level of strength. Plus, Ironclaw’s not even paying attention to the humans. He’s got his eyes on his ship, holding up his hands like he’s trying to placate it and if that weren’t just the weirdest fucking thing about this day…
This is going to go bad quick. Correction, this has already gone bad and it’s going to get worse.
Mason can hear boots hitting the ground, a lot of them, and he knows from experience what kind of response is gearing up. It’s not pretty. Ironclaw’s probably gonna die and then they’ll only have Softouch to negotiate with and that won’t go well. The Trolls will declare war on them and then promptly wipe the fucking floor with them. They’re tech is way too much for humans to handle with and Mason likes plucky-earthling-saves-the-world-from-aliens movies as much as the next guy, but that’s not how it’d go. The Trolls are space savvy and technologically advanced and if Softouch is anything to go by, they’re fine with killing the shit out of a lot of people.

Ironclaw, though. Ironclaw is a good guy who seems to just want them to be friends. He can’t die.

Mason sets his stolen gun down. Ironclaw can’t die so Mason’s going to do something incredibly stupid. He gets up out of cover and puts his hands up as he starts walking towards the alien ship.

The air is still sparking here and there from the force field, which is probably the only reason Ironclaw’s not dead yet, but he can hear through it. Ironclaw’s talking Troll, all growls and clicks and weird noises that do terrible things to Mason’s reptile brain bit. He squashes the need to run and just keeps walking forward until the static in the air is too strong to take another step. It feels like his entire body is trying to go to sleep and wake up, all pins and needles on every inch of his skin.

“Sir?” he calls and Ironclaw pauses, glancing over his shoulder. He looks calm, collected, weirdly put together.

“It is not safe for you to be so near when your people are agitated,” Ironclaw tells him because of course that’s what he’d say, he’s a goddamn good guy.

“Yes, sir, I’m not exactly the picture of sanity right now, but what the fuck happened here?”

Ironclaw sighs and the force field makes a sudden sparking noise, like it’s a thinking thing and incredibly pissed off.

“My helmsman took offense when several of your people attempted to circumvent the protection ring,” he says quietly, mouth going tight and brows furrowing. “She is young, easily agitated, and has decided to make her displeasure obvious.”

That is probably the most wordy way Mason’s ever heard someone say “rookie lost their head.”
He gives the ship a contemplative look.

“Hey!” he shouts, addressing it directly. “Lemme come meet you!”

The static increases suddenly, making his ears pop and his skin tingle so bad it hurts, and then decreases again. Ironclaw’s looking at him curiously but Mason just keeps standing there with his hands up. A ripple goes through the force field, golden with sparks of red and blue. The thing is massive when he can see it, which thankfully he can’t after the ripple.

Then the static dies down abruptly around him. Another ripple shows the field is still in place but right in front of him is a tear just big enough for him to step through. He takes a breath and then goes. The tear closes after him just as the main door of the ship opens.

“She wasn’t letting me back inside,” Ironclaw admits and Mason laughs, maybe just a little high and thready. His heart is going a million beats per second. What the hell did he think he was doing?

There’s someone shouting at him but sound is kind of weird through the force field, wow. It sounds like the asshole who probably got them into this mess. Mason pretends he can’t hear him.
and tries not to think about the court martial he’s going to be facing later. Maybe he can just move to Canada when this is over. He hears it’s nice there. Nah, he is not nearly nice enough to go to Canada, that is a terrible idea. He’d be a total ass and everyone would hate him. Maybe France? He could brush up on his French and make his mom proud. Or something.

Oh shit, his mom is going to kill him over this stunt. Doesn’t matter that he’s twice her size and a goddamn adult, she’s going to bust his ass. And his dad’s gonna get that disappointed look on his face, why the hell is he doing this…?

Somehow, Mason manages to follow Ironclaw into the ship to meet the mysterious (and murderous) Helmsman. He wonders what she’s like. He wonders if he should have maybe brought cake. Cake smooths everything over. Could Trolls eat cake? He doesn’t think the bio team had enough time to figure out allergies yet but oh man, what a crime against nature if Trolls couldn’t have cake.

One of the semi-adults crosses their path. She stops, staring at them wide eyed, and shoots Ironclaw a look. He doesn’t say anything, just continues walking past with purpose, and Mason tries to do the same. The semi-adult doesn’t stop them.

The ship doesn’t seem near as big from the inside. It’s like ship, long corridors with offshoots and armored doors ready to be sealed off at any moment. Makes sense considering space, got to be ready to seal off breached sectors to keep from shedding oxygen and suffocating everyone or getting blown off course. He studies the welds to keep himself from freaking the hell out.

Another semi-adult peeks out of a door to stare at them while they pass. Mason figures they’re all probably aware by now. He gives this one a little wave and the Troll hesitantly returns it. That’s nice, right? Right. Friendly.

Holy shit, their spaceship navigator killed some people and he decided to go meet her in person because sure, that’s a thing he should do. Wow. This is such a bad idea. Jermaine would kill him for this. And then Mason has to stop thinking about Jermaine because wow, he is really pissed off they left him behind. He gets it, he really does, but he’s gotten kind of invested in the UN folks. He kind of… Well. They probably would have grabbed him if they could. Probably.

They stop in front of a much bigger door. The armor over it is seriously impressive and looks like it could withstand a fucking nuke. Ironclaw considers it a bit and then turns to Mason, looking him up and down.

“You don’t have to be respectful with her,” he says and what. “It’s likely better if you aren’t. She’s young and irreverent. She likes sarcasm. She has access to the vocabulary database we’ve gathered so far so you should be able to communicate well and I will translate further if needed.”

“So, is she likely going to kill me?” Mason can’t help asking and then something comes over the intercom he should have expected, sounding something like forks scratching against a plate and some huffing squeal, and he is pretty much fully convinced it’s laughter.

“Not right now,” Ironclaw replies in the least comforting way possible.

Mason takes a breath. He stares hard at the door and then says, “Okay, open up you bucket of bolts. Daddy’s got words for you.”

The sound comes again and then with something like compressed air and gear grinding, the door comes open.
MOORE: open up your helmet, dad. Daddy's got words for you.
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

No prompt again XD

That Troll is being eaten alive by fleshy, glistening tentacles. Mason goes dead still and it isn’t until Ironclaw’s several steps ahead that he thinks to look back at him. Ironclaw doesn’t seem to think there’s anything weird about the tentacle monster engulfing most of the Helmsman’s body. Mason blinks at him owlishly and then looks at the nightmare in the center of the (very fucking creepy with every wall covered in fucking glowing tentacles) room.

The troll has the same pitch black skin as Ironclaw, but she still looks young anyway. As far as Mason can tell the ages with aliens, anyway. Her face lacks the lines of Ironclaw’s and there’s just an air of curiosity and youthful exuberance about her as she peeks through a long fall of dark waves. Her ridiculous horns sweep back with graceful curves, splitting off part way into a shorter and longer one each.

_Holy fucking shit, are those goddamn things digging into her body- can she get out of there?! Is this like the fucking Philadelphia Experiment or-_

Her eyes are gold. They glow like Ironclaw’s do sometimes, pulsing along with the wall tentacles, and there is a spattering of tiny gold freckles along where the nose would be if Trolls had visible noses. Her gold painted lips quirk the longer he stares at her, splitting to show off more ridiculously sharp teeth.

_There are more tentacles than person there, what the fuck, what the FUCK-_  

“Lt. Mason?” Ironclaw asks quietly and Mason manages to tear his eyes away from the spectacle of body horror before him.

“Does that hurt her?” It comes out before he can even really think about it because his stomach is in knots and he’s two seconds from dry heaving.

Ironclaw looks a little startled. He glances between Mason and the other troll and back again. Pursing his lips a moment, he finally turns to address the troll, asking something in the other language that has her blink with confusion before laughing.

“Negative!” the tentacle troll says in a thrilled tone, the vowels sounding just slightly off, like when someone reads off a word they’ve never heard spoken before. “I pain negative!”

And then she snickers a little and mutters something unintelligible that has Ironclaw’s mouth twitching at the edge. Mason’s not sure if he’s disgusted or hiding a smile. He’s maybe just a little freaked out by the _fucking tentacles_.

She starts to speak, pauses, and then says something else in the troll language. Ironclaw sighs, reaching up to pinch between his eyes in a remarkably human gesture. “Your language is not easy to navigate. She would like me to tell you that she appreciates your concern and would be fascinated by the opportunity to explore your species’ romantic differences.”
Mason blinks long and slow. It takes him a bit to work through what has just been said to him and then he’s staring at the Helmsman, who just grins wider at him. “She’s hitting on me?”

“I’ve been briefed on your species differences in pale advances by Chief Ambassassin Vantas,” Ironclaw says without looking at him, “and have made that quite clear to my crew.”

The Helmsman snickers again. Mason is really not at all sure how to feel about this or even what the hell ‘pale advances’ actually means. “She’s totally hitting on me.”

“She is,” Ironclaw agrees.

Wow. This is not how Mason thought his day would go. “Okay, so. Uh. Nice to know I’m your type and everything but I think we should probably talk about you settling your shit, girl. We cannot have you going around killing my guys.”

Ironclaw’s unscarred brow twitches up a bit and something happens to the Helmsman’s face. It’s not exactly color that rises to her cheeks, more… something else. He can’t quite describe it but her cheeks change, like they’re getting retextured, and the pulsing of her eyes gets a little faster.

“You I stop positive?” she purrs out low and languid. Like some kind of test.

“Yeah, I’ll stop you from killing my guys. I don’t know how yet, but I’ll do it. Just watch me, Sparky.”

She grins wider, absolutely delighted in a way Mason does not at all understand. “You I pet nice?”

“Wha…” Mason glances at Ironclaw but Ironclaw’s covering his eyes and looking utterly exasperated. He thinks at first she wants to pet him but her arms are kind of entirely enveloped in tentacles (jesus christ, fucking tentacles) so that wouldn’t be possible, but then he remembers something from Adanna’s babbling about sentence structure. “You want me to pet you? Well, I’m always up for trying something once, I guess. That’s a weird fucking custom but okay.”

She squeaks. It sounds like a toy his mom’s dog has. He is starting to get used to the tentacles, if only because she’s just so much weirder.

“So, what’s your name?” he asks, grasping at straws. He has no idea what he should be saying right now.

She makes a series of growling click noises, pauses, and then says more carefully, “Scout Ship Antecedent.”

“Well yeah, that’s what the ship’s called, but what about you?”

The question seems to confuse her. Mason glances to Ironclaw, who’s at least dropped his hand from his face but still seems pretty done with the both of them.

“Most Helmsmen take on the ship as their identity when they’re installed,” Ironclaw says in a voice that is remarkably even and controlled for all that he seems ready to throttle them. “It is… an extension of themselves in the way a prosthetic limb might be.”

“So… Antecedent,” Mason says dubiously.

There’s a bit of back and forth and then the corners of Ironclaw’s eyes get pinched up, pulling at his scars on the left side. “She is willing to be called by her hatch-name, Aurous.”
“I can work with that.” Mason takes a breath and then steps closer to the central column of tentacles that hold her from top and bottom. “Hi, Aurous. Nice to meet you. I’m Abraham, but most folks around here call me by my surname, Mason.”

Aurous tilts her head a bit, a few strands of long, pitch black hair sliding across her face. “You, Mason, met well are. You I pet. Kill negative.”

He’s not sure if she means she won’t kill him if he does or won’t kill period, but he’ll take it. He reaches out, hesitating only a moment before he rests his fingers against her head. Her hair… isn’t. It’s not quite hair, nothing right in the texture. It feels almost like quills, just really tiny. He slides his hand down, following the curve of her head and avoiding the initial outcrop of her horns. Aurous quivers a little and-

“Holy shit, you’re purring,” comes out before Mason can stop it and that gets her snickering again. “That is not a thing I expected.”

It’s not a purr as he knows it from the barn cats. It’s more like an internal rattling and it seems to come from her chest. He looks back at Ironclaw, who is resolutely not looking at them. About that time, Mason realizes this is perhaps an inappropriate thing he should not be doing, possibly resulting from some kind of cultural misunderstanding because he was not goddamn trained for this. He starts to tug his hand back but Aurous growls and pushes her head back into his touch. Mason obediently goes back to petting her.

“Tell me I did not just accidentally marry you,” he demands but Aurous just snickers at him.

“It appears I will need to brief you about the differences in Troll pale affections,” Ironclaw says in a tone so dry, Mason’s surprised he didn’t hurt himself in the attempt.

“Put that on the to do list.” Mason turns his attention back to Aurous. “Okay, girl. Lets get some ground rules down. You need to not kill humans.”

She makes a weird chirring sound, still leaning into his hand. “Kill little?”

“No. No kill. Not a little, not a lot.”

“Kill tiny?” she pouts out and Mason resists the urge to laugh. He’s pretty sure it’d turn hysterical quick.

“Kill none.”

Aurous keeps pouting at him. Mason stares back at her steadily, unwilling to back down. It seems like a really, really bad idea to show weakness, just like back at base when the new kids wanted to make a name for themselves. Finally, some tension breaks and she rolls her eyes (which he’s not even sure how he knows she’s done it because the adult trolls don’t seem to have visible pupils) with a little sigh.

“Kill negative,” she agrees and he counts it as a win.

“Good girl,” he croons at her and then rubs a bit at the base of one horn. And that gets the purring back, loud and ridiculous as her cheeks look even weirder. They’re still not actually colored any differently but he’s pretty sure it’s the Troll equivalent of blushing.

“Lt. Mason,” Ironclaw says sharply and Mason glances at him only to notice the same weird texture thing happening high on Ironclaw’s cheeks, right under his eyes and not nearly as noticeable as on Aurous. “I congratulate you on a serendipitous first meeting but this can wait for another time.”
He’s missing something weird and alien. Mason considers that and then rubs the base of Aurous’ other horn without breaking his gaze from Ironclaw’s face because it has been a long goddamn day and maybe Mason is enjoying this. Ironclaw’s mouth is a tight, embarrassed line, like Mason had just torn Aurous’ clothes off and had his way with her on the floor.

Aliens are so weird.

“I you keep,” Aurous chirps out and Mason figures there’s worse things that can happen to him than that.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

No prompt!
Also there is art at the end of chapter 25 now!!! go look!

The Geneva office is a model of efficiency that Jermaine appreciates from the bottom of his heart. The details of their arrival have already been handled, including temporary living spaces and a communications hub already set up for the alien ship’s frequency, should they choose to reestablish contact.

They’re not on American soil anymore. The US military cannot bully an override of his authority and he is going to reestablish contact as soon as possible. Jermaine has no idea what Ironclaw thinks of the last few days or their sudden departure but he hopes very much that this hasn’t damaged things to an unmanageable point.

This office isn’t as large as the New York City one but it’s plenty big enough for Jermaine’s purposes. He commandeers a smaller meeting room and drags Noe along with him so they can compose a message to send to the trolls. There is so much to be said, so much that needs smoothing over.

“I wish I’d had more time to talk to him about their culture,” Noe sighs out, rubbing his temples. “He seemed rational enough and I’m pretty sure he won’t take any of this personally, but…”

“But he might,” Jermaine agrees. He sits back, considering their message so far with furrowed brows. “We also have to consider what Softouch’s influence might be.”

“She is a higher social rank, he made that pretty clear, and social rank is a big deal for them.”

“She is also considerably more dangerous.”

They share a look, both worried.

“There’s also Vantas,” Noe says and that just gets Jermaine sighing.

“I doubt we have to worry about him refusing to work with us. He’s involved with Dave Strider and it seems to be fairly serious. There’s vested interest.”

“They’re teenagers. Everything is serious.”

Jermaine snorts and considers the message again. “This should be all right for now. It’s merely an invitation and unless the Americans decide to drop nuclear bombs on their own land so close to a civilian population, I think the ship will stay around.”

“…I’m really curious as to why that even happened.” Noe gets up and arches his back, working out a few kinks. “I thought we’d already gotten through the necessary permissions from the locals. We clearly had jurisdiction.”

“Clearly,” Jermaine agrees. “Someone seems to have disagreed and had enough authority to bully
their way through. I’m fairly surprised we didn’t get a real explanation right from the start.”

Noe jerks his head around, giving him a surprised look. “Wait, I thought that first day-”

“General Lee had no interest in explaining why he was interrupting our operation and our communications found themselves strangely blocked when I tried to contact Washington directly.”

“Blocked.” Noe repeats dubiously and then his mouth goes tight at the edges. “That’s why you ordered us to cut off the computer feeds to HQ.”

Jermaine inclines his head. “If some were blocked, I saw no reason why our transmissions might be secure at all. I continued attempting to contact Washington with no success, as well as Headquarters.”

“So, then the mad dash across the drink-”

“A matter of security. Despite the extraterritoriality agreement for Headquarters, I did not feel I could trust it at this time.”

Noe lets out an explosive breath all at once, shoulders slumping as he glances skyward. “This is not a game I signed up for.”

“I have little doubt that the others feel the same.”

Jermaine has never regretted getting into politics. There is a lot of good to be done, a lot of help to give. He considers it his duty to participate to the best of his abilities, if for nothing more than the promise of safety for his wife and children.

Still. He prefers it when everyone stays on the same page.

There is a knock at the door before one of the assistants pokes her head in. “Sir? Washington’s sent word.”

“Slower than I expected,” Jermaine says with a shake of his head. “Noe, please run this out to the hub. The new officer isn’t nearly as quick as Mason but should manage just fine.”

Noe nods and heads out as Jermaine takes the printout to glance over it. The Obama administration might be preoccupied with getting basic assistances to their own people and a disastrous military action of dubious intents but they were usually more prompt. A full day after their hasty extraction seems a little late.

He considers the careful wording. Jermaine expects the politeness. He did not expect a blatant admittance of faction politics causing the entire problem in the first place.

“…Huh.” He squints a little, rereading a few portions of the short letter. There are assurances that the internal problem would be taken care of and that no military action is planned against the aliens for now. General Lee seems to have gone rogue, if he’s reading this right. An ambassador is on her way to give more information in person and to smooth things over and will arrive in the evening. There are apologies aplenty. It’s all well and good to get them now but he has more pressing issues to take care of right now. This can wait for the ambassador.

Jermaine finds Sarah’s team huddled around their notebooks with three of the Egbert children (Dave, Rose, and one he has not personally met yet) and two juvenile Trolls. He recognizes Karkat but not the short haired Troll with him. She appears female, one of her upright horns crooked at the end, and speaks in formal tones as she answers Adanna’s questions and corrects little details of their translations. Last report, the lexicon had grown to some five thousand words
and there had been something about “fascinating idioms and accents” that got Sarah excited and that Jermaine had not honestly paid much attention to.

There are three more juvenile Trolls with Yui’s team as well as another Egbert child, John. Henok is asking rapid fire questions to the tall, gangly Troll with the antelope horns and doesn’t seem to really like the answers while Yui and Theodora work with the other two. A quick glance at Theodora’s tablet screen and he sees a word count in the several thousands. He’s sure there will be some interesting and horrifying discoveries there.

There’s another gaggle of trolls with his security advisor, along with Jade and a very nervous looking boy, but they seem all right as well. He’s not sure what they’ll get out of children about the capabilities of their species but a general idea of their usual level of technology will help immensely.

“Sir, the Antecedent is hailing us!” an assistant calls down the hall, running towards him a steady clip. It takes a moment for it to sink in and then he’s hurrying to meet her and follow her back to their communications hub. It had been barely ten minutes since he and Noe parted ways; were the Trolls that eager to start again?

They arrive quickly and Jermaine stops when he recognizes a familiar voice over the comm.

“-blame us for anything, I mean. They figured it was a faction dispute since we, and I quote, ‘don’t have a centralized world governing body like any rational species’, end quote,” says Lt. Mason, voice barely crackling over the line.

There’s a hissing, broken sounding laughter behind it but Jermaine doesn’t care. He’s a little too confused on just why Lt. Mason is using the Troll’s communication line.

The comm. officer steps aside gratefully as Jermaine slips into her place. “Lt. Mason, while it is good to hear from you-”

“Mr. Moreau! Oh man, finally. Hey, Ironclaw wants to keep talking to us but they might have to move the ship. Actually, the ship kind of wants to move because she’s annoyed with the army right now.”

Jermaine gives the station a hard look. Really?

“The ship,” he deadpans.

“Yeah, Antecedent is kind of really mad right now. Apparently, a team of knuckleheads decided it would be a good idea to try to sneak on board and she took offense to it. Violently.”

There had seemed to be something starting the moment they left camp and Dave had come to warn them. Still.

“Mason, am I to understand that the ship is alive?”

“Well, the Helmsman is alive and she’s sort of merged with the ship so might as well.”

Jermaine rubs between his eyes. He takes a breath, counts his blessings, and then mutters, “Please let Ironclaw know that we will ready a suitable secondary landing site with proper support and that we will handle protections should they need to retreat to orbit beforehand.”

“Yes, sir.”

It helped that the original planned landing site and added support structures had been nearly
completed before the unplanned landing wrecked all their timetables. He makes a mental note to send new requirements to that team.

“Before you go, I have a question. How is it that you found yourself on the *Antecedent*?”

Lt. Mason huffs out a laugh and then says, “I’ll tell you the whole story later, in person. Mason, out.”

Well. It’s something to look forward to.
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It’s less than a day later that the Antecedent goes into orbit. There’s no warning, nothing from Mason. The ship simply lifts off. They find out due to surveillance but have no explanation. Then it starts being covered by the American media, filtering in details of some kind of altercation, of unknown casualties and property damage, but none of them agree on what actually happened. No one’s quite sure of the truth. Even after the White House releases a statement about the event, there’s enough confusion to cast doubt on the official story.

Sarah makes the mistake of checking Fox News on a lark. The theories being spouted just make her mad and offended. As if Jermaine or anyone else in the UN would really be collaborating with the aliens for an invasion of America. From what she’s observed of the aliens, they’d be much more interested in Australia, in that so many things there could and would try to kill you.

She says this after observing the alien named Vriska swap increasingly outlandish stories with a security officer. She thinks they stopped being truthful about half an hour ago. Of course, then she has to explain Australia next and, as expected, Vriska’s eyes shine with excitement.

There will be time for a visit later (if all parties are as enthusiastic about as Vriska) but for now, Sarah got a data packet to get to the ship at Mason’s request.

“Sarah,” Jermaine greets from the doorway to her temporary office another day later. “If I may have a moment of your time?”

“Considering you’re the boss, I think I’m not allowed to say no,” she teases and is gratified by the way his lips twitch at the edges into an almost smile. He really needs to lighten up a little. Bad for his heart.

“Have you heard the term ‘urban dictionary’ before?”

Sarah blinks. “In what context, exactly?”

“Mason reported that Antecedent has downloaded the entirety of dictionary.com, thesaurus.com, and the ‘urban dictionary’.” Jermaine says the last in the puzzled tone of a man not sure he wants the answer to his own question. “I’m not acquainted with that publication.”

Sarah’s brows scrunch up as she tries to think of why that sounds familiar. She whips out her phone and pulls up her browser to pull it up and- Oh. Oh that’s why.

“Oh god. Jermaine, we need to let them know it’s not a trustworthy source of information. This is the exact opposite of trustworthy. This site’s pretty much teenage american pop culture in linguistic form.”

Jermaine does not look amused as he heads off to send a transmission. Mohamed and Adanna both start laughing their asses off the moment Sarah tells them what happened. She supposes she’s not surprised but at least David looks suitably chagrinned. The rest of the day is a whirlwind of activity as they finalize the linguistic data packet for Antecedent with more haste now that they knew there’d be information to counter as quickly as possible.

“Is anyone else worried that the aliens can interact with the internet like this?” David asks abruptly and the rest of them stop.
Sarah’s been so wrapped up in chasing possible misunderstandings that she didn’t even consider what was involved in creating the situation in the first place.

“What’s next, wikipedia?” David continues as his mouth tightens. “Or possibly government servers?”

Sarah gets Jermaine on the phone. Apparently, that had been one of his first concerns and he’s already on figuring it all out. She lets out a relieved breath. Thank goodness it wasn’t her headache to handle.

She doesn’t realize the damage that’s been done until she’s going to get lunch two days later and comes across a wall of monitors all showing some kind of cat animation with a rainbow going behind it. The video is strange enough but then she notes the panicked way half a dozen people are pounding at their keyboards.

“What-”

“Not right now,” one of the techs says hurriedly without even looking up. “Trying to fight a virus.”

She looks at the screens again and then decides firmly that this is not her circus and these are not her monkeys. There’s a reason she makes a living with words and not computers.

The next strange thing she comes across is Jermaine looking even closer to a heart attack than before as he taps angrily at his phone. She pauses there a moment to watch him mumble, catches a few French words she knows very well because they are all very impolite, then decides this is slightly above her pay grade and continues on. She does not want to know what caused him to snarl out “fils de pute.”

It comes to a head at finding Yui, Henok, and Theodora huddled around a computer of their own snickering. Well, Yui and Theodora are; Henok has the most constipated expression as he peeks over their shoulders.

She can’t stand it anymore. Sarah bustles in and asks, “Just what has gotten into everyone?”

They look back at her and then Henok moves as Yui waves her closer.

“Antecedent started an AMA on twitter,” Yui explains gleefully.

Sarah looks at the screen and says one quiet word at a time, “Antecedent has a twitter account.”

“Yes!” Yui hits the tweet button for her newly finished micro-communication message. (Sarah does not really get twitter, honestly. Then again, she only visits Facebook to check if any of her family have sent her messages and decided not to use her phone.)

“What is an AMA?”

“Ask Me Anything!”

“Antecedent has a twitter account and is answering questions- did that girl just ask if aliens had di-”

“I KNOW!” Yui practically bounces in her seat. “We thought they might have something similar enough to count but I haven’t been allowed to ask them directly yet!”
“This looks like a fake account,” Sarah mutters, squinting at the reply that is not actually a reply.

“We thought so as well,” Henok admits as Theodora reaches over Yui’s arm to keep scrolling through the insanity. “However, it has been confirmed that Antecedent is behind this. According to Mason, he and Ironclaw have been unable to get the ship to stop. They say she finds it too amusing. When we attempted to block the transmissions, she infected half our systems with a virus that took over the video feeds on the computer monitors for some kind of animation and so far has affected nothing else. Small mercies.”

They knew the ship was at least half sentient. It appears their estimates were very under the bar. Sarah considers the tweets updating every few seconds as more people discover the account.

“Please tell me the major authorities haven’t figured out this is happening yet,” she says with growing mirth. The ship has style, she’ll give her that.

“That is definitely something I never pay attention to,” Yui admits, pulling up the tweet window again to fire off another message.

“If you don’t have any other work to do right now-”

“The kids all went home for the day!”

“-can you ask her if Ironclaw has a girlfriend?” She doesn’t have to look at Henok to feel his disapproval even as Yui stares at her, delight taking over her face. “We might as well take advantage of the ridiculousness of the situation.”

“Sarah,” Henok grumbles simply as Theodora taps in Sarah’s request, grinning the whole time.

They get an answer within thirty seconds, miraculously enough.
“Hm, I wonder on whom,” Sarah murmurs thoughtfully. She doesn’t actually care about alien dating lives but she might as well have as much fun as the rest of them.

She leaves the three of them to continue bothering the alien ship and goes to check in with her own team… who are all huddled around Mohamed’s computer snickering. Sarah clears her throat and they look up guiltily. She lets them stew a few seconds and then says, “Did you know Ironclaw has a crush on someone?”

The rest of the day is a wash. There’s no pulling anyone’s attention from the twitter debacle. The news catches wind of it finally and Sarah spends a while watching the very serious debate about the very not serious public alien interactions because it’s a lot more entertaining than worrying about the worse things of their situation.

Chapter End Notes

In case anyone is confused, "not my circus, not my monkeys" is an idiom that means "not my problem" :D

7/19 update: changed photo hosting, hopefully that'll work for a while.
Chapter 29

Mohamed registers it abruptly and lets out an inhuman sound. Sarah, Adanna, and David look at him with horrified concern (well, David mostly seems annoyed at being shocked) but all Mohamed can do is cover his mouth as the stunning realization rolls over him. He can’t believe he didn’t notice it before now. He can’t believe he didn’t even think about it.

“If you have a stroke right now, I will personally raise you from the dead just to kill you myself,” Sarah promises even though she seems worried.

“Are you okay?” Adanna asks as she nudes his arm with her elbow.

“I-” Mohamed blinks quickly a few times, sucking in a breath. “I have to go.”

He jumps from his seat and doesn’t stop even as Sarah calls after him. He can’t! Not now that he knows! It’s- he can’t believe he didn’t realize this sooner.

Mohamed rushes past a few people in the halls, stumbling over his own feet when his shoes catch on the well polished floors, and finally skids to a stop at Noe’s door. He knocks swiftly, then jerks the door open a half second after.

Noe gives him a confused look but Mohamed’s attention gets routed to Dave Strider sitting across from him.

“You-” Mohamed manages to get out, through his panting. “You’re- Dave Strider.”

“Oh.” Dave’s shades are too dark to see his eyes but his pale brows twitch higher on his face. “Yeah, last time I checked. Unless I’m actually some rando asshole taking over people’s identities in some shady Ponzi scheme.”

Mohamed tries and fails to calm his racing heart. This- Maybe it’s a common name. Maybe it’s the wrong person. Maybe- “I-I’m falling down all these stairs.”

For a solid minute, there’s absolute silence past Mohamed’s panting breath. Then Dave’s lips quirk at one side and he replies smoothly, “I warned you about stairs, bro.”

“I told you, dog!” Mohamed screeches out and then he has to lean against the door frame and cover his face with his hands because Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff.

“I’m missing something and frankly, I think I should be glad about that,” Noe mutters grimly but Mohamed ignores him entirely because that silly comic is half of why he studied American culture at all, the most ridiculous manner possible because he had to understand.

“Are you like my biggest fan and about to lock me in your house and break my legs to keep me there?” Dave asks in the most pleased tone Mohamed has heard since he bragged about sleeping with aliens.
“No,” Mohamed manages through his fingers because he is both overwhelmingly elated and horribly embarrassed with his own conduct. He is an adult; he is an important part of the UN; he is playing a large part in facilitating good relations with their first alien race; he should be more composed than this. “Sorry, I just-”

“Dude, it’s okay,” Dave assures him. “I get it. My amazing contribution to mankind is kind of a big deal and fit to cause heroic BSODs in any unready for the full extent of my sick brilliance.”

Noe snorts and Mohamed has a little weak giggle escape. He is going to be mortified later. Adanna will laugh at him for a million years when he explains it to her. He doesn’t even care. When he tells his siblings about this, they will have more trouble believing it than anything he tells them about the aliens.

“Will you sign my mouse pad?!?” he says before he realizes he wants to. “Just- I have to- It’s in the other room, I’ll just-”

He doesn’t wait for a reply. He runs full tilt back to the dormitory he’s staying in while they’re here and fetches the thing. It’s a bootleg, something a friend from France sent him after having it made on a rip off website that doesn’t care about sources and he’s always been a little guilty about it but there’s never been real SBAHJ merchandise available and he’s not going to fault Maeve for being illegally thoughtful and oh no, he realizes as he gets back to Noe’s office that Dave might be offended that he has something like this but he’s already there and Dave is looking expectantly as he reaches over to steal one of Noe’s pens.

“Oh my god,” Dave says as he takes the thing from Mohamed’s hands.

“I- There’s never been anything for me to buy, I just-”

“This is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” Dave says, staring at the raised globes at one end, printed lovingly with Sweet Bro’s backside. Mohamed feels increasingly more embarrassed the longer Dave looks at it, even after the kid starts signing it on one red cheek.

“Thanks.” It comes out breathy and weak but Dave doesn’t seem to mind. He just hands the mousepad back over and Mohamed looks. There’s a penis drawn right above the initials D.S. He can’t think of a more perfect signature to grace his prized possession, even if it does mean he can’t use it in public, which he wasn’t doing anyway.

“Are you both done now?” Noe asks with a sigh. “We were in the middle of something, Mohamed.”

“Yes, I- Yes. Sorry.” Mohamed swallows as his face goes hot. “Thank you, Dave.”

“Yeah, anything for a fan.”

It might be his imagination but he thinks Dave sounds a little dazed. He can’t look the kid in the face to make sure though. Mohamed says something and has no idea what it is but he’s pretty sure it contains some kind of farewell before he escapes to drown in his mortification.

He ends up in a stairwell, head in his hands and giggling over the irony. He is too old to be acting this way, but he’s just… Of all the unbelievable things he’s seen and experienced during this whole endeavor, this seems to have been the tipping point in his ability to handle it all.

He doesn’t know how long he sits there before he hears footsteps coming his way. They pause around a bend and Mohamed lifts his head to apologize for being in the way, but it’s one of the Trolls.
“Uh,” the Troll says and Mohamed blinks as he finally comes up with the name, “are you okay?”

“Yes, yes, I’m- I’m all right. Thank you.” Mohamed drops his head again and can’t believe he’s still losing his composure right now in front of one of the aliens.

Tavros stays silent and still for a little while before slowly stepping closer, but he doesn’t pass by. Instead, he sits down next to him on the step, a quiet companion. He tugs at his fingers, rubbing the pad of one finger over the claw of another, and then reaches over to awkwardly pat Mohamed’s shoulder once.

It’s bizarre. The whole situation is bizarre. Mohamed feels like laughing but can’t because he’s too confused and amazed by the similarity in how Trolls apparently do comfort and the empathy being shown here, so familiar despite the difference in species. He’s going to have to tell the others about it later, to add to the collection of slowly observed knowledge for Troll behaviors, but right now he’s just sitting there feeling silly and young.

“I’m all right,” Mohamed says again and Tavros just nods.

“Sometimes, um- sometimes I’d see a barkbeast pack. And they’re mostly happy? But sometimes they get, uhh, weird. Preoccupied? And then they need some time,” he says, halting and awkward and not quite looking at him.

“Barkbeast,” Mohamed murmurs, trying out the word himself. He wonders if it’s a trick of translation.

Tavros brightens and then describes the barkbeast, a non-sentient quadruped predator species that hunts in packs and apparently has very soft fur. After that, he talks about a flying herbivore that was his “lusus”, which Mohamed assumes is a word for pet that somehow isn’t getting translated, and then giant insects and reptiles, and all sorts of other animals. The more Mohamed listens, the calmer he feels. He’s still pretty mortified over the whole thing but it’s better. He’s got this.

“Thank you,” he says finally and Tavros smiles crookedly.

“I know what it’s like to, uhh. To get stuck sometimes.”

Mohamed smiles back at him and they sit together a little while longer before he gets up and goes back to his job like the grownup he’s supposed to be. Sarah doesn’t ask. She just puts him back to work. Adanna’s got that look on her face that means she’ll be dragging the story out of him later. David makes a passing comment that Sarah shoots down in a bored tone and Mohamed finds himself settling back into the familiar routine.

Chapter End Notes

Prompt: the-multifandom-memelord said: Also if you do a short lil thing with mohamed talking sbahj with Dave and/or Dirk I will die happy omg
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Prompt:
Anonymous said: oh man i cant wait for the UN to learn about _quadrants_ holy shit (if they ever do, but knowing them theyll eventually ask rose about love(red) vs love(black) vs love(grey) etc bc dave was a vague lil shit abt it)

Antecedent gets to land after two weeks in orbit. Which is great because while Mason gets along with most of the Trolls now (Aurous or Ironclaw have been translating for the semi-adults, who are for the most part pretty great except for like two of them that get weird creepy or just snotty) he is ready to get off the confined space Softouch inhabits. She is so much creepier in close quarters. She stalks around nearly soundless and thinks it’s great fun to shock the hell out of him multiple times a day. He’s getting a twitch.

Aurous thinks the undignified sound he makes when Softouch surprises him again is hilarious and has done nothing to warn him of Softouch’s imminent arrival, the traitor. He thought they had something special.

(He’s afraid they might have something alien-special. Ironclaw won’t stay in the same room as both of them for long and the semi-adults keep acting like he’s a daytime kinkster wearing full leather bondage in public. It is really weird.)

Softouch, though, is getting to be a big problem. It’s not only that she’s super quiet and sneaky and creepy, but every time she comes around, it gets hard to breathe. His chest tightens up, his heart races, and billions of years of survival instincts scream at him to run away as fast as he can. Mason doesn’t like to run. He kind of really hates the way his body goes total fear response every time she’s within ten feet.

It’s only a slight comfort that the semi-adults react nearly the exact same way.

So yeah, Mason is fucking thrilled to get to land. He stays in Aurous’ den during the landing because watching her steer the ship is kind of fascinating. He watches her eyes go unfocused as she concentrates on the ship instead of him, and then the glowing starts. It’s in her eyes, so bright he can barely look at them, and then it spreads through the tentacles wrapped over her body, a kaleidoscope of colors pulsing and shooting along the walls of the room in a pattern he can’t even begin to decipher. It’s beautiful. It’s still creepy as hell, is that Troll default?

The landing goes smoothly. He barely even feels the massive ship settle on the ground. Ironclaw comes in to fetch him and Mason reluctantly leaves the Helmsblock and the permanently installed Helmsman. (He didn’t believe it at first, refused to believe it at first, but Aurous very patiently explained it in a weird mix of solemnity and memes. He still doesn’t like it. He wants to find a way to change it.)

“Just give me a couple hours,” he tells Aurous, who just grins big and does the blush thing again.

“Go away, I’m sick of your face,” she giggles out. Her English went from one to eleven over about ten hours when she downloaded the internet.
Mason follows behind Ironclaw and then feels the shivers just before they get the front door. He stops, jerking his head around, because he has to figure out where she is. He cannot deal when he doesn’t know that. And… there. Leaning up against the entrance of a further corridor, arms folded and sharp claws tapping on her forearm, is Softouch. Her purple eyes glitter with mischief and barely contained violence. Mason forces himself to suck in a full breath and start moving again. He ignores the way his fingers twitch and clench, the way his blood sings in his ears and begs him to run or fight, take out the threat before it takes out him. He can’t do that, not right now anyway.

Of all the things he’s learned about Trolls so far, the one lesson that has stuck best is not to fuck with Softouch. There are a few things he’s figured out about her specifically. One, she is freaky strong. He saw her dent a metal wall with her bare hands while Ironclaw was talking to her. Two, she is scary even by Troll standards. The semi-adults will not be alone with her, not even Talvar and she’s kind of creepy herself. Three, she refuses to learn even the basics of English but has been very easy to understand, at least threat wise. Ironclaw and Aurous haven’t translated everything she’s said but he’s gotten the gist of it and he’s pretty sure she’s been threatening to eat him.

Cadet Hoyali is waiting at the main door, standing straight backed and solid, all lines of military precision. She’s got a stick up her ass but Mason gives her a respectful little nod because she’s been decent to him. She’s learned a handful of English words, enough to get the point across even if she’s got no grasp of the grammar, and he tries to give credit where it’s due. She also hasn’t tried to menace him the way some of the others have (ineffectually, unlike Softouch). The other semi-adults seem to tolerate her with a good amount of eye rolls but Ironclaw clearly has a good amount of respect for her and despite her being at least two feet taller than him, she doesn’t seem to look down on Ironclaw either.

Ironclaw says a string of Troll words and Hoyali responds in tight, short syllables. It might sound annoyed on one of the other trolls but from her it seems more rigidly polite. Mason maybe has been spending a little too much time observing the aliens but he doesn’t have his gameboy so what else was he supposed to do?

“Moreau is waiting for us,” Ironclaw says at last, turning back to him.

“Cool. Well, let’s not keep him waiting. He gets cranky.”

Ironclaw lifts his unscarred brow but says nothing more as they head out of the ship. And wow, this is the first look Mason’s gotten of the planned facility for the trolls. It’s a large, blocky building, all austerity and purpose. There are windows all through it but squinting, he can make out some kind of armored quality to them. He’s not sure if it’s to keep them in or keep others out. The facility itself isn’t huge but there’s a fair amount of open ground space between it and the security fences surrounding the property. Some lucky gardeners went through a lot of trouble to plant garden patches all over the place, situated between loops in the windy walking paths. It’s a weirdly pretty counterpart to the lack of ornamentation in the building but they had been kind of rushed. At least the doorway is tall enough for even Softouch, if she deigns to leave the ship.

As promised, Jermaine’s there to greet them and Mason gets surprised by the sudden mix of relief and hurt at seeing him. It’s been a couple weeks, he should not still be mad at being left behind when he knows it was necessary. Mason decides he’ll think about that never and then shakes Jermaine’s hand.

“It’s good to see you’re well,” Jermaine says without smiling because he’d probably die if he ever had a pleasant thought.

“You too, sir.”
He turns to Ironclaw next, who inclines his head and then says, “Thank you for your welcoming accommodations. I trust there is also room for Lt. Mason so that he does not have to remain on the ship?”

Mason blinks and it’s only slightly comforting that Jermaine seems a little thrown by that, too. “What?”

“You will, of course, want to stay in close proximity to your new morail but also have your own territory.”

There’s a beat of silence and then Jermaine takes up the slack because Mason is so incredibly confused right now.

“I’m unfamiliar with this term,” Jermaine admits. “Please explain.”

“I am aware that humans have other ways of expressing pale affections due to the nature of your mammalian heritage and cultural differences,” Ironclaw begins politely and confusingly. “However, it has been quite obvious that you are capable of deeply pale relationships outside of familiar bonds.”

“Pale?” Mason manages and Ironclaw nods.

“Close non-sexual emotional attachment. We refer to this as moirallegiance. Those participating are called morails.”

Mason blinks again, slow and quiet. “You mean friends. Oh my god, you have complicated the concept of friends—”

Jermaine shoots him a dirty look but Ironclaw lifts a hand to pause him. “No,” he murmurs simply even though he’s doing the blush thing. “Morail implies a deeper relationship than mere friendship. It is a committed dual pacification that requires deep emotional understanding and care.”

“And you think I— you think I have one of these?” Mason says and there goes Ironclaw’s eyebrow again because of anything that had to be universal.

“You have demonstrated a fine tuned instinct for it with my Helmsman. I admit, it has been a very long time since I saw such serendipity unfold before me. I would prefer a measure of discretion.”

Mason stares at him and then looks back at the ship. He looks between them a couple times and then turns to yell at the ship, “YOU COULD HAVE TOLD ME I TROLL MARRIED YOU!”

His only answer is the digitized sound of Aurous cackling.
Chapter Notes

Prompts:

anon: Hey, I just read all of so it goes and the asides and the sequel and I loooove it! Watching Dave explain the linguistics was awesome! I really want to see the officials flipping their shit when someone finally explains the quadrants to them (probably Rose once Dave goes to talk to karkat?) and maybe the hemospectrum too? That would be awesome!

anon: For SIG:FC, is the quadrant system going to get explained to the poor humans?

anon: Hi! Im a huge fan of your So It Goes AU and if you have time could you divulge who took the time to explain quadrants to the researchers (was it Nepeta I sure hope so) and if the researchers understood the concept very well

Jermaine’s head hurts. It’s entirely metaphorical and he feels almost betrayed by the lack of any physical indicator for how much he is not enjoying this. He does not want to have this conversation. He should never have had to have this conversation and yet, here he is because Lt. Mason couldn’t keep it in his pants.

It’s different for Dave Strider and Rose Lalonde. They’re children and expected to do things that aren’t necessarily in their best political and professional interest. Lt. Mason is, supposedly, an adult with a modicum of self control. To say Jermaine is disappointed is an understatement.

Little comfort that Yui has reported that Human-Troll hybrids are laughably unlikely for several reasons he admittedly did not listen to.

“And you believe it would be in best interests not to sever the relationship,” he says in the most polite tone he can muster. It’s not great.

Ironclaw tilts his head in a crooked nod. “The partnership appears beneficial to both sides. In my experience, such serendipity should be respected and allowed to flourish. My most successful students and fleetmates all had steady moirallegiances.”

“It isn’t so simple,” Jermaine grits out, mouth tight. “Lt. Mason is part of both this contingent and a separate military entity. This will likely bias his interactions with your people-”

“I should hope it does,” Ironclaw says, unconcerned, “or it would be taken as a sign that his moirallegiance is flawed.”

“Disregarding that, if the relationship is allowed to continue, he must excuse himself from most if not all inclusion in the negotiations.”

He doesn’t like saying it. Lt. Mason had been invaluable in getting their communications to this point, in helping to ready for the Trolls’ arrival in the first place, and a steady head in their operation, but Jermaine cannot ignore the fact that he is now absolutely compromised. He’s not the only one who thinks so, either, and the only way Jermaine can protect Lt. Mason is by
distancing him from the situation.

“That is… understandable,” Ironclaw murmurs after a long pause. He doesn’t seem to like it any more than Jermaine does, but he’s no stranger to this game. “While barred from official negotiations, can he be allowed to continue contact with my Helmsman? The stability this relationship affords cannot be understated.”

“For now. We may need to revisit this if problems arise.” Jermaine has no idea for how long but they can make it work until someone unfortunate figures it all out (and Jermaine has no illusions that this will happen faster than he wants) but he’ll allow it for as long as he can. “In the meantime, I need a better understanding of your people’s affections. If only to keep a similar situation from blindsiding us.”

Ironclaw snorts, worrying the edge of his mouth with his exposed fang. “Of course. This was truly unexpected to us as well. Things are rarely so spontaneous—”

“I’m here!” comes loudly from the door as Karkat Vantas stumbles inside, faint pink on his cheeks much more like a human than Jermaine’s observed with the Trolls. He wonders if it’s part of the mutation he apparently has. “I’m here, sorry, there was some- John’s a fucking moron- Anyway. Are we starting?”

“Moreau has asked for an explanation of quadrants in light of recent developments,” Ironclaw says and Jermaine frowns, puzzled by the word. He is even more concerned by the way Karkat lights up like his children on Christmas morning.

“You mean the miraculous and ridiculous serendipity of Helmsman Dipshit and the Media Monkey?” Karkat says, sounding far more excited and pleased than Jermaine’s ever seen him. He drops into the chair next to Ironclaw, eyes practically sparkling. “Yeah, that came out of nowhere. It must have been irritable conciliation at first gander. I didn’t think that happened in real life. I heard he papped her in front of you.”

Conciliation. Odd word for a romance. Jermaine starts to ask and then doesn’t because Karkat is drawing himself up with knowledgeable pride while Ironclaw looks embarrassed.

“Listen up, nookmunch. You’re about to get schoolfed in the socially proper and superior nature of quadrants by the undisputed king of romance,” he starts brightly even as Ironclaw gives a quiet sigh.

What commences is an hour of complicated cultural nuance and bewildering tradition. If Jermaine is honest with himself, it’s not the most complicated thing he’s ever heard of but it’s certainly… unorthodox. At least compared with what he’s used to. It’s little consolation that at least the name “quadrant” makes sense now. He’s at least heard of plural relationships and such, but to have it instituted in such a pervasive way mystifies him. He reminds himself not to judge. They have very important biological and historical reasons for such a system. It’s just… Jermaine cannot even imagine being so devoted to another person in addition to his wife. He, at most times, is fairly overwhelmed by his feelings for her as it is.

At least he doesn’t have to worry about possibly walking in on Mason and the Helmsman in a compromising position, at least how humans understand it. Ritualized petting is not exactly something that embarrasses him, much as the Trolls find it socially unacceptable in public if not actually obscene. In light of that knowledge, a few behaviors are a little more understandable.

He can also let Sarah know what the words for love(red), love(black), love(gray), and love(pink) actually mean now. She’ll get a kick out of it, if nothing else. And perhaps it will assist Yui’s team in understanding the Troll’s biology a little more. Perhaps Noe will also gain insight.
In the meantime, the sudden join that Lt. Mason and the Helmsman have made seems to be rare and very out of the ordinary, which is comforting. Trolls also tend to prefer their own kind. Karkat and Kanaya seem to be outliers.

“Yeah, sure, call me an outlier when you were boning a fucking rock for a sweep,” Karkat grumbles.

Ironclaw’s brows twitch. “Krthrsnsrhrtrk are not rocks. They are silicon based lifeforms—”

“That are rocks.”

“That hold resemblance to rocks.”

The two of them glare at each other a moment as Jermaine tries to conceptualize rock like people and keeps coming up with one of the golems in his daughter’s silly fantasy card game. He wonders how similar that is and gives himself a little while to marvel at the knowledge of another alien race they may some day have contact with, especially if relations with the Trolls continue to go well.

“What are they like?” Karkat says with a roll of his eyes. “At least humans are just Trolls without fucking horns. That’s still bizarre and I spent three years with them.”

Jermaine blinks. “The… lack of horns is disturbing?”

“Let me explain.” Ironclaw takes a moment to consider his wording, then continues. “We use our horns for certain sensory- hm. I don’t seem to have a translated word that suffices. There is a spacial awareness we gain from them. Not exactly sound or proximity, something similar that I have no words for. Trolls who have damaged or removed horns tend to suffer for it at least minimally through motor skill impairment and the like.”

“It’s like getting shot and not doing a damn thing about it while you dribble your fluids all over the fucking floor and insist it’s just a flesh wound.”

It’s completely inconsequential but now Jermaine wonders if Karkat has seen those silly english comedies Léa likes so much.

“I see,” he says at last. “I hope it is not too distressingly disturbing.”

“Ambassassins are trained to accept differences in other species,” Ironclaw assures him.

“There’s way fuck-uglier aliens,” Karkat adds.

A comfort, Jermaine supposes.
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Prompts:

Anonymous said: SIG REQUEST: What are Feferi, Eridan, and Gamzee doing?

Anonymous said: Have we heard anything from feferi? How about having Jermaine or Mohamed find out she’s the heiress?

Anonymous said: Do you think anyone in sig is going to ask about alien religion and then immediately regret it?

Noe hasn’t met this Troll yet but he’d been briefed on him by Yui (apparently, he’d spent half an hour insisting that the answers to every question Henok asked him was “motherfucking miracles, brother.” No one is quite sure if he really meant it or was just messing with them.) The Troll is easily the tallest of the younger trolls and taller than all but two of the semi adults and Softouch while much leaner than any of them. He looks like a strong gust could knock him to pieces.

And yet. When the Troll looks at him, dark eyes heavy lidded and calm, a strange chill runs down Noe’s spine. Something in the lizard part of his brain puts him on high alert: there’s a predator nearby. Yui hadn’t said anything about feeling the same way but then again, she could be a little inattentive about things like that.

The other two juveniles aren’t nearly as overtly dangerous. Feferi seems nice enough and though Sollux keeps grumbling in the Troll language, he comes across mostly as bored.

“Hello! How are- oh, this language feels so weird,” Feferi says when the three take their seats with him. The meeting room is bigger than his office, better suited for something more than one-on-one, and the round table would keep any of them from feeling overwhelmed. He’s a little outnumbered but he hasn’t had any violence reported to him regarding the three. There is, however, a certain way Sollux keeps tilting his head towards Gamzee but with the opaque glasses, it’s hard to tell if he’s side-eyeing him. Noe decides to just be patient and watch. He’s supposed to be figuring out the group dynamics, after all.

“Thank you for coming,” Noe says to start things off. “I have a few topics I’d like you to expand upon, if you would.”

“As long as they aren’t empire secrets, I’m game!” Feferi grins widely, showing a plethora of sharp, even teeth. It’s too absent to be a power play or aggression, even if he’d believe that of most the other Trolls.

“Like we know any empire secrets,” Sollux mutters with an unfortunate lisp. Well, good to know he apparently got the same language dump that the other non-god tier Trolls did (and that is another thing he should probably find out more about if he can get a good rapport going with them. No one else had been able to get it out of the children.)

“I got all the motherfucking secrets,” Gamzee says, eyes going even lazier and nearly entirely shut. Something about his voice makes the hair on the back of Noe’s neck stand up, like a kind of
subvocal danger cue. He’s not really comforted by the way Sollux’s shoulders tighten as well.

“Nobody asked about your shitty messiahs,” Sollux shoots back as Feferi rolls her eyes. “Don’t even start.”

Gamzee just tilts his head, giving Sollux a solid, unblinking stare. It doesn’t necessarily mean the same as it would on a human, being that Trolls barely blink anyway, but it still seems unnerving enough. Sollux doesn’t back down and Feferi rolls her eyes.

“I don’t suppose this has something to do with the ‘cultists’ that Dave described Softouch possibly being one of?” Noe asks and the three look at him with varying emotions. Feferi’s mouth purses tight, Sollux does the equivalent of gagging, and Gamzee seems mildly perturbed.

“That sister’s in with the wicked whimseys, but she’s no believer,” Gamzee says with a wave of his hand. “Ain’t got the motherfucking spirit.”

“One of her only virtues,” Feferi mumbles under her breath before shaking her head and adding louder, “Softouch is the same blood caste and fleet position but she doesn’t practice.”

And despite by the way Sollux had grumbled before, this doesn’t seem to be a good thing. None of the three look pleased. Interesting. Also interesting that these cultists seem to be confined to a single caste within the species. Were they elevated to said caste or only born into it? Was Softouch divergent from her ancestry? They didn’t know nearly enough about the castes yet.

“It would be useful if we knew a little more about this faith.”

Feferi sighs, Sollux knocks his head against the back of his chair, and even Gamzee seems just a little uncomfortable. Just as Noe starts wondering if he’s said something wrong, Sollux gets up out of his chair and starts for the door.

“I’m going to make sure ED’s not murdering someone again,” he mutters and disappears out before Noe can stop him.

“They got a motherfucking room yet?” Gamzee drawls out and Feferi glares at him.

“It’s platonic,” she insists while Gamzee just shrugs his shoulders. “Eridan is not allowed to black date anyone right now. Or you.”

“Fair.”

Noe glances between the two of them, theories on the unsaid background filtering through his mind. This isn’t quite the time to go into it yet and, besides, someone else is trying to ferret the kids’ story out of them. He gets to concentrate on the now.

“Well,” Noe says, trying to get some control of this conversation back. “I would appreciate an overview of this faith, if only to make sure that none of us overstep or insult.”

Gamzee grins. He’s obviously pleased but it still makes Noe’s fight or flight gear up. He ignores this. Gamzee has not shown any violent tendencies towards the human contingent, even though the other Trolls treat him with a heavy dose of caution. Noe’s sure there’s history there and he’s being careful, but he’ll let take the kid on his own merit.

“Once, there was only the Mirthful Messiahs,” Gamzee starts and then Noe finds out a lot more about the violent, murderous alien religion than he can really stomach. He takes diligent record, makes a mental note to have some comfort food when he transcribes the recordings later, and tries not to think about the horror of a group of people who paint with blood. While interesting that
Troll blood apparently does not discolor after drying and has suitable consistency for painting, he barely keeps from losing his lunch.

The fact that Gamzee shows no horror in his descriptions and Feferi seems mostly disinterested is telling of not just their character but the character of their species. The faith is inherently violent, inherently murderous, and seems to actually worship these ideals as much as their Messiahs. It worries Noe to his core. The cultists were tolerated but not well liked, if Feferi’s reaction is to be held as a norm, but they don’t seem to be curbed. Noe’s had a lot of evidence so far for how violent a society Trolls have but this is a little more than he’d expected.

“And you’re a believer?” he asks to clarify for the record and that is the first time Gamzee’s smile drops. Gamzee stares at him with little expression to speak of before his eyes slide away to some random point in the room.

“Sometimes, a troll gets to thinking someways,” Gamzee murmurs quietly and for once, the dangerous undertones are absent. He seems almost lost, thoughtful but unsure what to think of it.

Feferi’s hand twitches, lifts a little, and then sits back down, like she’s not sure if she should comfort him. Considering the “romance brief” that Jermaine had written up and given them all, Noe’s not entirely surprised. Their interpersonal relationships are so segregated, it probably interfered a lot in how simple friendships worked.

Noe does not have time for Gamzee’s apparent crisis of faith. While it’s almost comforting to see it, considering what he’s learned about the Subjugulator Cult, he doesn’t yet know enough about them to even begin helping. Likely, Gamzee wouldn’t accept it anyway.

“There’s probably going to be some reforms,” Feferi pipes up, dragging her gaze off Gamzee to meet Noe’s own. “Meenah’s kind of over the whole conquest thing so we’ll have to do something with the cultists.”

“Meenah?” He’s not familiar with the name. It isn’t one of the children or any of Ironclaw’s crew.

“Oh, yeah, that’s the Empress.”

Noe blinks and his mind immediately latches on: Feferi is familiar enough with the Empress to use her name when every other Troll has only used her title? Is it only a matter of her caste? The children didn’t seem to care much about their relative castes but Ironclaw had been seen to defer to her here and there, as he’d been recorded doing so with Terezi.

He wondered if Softouch, who apparently was a high caste, could use the Empress’s name, but he really did not want to be the one tasked with finding out.

“That motherfucker’s got work all up and cut out for her,” Gamzee says absently, tilting his head. “Might need a dancester’s help.”

Dancester? The word didn’t seem to translate for English, so Noe asks, “What is a dancester?”

“Oh, that means the sister’s what got the same slurry start as-”

“No, stop! We’re not supposed to tell them that!” Feferi snaps to stop him, suddenly sharp and all business, but it wasn’t fast enough.

Noe puts the pieces together. He knows the term “slurry” has to do with Troll reproduction (thanks to Yui who, in the thralls of over-caffeination, cannot stop babbling to save her life) and he’s quick enough to see the connection, especially with Feferi’s reaction. He just needs confirmation.
“Are you of the same blood caste as the Empress, Feferi?” he asks quietly.

She’s silent. It’s enough.
Tavros is a nice kid, Yui decides. Nice, has a good sense of humor, and the most adorable blush (now that she knows how to recognize it, even if she only has theories on how it’s happening. Someday!!) And while he is horribly embarrassed by the whole thing, he’s also being dutifully honest in answering her questions.

“That’s what it means,” she murmurs as she adds to her notes in the margins of the Romance Brief. So, two Trolls mix their “slurry” and present it to the Mother Grub (and she is happy for the confirmation of Jade Harley’s information) and then there are new Trolls. The two sexual partners, kismesis and matesprit, for more contributions to the species whole. Diversity concerns? Maybe some kind of natural response to larval attrition through genetic anomalies or illness. Oh, but-

“The others that came with you,” she starts, flicking her eyes back up to his face. “If we’re at least going by the way we categorize humans and the similarities between our two species, at least visually, it looks like there are two sexes present? I’ve noticed some of you seem to use feminine pronouns and others use male pronouns and that there are physical differences. Do you need one of each sex to contribute the right slurry?”

Tavros blinks slowly, deliberately. It’s not a lack of moisture, it’s emotive. Theodora figured it out the other day, the lack of blinking or wet sheen to the eyes. They haven’t quite confirmed it but they’re pretty sure there must be some kind of secondary, transparent lid that is either usually closed or simply entirely affixed because the eyes are definitely moving in place and must be in some kind of fluid suspension but-

“What?” he finally says, completely baffled.

Oh boy. Too bad Henok is off calling his family right now, Yui would love to watch him have this conversation.

“With most species here on earth that have sexual reproduction, morphologically different sexes contribute only part of the genome required for a new specimen, usually to aid in genetic diversity and- Oh, I’m sorry,” she interrupts herself, seeing the glazed quality coming to Tavros’ gaze, “I’m getting a little technical. So, usually when you have differing visual gender traits, it’s for some kind of mating reason or for child-rearing- and can I tell you how fascinating it is that your species has something amounting to breast tissue? But your group seems to have male and female differences, so it seems to go to reason that you, for example, would need a female partner.”

It looks like Tavros has just swallowed his tongue. He stares at Yui wide eyed, blush in full force, and like he has no idea how to react to her.
“Why… why would, uhh, being female matter?” he finally sputters. “It’s not like we’re- It’s not like we’re different. There, I mean. Wait, are humans- What?”

What? Yui feels her head tilt in response for how much that’s thrown her.

“I know Kanaya’s venom sacs are, uhh. I know they’re bigger than mine but—” Tavros waves a clawed hand like it somehow helps explain what he’s saying. “It’s not like her… bulge is somehow- Oh. Oh. That’s what she meant about Rose! Oh.”

A lightbulb comes on in Yui’s brain as Tavros sits back, apparently amazed by his own realization.

“Trolls aren’t different sexes,” Yui marvels after a moment. “You’re different genders.”

“Humans are weird,” Tavros says with another slow blink of his (outer?) eyelids.

They’re all drones. It’s not a triple set, it’s a dual one. The Mother Grub is the only different individual. And going by what she’s called, Yui can’t help but figure she’s likely the source of ovum, or at least the Troll version of it. Which would mean, for all intents, that the drones are all male. Two males contributing together to broaden the diversity of the offspring, fascinating. There are stranger configurations on Earth, especially in insects, so it’s not as if this is completely unheard of, but she finds it so interesting in such an advanced species! And the way that the Troll reproductive cells interact could be like nothing she can compare to with her own internal binary, but- Oh, this is wonderful.

“Venom sacs!” she exclaims suddenly and ignores the way Tavros jumps. “That’s how you decide your gender, the size of—”

“Uhh, no.” One of Tavros’ eyebrows has gone sky high, even if he isn’t quite recovered from the earlier realizations. “We just are. I mean, my sacs are bigger than Terezi’s, but she’s her and I’m he.”

And Yui isn’t sure she’s imagining it when the deliberate pronouns don’t quite sound right, like he’s saying a word but she’s hearing something completely different. A side effect of the language skill of god tiers? She has no idea.

She looks down at her notes, which she’s been writing without even thinking. Differing presentation of the same physical traits, sociological impact? Oh, and that is a question. There didn’t seem to be much, considering the Trolls had an entirely different way to base their social structure to the tune of blood color, which she really needed to learn more about, but she suddenly remembers notes Sarah had sent her way about how Dave had described two pronoun suffixes as “dude and way more dangerous dude”.

“Is one gender more dangerous than the other?” she wonders aloud and then, realizing she did, she runs with it and glances up at Tavros. He shrugs his shoulders a little.

“Vriska’s way more, um, dangerous than most of us,” he admits, “but Eridan killed more people.”

And that’s an interesting distinction. Yui considers it and then asks, “Would you consider Kanaya more dangerous than, say, Sollux?”

Tavros considers that pretty seriously, even if it’s obvious he has no idea what she’s going for. “Sollux shoots lasers out of his eyes. Kanaya uses a chainsaw.”

It’s not entirely clear who he considers more dangerous but that’s interesting, too. It speaks to less
of a gender bias and more serious consideration for skill. Considering their Empress is apparently female, in Troll terms, with not even one of the Trolls being the slightest bit snide about it, there is at least not a bias against females. But she’d also not heard or observed any kind of bias against the males, either. An offshoot of the lack of physical difference and the blood castes taking over for that kind of thing? She has no idea and it’s great.

Oh, but she also wants to follow up on the laser eyes thing! Because that is one of the neatest powers she’s heard of for the Trolls so far (not that telepathy isn’t neat) and she has to see it in action and figure out how it works-

Karkat and Jade appear out of nowhere in the middle of the room. Karkat stumbles a bit before catching his balance and then storms his way to Tavros, dragging him bodily up out of his chair.

“Gig’s up, that pan-fried, taintchafing moron just let the meowbeast out of the containment vessel,” he growls out with absolutely no context whatsoever.

“What did Gamzee do?” Tavros asks even as he lets Karkat drag him back towards a slightly worried looking Jade.

“Feferi,” Karkat snarls in explanation that even Tavros doesn’t seem to get anything from.

“Wait, we weren’t finished-” Yui tries, rising from her chair, but none of the children pay her any mind. The moment they’re near her, Jade grabs both their shoulders and the three of them disappear again. Yui gets about three seconds to wonder just what happened when her phone buzzes. She doesn’t react at first, but then it quickly happens again and a third time. Yui almost ignores that one, too, but then tugs it out of her pocket anyway because the action is more familiar than trying to figure out the children’s behavior.

Noe, 1 min ago.

Meeting room. Now. Feferi is Troll royalty on level with the Empress.

Noe, 1 min ago.

We need to figure out what it means that she’s here.

Noe, now.

Sorry, that was for Jemaine. Please disregard.


Chapter End Notes

I tried to make the last bit and image but photobucket is not keeping me logged in for some weird reason. / Here’s hoping it hasn’t somehow borked my other images on here.
Ironclaw is refusing to see him or any of the human delegation. He’s being very polite about it, excusing himself due to “much needed internal discussion”, but the bottom line is that their communications are, at least for now, on hiatus again. Jermaine can’t say he’s surprised. Not when a member of the royal blood sect has been revealed in Ironclaw’s party and was undisclosed earlier.

He doesn’t know what this means. It could be unrelated. Perhaps a training tour for a would be future Empress under the watchful eye of a well prepared adult. That might explain Softouch’s presence as a deadly deterrent for harm to come to them, even if the juvenile trolls didn’t seem to be staying on Ironclaw’s ship.

It could be the Empress sending one of her own to become ruler of their planet in her stead, to subjugate in her honor for better favor among possible other candidates.

He doesn’t know and letting his mind spiral this way won’t help anything but he can’t make it stop. He has to consider all eventualities. He has to make sure they don’t meet a bad end. His wife and children’s lives are hanging in the balance of his work.

Noe’s text messages had been sent to the entire team due to an unfortunate technological error (the likes of which were usually humorous, but not right now, and someone should really sit Noe down and teach him the finer points of using a smartphone) so Jermaine has been fending off curious inquiries while trying and failing to get Ironclaw to talk to him again. The ship is silent. Lt. Mason isn’t able to get an answer either, but at least the Helmsman seems regretful about it. She’s even stopped her activities on Twitter.

The radio silence feels damning. He and Noe spent most of the night trying to figure out the meaning of all this from what they’ve observed but all he has is a list of wilder and more distressing possibilities. They go over the documents that had been handed over to them, apparently from the Empress herself, but it’s still just a mix of trading options and travel ordinances, should humanity venture into Troll space, as far as was translated. Sarah is fairly sure of the translation, as proofed by Dave Strider and double checked by Jade Harley. They had been surprisingly serious in their attempts to help. Jermaine still feels a lingering distrust, well aware of the scary ease the children would have in deceiving them…

No matter. He can’t sit idle forever.

Jermaine stands in front of the ship, outside of range for the small, barely visible sparks of light from the Troll’s forcefield. There’s no answer to his request for an audience. He waits.

It takes only half an hour. He’s actually surprised but he doesn’t hesitate to walk through the thin
doorway opened up for him in the forcefield. The outer door of the ship slides open next and a semi-adult beckons him inside. The brown marked semi-adult doesn’t speak, but Jermaine isn’t surprised. There’s been no sign that the language gift has been bestowed on any of them.

Jermaine follows them- her?- into a long hallway. There’s little ornamentation. The ship is a tool, meant for more than just show. He has the terrible suspicion that it isn’t even meant for Ironclaw’s kind of work in the first place. There’s nothing to show off to an alien race. Nothing to boast. The ship is entirely functional and nothing more, as far as Jermaine can see.

The semi-adult leads him through several undecorated corridors to one of the many thickly built doors that remind him very much of larger version of those he’d see on a submarine. In hindsight, he supposes that makes sense. The semi-adult speaks in the guttural, clicking Troll language and there’s an answer from behind the door. She opens it and gestures him inside before turning on her heel and marching away to other duties. Jermaine watches her go and then steps through.

This room is about as undecorated as the corridors. There’s some kind of map taking up most of one wall and a thick table with chairs bolted around it at a steady interval but little more. Ironclaw sits at the far side of the table, hands folded in front of him, and at his shoulder is Softouch. A little trickle of displaced cold runs along Jermaine’s spine but he doesn’t allow himself to react to it. Her lips quirk at one side, showing more sharp teeth than the few that hang over her bottom lip.

“Thank you for seeing me,” Jermaine says as he takes a seat across from them.

“My apologies for the wait,” Ironclaw responds, his expression completely closed off from what little he’d been emoting before. “There were internal issues to attend to.”

Softouch tilts her head, a loose curl of hair sliding to hang between her glowing eyes, but says nothing.

“It’s all right. The important thing is that talks have opened again.” Jermaine straightens further in his chair. He has to retain a strong front. He’s not in his own territory right now. It’s unlikely anyone else would be able to come in after him. “I’m sure you have an inkling of what I’d like to discuss.”

“The Heiress.” It comes out quiet, flat. Not worried, almost annoyed instead, but Jermaine gets the feeling that the annoyance isn’t directed at him. And at least the title does confirm Feferi’s status.

“We were not informed of her title,” Jermaine says.

“I did not intend to reveal it.” Ironclaw does not blink or turn away, looking as if made of stone. “Her status is unimportant and revealing it is a security risk. She’s been forbidden from interacting with humans further.”

Jermaine waits. With Ironclaw on the defensive, he might reveal more if given time to worry. And if he doesn’t, there’s nothing lost. Jermaine already has more information than Ironclaw meant to give.

Ironclaw’s eyes narrow. “You’re going to ask for something. Go ahead and do it.”

“Your presence here has been explained as a whim of your Empress,” Jermaine begins and Ironclaw simply listens without any sign of how it affects him. “There is obviously much your people could offer to us, much that could be taught, but nothing you have asked for in return.”

“There is little your planet could offer that we cannot find on a different world within the Empire,” Ironclaw admits quietly.
Jermaine expected as much. “What does she want with us?”

A quiet rattling sound starts in the room. It takes a few moments of ignoring the tightening of his throat before Jermaine realizes it’s coming from Softouch. Her toothy grin widens, the glow of her eyes becoming brighter, and then Ironclaw says a sharp word and it stops abruptly. Jermaine draws in a shaky breath and pretends his heartbeat didn’t jump half again.

Ironclaw doesn’t bother apologising for Softouch’s behavior. He merely turns his gaze back onto Jermaine, eyes glowing brightly a moment and then fading again.

“She gave me no orders but to open contact,” he says simply.

“It can’t just be curiosity-”

“It isn’t.”

Jermaine watches him closely. One of the others he might expect getting answers to be like pulling teeth but Ironclaw had been so very open and willing to share before now. “You’re worried we may do something to the Heiress.”

“It would make tactical sense.” Ironclaw’s words are quiet and even but the fact that his face is still so completely closed off reveals everything. “I did not wish her to accompany me. Her safety cannot be guaranteed and her role is important to our society.”

“Because she’s to reign after the Empress.”

“Because she is to challenge the Empress.”

Jermaine blinks. “Challenge?”

“This is a conversation for another time, I believe.”

Truth. However much Jermaine wants to disseminate the implications, he has more pressing matters to attend to. “Why did the Empress send Feferi?”

“I don’t know.” Ironclaw stares stonily back as Jermaine frowns. “The Empress did not explain. She simply ordered that I bring these twelve juveniles with me, the Heiress one of them.”

“Just happened to be the Heiress.”

“Moreau, I am well aware of what you are implying.” Ironclaw says sharply, even though his voice didn’t rise at all. “The Heiress was kept secret for her safety. She must return to Alternia and challenge the Empress once she has had final molt. I attempted to leave her behind but the Empress insisted. Since I was unable to secure the Heiress’ safety, I ordered the juveniles to keep her blood caste secret.”

“You must understand what this looks like.” Jermaine sighs a little. He finds himself wanting to believe it at face value. The rapport he’d been building with Ironclaw had to count for something. “Your race has conquered other planets, other species. An attack on Earth does not seem out the ordinary.”

Ironclaw goes quiet for a moment. His gaze slides off Jermaine’s face for the first time. His brows twitch, bunching just enough to notice. He takes a slow, deep breath like he’s gathering himself.

“Let us be perfectly clear,” he begins and his voice is quieter, a little tight. “This mission is peaceful. There are no orders to incite aggression. There is no plan for the subjugation of your
“Then why did you come?” Jermaine asks, needing to understand.

“Because the Empress ordered it.” Ironclaw looks at him again and- he’s upset. It’s subtle but there. Upset at having his intentions scrutinized? Or that humanity isn’t just accepting them at face value? “The juveniles had contact with your juveniles. We are unsure how and I’ve been ordered not to question them. I’ve wondered if the entire mission was simply to reunite them.”

It comes across as honest. It feels honest. Jermaine… wants to believe him. It just seems incredibly farfetched to travel so far for such a small reason. Space travel, as routine as it seems for them, must burn incredible amounts of fuel and other resources…

“Jermaine?” Ironclaw says with a softness that has even Softouch looking at him askew. “I mean you no harm. On my hatchname, Charis Iremia, I mean absolutely no harm.”

Softouch is staring at him, her brows jerked high on her face. He is fairly sure she hasn’t had the language download but she seems to have understood what Ironclaw said to him. This has meaning, more than just of calming Jermaine’s suspicions. He may not understand the full meaning, but it’s there. And Jermaine believes him.

“All right,” he says finally. Ironclaw doesn’t smile but his expression settles a little.
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

Your super long finale that i could not divide into five parts and so decided to post all in one instead. :D No specific prompts.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's been only six weeks since the aliens arrived. Six weeks of language learning, dancing around cultural differences, figuring out biological nuance, and trying to keep a handle on the entire process without going insane. Jermaine thinks he's done all right at it.

Since Feferi's royal reveal, they've gotten quite a bit done. The juvenile Trolls have kept mostly to themselves, popping in here and there but largely absent. He's not sure if this is in the interest of protecting other state secrets or some other internal orders but Ironclaw keeps things quiet on his side. It has at least given Jermaine's team time to catch up and handle the masses of information they've been given over the last weeks and form concrete plans for eventual presentation to the UN and the public at large.

"Preliminary reports?" Jermaine asks more from tradition rather than actual need.

"All good." Yui flips open the cover of her report. "So far, no human with contact to the aliens has reported any sort of illness and the pathologist report is clean. Trolls have a vicious immune system that suggests plenty of native virus and bacteria exposure at home but somehow their ship travel seems to be scrubbing them clean. Still following up on that but no cultures taken from skin swabs have grown into anything yet. All tests conducted within the lab have shown Trolls to be essentially immune to human borne illnesses. Either there is no reaction and the virus is passed harmlessly or an immune response begins quickly to eliminate it."

Well. There's at least one thing they don't have to worry about. As far as they know it, anyway. He keeps the possibility in mind so he can consider ways to counteract any political fallout if one of the Trolls becomes ill or somehow passes something to a human.

"I suppose our imperfect quarantine will have to do for proof of safety," he mutters as he considers the report. He read it before the meeting started but he’ll be giving it a more thorough run through sometime after.

"You mean if things had gone to plan and they didn’t land before we had the site finished?" Sarah teases, shaking her head. “I’d say we got out of that pretty lucky.”

“When I explained it to Mr. Nitram, he seemed surprised that illness might even be a factor,” Yui says in a thoughtful tone. “Either Trolls never thought to care about it before or they’ve never had to. It makes me wonder if the microscopic life of their home planet even works like that.”

Jermaine admits that it’s a fairly interesting line of thought but they have other reasons to be here that need handling.

“The bottom line is that, as of now, broad human and Troll interaction has been deemed relatively safe,” he says to bring them back to the point. “Good work, Dr. Saito.”
She grins at him and then sits down as Sarah rises with a grunt and an audible pop as something in her back settles.

“We’ve got a working primer on the language. The kids call it Alternian but apparently the word sounds different when not spoken with magic powers-” Jermaine clears his throat and Sarah rolls her eyes a little before continuing. “It’s a beast of a thing but probably easier than English or Chinese, so at least it’s got that going for it. We’ve amassed a fairly large vocabulary and Mr. Captor worked with our local nerds to smooth out that translation software of his.”

“Nerds,” Jermaine deadpans with dismay because this is being recorded and that just makes Sarah smirk at him.

“I call it like I see it,” she snarks at him. “Anyway. We should be able to use the translator for any interactions with the Trolls once Miss Pyrope’s language dump fades”

“Once it what?” Did he hear that correctly-

“Mind your blood pressure, ” Sarah says sweetly before dropping back into business. “You must have skimmed that report. The language dump isn’t permanent. It’s already fading. Miss Pyrope would have to keep reapplying it and there is apparently far more strain to the deed than we initially thought. She can’t just keep doing it. We’ve been getting as much important vocabulary down as possible and working on the translator for that reason.”

That was going to make things a lot more difficult, considering Ironclaw was one of the first to receive the language skill. He makes a note to speak with Ironclaw and Terezi about possibly reapplying the language dump at least to Ironclaw when it fades, if no one else. At least Ironclaw had a good amount of English language logistics down already. If the dump faded unexpectedly, they had something to fall back on.

“Thank you, Dr. Bradshaw. Please keep me informed,” he says for the sake of the meeting recording, reaching up to rub the beginning ache in his temple. “And you, Dr. Galea?”

Noe rises with a little yawn. “So far, with the exception of Softouch, there have been no serious threats posed by the Trolls. And Softouch’s are debatable as to seriousness. Probably just high caste posting. We see similar with Miss Serket, Mister Ampora, and Mister Makara. In any case, nothing that would threaten the proceedings as far as I can tell. Ironclaw has a good grasp on things. We will need to include Softouch in the presentation. By their social rules, it would be a grave insult not to in favor of Ironclaw and he’s not about to stand for that officially, much as he’s let it slide for now.”

The Bloodcaste Brief is ten times the length of the Romance Brief. Jermaine hasn’t quite committed it to memory but he easily recalls several pertinent passages. While he’d like to keep Softouch as far away from everyone as he possibly can, it’s not a risk they can avoid.

“Coordinate with Ironclaw as to the best way to integrate her into the proceedings,” he says and Noe gives him a polite nod as he sits. There are other reports to listen to, from engineering to security to sundry others. By the time they finish hours later, Jermaine’s headache has spread across his forehead to pound on both sides. In a way, he’s almost relieved to feel it. Keeps him rooted in the real world where this is really happening, rather than entertaining the idea it might be a dream.

What really nags him as he gets to his quarters is the language issue. The rest is all very important but what could hamper things most is if Ironclaw loses his grip on English. Jermaine knows Sarah’s sent her primer to the Antecedent and that Antecedent herself is fluent, in some manner of it, but he still worries. They’ll handle it, he knows that. He just hadn’t considered the gift might
not be permanent. He’s not even sure how the gift really worked in the first place.

Both the Trolls’ and children’s powers are still as much of a mystery as they were in the first place. They have made notes of things shown freely and spoken of in passing but the children react to direct questioning with a disappearing act if it isn’t dropped after the first denial. All questions about “god tier” are similarly ignored.

Jermaine spoke with Mr. Egbert about possible counselling for the children (and him) on Noe’s insistence but Mr. Egbert hadn’t agreed to anything as of yet. He skirted around why, deflecting in ways very obvious but still skillful enough that Jermaine has since let it slide. With so much else to concentrate on, he simply doesn’t have the patience to keep on it.

There has been a decision about not including Trolls with mind control abilities into the official first presentation, however. With the exception of Softouch, who must be in the party, the others with any mind altering abilities will be excused. He will not take that risk, doesn’t even much like that he had to with his team. There have been no incidents but he hopes to keep it that way.

Jermaine lays down on his bed and covers his eyes with both hands. They’re about to reach a turning point. He’s been able to handle everything mostly on his own terms until now but that’s going to change, he knows it will. It’s for the better, most likely, but he still worries how other influences will change things.

He picks up his phone and pulls up the latest messages from Léa, letting himself miss her and their children. They’re doing well, he doesn’t worry after them, but he will be so very relieved to see them again soon. With the final declaration of the safety on contact with the Trolls, he can visit home for a little while soon. It warms him to think about.

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Softouch blinks even less than Ironclaw. Her purple eyed stare is steady and focused above the bright spots crossing the middle of her face and her wide, fanged mouth. She rarely stops smiling, sharp teeth edging out on both sides like a half considered warning. He’s not sure if it’s an actual threat or simply something she’s gotten so used to doing that she’s forgotten how not to.

Noe watches the hesitant way Terezi reaches for her. There’s no shake to her fingers but her body is coiled and ready to run. Her eyes are rimmed with greenish blue in a way he usually only observes from Karkat but has been told is stress and sleeplessness. He finds it interesting how like a human that is but it only cements home the vehemence that she only bestow the language gift sparingly. It’s already faded nearly completely in the non god tier juveniles and Ironclaw has refused it reapplied for now while he works with Sarah on learning more for himself. He’s getting passable, still shaky on some syntax but doing very well in the short amount of time he’s been studying.

Softouch has made absolutely no attempt to learn it, scorns the very idea of lowering herself to “the meat beast’s tongue” according to Tavros. They’re lucky she agreed to this, only because it’s temporary.

Noe’d been warned that this bloodcaste tended to talk a certain way and has observed it with
Gamzee. He’s not surprised but the way her words, even in English, seem to drip with amused threat and the subvocal rumble of violence still gets to him. The lizard part of his brain seizes and screams to run. He doesn’t.

“Thank you, Terezi,” he says instead, trying to ignore the uptick in his heartbeat. She smiles, tense and sharp, and then she’s gone the way the juveniles always are. Noe turns his gaze to Softouch and is resolutely not frightened of her.

“Now then, with the presentation coming up, we should-”

“Well damn, those mouth noises actually make some motherfucking sense!” Softouch laughs, a grinding noise that isn’t quite all vocal and seems to rumble in him in a way he’s extremely uncomfortable with. He wonders if this happen when Ironclaw laughs more than once. “Miracles.”

“We thought you might like being able to talk to us.”

Softouch snorts derisively and waves a sharply clawed hand. “Ain’t got much to say to your kind. I’m a motherfucking war negotiaterror.”

His curiosity piques. “I wasn’t aware there were different kinds of- how was it- yes, Ambassassin?”

The way her eyes crinkle, he’s pretty sure the translation isn’t quite right, missing some kind of nuance, but she accepts it well enough. “Sure, bro. There’s to being Ironclaw and then all us other fuckers.”

“Oh?” Noe gathered pretty quickly how strange Ironclaw must be, considering the way the juveniles and his own crew seem to be confused by him. He’s kind of relieved for confirmation.

“See, thirty sweeps ago, Ambassassination was all to being incitement and motherfucking sneaky plans, toppling all manner of troublesome rebels and axing out those what show to be annoying,” Softouch says with a shrug, slumping in her chair as she starts picking at one of her claw beds. “Then this motherfucker comes in and thinks, ‘Hey, maybe we can be all hatefriend-like’ and fuck if the uppers didn’t motherfucking let him.”

Spies. They’d been spies. Spies and assassins, guerilla forces set to destabilize rather than annihilate, to get a people ready for complete warfair pitched for the Trolls. That’s why the word seems so violent. Noe wonders why he’s not more surprised. Honestly, he’d been kind of waiting for some turn like that.

“And Ironclaw changed that,” he says.

“Motherfucker’s pale for the entire goddamn universe,” she agrees. “Thinks we ain’t got reason to subjuggulate them what’s beneath us, meatbeast and mineral alike.”

Lucky break for humanity. But it just reminds him that Ironclaw had mentioned being near the end of his lifespan. They might be safe now, but… If most of the Ambassassins were like Softouch, it likely wouldn’t be long.

“Your role as a… negotiaterror,” Noe murmurs finally, jotting down the term in his notebook. “Is this common for you to-”

“If’n they’s already shown they ain’t down for the safe talk,” she says as she sits up more proudly. “I get to go in all sneak like and give the riotous fear thoughts straight to their little pans, or steal the breath from their wigglers.”
Noe swallows thickly. Because that... “Under orders.”

“Not gonna roll over and show underbelly to those all up and in with the blood need.”

He wishes Ironclaw was here. Ironclaw didn’t make the sour burn rise in his throat.

The Trolls are militaristic, violent, and absolutely fatal as a species; a race of conquerors who had spent who knows how long smashing any civilization within their space under their heels. He keeps forgetting that because of how mild Ironclaw and most of the juveniles are. He keeps forgetting, likely because he wants to. He can’t do that.

“What is it you want from us?” he asks because he can’t not ask. They still don’t understand why the Trolls are being so friendly when it’s against their nature.

“Pain in the globes says jump, you motherfucking hit orbit,” Softouch replies. “Ain’t nothing doing, you go as what’s told. You do as what’s told. Empress wants to talk, we’re motherfucking talking. Ain’t in me to know why. Ain’t in me to care.”

Softouch rises and leans half over the table, her hands sliding across the wood to support her as she gets into his space, gets so close he catches the alien sour of her breath and can see the faintest indication of the edges of her pupils in the sea of purple and suddenly it’s like he’s going to drown in it and he can’t even hope to get away. He feels claws digging into his chest.

“All meat to me,” she whispers low and soft, the sound of it cloyingly gentle in a way that hits the back of his neck and tightens the muscle it finds. “Poor little treebeast, shivering like there ain’t enough motherfucking heat in the whole planet. Ain’t been so alone, huh? Motherfucking soft and tiny and on your lonesome.”

“Stop it,” he manages to edge out only to have her coo at him.

“Shush, shush, soft and motherfucking quiet now,” she says and it’s like molasses in his brain. He can’t- His thoughts are muddy and slow. “See this? This ain’t nothing. This ain’t shit. Empress’s motherfucking gifts be all up in your senses, be in your bloodpusher. You don’t motherfucking see it, ain’t got the knowing it’s happening, but she’s there. And you ain’t getting her out til she says or you’re a stain on the motherfucking ground.”

She straightens and the spell breaks as quickly as it came over him. Noe sucks in a hard breath, belatedly realizing his cheeks are wet and he’s so sick in his guts, twisted farther than he has been in a long time. He stares at her, sees the pleased twist of her lips and the satisfaction in every single inch of her.

“Point motherfucking made?” she asks idly.

“Point made,” he croaks and then ends the meeting so he can relieve his stomach of it’s contents. He didn’t expect Ironclaw to be waiting when he finally makes it out of the bathroom. Noe’s strung too tight and he absolutely does not have the composure to do this right now. His hands are shaking and he’s not sure he’ll ever be warm again.

“I can’t-” he starts and Ironclaw sighs softly.

“You say and do nothing,” he murmurs, lips curling over the words with more finesse than yesterday. “You me come- You come with me. Yes?”

“Ironclaw...”
“It is better,” Ironclaw insists, pressing his hand to the back of Noe’s arm to lead him away from the bathroom and Noe goes because he’s still pretty messed up right now. Ironclaw doesn’t ask him for anything, says nothing as they walk until they’re out of the building and in the sunlight. And Noe finally sucks in a full breath. He half collapses into the bench Ironclaw directs him to, grabbing his knees to make his hands stop shaking.

For long minutes, they sit in a silence that for once doesn’t seem expectant or uncomfortable. Ironclaw stares out over the well manicured grounds and over the security fencing to the tall, far off buildings they can just make out of the city.

“She wants to kill us all,” Noe says finally. His voice is too high, cracking.

“Yes,” Ironclaw says without a trace of guile. He tilts his head, good eye focusing and now that Noe knows how to differentiate the pupil, he sees the red side doesn’t have one. He doesn’t know why he fixates on that. “Softouch is… hungry? For not food. For fighting.”

Noe finds himself laughing a little. “Understatement. She’s… Is your Empress really worse?”

Ironclaw considers that. He looks out towards the city again, folding his hands in his lap and tucking his claws in harmlessly. He’s always so careful about that kind of thing.

“She is very old,” he says finally. “She sees- She has seen many things, knows many things. She makes her word law. Sometimes by saying it in the mind. She has… I do not know the word.”

“It’s okay.” Noe closes his eyes and presses his palms tight over them for several seconds. “She’s more powerful than Softouch.”

“Yes.”

“But she sent you.”

Ironclaw hums softly, a rattle deep in his chest but Noe doesn’t get any danger sense from it. The Empress could make her followers do whatever she liked and what she wants right now is Ironclaw here, talking with them. It could have been Softouch on point here, could have been some other Ambassassin, but instead it was Ironclaw. A diversion or a statement? Who knew.

“I’m going to be glad when this is someone else’s job,” he sighs out.

Ironclaw just snorts, his lips quirking on one side and they stay there until Noe’s heart stops racing.

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It’s not often she sees Jermaine soften up, but she doesn’t begrudge him a bit the way he sweeps his wife up into his arms the moment he sees her glide into the room like a queen. Sarah grins instead and gives a wave to the twins, both rolling their eyes like they’ve seen something utterly inappropriate. She hadn’t thought they were due for another few hours but the look of shock and happy relief on Jermaine’s face is plenty to soothe over interrupting their meeting.

“Oh,” Ironclaw says softly from his seat beside her. (Not quite “oh” so much as a half vocal inner chest exhalation, fascinating...) There’s a thoughtfulness to his face as he watches Jermaine brush a chaste kiss to the corner of Léa’s mouth.

“I know your people do kissing,” Sarah says and Ironclaw’s scarred brow twitches a bit. Like he’s embarrassed getting caught, aww.
“I know not red or pale.”

Sarah snorts. “Not quite cut and dried with humans.”

“Mm. Yes.”

“Alien!” the kid with shorter hair shouts abruptly, her whole body going stiff.

“Sylvie,” Jermaine hisses sharply and his daughter’s shoulders hunch, but then Ironclaw’s giving a quiet laugh, rumbling and odd but not unpleasant. A bit like a well tuned engine.

“Hello,” Ironclaw says, mouth twisting into an almost fond smile. “I speak with you, yes?”

He’s getting better with the inflections, Sarah’s pleased to note.

“That’s not-” Jermaine starts but both kids perk up and start over to the table undeterred. Léa pats his arm as his mouth twists with defeat and Sarah shifts her attention to the twins sliding into empty seats across from them.

“I’ve never met an alien,” Sylvie says, a little slow as she moves over a language she’s not entirely secure with.

“I meet many aliens,” Ironclaw tells her. “I am Ironclaw. Your name is?”

Sylvie wets her lip and then gives her name politely. The other child joins in with a quieter “Lucas” and Ironclaw nods to them both.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Ironclaw says from rote, one of the many stock phrases they’d penned down and practiced so that his unfamiliarity wouldn’t cause too much offense in mixed company.

“Are you going to take over the planet?” Sylvie blurts abruptly and Sarah can’t stop a bark of ugly laughter when Jermaine looks skyward like he’s regretting every turn in his entire life that led him to this moment.

“No.”

“The moon?” Lucas adds hesitantly with a quick glance to his sister.

“No.” That one makes Ironclaw smile again, though.

Sylvie squints her eyes a bit. “Eat us?”

“No.”

“Choose a wife to have your alien babies?!” Lucus cries suddenly, unable to contain himself.

“Arrête ça,” Jermaine grumbles. They all ignore him.

“What is wife?” Ironclaw asks instead of answering and that just kicks off the kids asking all sorts of questions about Ironclaw’s family, which it turns out there is none of because Trolls don’t do that, and the kids are absolutely flabbergasted by how his parent was apparently a giant, partially sentient animal. He doesn’t have the words to really describe it but Sarah shoots a text to Noe and Yui about it for future study.

Jermaine eventually puts his foot down and bullies the kids out of the meeting room while they babble excitedly about making their dog being a ‘lusus’. Léa hangs back a moment, clearly
amused by the whole thing. She slides her gaze over to the table and gives Ironclaw a polite nod that he returns easily.

“Thank you for coming peacefully,” Léa murmurs with a softer smile. “It’s a bit of a dream for me. I’ve read a lot of stories about... Well. In any case, thank you.”

She glides away after to join her family (Sarah swears the woman looks like she’s dancing at all times, it’s almost ridiculous) and Ironclaw looks after her thoughtfully. He murmurs something in Alternian and Sarah catches something about old and that one word for silly that has ten different connotations depending on the articles attached to it, but it’s far more difficult the parse spoken Alternian than written. There’s so many layers to it.

“They’re a handful but those kids sure liven a place up,” Sarah says, resting her head on one hand. “Hope that didn’t stall you too much.”

“No. The juveniles are pleasant.” He’s been soaking more flowery vocabulary lately, pouring over the dictionary she’d lent him eagerly. Suits him.

“Yeah, they’re pretty good kids.” Sarah stretches her arms, sighing as a stitch of knotted muscle finally unravels between her shoulders.

They’d been going over the speeches before the interruption, getting ready for presentation to the UN at large. Jermaine’s speech writer team had a perfectly workable draft, but Ironclaw has definite ideas about what’s appropriate and the draft is littered in blue marks, both English and Alternian. She’ll have to annotate Ironclaw’s characters later but most of them are small additions and substitutions. It’s been a long time since she had such grueling discussions over specific syntax.

Softouch had taken one look at the Alternian translated copy of her own speech, as proofed by Karkat, and laughed for about five minutes straight before declaring them all to be “fragile ass grubs all to needing shooshing niceties” but Ironclaw’d gotten her to agree to using it with a few small changes. She seemed happy enough not taking point, finding the whole business boring. Sarah’s kind of relieved about that.

Mohamed and Adanna come by just when Sarah’s sure they’ve been lost to the ether. Mohamed gives her a small, apologetic smile while Adanna lugs in a huge binder of old speeches from previous presentations and older historical meetups. Ironclaw could have had his Helmsman look it all up but he’d deferred to only looking at what they’d prefer him to see. Sarah finds it pretty comforting that he continually lets them take the lead.

“This should start you out pretty well,” Adanna says as she sets the binder down on the table for Ironclaw to flip through. “We ran out of paper but someone’s off to fetch more.”

“Thank you.” Ironclaw’s words are absent, already absorbed in the documents. He’s thorough. Sarah can appreciate that.

“Did they get us a date yet?” Mohamed asks as he sets down his shoulder bag.

“Next month,” Sarah’s kind of relieved to have a definite, even if it’s, “on the ides.”

Mohamed’s lips twitch. “That’s not ominous at all.”

“I doubt they’re making a statement,” Sarah snorts, shaking her head. They all settle down and help Ironclaw go through the logs, explaining any turns of phrase that don’t make sense for non-native speakers and adding little sections he likes to a growing resource library for him. Jermaine joins them soon after, having gotten his family settled, and they spend the next few hours working
pleasantly.

That all changes when someone calls Jermaine out into the hallway, posture screaming barely contained terror. Sarah’s immediately on guard. She shares a look with Adanna and then gets up to go after him. Her suspicions immediately twist to Softouch, wondering what the hell she might have done-

Jermaine jerks the door open again before she can get there and then absolutely ignores her to round on Ironclaw. “You did not inform us of any incoming contingents.”

Ironclaw’s brows jerk up. “I am aware of one not.”

“There is a large object heading this way. Our sensors picked it up passing Jupiter and at the current speed, it will likely arrive within days. Considering the direct nature of it, we are sure it’s artificial. A ship,” Jermaine reports to him, sharp and tight and not at all happy.

“I must speak to Helmsman.” Ironclaw rises, expression tightening and just upset as Jermaine’s own.

“I’ll accompany you.”

As the two of them leave, stormy and dramatic, Sarah drops back into her chair and rubs her head.

“This was going so well, too,” Adanna mutters with a roll of her eyes.

“More Trolls?” Mohamed wonders aloud.

Sarah snorts. “Let’s hope so. If it’s anyone else, we’re probably fucked.”

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The human images of the object aren’t very conclusive. Ironclaw volunteers his ship’s systems to get a better look. The object that the Helmsman projects for them on one of the strange, pulsing walls is not a Troll ship. It’s larger than Ironclaw’s ship and more smoothly shaped, elegant in it’s design. Large, dark divots mark the surface, matching too closely to be anything other than deliberate. Jermaine’s a little impressed by the clarity the Helmsman gets, even if he’s less impressed by her commentary.

“-coming here in my space without even a by-your-leave, RUDE. And that bitchass navigator’s making no sense, what a dweeb,” she grumbles so seamlessly in the middle that Jermaine almost misses what she’s just said.

“Navigator? You’ve made contact?” he demands when he does realize it and the Helmsman cackles.

“’Course I made contact. What do you take me for, a fucking amatuer? Asshole didn’t even say hi before entering the system. Lucky I didn’t totally ruin him.”

Ironclaw sighs a little and mutters something sharp in Alternian. The glow in the Helmsman’s eyes sharpens and goes bright as something replaces the ship projection. Alternian characters, long strings of them. Ironclaw studies the projection closely and then, “Sound.”

Jermaine frowns as something crackling and distorted begins to play over the speakers. High pitched interference punctuates long stretches of clicking. He thinks something must be wrong with them before realizing there are irregular drops in sounds that aren’t so random to be distortions so much as-
“That’s- I think that’s speech,” he murmurs, mostly for himself. It’s even less like a human language than Alternian. “Ironclaw, do you-”

“I know this speech not.” And he doesn’t look happy about that either. Eyes narrow and hardened, he drops a few orders for the Helmsman. If Ironclaw isn’t familiar with the language or the ship, it’s a good bet this isn’t a species the Trolls are allied with but also not likely one they’ve had bad relations with. This could go very well or very badly, depending on the ship’s intentions.

“I am a warship, you know. I do have functional laser cannons,” the Helmsman says oh-so-helpfully and Jermaine shoots Ironclaw a dirty look because [*laser cannons*?]

“No,” Ironclaw says in English, for Jermaine’s benefit no doubt. “We talk first. Kill later, maybe.”

The Helmsman looks disappointed. Then she perks up and warns about an incoming visitor. Well, of an “incoming naked monkey”. It’s… close enough. Ironclaw gives permission for boarding and within minutes, one of the semi-adults is leading a messenger to report that the Egbert children are on base.

Finally a break. This is *precisely* what Jermaine needs right now. “Please send the audio recording to us. We’ll have the children listen and interpret if they can.”

The Helmsman cracks wise about it but Ironclaw seconds the order and follows as Jermaine goes with the messenger to greet the Egberts. He doesn’t know why they’re here but it is absolutely second in importance to the current threat.

**Humanity is vastly outclassed by Trolls. Who knows how much worse these new aliens might be?**

What Jermaine isn’t expecting is to see *all* of the Egbert children at once, along with all of the juvenile Trolls. They barely fit in the conference room and a quarter of them have to stand from lack of chairs. The random side conversations stop as he and Ironclaw step inside.

“I don’t know why you’ve all come but it will have to wait,” Jermaine says immediately and then ignores a few eye rolls. “There is a second ship heading this way. It’s not Troll made.”

They have the audacity not to be surprised. Except John, who’s surprise is so over the top that it cannot be anything but a farce. He grips his chest, eyes wide as he gasps out, “*No! Really?!*”

Jermaine reminds himself that he cannot incarcerate a child for lacking situational gravitas, no matter how much he’d like to. He settles for glaring until John stops pretending to have a heart attack.

*Antecedent* has received footage of a ship and confirmed it not to be of any species Trolls have had contact with,” Jermaine continues as if he hadn’t been interrupted at all. “An attempt at contact has failed but audio was recorded from it. We’re unsure if it’s merely interference or some kind of transmitted speech.”

“Oh hell yes, this is my time to shine,” Dave immediately pipes up only to have Terezi shove him half out of his chair.

“I think it’s mine. I’m the language mystic right now, coolkid,” she says with a smirk that doesn’t quite hide how tired she still looks.

“I’m so not doing it,” Vriska chimes in, folding her arms behind her head. “Boooooooooring.”

The children mostly degenerate into trying to delegate helpfulness between themselves, the way Jermaine absolutely did not need right now when they only had days to figure out what the new
aliens wanted and how to proceed. Ironclaw is apparently at the same level because he makes a sharp, guttural sound that seems to rattle Jermaine’s very bones like a concussive force. The children go silent, staring at him, and the juvenile Trolls in particular have shrunk back as if Ironclaw were Softouch instead.

Ironclaw runs narrowed eyes over each one of them. “You all will listen.”

Jermaine has the audio clip run through the conference room speakers. For the first thirty seconds of it, there’s nothing. Then Dave stands up so fast that he knocks his chair over, slamming his hands against the top of the table.

“The Mayor!” he hisses with utter reverence.

The children fall into a loud mix of chaotic celebration and relief. Roxy bursts into elated tears as she moans out another name and Karkat surrenders to it with her while various others comfort them, trade high fives, and are generally filled with absolute mirth.

Jermaine has no idea what this means, except… The children understand. They understand and they aren’t afraid. He trades a look with Ironclaw and recognizes a similar realization. More aliens, perhaps, but more that are apparently friendly. It’s… better than it could have been.

“I saw this possibility,” Rose says as she steps away from her laughing, hugging siblings and friends. She gives Jermaine a softer, simply happy look. “I’m glad it took hold.”

“I take this to be more friends of yours,” he says.

“Oh, yes. Different than the Trolls but still very much friends.” Her smile brightens even more. “The last pieces of our little crew.”

“I don’t suppose you would be willing to translate the message for me, just for clarity’s sake.”

“I would be happy to,” she assures him. “‘Hello, friends! I apologise for how long it took to get here. Calliope had to wake up first.’”

Jermaine glances to Ironclaw to see if the name has any significance but it appears not to. Well. He’d already done one first contact. He supposes another can’t be any more difficult.

Chapter End Notes

I am super duper leaving it at that. For serious this time y’all. Not writing a third story!

Thank you so much for sticking with me on this project :D It's been a lot of fun to write and explore and I hope everyone's enjoyed it.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!