This Is How The Story Ends: Dark, Glimmering and Finally

by Twilit

Summary

Three women.
Two forces.
One ending.
Finale.
This

2600 years ago

- ps his head all the way back and in an ice-cold breath she tells him, "I do not know about any afterlife, but if you see Caliborn, tell him he will not walk this world so long as one of my blood bars the gate."

Then the blade sinks into his flesh, sending icewater through his veins. He cannot scream, his larynx speared. He soils himself and his body begins to shiver as she works the notched blade down his throat, into his chest cavity. It scrapes roughly against gristle and bone and a froth of blood and spit bubbles from his silently howling mouth. He is shaking by the time she pierces his heart and stills him forever.

Then she braces her foot on his chest and rips the blade out through his front in an explosive display of impossible force, completing the unholy sacrament. Red-spattered hair is brushed out of her eyes with a bloodied palm and she tosses the sword to a guard.

"Burn that," she says before stalking off through the muddy field, heady with a rush of stolen power. “There's a sword in a stone that I intend to-

700 years ago

- nsanity, Porrim, you cannot simply consign an entire clade to execution because of the follies of a few elders!”

“I am not executing the entire clade, just those in Venezia. Durgas has relationships with other cities and clades, there will be survivors. I would never countenance the extinguishing of an entire bloodline, but this one is too far corrupt in this location.”

“It will take Durgas centuries to rebuild, you cannot verify their numbers outside the city-”

“And you cannot verify those who have drunk of the blood of the sorcerer! The entire clade, by virtue of obfuscating the truth, is complicit in the crimes of the few.”

“We can hold them, watch for the mutations to manifest-”

“God's blood, Aranea! We barely have the numbers to encircle them now. If any of those mutations exceed the ability of these troops when they go feral, we will have an outbreak that will-

28 years ago

-thetic, in your skeezy, Eurotrash way,” growls Roxy through panting breaths.

“Oh, I'm sorry, did you want me to stop. I'm sure its too difficult for you to bitch and-”

Her thighs clamp around the shaved head and press her against his ope-

12 years ago

- hands interlace on the cool grass. The great joy of Rainbow Falls, possibly the only joy of
Rainbow Falls, Rose thinks, is the clear skies at night. The lack of light pollution renders the dark glory of the stars in high definition, twinkling diamonds in the infinite abyss tugging at her heartstrings with something like hope. Everything feels hopeless and every day she feels like she is decaying from the inside out, rotted veins and guts pushing and pulsating against the barrier of healthy flesh.

But on nights like these, in moments like these, she finds a kind of blessed peace. The girl beside her makes her feel like a human again, a giggly, awkward teenaged human, but a human nonetheless.

She lets go of Kanaya's hand to roll over and hug the tall, lithe girl close, burrowing her face between silky black hair and smooth brown skin. A breath in, and the scent of her sends a thrill through Rose, sets butterflies off in that most pleasant of stomach sensations.

“Thank you for coming out.”

“Thank you for showing m-

5 years ago

-pread skittering flashes of pink lightning across dark shoulders as she kneaded the monster's flesh, rubbing out a knot. Kanaya made a small noise, her face pressed into the pillow and Roux licked her lips at it.

“You're not burning anymore,” she observes. “Either you are getting better at this or I am becoming soft in my attachment.”

Kanaya shifts, rolling her head to the side. “I can feel my reserves increasing and soft has never been a thing that remotely describes your behaviour, so I imagine it is my improvement rather than your burgeoning humanity. Alas.”

“Alas? How dare you,” purrs the thing as she lowers herself from her straddle, her palms sliding around the slim body to c-

3 years ago

-lright old man, we gotta talk.” Meenah spins the chair around, mounts it, and sets to rocking forward against the back of it.

Across the table, Karkat doesn't look up from his book. “Stop that.”

Meenah definitively does not stop, tipping the chair forward until it leans against the table and she is balanced on it, feet tucked up against her legs.

“I'm totes thankful and shit for you putting me up these past years, but I'm gonna split pretty soon.”

Eyes dart up from the book and something like surprise can be found in there, before being quashed. “Thank fuck for that. It's about goddamn time your freeloaders ass got out. You find work?”

“Yeah, whaling work.”

A scowl. “Typical. You leave, improving my quality of life, only to go off and make the
environment worse.”

“Yeah sure, I totally took the job solely because it would piss you off and not because there's no questions asked and its in the middle of the fucking ocean.”

“Gonna be able to cover your shit up?”

“I've managed here, haven't I?”

“Rainbow Falls isn't exactly filled with the brightest people.”

“No shit, I mean the Lalondes found you here.”

“Ok, one, I found Lalonde and two, good fucking point.”

The self-deprecation brought a lull in the conversation. Meenah swallowed, hesitating. Ah, fukkit.

“Yeah so the Lalondes are what I wanted to tal-

3 months ago

-ASA is still at a loss to describe the anomaly approaching Earth and all military strikes against it have had no discernible effect. In the midst of worldwide panic, the growing number of so-called 'horrorterror cults' are providing disturbingly calm refuges for terrified populaces.

Rose Lalonde could not be reached for com-

30 days ago

-ore neural energy,” orders Roxy as she goes over the data from the latest sacrifice.

I recommend against any further ramping up, as you've already lost enough blood that I have to compens-

“Wow, yeah, don't care. Keep compensating and keep ramping me up. The answer is in here somewhere, I can almost feel it.”

Be that as it may, I also live in your head and would rather not explain to Rose why I am trying to restore your personality from a seizure. I could tweak your pathways to favour instinctual leaps over raw data-processing, as you seem to be on the cusp o-

48 hours ago

-unker that you have been assigned is right here, Miss Duena.”

“Just Duena is fine,” she says for the upteenth time. If the Zahhak personnel are not particularly hostile to her, they are also not particularly welcoming either. Not unwelcoming either. But very formal. The most formal. The absolute opposite of informal. And this was coming from a woman who helped the Dolorosa change for different occasions throughout the day.

Basically, it feels like all of Zahhak has a stick up their entire collective ass.

But the end of the world could have that effect on people.
She steps into the reinforced room and gasps.

“Oh my, this is all very well appo-

5 minutes ago

-choes in your ears.

just end the bitch already, i have a world to consume and you're both just holding it up. really would you prefer your entire dumb monkey species suffers a long drawn out deliciously agonizing death or a quick end in fire. wow you really shouldn't let me talk like this i'm giving myself more brilliant ideas oh wait hahaha you can't stop me. shouldn't let me ha what a joke i'm such a good joker

In spite of the irritating alien cacophony in your ears, you continue to put one foot in front of and slightly above the other as you climb the stairs. Your steps are mechanical, devoid of all the practiced elegance that you've managed to accumulate over the years. The hand that a few flights back rested gently on the steel railing now gripped it in fear and help haul you up, help hold you up under the pressing weight of the enormity of what you were about to do.

Over the years, the thing in the back of your head has made you quite aware of the folly of resistance. This is a single ball of dirt in a cosmos full of things that could wipe the system from the map. Your planet had the misfortune of catching the attention of one of the more sadistic, and then having the gall to thwart its original attempt of making planet fall.

Gall. It's a good word. Appropriate. For what you are about to do.

All of a sudden, the door to the skyscraper's roof looms before you, just a few ste-

Now

Your arms are flung wide open, your lungs filling with the howling winds of the apocalypse and your soul thrumming with the out-right, abject worship of billions of humans. That which has encroached upon your thoughts, visions and very planet for years is finally arriving, a coalescing, radiating multi-dimensional construct-creature that hungers and slavers for both your people. Once upon a time you feared this thing, feared it like the Noble Circle fears it, but that was before you felt like this.

For the first time since humanity put hoe to soil, since before civilization, a horrorterror fills with the power of worship and in such quantity that has never been seen. As the wind of Earth whips around you, the tenebrous winds of the Furthest Ring howl out from your soul, overflowing from the spiritual pressure. You weigh heavy on the material of this plane, like a ball of lead in a skein of silks. A bit more and you could burst into one of the dimensions of this affront to reality before you and take the upcoming fight to it on multiple levels.

A breath in and the welling of power...

...and the door opens behind you.
Chapter Summary

there must always be a [redacted].

2600 years ago

The battlefield is a dusty, wrecked and wretched place. The hide banners of the victorious flutter loosely in an errant breeze that does nothing to remove the stench of death from the place. Spilled blood, gutted entrails and vented feces mix and stain the earth and air. Corpses are stripped, then heaped high in preparation for funeral pyres, roughly tossed from one warrior to another to another to the pile. It is the horrible, methodical aftermath of war.

Other warriors move through the ruin of flesh, granting friend and enemy one last mercy. The merely wounded have long been carted off, to be healed or sold as appropriate. Bronze, leaf-bladed weapons rise and fall in a discordant rhythm, a wet percussion that promises an end, endless sleep, a red abyss.

One figure stands out from the masses. By herself, she looks a frail thing, nevermind the armour and bangles that proclaim her a warrior of high standing. With a half-circle of enormous bodyguards, she looks a kitten amongst lions. The iron sword in her hand hangs heavy, not with purpose, but with disinterested idle.

A man in ornate armour is thrown to the ground before her, hands bound at his back. The enemy general. An elegant, ambitious, useless fop of a man. She expects to find him fearful, and is instead mildly surprised to see the venom in his eyes when she wrenches his head up.

"Heathen bitch! Do not think your victory here today means anything. We are but one of a half-dozen arms that strike through." 

"The Tulingi Gap, Ludobrivic’s Plain, the Ardeunna and the Alpen, yes, I know."

She's not sure if he is more confused at her foreknowledge or command of his tongue. It earns him a quirk of a thin lip. "Yes, I speak the tongue of Athens, you peacock. You can forestall your rant about civilization and assume I've heard it a dozen times."

The man licks cracked and parched lips uneasily. "That's how then? You must have intercepted a missive, some orders, been able to read them..."

"If that makes you feel better, certainly. One must take what comfort one can before the end."

A flicker of fear, of doubt, quickly replaced with the fires of zealotry. She can barely restrain the urge to roll her eyes. "Your victory here will only delay your end! The others-"

"Oh please. Do use your head. You showed some tactical creativity on the field. You must be able to do the same strategically. If I know of the other fronts and waste time here listening to your prattle..."

She trailed off, leading the commander to the inevitable. "The others are also engaged? But... there
is no cohesion, you are all tribal barbarians, how could you have hoped to mount a united defense against so many simultaneous thrusts?"

A slow, smug smile spreads, revealing shockingly white teeth, like those of the reed-brushed Egyptians. "United? Gods no. They all believed they were defending their homelands from invaders. I doubt a single one of those idiot chiefs knows that his neighbours fight the same war."

The fires of zealotry ebb finally as uncertainty overcomes the man. "But, we were promised... the master said..."

"Ah! Yes! Your master. Did he string you along with promises of freedom? Did he promise to strike down your false gods from their empty thrones on that mountain? If you drew the stopper forth, would you be crowned a king among men?" Her mocking tone is razor-sharp and her smile is turned wicked. A fist gouged into his hair, his scalp pulls him up closer to her face and he gives a small cry of pain. "I have heard it before, whispered into these very ears."

There is a whupp-whhuup-whhhuuuup sound as her wrist rolls once, twice, three times to bring the sword up, rotating smoothly on an arm too slim to hold it. It is held impossibly still, point aimed at the enemy commander's throat. A gulp to try to swallow his fear. Not at the sword, oh no. He had accepted the slim possibility that he might die on campaign long ago. No, his fear comes from what he beholds in her eyes. A dark concept being slowly unshackled, tendrils of the abyss leaking from pupils, past violet irises. The birth of unholy, archaic power. He is spared further madness as white hair falls in front of her eyes.

She tips his head all the way back and in an ice-cold breath she tells him, "I do not know about any afterlife, but if you see Caliborn, tell him he will not walk this world so long as one of my blood bars the gate."

Then the blade sinks into his flesh, sending icewater through his veins. He cannot scream, his larynx speared. He soils himself and his body begins to shiver as she works the notched blade down his throat, into his chest cavity. It scrapes roughly against gristle and bone and a froth of blood and spit bubbles from his silently howling mouth. He is shaking by the time she pierces his heart and stills him forever.

Then she braces her foot on his chest and rips the blade out through his front in an explosive display of impossible force, completing the unholy sacrament. Red-spattered hair is brushed out of her eyes with a bloodied palm and she tosses the sword to a guard.

"Burn that," the grove maiden says before stalking off through the muddy field, heady with a rush of stolen power. "There’s a sword in a stone that I intend to snap in half."
700 years ago

“What are their numbers, captain?” A swirl of skirts as the dark-skinned woman closes the heavy wooden door of the gatehouse.

“We believe no more than eighty, all holed up in those freakish castles they mockingly refer to as manors. Plus anywhere from two-to-four hundred human armsmen.”

“Any sign of the sorceror or his disciples?”

“A patrol found a few likely corpses.”

“Likely? What makes corpses likely ex-sorcerors?”

A shrug. “You know, pale, sunken cheekbones, knobby fingers. Brands that make your eyes hurt on various body parts.”

“Ah. Yes. Those. Burn them, would you? The corpses, I mean.”

“I don’t think you could stop my men from doing that if you tried.”

A commotion from outside draws the pair to the window, where a single rider on a horse is raising hell in three tongues. Porrim Maryam sighs and pinches the bridge of her nose. Of all the envoys the Council could have sent, they sent her, on this night. Of course.

“Captain, could you please direct the soldier to let Signora Serket through and direct her up to me. Then see to it that the assembled Condotierri have been properly educated on upcoming tactics. When my countrymen arrive with the Almohad devices, direct them to the blocks nearest the manors. I want an assault happening the next morning.”

“Yes, my lady.” A salute, and the brightly-garbed man leaves in some haste.

Porrim has a few moments to gather her thoughts and arrange them in a manner that will hopefully calm the approaching envoy. There is a bottle of wine on the table that she unstoppers and pours out into two goblets. Then she turns, and awaits her guest.

Not long thereafter, the door is thrown open by a panting, pale-faced woman. “Porrim, what-”

She draws up short as Porrim thrusts the goblet at her, “Good evening Porrim how are you Porrim it’s been so long Porrim, oh hello Aranea what a pleasure to see you what brings you to Valencia this fine night?”

A guilty look crosses the other woman’s face before she reluctantly accepts the cup.

“My apologies, Porrim. Thank you for your hospitality.” She takes a sip and plays the grimace across her features. Aranea could never admit to liking mortal drink.

“My pleasure, Aranea. How was your journey. Last I heard, you were in Roma?”

“Yes, and that is precisely why I have come. The Council dem- strongly requests an explanation for your deviance from your schedule to this place.”

Porrim’s eyebrows nearly shoot up at the word choice. Aranea is no one’s fool and everything,
down to the last second change of word choice, is intentional.

“I believe I wrote about this in my last missive. The Durgas have been experimenting with alchemy and the resultant mutations and feral kin threaten the great game.”

“And camping out in the middle of Venezia does not?”

“Of course not, this sort of overt hostility is rare between merchant clans, but not unheard of. Sufficient palms have been greased.”

“Please tell me that this is just a show of force to cow the clade, because if so let me be the first to congratulate you. The entirety of Roma is in a shock that the Dolorosa managed to field an army this size, so I can’t believe the Durgas are uncowed.”

A deep breath and a sigh escapes her lips before Porrim states, bluntly, “No. No, it is not.”

“This is insanity, Porrim, you cannot simply consign an entire clade to execution because of the follies of a few elders!”

“I am not executing the entire clade, just those in Venezia. Durgas has relationships with other cities and clades, there will be survivors. I would never countenance the extinguishing of an entire bloodline, but this one is too far corrupt in this location.”

“It will take Durgas centuries to rebuild, you cannot verify their numbers outside the city-”

“And you cannot verify those who have drunk of the blood of the sorceror! The entire clade, by virtue of obfuscating the truth, is complicit in the crimes of the few.”

“We can hold them, watch for the mutations to manifest-”

“God’s blood, Aranea! We barely have the numbers to encircle them now. If any of those mutations exceed the ability of these troops when they go feral, we will have an outbreak that will not only shatter the great game but call a Crusade down on our heads!”

Aranea recoils from the suggestion. “The Vatican would not dare to launch of Holy War on Christian soil!”

“Aranea, please. Even before the Reconquista ravaged my homeland, there were the Wends, the Cathars, the Bosnians… where the church sees land and influence to be gained, there is always the chance of Crusade.”

“And you believe that this… this outbreak will cause that.”

The dark matriarch without a clan turns from her companion to the window. Below, another rider is being admitted through the gate. She does not recognize him, but the captain’s men are reliable. The midnight blue cloak and outlandish hat hides garish clothing underneath; it is likely a scout returning. She watches the figure disappear through the ancient gate and murmurs an answer.

“I cannot imagine a better opportunity for them.”

Melancholy descends over the room, a cloak of a different material, blue all the same. In the gloom and quiet of the dimly lit gatehouse, Porrim almost misses the shuffling, the preternatural stealth, the less-than-a-whisper,

“Then I am sorry.”
She whirls in time to catch Aranea’s arms as they try to drive the stake into her. Eyes widening in incomprehension, it is all she can do to hold back the pressing force of the Serket’s thrust. She can’t speak, can’t manage a “why?” that she already knows the answer to. Aranea has ever been a supremacist more than a purist.

As Serket-strength begins to overwhelm her, Porrim’s panicked eyes take in the long gloves, high-necked dress, accoutrements unsuited to long distance riding, but designed to resist the onslaught of sun to come. Her old lover might yet-

The thought is banished as the door is kicked clear down and a riot of colour hung loosely over a narrow frame strides in. Both your heads whip around in surprise.

“Hello, cousin,” comes the offhanded greeting as another Serket raises a crossbow. “Shame that all you inherited from the Grandsire was our name.”

Spinneret Mindfang shoots her cousin in the back with the over-sized bolt. The force of it drives the embattled pair towards the window, almost over its lip, but Porrim is more terrified by the barbed, silver head jabbing out from Aranea’s chest.

“Shame to the clade that I am, I at least don’t go around betraying loved ones.” She hauls the sputtering, blood-blubbery kin from Porrim by the hair and lops the head clean off.

Locking eyes with the rapidly disintegrating thing, the criminal says, “They say goodbye, by the by.”
The

12 years ago

The mocking tones of her inferiors burn in her ears, and for a moment grey fills her vision and the bright spots that make up these paltry things’ souls glimmer attractively. Limbs and jaws that she doesn’t have, has never owned, grind stickily, as if a familiar black mucus gums up their functions. Then she can taste it, taste the filth, as if it were secreted from her cheeks and suddenly she wants to be sick.

But a black specter slips out from a hallway and interposes itself between her and the clique intent on furthering mental warfare. It slips an slim arm through tightly-held limbs and rests fine fingernails on pliant flesh.

“Rose, we were just looking for you. Can I steal you away? Mrs. Listerman needs input for drama scenes.” She turns her eyes on the gaggle of girls following and blinks guilelessly. Under the earnest stare and with a name invoked, they slow, turning inwards to mutter among themselves.

Rose’s wrist rotates quickly to catch up Kanaya’s - her girlfriend’s - hand up. Enfolded in that warm grasp, she squeezes and manages a cloying whisper,

“Thank you.”

The small, curling smile that alights on the other girl’s face is bashful and hesitant. “My pleasure. If, ah, I could recommended exiting the premises through the drama ward- oh, I beg your pardon!-room, we could leave campus early.”

“Please,” the rounder girl breathes, terrified that her breath actually stinks of half-decomposed fish and abyssal oils.

They dart through the empty drama room and out an emergency exit to emerge into the open, cigarette-littered concrete beneath their feet. Kanaya stops suddenly and lets out a high, nervous giggle, detaching her hand to cover her face with it.

“What?” asks Rose. “What is it?”

“Oh, it’s just…” another cracking laugh. “I cannot bring myself to believe that worked. I’ve never… I’ve never done anything remotely resembling that performance before. My legs may yet fail me.”

Hesitantly, Rose moves in to support her, looking up into her face, “Do what, may I ask? Save a damsel in distress? Confront a gaggle of bitchy teens? Lie about a teacher’s needs?”

“Um… yes?” Kanaya almost looks as distressed by her uncharacteristic lack of verbosity as Rose’s list.

But Rose laughs and goes tippy-toe to kiss her cheek. Once she would have worried about tripping, or somehow ruining the elegant girl’s wardrobe but Kanaya’s evident enjoyment of the affection and shared awkwardness has largely banished those worries, as effectively as Kanaya’s presence banishes…

Well.

“My daring outlaw knight appears to need a getaway, and thanks besides,” she murmurs,
recapturing the lithe brown hand. “Can I steal you away from your family for an evening?”

Furious blushing. “I… I will have to ask my parents and oh, will your Mother mind?”

A grimace. “If there was a God, he would make sure that my mother would be so in her cups she doesn’t hear us come home, but as it stands I will simply have to deal with her endless post-date squeeing.”

More blushing. Ah yes, the socially charged D-word. If she isn’t careful, Rose will shortly lack a girlfriend and be up one puddle of complex proteins as Kanaya Maryam’s excitement and nervousness causes her to break down on a cellular level. She does manages to extract her hand and lift a small Nokia from a skirt pocket though.

“I should call them soon, my mother is rather busy this time of year and sometimes hard to get a hold of.”

“Annd I suppose the responsible thing to do would be try to either confirm my mother’s presence-slash-absence or somehow arrange something approximating dinner.”

While bruised and bitten lips throb, hands interlace on the cool grass. The great joy of Rainbow Falls, possibly the only joy of Rainbow Falls, Rose thinks, is the clear skies at night. The lack of light pollution renders the dark glory of the stars in high definition, twinkling diamonds in the infinite abyss tugging at her heartstrings with something like hope. Everything feels hopeless and every day she feels like she is decaying from the inside out, rotting veins and guts pushing and pulsating against the barrier of healthy flesh.

But on nights like these, in moments like these, she finds a kind of blessed peace. The girl beside her makes her feel like a human again, a giggly, awkward teenaged human, but a human nonetheless.

She lets go of Kanaya’s hand to roll over and hug the tall, lithe girl close, burrowing her face between silky black hair and smooth brown skin. A breath in, and the scent of her sends a thrill through Rose, sets butterflies off in that most pleasant of stomach sensations.

“Thank you for coming out.”

“Thank you for showing me this night. I did not take you for an outdoorswoman.”

“I hardly need to be that to enjoy my backyard.”

“Your pardon, but have you seen your backyard?” Kanaya’s arm comes up in languorous wave at the midnight field. “It’s larger than the shoddy collection of thatch and mud that masquerades as our school.”

“Mmm, yes, delicious hyperbole from a satin-soft voice on an evening already overflowing with with debauchery.” She props herself up on an elbow, letting the other hand slip under the black t-shirt, trace faint lines on a tautening stomach. Breath hitches through darkened lips and flushing heat emanates. Her own cracked lips broaden in a smile.

“No, um, less than the quality of the, ah! place deserves.” A hand snatches down, trapping the pale questant to bony ribs. Rose snuggles in closer to whisper in her girlfriend’s ear.

“Speak more hyperbole under this starry dome, and drive the lingering cold from my bones and flesh.”
Drive from me the visions of lingering things, of countless pressing limbs. Scour me of the filth that seems to coat my every pore and thought. Be the only thing I desire, even as the treacherous and unknown depths of my heart want for ano-

“What… what would you, um, have me say?” Her breath coming quicker, more shallowly, Kanaya barely resists the urge to arch, pressing her flesh into Rose’s wanting hand, even as it splays across her ribs.

The hum that vibrates in Kanaya’s ear nearly makes her jump and does succeed in crossing her legs. “Whatever you like, Kanaya. I just want to hear more.”

That splaying hand reaches its furthest span and a single, carefully manicured nail scrapes at the underside of Kanaya’s breast. She swallows, hard, and tries to make the sounds mean things.

5 years ago

Dawn has already turned to bright morning when she returns to her apartment. The kin’s request this time was very simple, almost cute in its way. A little waif of a thing that had been living in New York for the past two centuries, she’d flitted from shadow to shadow, uncertain and untrusting. It had been her first dawn since turning and Kanaya’s heart very nearly broke for her.

She refused charity, but agreed to book more time with this Dolorosa, now that she’d grown somewhat trusting.

With the endless flak she got from her more upscale clients, it was good to be reminded that her system was at the very least more equitable than Porrim’s.

A sound from her living room cocks her ears, even as a familiar scent inflames face. Roxy, she would say, were it not for the subtle tinge of ozone. She shucks her jacket into the hall closet, checks her appearance in the mirror and nearly bites her cheek out of frustration. She is not attempting to look good for this thing.

She turns and begins to tread silently to the living room, only to see the form of Roux wearing Roxy pad around the corner. Their eyes lock, briefly, before Kanaya’s eyes shift glassily past her, unwilling to give the other monster her regard. For a moment, they are silent predators, stalking towards each other in the harsh light of a New York morning. They approach, slow and very nearly stop before Kanaya slips past.

Or tries to. With the sort of languorous speed that seems to define her, Roux’s arm suddenly encircles her waist.

“What,” her voice whispers in her ear, “are you not going to ask why I’m here?”

“Since you’re permanently leashed to Roxy’s body and almost never out during the day, I assume Roxy was nearby late into the night and sought out this apartment since she has the keys.” Kanaya followed her response by delicately but pointedly removing the arm and continuing into the living room.

The wine fridge, a thing she still manages to call by its original name, gives up its treasures and Kanaya pours herself a glass. She doesn’t need to imbibe, the sun’s light granting her plenty of energy, but she is making a point. Eyes spear Roux as she takes a sip of the thick liquid.

It probably does not work, but it does convince the angel to change her tack.

“And you? Were you working late last night?”
“Early this morning rather.”

“Mmm, kin work then, not fashion-related. You do smell somewhat… off.”

That gets a frown. Keen as her senses are these days, they are still tied to a humanoid nervous system and it is easy to get habituated. The young one- no, her senior, pitiable though her age of transformation was- did live in extremely poor conditions. A shower before any further business was probably in order.

“Thank you for the notification. I’ll see to that promptly.”

“Oh, don’t go getting wet on my account.”

The glare that results from that quip would have quailed a mortal. Instead, Kanaya feels that she should be warning Roux not to try get into the shower. With her. She can feel hot pink eyes on her back every step of the way into the bathroom. And the shower within is no better. She’s tempted to turn the water to cold, but that has negative consequences to her body when the last warm blood she’s ingested was days ago.

She’s likely enough to pin Roux to the wall and Kiss her Red as it is.

The shower is beautifully warm and Kanaya feels rather more human at the end of it. That feeling is fleeting, as she makes her way to her bedroom to change and finds Roux perched in a chair. Bristling, she manages to bite out,

“You are incredibly, irritatingly persistent today.”

“Kanaya dear, something is eating you! I’m afraid you will simply have to put up with me until I wrestle it out of you.”

A flicker of self-doubt. The girl had been affecting, in her way. But she is not in the mood to “wrestle” Roux, as much as her body protests otherwise.

“Fine. Make yourself useful,” she says, slipping the robe off her shoulders as she lays flat on her stomach on the bed. “I believe, given my state of agitation, that continuing with the experiments could be therapeutic and…”

“…fused to let me help her,” Kanya growls, suppressing a shudder. Her flesh glows while Roux spreads skittering flashes of pink lightning across dark shoulders as she kneads smooth, monstrous flesh, rubbing out a knot. Kanaya makes a small noise, her face pressing into the pillow. Behind her, above her, Roux licks her lips at it.

“You're not burning anymore,” she observes. “Either you are getting better at this or I am becoming soft in my attachment.”

Kanaya shifts, rolling her head to the side and letting a green eye settle on the figure hovering over her.

“Mm.” The sound comes out too pleased, but she can’t be bothered to obfuscate. “I can feel my reserves increasing and soft has never been a thing that remotely describes your behaviour, so I imagine it is my improvement rather than your burgeoning humanity. Alas.”

“Alas? How dare you,” purrs the thing as she lowers herself from her straddle, her palms sliding around the slim body to cup at warm, brown breasts, her lips grazing flesh. Fingers find peaked nipples and Kanaya turns further, her breath shuddering out of her. Roux blinks as lips part, fangs
grinding slowly out.

“Perhaps I need to harvest some of it from you. Your humanity. I need you as a competent trainer and power source, not a budding mortal.”

“Need me, hmm?” Roux lowers herself, finding a pulseless neck to press ardent kisses into. “Do tell-ah!”

A jaw opens impossibly wide, glistening pink mouthflesh yawning wide into the beaming morning. Fangs like gleaming knives flash before the whole terrifying aparatus snaps down. Their worlds go red and they blend and intertwine.
Story

three years ago

“-ack with Rose Lalonde, discussing the newest volume in her series, The Gospel Bright and Tenebrous. Tenebrous, now that’s a word I had to go to the dictionary for.”

“Well, mission accomplished, I suppose!”

“So for anyone who’s not read it, your writing style leans much more towards Faulkner than Hemingway in that little argument.”

“Oh, I knew there was a reason I chose this show, Ms. Bee. But no, I’d go even further back than that for influences. Romantic poets are probably the closest modern parallel, I’d say.”

“This is where I’d ask between Byron and Shelley who you’d do, but-”

“Shelley. Mary, obviously.”

“Ha, obviously! But seriously, people can call your work reminiscent of other authors and poets, but it is very distinctly you and really at odds with quote-unquote modern sensibilities. Or diction. Or vocabulary. Or…”

“Ha, yes yes, I get the gist of it. I suppose it’s just that I’m a product of my generation, like any other. We push back at retrograde attitudes and aesthetics and try new and drastic things. That’s where it started for me, certainly, little bullied girl in highschool, held down by the boring fist of standardized education and literature. I just wanted to change something.”

“So you changed… what, the way you write?”

“At first, yes. But I also wanted to change the way we conceive of the world. Now, I feel like I’m trying to shift the Weltanschauungs of the, well, the entire Welt.”

“And you think - oh sorry, this is going to sound really dismissive, I promise it’s not - but you think you can do this with fiction?”

“No, I intend to do it with language.”

“How do you mean?”

“Language, you see, infects us. Thanks to Arrival, any amateur linguist can tell you it alters the way we think, erecting the scaffolding of our thoughts, but it takes a more learned and discerning mind to delve deeper into the terrible, unconscious artifice of the matter. Here, what movie is ‘Fly, my pretties, fly’ from?”

“The Wizard of Oz! …except why do I think you’re going to tell me I’m wrong?”

“Well, not exactly. The line is ‘Fly, fly, fly, fly!’ Why then do we remember it as the former? Repetition down the ages, certainly. But someone must have remembered it falsely at first, and no indeed we continue to misremember it even after re-watching it. Why? It is believed that the sheer quantity of diacopes, that is, that hamburgeresque repetition of a word, another word, the first word again shapes our perception of the movie.”

She leans forward and the whole world seems to lean in, the already intimate lighting changing without dimming to make Rose Lalonde the focus.
“It took a thing that was real and made it a thing that we thought was true. Like a virus, language took something in our brains and rewrote it to make it more appealing to us, allowing it to replicate through pop culture and erasing the original, less fit phrasing.”

“So you’re what… playing linguistic eugenics in the pursuit of…?”

“Ok now you’re being dismissive. If it were eugenics I’d be trying to kill of old and staid authors and as much as I hate his writing I don’t want Mr. King to die. No, I’m just trying to shift the way we look at the world. To go back to what you made mention of earlier, I am cast my work in the face of Hemingway. Even as his work stood in stark opposition against the tarnishing gilt of his predecessors, it ushered in this era of dry, dusty indifference and base utilitarian existence.

“I want people to remember how to sing, praise and revel in the glories of life and love until we shake with passion for the the world and our places in it. I want to be that conduit for a more colourful, animated world, dark and monstrous as my language might be.”

“NASA has announced that the object approaching our solar system appears to be several times the size of the moon. The radiation that the object is emitting is hampering further analysis, but there is speculation from members of the scientific community that this object is a rogue planet that has been flung from its system and has now intersected with ours.

One thing that the community is united on is that it is too soon to speculate on the object’s danger to the solar system. Its path does not take it anywhere near Earth and scientists assure us that despite the catastrophic amounts of radiation pouring off it, Earth’s atmosphere protects us from worse from the Sun daily.
In other news, the Toronto Accords on Climate Change-”

“Right this way, Dolorosa.”

The new functionary is the pinnacle of Zahhak officiousness and betrays no hint of nervousness, visibly or chemically. Kanaya is not clear on the precise requirements of Zahhak ascension outside of combat, but it strikes her that this one is well in tune with Equius’ disposition.

With dignified creaking, the ancient doors swing open. The soaring Romanesque columns of the penthouse are less impressive now, but she still takes a moment to take in the grand quietude of the place, how the dark marble doesn’t stifle, but mutes the atmosphere. This receiving hall is designed to cow guests and encourage them to reflect on their position in regards to the towering might of the pre-eminent kindred on this continent.

But Kanaya is finding more and more that such tactics no longer work on her. She is Dolorosa, the Dolorosa and cannot be intimidated by such displays. As Zahhak and Dolorosa are at least nominally allied, she takes the time it takes to cross the hall to reflect on other things. The dark is good for that. As it stands, she doesn’t see enough of it. And so, wrapped in darkness, she treads into the room. No clacking power heels here, merely simple flats so she passes silently enough to escape even some clades’ notice.

But the room’s other occupant is no ordinary kin. At the far end, where Equius Zahhak would normally stand, slouches a figure in a loose-fitting suit. A single one of Kanaya’s eyes twitches as she takes in the sloppy cut, the baggy legs and sleeves. Keen eyesight allows her to pick out quality stitching and the fabric is free from any hint of chemicals so the quality of the tailoring is clear. So the fault must lie with the bearer.

“Hello, Dolorosa,” Nepeta Leijon says as she pushes off from the wall in a sinuous flexing of
muscle. Hair that had once been kept in a military bob now erupts in a buoyant mass behind her, held back by a simple black band, while wild sideburns have been fluffed and encouraged to complete the illusion of a mane.

“That,” Kanaya growls, “is the worst fitting suit I have ever had the misfortune to lay eyes on.”

“Ahaha! I knew it would tick you off. But you know what would piss you off more?” Without waiting for a reply, she bends double in reverse, placing her hands between her feet and gracefully performing a back handstand in place. There is a moment of her back cannot bend like that before her legs languidly kick up and over and she completes the move, not having moved an inch.

“Damned if that wouldn’t have torn several stitches.”

“You could, you are aware, perhaps lower yourself to wearing a dress.”

A face scrunches up in a distinctly feline manner.

“Or tights, or leggings. Leggings are very in and I believe they would suit your frame well.”

A face unscrunches into amusement.

“Yeah, because Equius would let me walk around an official meeting in tights.”

“I thank you for maintaining that sense of decorum in the face of your new-found independence.”

Kanaya starts at the rumbling voice, even as Nepeta’s grin widens. Her dignity plundered somewhat, she turns and nods at the patriarch of clade Zahhak.

“My Lord Equius, thank you for seeing me.”

“It is my pleasure, Eminent Dolorosa. Politicking and planning can only be so comfortably regular for so long. The chaos and and uncertainty you seem to introduce every few years is a welcome distraction.”

A blush, to cover uncertainty.

“Lord Zahhak,” Nepeta says, the words ringing low through the hall despite her tiny frame, “perhaps we can adjourn to more private rooms to pursue this conversation?”

“Mmm. I find Lady Leijon’s suggestion agreeable. Dolorosa?”

“Please,” she says simply, taken aback somewhat by Equius Zahhak’s deference to Nepeta’s words. Perhaps he has changed, or perhaps his adherence to the strictures of clade politics are so committed that he is easily able to accept Nepeta’s status as a peer. Or perhaps Kanaya is entirely wrong and that regard has always been there. Something to think on in better times.

The trio of clade heads makes their way into a side room, richly appointed in plush furniture and carpets. Recently a ruined clock has been moved into the room, a trophy that Equius claimed from the Swiss site. For all the shattered wood and crumbled brass, it is functional now, its delicate gearworks repaired by the surprisingly dextrous and careful Zahhak. Kanaya goes to the windows and whips the heavy curtains open, letting the waning sun of dusk into the room and swallowing that radiation whole.

Turning back, she can see that it is all Nepeta can do to stop from splaying out and curling up in the waning sunbeams, while Zahhak merely crosses his legs stiffly and leans back a little. The quiver in Nepeta’s chin concerns her and Kanaya makes a note to read more up on Leijon behaviours and dependencies.
“Is everything alright, Nep?” she asks quietly.

“Yeah, just basking like my namesake, Kans.”

Zahhak’s gaze darts between the pair of them. He promptly bursts into sweat. “Nep? Kans? Oh, what horrors have I unleashed upon the world?”

Nepeta gives an almost squealing laugh, “Ahahah oh man, no, nothing like that Eqs! No, Kans and I are strictly platonic.”

Kanaya, meanwhile, is trying to push the shorthand of “Eqs” from her mind in preparation for the meeting.

“My apologies. It seems one must exercise their humor like any other muscle and mine has atrophied.”

“Oh please, do not take my stunned silence as a poor reception, Eqs. I am simply having trouble processing that someone of your august and storied history can be called Eqs. Please Eqs, forgive me my reticence and- oh, should I be calling you Eqs?”

A patriarch licks his lips uncertainly. And then, “I have regrets.”

The women in the room share a sparkle of laughter. But Kanaya is here for a reason and she schools her face into sobriety with kin-shocking speed.

“I am filled with an appreciation for the levity levered by camaraderie, more than I can possibly communicate in this short time, but it is with some apprehension that I announce that I have grave, ah, ‘chaotic’ news.”

Massive legs uncross as Equius Zahhak draws himself to his full height, sitting, and Nepeta Leijon stills herself, eyes widening like the huntress she’s become.

And so she tells them. Of Caliborn, the Lalondes, and the Doom that comes to their world.

“Well,” Nepeta manages eventually, “shit.”

His head propped up in one hand, Equius Zahhak remains silent. He has allowed his posture to slouch into it somewhat, giving him the air of a long suffering, exhausted man. Presently, he brings that same hand up to wipe down his face and restore some semblance of impassivity to his countenance.

“What can we do, Dolorosa.” The deference in his voice nearly floors her, but she swallows and raises her chin.

“I wish to revisit previous arrangements and arrange a failsafe for the coming years. As I still believe in and intend to carry out the original plan, I must ensure the survival of the kin in the event that things go typically awry.”

A servant, summoned some time ago, arrives with a dialysis machine and a familiar titanium case.

Four years ago

The door closes and Roxy curls up on her bed, reeling from her daughter’s workings in her mind.
The ever-present weight of Roux is gone, consigned to a jail made of hate, rejection and loathing in her own mind. She’d willingly offered up those emotions once she understood what Rose was doing. The fact that she’d nearly come to love the monster living in her head…

_I’m sorry, Roxy._

“The hell you are! You made Kanaya cheat on Rose with _my body_ you horrific bitch!”

_I… yes, I did. I will never be able to make up for that, but please, believe me… I am sorry._

A memory of her body burbles up suddenly, of her, crumpled, kneeling, Kanaya on her lap. Roux turns her face upwards and sudden static erases most of what happens, but she can remember the tears. Hot, thick things. Dripping, human things, called forth by Roux’s fledgling emotions and suddenly that’s more than she can stand, more honesty and love and positivity that she wants to assign to the monster in her head.

So she stands and rushes out of the room, into the hall and past the floating, angry form that is her daughter. She slams through the door and runs at the elevators. The indicators note no elevators near this floor so she turns and rushes down the stairs. Other people her age would probably have problems leaping entire floors, but not Roxy. Bare feet slap against concrete floors and walls as she careens down to the first floor. The door to the lobby looms and she hip-checks her way through it.

The _k-chak_ of its opening echoes through the empty vastness in the early morning. There are only two to hear it, the concierge and her target. The concierge quickly looks down, so Roxy beelines for the the stiffening, done-up form of Kanaya Maryam.

She has no idea of the specifics of what’s boiling through her veins, but there’s hatred, betrayal and confusion. She can deal with most of those, but the confusion - that she needs to resolve. And the only way that’s happening is by putting Kanaya to the rack. Figuratively speaking. Fuck, she knows that’s leftover reactions from Roux’s thoughtforms, but it doesn’t help the revulsion that cascades through her.

_“Kanaya!”_  

The figure slumps, turns, losing some of what Roxy can now identify as entirely constructed confidence. How much of Roux’s mentality has been defaulted to her, she does not know, but that sort of penetrating personal observation would have been beyond her before. She shoves those thoughts out of the way as she tries to formulate a penetrating hypothesis for Kanaya’s behaviour to throw in her face, or failing that, a cutting question to upset her.

But what comes out is the ever-trite, but ever-applicable,  

_“Why?”_  

Kanaya looks almost relieved by the simple question, even as her eyes look to the taxi queue for a car to rescue her.

_“I could never answer that question in the time we have. But, it’s one I have I thought on often, and…_  

_“All I can do is say that Rose reminded me of the human I came from and allowed me to be the one I nearly forgot I could be… but Roux allowed me to be the monster I am in a context I needed to express.”_  

With fury mounting in her, and her nails digging into her palm, Roxy bites out, “And that excuses
cheating? Bitch, did you ever hear of polyamory? Communication? Any decent human resolutions to your fucking ‘monstrous’ problems?"

Real shame takes over the fine and delicate features of the young Maryam in front of her.

“Yes,” she whispers. “That would have been the wisest course. I have no excuses. I was caught up in my own… hungers and fears. I was too afraid.”

“Afraid of what? Did you really see any ending other than this when dating a fucking clair-"

The sense of it nearly crushes her. The background fear and worry from Roux suddenly floods into her cortex.

She- no, dammit, it had a mission on this plane and Roxy was only a host for it. The Host wanted Rose divorced from humanity and had chosen the Lalondes as their mechanism to achieve that. The flood of feelings from Roux were a driving need to fulfill that strategy, so that-

Oh god.

She nearly gags as it washes over her. Roxy breaks away from Kanaya, from the living manifestation of that desire. Her bare feet slap across cold marble and slate in a rapid patter-patter until she crashes into an elevator. She jabs her floor button, Kanaya’s floor button, and crumples in a corner, alone.

Her daughter has turned her into a cage for a being that only wants to live and struggles throu-

No. The bars of the cage within her rattle, a sensation she could never comprehend before.

I am committed to this penance. I know what I have done and though I appreciate it, I will not allow you to imagine that you are unjustly condemning me.

“So then what?!” Roxy screams into the empty elevator. “You seduce my daughter's girlfriend to carry out your people’s plan?! Fuck you, I know there was more to it!”

Obviously, there was. The One God knows, I- oh fuck, I love Kanaya-

“FUCK YOU!” sobs Roxy.

but I- I’m sorry Roxy. I couldn’t stay here if I didn’t-

“Fuck you and your host,” whispers Roxy, crying into knees drawn up to her chest. “You used me. You used my body to fuck my- my daughter’s girl. And you’re telling me it was only to-”

Not only to execute the plan, I simply don’t want you excus-

“Oh don’t you fucking worry!” laughs Roxy, high, manic and fey. There’s a ding from the elevator as it opens onto the floor and the human host drags herself up, snorting the weeping-snot back up into her face. A rough forearm drags across her face, smearing fluids clear or mulching them together.

“I’m not going to ‘excuse’ any of your fucking behaviour, any of your fucking abuse of my body any time soon. I’m your fucking jailor, your fucking warden, and your God only knows, I’m going to make the most of that!

“The only thing keeping me from breaking you in this brain of mine is that I can- hurrrrgk- I can feel the fucking love you’re suffering from. So stay down there. Stay there and pine for love that
you’re never going to feel again.”

Roxy pulls up in front of the door to the apartments. She blinks, once, twice, three times to clear the tears from her eyes, if not her face. She tries the handle, and, finding it locked, knocks.

Rose answers, disconcertingly hesitant in the face of her mother’s messy face.

“Well, no, it’s clearly not, you silly thing. But we’re Lalondes and we’ll get through this.” It’s a wan smile Roxy manages for her daughter, but what goes on in her head gives her the energy to give it real emotion.

Pine for the love you’ll never feel again, unless you help us crush the Cosmic Beast.

---

One year ago

“NASA is still at a loss to describe the anomaly approaching Earth and all military strikes against it from Tesla’s Mars Forward Base have had no discernable effect. Elon Musk is on record as saying that while his facility is still available for any and all military action against the approaching anomaly, he urges civilian engagement and problem-solving in the face of widespread, multinational failures.

“In the midst of worldwide panic, the growing number of so-called ‘horrorterror cults’ are providing disturbingly calm refuges for terrified populaces. Copenhagen has been declared an universal safe-zone, a statement hampered by EU immigration policies. This does not seem to have prevented mass immigration to the small town and indeed other ‘horrorterror temples.’

The temple in Kuala Lumpur has recently declared that it is re-opening, without the quote-unquote ‘insurance tithe’ it initially charged and huge populations from Southeast Asia are flocking to it.

“Rose Lalonde could not be reached for comment. The last statement released by her office neither approved nor decried these temples, and instead encouraged all peoples, not just her followers to “be excellent to each other.”
Ends:

30 days ago

There is a crease in the fabric of reality in the backwoods of New York. It used to be a bare ripple, then a rumple. Things unnoticeable by mortals, and vaguely disturbing to those with extra-human perceptions. But now, if humanity had its telescopes and sensors pointed at Earth instead of into the depths of space, even they would be able to identify the cosmic disturbance.

There is a house in Rainbow Falls where once the sun shone too brightly, or not at all. Now it hunkers down under the pale of clouds and dun skies during the day and gleams eerily at night. In the dark depths of the basement, the atmosphere evokes more of the mad scientist’s lab than a hyper-modern research facility. Lightning doesn’t crash, there is no cackling, but there is the sense that madness and obsession lurk just beneath the surface. The lights flicker as the micro-reactor powering the place dumps energy into a casement of stabilizing energy, a visible, strangely grey sphere that encapsulates a raised ceramic slab.

A man dies on that altar to that mad, obsessive science and two beings watch. Not him, but his death, the curling escape of energies generated by processing food and water and experiences, the ephemera of life. The serial killer’s death will be of more use than his life. Twelve murders redeemed by the salvation of billions.

Roxy Lalonde is not sure that she enjoys the turn her thoughts have taken over the years. Scratch that, she definitely does not enjoy them. But as much as they sit poorly with her, she can’t bring herself to regret them. The increasingly religious language she finds herself falling into is very likely bleed-over from the mental… tenant she’s endured these past years. Unlike Rose, who is very likely the other source of the ridiculous religiosity, she can’t bring herself to call Roux a parasite.

She can manage a lot of other insults, some verging on the ridiculously gendered and misogynistic. The fact that Roux has never objected to, and in fact has even embraced, the pronouns she inherited from Roxy, somehow makes it worse. She should not be cursing her with “whore” and worse, but given her far-too-enthusiastic liaisons with Kanaya years past… The revulsion of her body betraying her daughter like that doesn’t override the guilt. Damn the mind that cannot stop analysing.

“More neural energy,” orders Roxy as she goes over the data from the latest sacrifice. But endurance doesn’t imply affection.

I recommend against any further ramping up, as you’ve already lost enough blood that I have to compens-

“Wow, yeah, don’t care. Keep compensating and keep ramping me up. The answer is in here somewhere, I can almost feel it.”

Be that as it may, I also live in your head and would rather not explain to Rose why I am trying to restore your personality from a seizure. I could tweak your pathways to favour instinctual leaps over raw data-processing, as I agree that you seem to be on the cusp of a breakthrough. But I would rather not be tortured for failing to prevent you from crippling and/or killing yourself.

“Fine. I tend to get bogged down in the numbers anyways.”

They are a language common to many universes. But where this thing is from, they are but a
“Those sure are words,” Roxy mutters as she feels her focus wane. Tracking the minute fluctuations in entropy became harder, with her imagination starting to edge in and spin wild theories on the ghosts of these snippets of data. It becomes almost more work to keep herself rooted in reality, but even as she’s lamenting that, it staggers her.

**Roxy! What-!**

“Oh my god. God.”

She turns away from the console, from the LED screens and blinking lights, leaning heavily against it. She rubs her face and slides down the smooth stainless steel, moaning softly. Soft pink light bleeds from between her fingers where they hide her eyes and the very air around her fills with static.

“I am a moron genius.”

“Stop that.”

No.

“IT will kill her.”

No, it won’t. Roxy, look.

A part of their mind opens, a hidden pocket made of carnal memories of Roux and Kanaya intertwined, gasping. Their lips part, their limbs unfold and through the fragments of love-making their plan drives itself home, white and flashing like -

She nearly hurls, the sensations of sex and passion overlaying murder and hunger and all focused on one person. While Roxy can push aside the revulsion, the gagging, incestuous horror of her perspective doing that to Rose, she cannot push aside the knowledge that floods her.

“Oh my god. You are assholes.”

*That, I cannot argue.*

“Just... just...why?”

*How do you save a saviour?*

---

**48 hours ago**

It seems that she won’t get to see that enormous Romanesque receiving room that Kanaya told her of. A pity. Though her Mistress harbours an appreciation of art of all kinds, her specializations lie in other areas. Duena would have killed for an hour under those stolid arches, even in the gloom that was said to accompany them at the heights of Zahhak Tower. Instead, she is met in the foyer by polite underlings and directed to an elevator whose lurch definitely took them down. There’s something dismally appropriate in that, given the oppressive atmosphere outside. Like a storm, but instead of of darkening clouds, the sky is lit in sick greenish, blackish light day or night. The tower, sparse as it is, has more life to it than the outside. But given its populace, that almost makes sense in this apocalyptic nightmare.

Idly, she wonders if the tower goes as deep as it does high, like some fantastical videogame
construct. But that thought is quickly disabused of her as the lift slows with the weight of inertia and they step out into a brightly lit corridor. Her escorts, muted in gray and blue, step out and perform an elaborate after-you.

The corridor splits into a T-junction ahead and they take the left, but as they do, Duena feels the pressure of a gaze on her back and looks over her shoulder. No one is there, but that means little in this place.

Sooner than she expected, she is told, “The bunker that you have been assigned is right here, Miss Duena.”

“Just Duena is fine,” she says for the upteenth time. If the Zahhak personnel are not particularly hostile to her, they are also not particularly welcoming either. Not unwelcoming either. But very formal. The most formal. The absolute opposite of informal. And this was coming from a woman who helped the Dolorosa change for different occasions throughout the day.

Basically, it feels like all of Zahhak has a stick up their entire collective ass.

But the end of the world could have that effect on people.

She steps into the reinforced room and gasps.

“Oh my, this is all very well appointed.”

Stepping into it is an experience, with rich, gleaming hardwood immediately replacing the sterile ceramic of the corridor. Soft amber lights give immediate life to the place and the elegantly, organically curving furniture could have been take out of her dream home. It’s Kanaya’s fault, she knows. Since before they were forced into their current roles, they’ve gushed about the design of houses, all the way back in Valencia.

The walls, for the most part are equally well designed and provided for with bright and evocative paintings and paraphernalia. But one wall is a matte black and, she suspects, made of monitors.

“You everything to your liking, Duena Garcia?”

It’s like the person behind that voice has specially tuned it to send shivers down her spine. Simultaneously she feels she’s being sized up, made prey and seduced. So of course she turns to face the voice, because she’s the Dolorosa’s haemofont and like hell she’s going to be terrified by some other clade.

This turns out to be a mistake, because before her is someone she recognizes from Kanaya’s descriptions as Nepeta Leijon. A compact body, rippling with bared muscles is on display in workout gear as she leans in the doorway to Duena’s rooms. More than any vampire she’s seen, Nepeta looks like she wouldn’t break a sweat benching her. Her family is fantastic at making fucking incredible mistakes.

*I am so goddamn gay,* Duena thinks, consciously having to stop from biting her lip.

“Oh yes, this is marvelous. I knew Zahhak had a certain… old-world style, but this is,” she runs her fingers along the counters of a rich wooden chair, “This is real elegance.”

“I’ll be sure to pass that on to whoever Equius gets to design these things. They had a lot of data to build mine from, but yours was basically guesswork.”

“Well, it was very accurate all the same.”
With a casual roll of one shoulder, Nepeta detaches from the door, which slides shut presently. Duena swallows suddenly. While she doesn’t have a celebrity’s pick of who she wants like Kanaya, being assistant to the Dolorosa does mean that she has plenty of opportunities. Her relative plainness is inconsequential before her mastery of the weapons of cosmetics, fashion and poise. And while she is very keen to capitalize on this opportunity, the sudden close proximity of Nepeta means that Duena is now very aware that she’s in a room with what is probably one of the planet’s apex predators, if not the apex.

It is annoyingly arousing.

The vampire moves past her, very pointedly giving her space, to pick up a remote on a stand. Pointing it at the blank wall, she presses a button and the whole wall turns into a display, a virtual window onto the windswept shores of the western Mediterranean.

“They figured we’d all go insane cooped down here - so all of the suites have something like this. Human rooms, like yours, also have UV lamps. No telling how long we’ll be down here.”

“And a useful defense against any unwanted advances,” Duena muses.

“There is that, yes. Though Zahhak in general and me in particular are pretty big on wanted advances.” She doesn’t look at Duena, but the human knows a hint when she gets one.

“Well, hopefully we won’t be here too long for anyone to suffer from the, ah, close quarters.”

Nepeta does look at her then, her face flickering between interest and amusement and something else. When it finally settles, it’s on something like dislike.

“Yeah, I’d like that as well. But… ah hell, might as well get this out of the way now. Come on, we let’s skip the tour and get right down to it.”

Too much to ask that what we’re going to get down to would involve a mattress and too few clothes, Duena thinks glumly, her heart sinking.

Nepeta goes to one of the side tables and picks up from the floor a rather outsized briefcase, twice as thick as one would expect. From the thump that it makes hitting the table, it has to be much heavier than it looks. She flicks through the combination lock easily enough, and the thing pops open with the foreboding, snapping hiss of atmospheres equalising. The fog that rolls out of the thing clenches her stomach.

Oh, Kanaya. You sweet, damnable thing.

Nepeta takes in her face and gives a sad smile. “I’m guessing you’ve already figured out what these are.”

Duena drags out a chair and shuffles into it, not quite slumping, but placing her hands in her lap and staring at the case.

“Show me,” she whispers. Nepeta does, turning the case around and revealing the three litre bags of blood, suspended within the refrigeration blocks. Duena winces, doesn’t open her eyes.

“I wanted to believe her when she said she was coming back.” A deep breath held. Still she doesn’t open her eyes as Nepeta shuts the case with a hissing click. “I wanted to hope this was just some horrible vacation, a precaution against the worst.

“It’s only now that I’m willing to believe that the worst will come to pass.”
A hand closes over hers, rough and calloused and warm with strength and power. Her eyes fly open and find Nepeta, slipped into the seat next to her.

“Precautions and contingency plans are wise and necessary. But you worked with Kanaya for years, you have to know - that woman is capable of great things when pushed and hell, she’s been pushed like never before.”

A wry laugh escapes her throat and Duena admits, “Yes, yes she has. Oh God, I hope her and Senorita Lalonde can put aside their differences.”

“As I understand it, it’s not differences that separate them, but tragedies.”

Duena nods at that, brushing some loose hair from her face. “Yes.”

“Kanaya’s overcome tragedy before. I don’t doubt that she’ll overcome these problems. She’s dedicated enough to us, to the world, to persevere.”

“If only dedication were enou-”

“Who cares if it’s enough?” Nepeta growls. “Back-up plans are in place, she’s made her peace with her future and she’s made arrangements that we can hope to survive if she fails. What’s lost by hoping, by believing that she will succeed?”

Her hand tightens on Duena’s as she speaks and Duena swears she sees that mane bristle with affront, with pride and belief. Nepeta’s as flushed as Duena has been, skin bright and ruddy with blood and emotion. Very carefully, Duena removes her hand from Nepeta’s grip and before the vampire can apologize, she puts a finger to those lips.

“Very well, Nepeta Leijon, you’ve convinced me. I must say, this… aura of feline courage of yours is very heady. But I am going to have to ask you to leave now,” Duena pauses, giving Nepeta just enough time to process those words and begin to wilt, “because otherwise I am afraid I am going to jump you and have my way with you on this table.”

The other woman’s jaw works soundlessly as she slowly tries to form some sort of coherent sentence.

“We’re all about minimizing unwanted advances and maximizing consent here, aren’t we?”

Nepeta looks for an instant like she’s going to spill her consent all over Duena, but she nods and bolts like a spooked cat instead. Duena’s face splits into a guilty grin as she stands and begins to take stock of her new, hopefully temporary home. The massive, heavy case is still there. Perhaps she’ll have Nepeta move it when next she sees her. The thing is less foreboding, less oppressive in the wake of Nepeta’s few words. The concept of Dolorosa is less fearsome than it was minutes past. And who knows, perhaps she will make the role her own, as Kanaya did when she inherited it from Porrim.

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**5 minutes ago**

The atmospheric distortions caused by the extraterrestrial extinction event known as Caliborn have consigned most of the city to their homes, but there’s always a cab ready to brave the apocalypse in New York. Rashiid, your cabbie for the afternoon, battles heroically against the howling, hurricane force winds. Water splatters the windshields and your keen senses inform you that it is seawater, which you suppose it would have to be, given the utter absence of clouds here in this eye of the storm.
Rashiid swears as something that might have been the fabric top of a cabriolet whips across your windshield. A rapid snap back and forth of the wheel dislodges it and he settles back in, arms loose but eyes wary. You make an appreciative noise. He notices and gives you a grin in the rearview mirror.

“Dolorosa has nothing to fear! I drove trucks in the Syrian war, this is nothing. Well, not nothing. But less surprising than mortars!”

A small smile and you incline your head to him in respect. He takes his beaming visage and focuses it back on the road.

wah wah less surprising than mortars wanna know what’s more surprising? existential lightning out of nowhere KABLAM! wipe him and his silly fucking transportation enclosure off the face of your shitty little globe

Do try to not reduce me to my constituent atoms before my time, hmm? you venture bravely.

yeah yeah sweet thing, I’ll hold off because i’m such a magnanimous lord of time and space. plenty of vomitorious yellow enclosures to blastconsumeerradicate MAKE MINE before this is up like that word, vomitorious? i just made it up, completely new, out of your sad pathetic substandard lexicon

You subsume the desire to check the Oxford dictionary and call the sentient extinction event out on its bullshit. It would be an interesting way to pass the time, but you are already nearing your limit without giving into a surely-suicidal urge to play psychotic-breakdown chicken with the thing called Caliborn. Instead you check your phone for the umpteenth time. The darknet that had sprung into being with the warping of satellite orbits was a poor replacement for a true 5G mobile connection, but it did allow for easy streaming and viewing. This stream’s chat is an endless waterfall of digital prayers, the calls for stabilized video having been heeded.

You glance at the skyline. You’re nearing the location under observance. Idly you tap the donate button again, depositing another two hundred dollars into the streamer’s account. Predictably the prayers are momentarily interrupted by a torrent of vitriol and hate as the numerous real accounts drown out the prayers. You consider a scathing indictment of them, but dismiss it. Better to let the prayer bots overwhelm them again.

Then, just like that, Rashiid pulls over. Turning in his seat, he nods seriously at you.

“We are here Dolorosa. No, no, put it away. I don’t need cash. Anyone with two eyes can see that you are about God’s work today.”

It takes a lot of effort not to snort, and a lot more to not react at the mocking laughter in your brain. The mocking laughter that doesn’t look to be shutting up any time soon.

“No, you will be taking payment, Rashiid. These are dark times, and irregardless of the possibility of my person being on some holy quest, you have a family that you will need to see to in the coming and aforementioned times. So there, the fare. And here,” you rummage around in your purse, withdrawing the items. A solar USB-C charger, a too-expensive, too-gaudy broach some ancient kin tried to bribe you with, and a small bar of platinum.

The driver’s eyes are far too wide for your liking and you can feel the sputtering refusal coming. So with a burst of speed you open the door, step into the howling storm and cross to the building’s doors in something slightly longer than a blink. Rashiid wisely decides to stay in the car, possibly juggling the small pile you thrust into his hands. You choose the smaller, traditional door instead of the revolving ones. It will be locked and punching the lock out looks less obtrusive than
shattering your way through two or three panes of glass.

obtrusive are you actually kidding you’re marching right up into that ridiculous slapdash ritual in front of a kabajillion remote viewers there ain’t gonna be much unobtrusive about you and your kind much longer, K-baby

At what point, exactly, did you bothering picking up the Roman alphabet?

The lock shatters easily before your fist and, shockingly, there are no alarms. Rather, there likely are, in some unmanned security office that you absolutely cannot bring yourself to care about at this moment in time. The stairwell door gets ripped off its hinges as Caliborn continues its slimey diatribe in your mind.

bitch please the last time i took an interest in this fucking dirtball Rome was a couple of decades away from being hot shit and the alphabet was shit, ahahah what am I saying it’s still shit, but come on i am a genius shit’s too easy to learn.

The stairwell itself is dark, emergency lighting more than sufficient for your needs. The apprehension in your gut is a heavy, leaden thing. Part of you, that suicidal, playing-chicken part of you wants to take the stairs five at a time to rush out into the roof and blurt the plan. Another suicidal part of you wants to do that thing for rather different reasons.

You would not be surprised to discover that, if you took a poll, there would be a quite a few different suicidal parts of your brain. Thankfully, the part that is currently firmly wedged at the forefront of your mind is simply grimly determined. You shift the purse, draw yourself in tightly and begin your ascent.

It seems to take a small eternity.

Sixty stories. In another life, you could never manage this, but in your undeath, your legs are but tireless automata that eat up the distance and heights. It is almost calming, this steady, meditative last walk. Almost, because a voice echoes in your ears.

just end the bitch already, i have a world to consume and you're both just holding it up. really would you prefer your entire dumb monkey species suffers a long drawn out deliciously agonizing death or a quick end in fire. wow you really shouldn't let me talk like this i'm giving myself more brilliant ideas oh wait hahaha you can't stop me. shouldn't let me ha what a joke i'm such a good joker

In spite of the irritating alien cacaphony in your ears, you continue to put one foot in front of and slightly above the other as you climb the stairs. Your steps are mechanical, devoid of all the practised elegance that you've managed to accumulate over the years. The hand that a few flights back rested gently on the steel railing now grips it in fear and helps haul you up, helps hold you up under the pressing weight of the enormity of what you are about to do.

Over the years, the thing in the back of your head has made you quite aware of the folly of resistance. This is a single ball of dirt in a cosmos full of things that could wipe the system from the map. Your planet had the misfortune of catching the attention of one of the more sadistic, and then having the gall to thwart its original attempt of making planet fall.

Gall. It's a good word. Appropriate, for what you are about to do.

All of a sudden, the door to the skyscraper's roof looms before you, just a few steps away. The various parts of your mind are screaming in terror, panic, regret, but you have them all yoked and marshalled, cracked and shuddering as that yoke is. Your steps slow, and even the entity intruding
on your thoughts is silent. Probably to better enjoy the tragedy unfolding before it. Still, it is…
calming this lull before the end. You run over your plan, the talking points too brief to be called a
speech and your resolve. And then you *unfold*, a wilfull decision to stop hiding, to be present…

...and you open the door.
Three billion souls.

Of an available seven billion, it is estimated that *The Gospel Bright and Tenebrous* has been consumed by three billion people. While your sales numbers don’t quite reflect that, it does tally with the intoxicating impression that fills your head, fuzzing out the reality of this plane when you do not focus. Too tempting to swim in the regard of three billion souls, hear their prayers, peek into their lives, breathe their wishes. In this mortal shell you cannot act on them as you could as a proper godling, cannot sift through them with any detail lest you drown in their vastness. And so you must focus, will yourself to be present and face your future.

Face the thing in space between sky and void and other realities called Caliborn. You can faintly hear its mocking, this close on this plane and this far through your barriers. Concepts that you’d lost with your transition back to mortality could describe the vastness and vertices between the pair of you, but more important is its radioactive nearness. New York may be glowing for centuries, even if you succeed here.

And despite the impossibility of a single, empowered mortal facing down this thing you do believe you will succeed. You believe, in that simple, foolish way humans call hope. An Eater of Stars and Souls is come, a Lesser Child of Entropy, a cherub of its people. But enough to crack the Earth to drink its magma and enough to break seven billion souls to consume a civilization whole. And yet. And yet.

Your arms are flung wide open, your lungs filling with the howling winds of the apocalypse and your soul *thrumming* with the out-right, abject worship of billions of humans. That which has encroached upon your thoughts, visions and very planet for years is finally arriving, a coalescing, radiating multi-dimensional construct-creature that hungers and slavvers for both your people.

Once upon a time you feared this thing, feared it like the Noble Circle fears it, but that was before you felt like this.

For the first time since humanity put hoe to soil, since before civilization, a horrorterror fills with the power of worship and in such quantity that has never been seen. As the wind of Earth whips around you, the tenebrous winds of the Furthest Ring howl out from your soul, overflowing from the spiritual pressure. You weigh heavy on the material of this plane, like a ball of lead in a skein of silks. A bit more and you could burst into one of the dimensions of this affront to reality before you and take the upcoming fight to it on multiple levels.

Distantly, you know there are camera drones out there, because you can feel the direct *regard* of your worshipers. Not so fulfilling as on a stage or altar before them, or as intimate as entangled among them, writhing and encircling ardourous supplicants. But the eyes of the world are on you, even now and that fact bolsters you, bolsters your connection with them and the Furthest Ring.

A breath in and the welling of power...

...and the door opens behind you.

Your hand is still shaking as you let go of the door, so you let it curl up into the sleeve of your coat to hide it. There’s the ghost of an impression of snideness from your mental passenger but to your utter surprise he doesn’t give up the game. *The game, you think darkly, If only.*
She’s turning as you step through the door and in a perfect world your heart wouldn’t be in your throat, seeing her so. Seeing her like she was a decade ago before another world swallowed her whole and sucked the life out of her and replaced it with something else. Shorter than you, rounder, paler but with rosy cheeks and glistening lips. Back then her lips were always chapped and it’s that incongruity that pulls you out of that descent into nostalgia.

Shivering, you suspect it’s her sheer presence, the leakage of accumulated worship of her that-

“Hello, Kanaya.”

So much for suspicion. The words crash into and through you like a wave. Cool water on a warm summer beach and the impression of gulls in the air, things in the water. The psychic, physical sensation of it is enough to drive Caliborn from your thoughts, and then, in them and before you, is Rose Lalonde. Black fabric on white skin and eyes deep enough to drink souls.

“Hello, Rose.”

It’s a whisper, one that could be lost in the wind. But it escapes your throat with a tremor of worship to it and so of course she hears it, eats it whole. You think her smile is just for you, so of course it can’t be. But you want to believe it, have to believe it, here at the end. You let yourself be drawn in by it, floating on that dark regard. And for a moment, you swear you can see the tendrils of that dusky power reaching for you, encircling you. A blink, and they’re gone. She isn’t being as overt as she could be, or perhaps she is concerned about it burning off like fog in the sickly sun hovering above you.

You can absorb what it is emanating, but without somewhere to dump it, this radiation will probably cook you from the inside out.

“I… could not let it end like this.”

The smile grows, knowingly, and your blood runs colder. That you manage to contain your panic at that certainty is testament to a decade learning negotiation and politics. Ha, politics. With one unknowable monstrosity calling me into her arms and another looming in the stratosphere and the back of my mind, what possible good can politics do me here?

“Oh, it won’t end here, Kanaya. I promise.”

“That’s… I am pleased you think that.”

“Not think, Kanaya. Believe.” Her eyes go glassy, and a pulse of something, radiates out from her, and you can almost feel the building shake. So it is with some trepidation that you take her outstretched hand. “Do you believe in me, Kanaya?”

“Yes,” and you find it is true. It’s always been-

“Strange that once you didn’t. That you conspired with the angel to try and change me, turn me from this.”

You swallow. Hard. This is it. No more coy banter, no more sesquipedalian evasions. It all comes down to this.

“It may not be in horrorterror to forgive, but fortunately for you, I am not yet one of the Circle once more. It’s alright, Kanaya. I am just glad you are here.”

Blinking tears away, you squeeze her hand. She squeezes back, smile dazzling, but not enough to
drive away the adrenaline high of your terror and anxiety. Every moment that passes is a war between adoration and scrambling to keep yourself on track and in the distance, the very furthest reaches of your mind, you swear you can hear him cackling.

“You shouldn’t be, though. This place-”

You cut her off with a raised hand. When she focuses on it, you wave it in the general direction of an HVAC unit. For a moment, nothing happens. Then, bubbling, it collapses in on itself as the concentrated radiation rapidly alters the molecular structure of the aluminium. You weren’t sure that was going to work, even with the thing in your head egging you on for this entire time. The thing hovering above the city, above the earth. Is it growing? Or getting nearer? Or more... present? In any case, the malice it represents bears heavy upon you, making it hard to focus, hard to divide your mind like you know you have to. Not in two, but in three, with the third hidden in the deepest parts of you.

“I am not going anywhere, Rose. Unless…”

You begin to draw away, but her grip tightens.

“No. My apologies, you’re right. Strange. I did not think to have a peer this night, but your presence is welcome, regardless.”

Hesitation, now. You have her permission, but how much? How much does she want you, and how close will she let you get. This close to disaster, the line you walk seems thin enough to part the edge of a knife. Your pressure is up, pumping thick blood through you at a pace that you are entirely unused to. It's when you can hear your heart that you have an idea. You close with her, place hands on her shoulders supportively.

"I am not afraid to admit that I am more than a little terrified, however. The disused wreck of cobweb-laden muscle I laughingly refer to as a heart feels ready to out my chest."

Rose covers a hand on her shoulder with one of her own. "Really, cobweb-laden? Charming hyperbole aside, surely it can't be in such bad shape. I recall making it pound more than a few times."

That her tone is enough to bring you to arousal here is a damning indictment of how little you are over her, and how uselessly driven by lust and desire your kind is. But even so, you let it leak, let her massive, sentinel mind pick up on it so that when your hands drift down to encircle her closely, she does not react, and even gives a small noise of appreciation.

Arms draped around her, you murmur, “Did you ever think that we would stand like this, together against the apocalypse?”

A soft laugh. “What, in some teenage fantasy after D&D and make-outs?”

“Or after. We have… we have been many people, in many places.”

A pause, one that drags on.

“Honestly? N-no. I always… I had always thought I would be alone, this singular figure. Leading the world into darkness, or delivering it from… this. I always thought I’d be alone.”

A tear, and a last kiss, pressed feathery to now-silken hair.

“Oh Rose. You’re not alone. You were not alone then, and you will not be alone, ever again.”
Have you ever seen a viper strike? Watched the predatory yawning of jaws in slow motion, been unable to translate the elegance of the arching neck and extending teeth to the lightning terror of the bite?

Have you ever watched the life fade from the twitching corpse of prey?

There’s no flash of of precognition when it happens, and not once did you calculate this outcome as a natural, inevitable eventuality of the course of things. A sharp cry escapes your throat to match the sting in your neck. You claw at her, reaching up and back in a violent, twisted parody of an erotic embrace. But even as your rage ignites, the sad reality of human biology asserts itself. No chance to call curses and evocations down on your ex-lover, not when your blood is being thinned, replaced with aphrodisiacs that lift you into what your brainmeats think is a high plane of pleasure. The black mists of the Furthest Ring bleed into the deep, red pulsations of endorphins and the promise of mortal sex. Your soul, the thing that was to be your divine vessel, empties as it tips, mirroring your body slumping in the arms of Kanaya Maryam. While hot blood gushes from your veins into her waiting jaws, you feel your powers seep from you as well.

Your Sight and kourvikoum have failed you, and you begin to know the true dark of mortal death. Lips part, and you try to form words, unable to scour her mind.

Why? Why now, why like this? Kanaya... I don't understand...

Keheheheh. Stupid wannabe bitch. You think I didn't seen your pathetic little family's preparations a mile away? That whorehouse you lived in and the shitty excuses for has-been gods living in that shithole of a planar abcess. Not likely! Fucking co-opted one of your own, let you think you had a chance, and then crushed the FUCKING HOPE OUT OF YOU AAHAAHAHAHAHAH!

no...

Yeah, gimme that goodness, That delicious despair, gonna call that shit the aperitif of this fucking planet. My bitch gets your blood and I get the shards of your hopes, dreams and... whatever the fuck else you ants do that makes you feel all goody-goody inside. Fuck that shit. The travesty above seems to pulsate in time with the hateful psychic thoughts. You think you see it expanding, popping clouds like bubbles and seeming through dimensions like acid.

As the thing becomes more present, bright blood burbles past your lips and the endorphins fade with your heat. Kanaya's grip on you is strong as her traitorous arms guide you to the dusty floor of the skyscraper's roof. You try to call up hate, call up spells, call up the basic willpower to effect change in this place and...

...nothing.

Death claims you, like any other mortal. Your cup is emptied. Your gate is shut.

The distant laughter of that malevolent, ravenous demon would be the last thing you hear, if not for-

No.

The word erupts from your soul like a bell finally allowed to ring. The taint of Caliborn is flushed from your mind's pathways and your veins, even as a new corruption takes hold. Rose's blood tastes nothing like you wish it would, nothing like a human's. That cloying scent and oily taste that
you refused to experience now fills your senses while stygian powers burn through your veins and collide with the inhuman genetics of your vampirism. The effects are immediate and wracking.

You are forced to drop Rose's body like a doll, discarded.

The tiny microscopic organisms that make you what you are turn on your body, trying to absorb the filthy energy that now roils through you. They consume it, store it, even as it corrupts them and tries to turn them to its own needs. The battle ripples through your form, popping joints out of sockets, growing bones so quickly they tear your flesh. Your skulls elongates and your vision swims and boils, even as your brain nearly strokes out with the changes. A curtain of black strands whip past you on the apocalyptic winds that howl around your contorting form and you realize that your hair is no more. A strange, vain moment of sorrow that is shattered by your jaw snapping open and outward, your fangs ripping into and through their opposite lips. With a horrific, vomitorius gurgle, your gut distends with black and green power, stretching your dress and popping the coat open so that it flaps and beats at the air darkly.

A scream finally forces its way through your larynx and it is like the sound of ten thousand bats dying.

Then, just as suddenly as they came on, the transformations end. Your wracking form calms, collapses. With painful care, you push off from the ground, dragging claws like serrated swords along the ground. When your eyes open, they are orbs of bloody red, with tiny black pupils and they snap up to the living cataclysm in the air above you.

You let out your breath and take it back in, uselessly, but for the focus the symbolic act affords you. Once more and and on this intake you reach out into the radiological haze that encircles your home, your planet and you suck.

_The fuck do you think you're doing, parasite? You'll get your taste of me soon enough, in all the RIGHT ways, you don't gotta... hang on. You really think...? AHAHAHHAHAHA, you do! You think you can hold me where your precious little godling whore couldn't! That bitch was a VESSEL of ELDER GODS, what the FUCK makes you think you can live up to that?!_

“As vessels go...” you rasp out, voice cracking and whistling through your mutated throat, “She lacked a certain... physical... hardiness.”

A claw spasms and your mind, boiling and on fire as it is, focuses. And you hurl that radiation into the sky in a sheet of lightning.
“Oh for fuck’s sake, Maryam.” Nepeta slumps back into the plush chair that, moments ago she’d leapt out and screamed invective at the television from. While her attire isn’t the heavy formal that Equius required in public, the lines of the pressed shirt and trousers still wrinkle pathetically.

The display of emotion is for once, Equius thinks, entirely warranted. Zahhak drones follow the showdown on the roof with as much interest as the media, though God knows what they are making of this show. He finds himself strangely at peace with the utter dismemberment of the great game.

They are, after all, facing down the End Times.

It is to the room’s other occupant that his eyes drift. While he’d been reluctant to descend into the bunkers until the last moment, Duena Garcia had prevailed upon him to at least join Nepeta and her for this vigil for the Dolorosa’s… friend. The fait accompli of his suites being moved in occurred to him only after the fact.

Indeed, Duena Garcia is one to keep tabs on. Even if currently she is pale white and quite probably destroying Nepeta’s couch with her nails. As her lips work in silent cursing, mouthing Nosferatu, he is reminded of the briefcase Kanaya Maryam left. Gleaming metal, cold to the touch and heavy enough to adequately signify the burden within. He marvels at the Dolorosa’s ploy, the way she presented the preservation of their kind with one hand while freeing herself to commit this apocalyptic power-play of a sin.

“Blood of a sorceror, indeed.” he murmurs, a deep, resounding thrum. Duena cannot make out the words, but Nepeta does and the look she casts him makes clear her confusion at his admiring tone.

Why not throw our nightmares at this? Why not show the world our worst face, here at the End of Things? Let the masque slip, let the horror out, let the world see that which we have hidden from them for millennia.

And God, please, if you are out there… let a mutant be enough to save us.

Then the green tinge of Kanaya’s bolt casts an all too appropriately ghoulish light across his patrician features.

“You’re the one who insisted that we let the testing finish before loading the damn thing up!”

There is no telling what could have gone wrong in the assembly, let alone shoving the device during its test sequence!

“I thought your math was infallible?!”

My math, yes, your assembly, no.

“Oh fuck off, I build exo-science machines while drunk, you think I could have mes-”

Exo-science? What in the name of the One is quote-unquote exo-science.

“Exotic science. Fuck you, I invented this field, I’ll name it what I want.”

We invented this field, you mean.
“Oh my fuck, would you shut up and help me mount this thing?”

I can’t do that Roxy.

“Fuck you! You’re not allowed to quote movies now!”

Roxy. I can’t. You know I can’t and you know why.

“I’ve seen you, and by you I mean me, move dumpsters like they were air-filled Amazon boxes!”

Do you have any idea how much control that requires of me? How much control of your body it requires? Perhaps you would like to know how much I can ex-

“Oh my god shut up and give me a minute.”

Roxy sits heavily on the tail bumper of the Land Rover and lets the dully gleaming contraption return to its resting place. Behind her, in front of them, nothing but traffic and honking horns as the highways out of NYC are filled with escapees. From their spot on the side of the road, the slow progress appears even more hopeless.

“You’re a real bitch sometimes, you know that, Roux Lalonde?”

A silence. Not one out in the world, filled as it is with the panicky, riotous noise of refugees, but an internal one. A quiet of two minds waiting for the other to make the next move. No banter now, no quips, just emotion and mental shorthand. Perhaps until this moment, Roxy had not understood the depths of their subconscious communication, how they evolved a language personal to themselves to overcome problems of theory, morality, and physical risk. But the blossoming pattern forming in her mind made it altogether too clear. She was trying to find common ground in an empty space. Their co-habitation of this shell worsened once they needed to talk and not… not fit minds together like a million microscopic puzzle pieces, like two halves of some cosmic, four-dimensional painting. She reaches, tries to grasp across a chasm in her own mind, tries to reach for a cage she cannot see or feel, a cage without bars.

In the way that concentrating on an unconscious task causes it to fail, Roxy stumbles in her own mind. And Roux catches her with,

Thank you.

“What the fuck,” she whispers.

Thank you for this time on this plane, for showing me the chemical, carbon reality that is mortal life. I yearned for this, and even in this prison, it is everything I wanted.

“What the fuck. You betrayed my daughter. We imprisoned you in what I’m only guessing is a maddening, stultifying cage. Why the fuck would you thank us? Why the fuck do I want to thank you in turn?!”

Because that’s what family does, isn’t it? Rose shackled me with it, but you put me in those chains long ago, didn’t you, Roxy Lalonde? She spat it, but I only feel affection from you when you call me Lalonde.

“Fuck you.” But it’s lost its bite. It’s all tired repetition, distant affection and fortifying invective. “Yeah, fuck you Roux, Lalonde. If this old body won’t manage this physical labour on its own, let’s see what we can do, hmm?

I assent. I, uh, set you free. No more cage for you, an-”
The sky is overcast here, the atmospheric wrath of Caliborn fucking with weather systems all around New York. It’s dark enough that the lines of refugee cars begins to approach that pseudo-romantic river of lights that you sometimes see on highways winding into cities. Dark enough that that first burst of pink light is unmissab-

For a minute the world makes such divine, perfect sense that the perversion in the sky is even worse, even more terrifying for the intertwining strands of wrath, elemental code, and hunger it represents. Roxy looks at the device she has built and is simultaneously in awe of her works and patronizingly proud that such crude hands built such a perfect vess-

It is a mushroom cloud and a flower blooming in reverse, even as thunder cracks down in visible bolts and lightning screams its verses at the sky. People nearby cry out as they go blind, as they can suddenly see through their bodies, their cars, the very earth beneath their feet. And then their voices abruptly shut up with the realization that they can see again, the only evidence of the phenomenon the echo of their voices in their ears and the sting of tears in their ey-

Her bones feel like what she imagines electrical conduits feel like, thrumming with coursing power. Her marrow is on fire, past the point of burning, of pain, straight to maddening delirium. The hot air is shockingly freezing in her lungs and and and andandandandand and two miles back she solved a math problem she’d been toying around with since undergrad and now she’s already lost grasp of it in her dizz-

The ground sizzles and sparks near the pulled over vehicle, and curious, fearful peomortalsple stare. Some try to summon some courage to investigate, but that train is all about escabbittingping and there’s too many families, too many self-interested souls. A few cameras come out, but capture nothnothing they will ever be able to understanding but a white blur, a pale smudge. A window is rolled do-

If her bones were electric, the feeling settling on her skin is grounding and with a start, RoRouxxy realizes it is RoRoxyux. Hand is laid over spectral hand is laid over carbonaceous hand is laid over flesh and blood is laid over love and their hearts fill bursting that geyser into a mind-breaking pulse of-

Andifweweadjusttheparametersto

Roux.

butthenmembranecollapsesbutwecan

Roxy Lalonde.

dontbothermeimworkingIMWORKINGihaveto

You have to save your daughter.

RoseisdeadnowaitmyRosemyRosienosheisn’tdeadshecamebackohwaitthen

You have to save your lover.

Kanaya’sabigirlshecansaveohwaitwehadaplandin’tweyestheplanohthatone

We have to save our girls.

If you look at depictions of halos in Western cultures, they vary from rings of divine light to
glowing plates, but they all crown the skulls of mortals. Every one. That picture of the Archangel Michael, with the burning sword? That’s a picture of an angel possessing a human bovesselfy. Theodora, crudely captured in stone and parchment? An angel, mantling a human. Christ? You get the idea.

But what is it? Is it a visual representation of Grace, that term that defies doctrinal definition? Is it a signal that the angel is in control?

In truth the angels themselves don’t know. Crude in its depictions it may be, it is a phenomenon born of belief, that thing that feeds anything esoteric. Perhaps it is the spiritual equivalent of the liquid that spurs from sinking teeth into a bloody steak, a ripe fig.

What they can tell you is what is up with the wings. The seraphic, the kabbalistic, the horadric, they all share an identical root. They’re equally as impossible to define visually but angels, and, distantly, horrendors, know what the wings are.

The world, our world, cannot hold the pressure of their presence. Like a hot leaden ball in a sheet of rubber, they weigh heavily, melt and tear at reality. And wings are the world stretching to accommodate them, the tracers of their passing. She moves now, through the paltry mortal dimensions and the weight of their passing blooms sheets of impossible colours behind her.

What once was a halo sshhattersters into the sky, over the horizon, through the earth and back up into them, through them, where it finally settles as a crown of shards, floating lazily about their brow. The dancing, sparkling crown is nothing before the blur of reality that they leave in their wake, the streaks and waverings of light and air and bits of souls they leave as they part the world before them. A static field encompasses the spherical device Roxy built and, after a beat and a beat of unseen wings, they bolt, sphere in tow.

Boiling black acid is your flesh, ravenous polyptic parasites are in your blood, and you drool slopping viridian lightning. Drool and eat it.

i actually fucking FELT that you heinous BITCH

And Caliborn drops a sky’s worth of extra-dimensional energies on you. The prickling of your skin and the surge of energy trying to leave your body is your only warning, but it is enough. From what Roux and Roxy learned all those years ago, you knew you could never stand against this thing. Your ability to absorb energy is enormous, outstripping any recorded Dolorosa (though you feel that is because no Dolorosa had the chance to tangle with electricity grids quite like you had), but that is from the Sun and mortal means.

The cherubic hydra is something else, something elemental. They were born of the same explosion that the stars were, yet older than them. They claim to be the first children of this universe, and Roux had ever been silent on that matter, but you know Caliborn is powerful enough to eat things of other dimensions. Things like the abyssal monstrosities that gripped Rose’s soul tight, things that live in microform in your veins now.

He will eat you alive, if he doesn’t do worse first.

But not before you take your pound of flesh. Or bolt of soulstuff.

You are reminded of those moments when foolish kin tried to ambush you. Like a light switch you snap into place, arms cracking back in effort. As the sky rained down upon you, searing and crumbling concrete, glass and steel, you hurl the depths of your being at it, a battery of soul-
sun-light. The sickly green of the night is suddenly banished by an eruption of crackling pink and searing gold as the roof you stand on and the buildings around you evaporate in the corona of your discharge.

*Kyeeearrrgh!* Caliborn would no be pleased by how effiminate and wilting his scream sounded in your head. *Where the FUCK did you HIDE that shit, parasite?*

A laugh escapes your ruined lungs as you drop to the floors below, crumpling to your knees. Racking coughs follow as your biology continues to crusade itself, but your mirth is clear. And not solely rooted in the hilarious juxtaposition of his cry.

“You and Roux... both enjoy calling me a parasite. But you... never bothered to explore the capabilities of this mortal shel-”

There is no warning this time as viridian spears slam into you and so you have no time to force your pores, your capacitors open. The stellar radiation sears through you, stripping flesh that should absorb it, baring fracturing, slivering bones. There is no pain, because there are no nerves left. But somehow, perhaps intentionally, he failed to take your head and the tainted symbiotes that survive go even further into overdrive. Now, there is pain, searing, bleeding pain as they sketch veins, muscles and nerves over your frame.

In detached fascination you watch the black, grey and green tendrils rebuild you. Horror is a distant, desperate memory as your new skin burbles through the flexing fibres, coating you in a sheen of oily, glistening dermis. It quivers suddenly and you snap your head up, your jaw wide, your cells open and swallow the next cherubic cascade whole.

When your maw closes, you are salivating, dripping irradiating fluids. Where they hit the floor, they sizzle. Where they hit your mutating, distended form, they disappear beneath your surface.

*Well fuck me, but-*

“No thanks,” you manage through the ruined semblance of your mouth. And you vomit his power in a spray back at him, heedless of how weak it makes you feel.

Rose was a vessel for power.

You are an engine. You will continue.
You are burning, falling, floating and lost.

Confusion, cold and despair fill you.

The place you are in is familiar, as are the feelings you try to hide from. But as there is no cover from the cosmic scourging, there is no hiding from your heart. What was not moments ago a pillar of defiance and worship is now a ball of sad, crippled fragments masquerading as your soul. They clash and shatter within you, driving what remains of your self-confidence and image into a niche of your psyche that they may never crawl out from.

You were a fool. You should never have succumbed to mortal desires, never gotten ideas above your already exalted station. But the call of family, of comforting mortal frailty in the face of daunting tenebrous eternity was too much. You’d not spent ten years back in your shell before everything went wrong.

You wanted so much more time with your mother, with Kanaya. And there’s that crushing despair again, the worm in your heart eating you whole. It’s too much, and you know that this anguish will see you scattered in this between-realm. But just that thought is freeing and a part of you leaps at the promise of eternal dissolution.

Then you hit something blessedly cool, something that envelops you and drags you under, down, down into darkness until nothingness comes like a salve and wipes you clean.

Alright, so, I’ll admit, that hurt! A little bit. A teensy weensy bit. But it should have, it was my power after all! Because, you know, you have none of your own, loser.

“Is that where we are?” you pant. “Devolved to grade-school insults?”

What? It’s accurate! You’ve lost your humanity, your lover, about to lose your life and your planet… LOSER.

“I cannot actually bring myself to believe that the cosmic antagonist bent upon eating our world and the very souls scattering its surface is functionally a teenager.”

Excuse yourself? I’m-

“A teenager. Oh yes, Roux told me allll about your life cycles.” The L’s loll out of your gaping maw as you struggle to get your tongue out of the way. It manages to flop uselessly aside and how your mutations are allowing anything like normal speech is something that wouldn’t make sense at the best of times.

“You have so far to go before you reach even a fraction of your maturity, the only term that could suit you better than teenager is chi-”

Your muscles twitch in a mighty spasm that throws you from the ruined tower milliseconds before another volley of sickly energy crashes down through it. You tumble through the air, lashing out to try and grab something to hold on to. Obsidian claws tear into concrete as you slide down the side of a skyscraper, and with a painful yank, you hurl yourself to the top.
Holding out here has drained you faster than you’d hoped, but about as quickly as you expected.

“See? The temper of a child.”

Eheheheh. I noticed that you’re not eating my projections anymore, parasite. Getting tired? Your cellular batteries blown? How is it that I’ve only had to look at your puny, wretch corpse for like 15 of your minutes and already know more about how it works than you do? Do you get it yet? Do you get how completely fucking USELESS and OUTCLASSED YOU ARE?

It is certainly irritating, you think to yourself. The building you’d leapt from is still a boiling, melting mass, falling in on itself like a science project gone wrong. You see things in those twisting, bubbling ruins, shapes and visions in the steam and haze. Most you cannot identify, but those that waver into something more than hallucinations promise a terrible end for humanity. You force your bulbous eyes closed in a blink, and of course that’s when the next torrent drops.

Rozh’l’onde.

Twice-born.

Twice-failed.

You come to in the massing, moving, morphologically meandering midst of the Noble Circle. Your mind still shudders from your transition through the planes, but it is immediately clear that things are different. More vibrant. The tenebrous psychic gloom that defined the Ring has lifted, and though the place remains dark, it is a gleaming, unctuous abyss that more resembles a fire opal under ultraviolet light.

The Noble Circle hunger no longer. And still call you a failure.

A gate.

where is our gate?

You were purposed to open a gate, Rozh’l’onde. You have failed.

Your psychic mass unfurls slowly from the droplet of pain and fire that you plummeted through the planes as. You breathe in, slurp up, gorge yourself on the amassed worship that pools and puddles through the plane. The Gospel did its work.

I was...betrayed.

You were spared, foolish mortalkin.

The Nosferatu took your power into herself because she feared your mind-petals opening would have eradicated you.

base pity

Uncertainty roils within you and without as your manifesting pseudopodia twitch and curl.

I am... was the most powerful horroterror on that plane in over a million years. I would have survived.

But would you have survived with the cherub there?
A long quiet. It presses down upon you, psychic consensus battering at you, forcing you to understand and accept their version, if not willingly then by their will inflicted. Your mind has not properly recovered yet and they make their terrible inroads, beating down tracks that you have already made in your mind with your self-pity.

They turn you from Rozh’l’onde the horroterror back to Rose Lalonde, the failure.

“Kanaya!” Coursing white lightning peels through your body from behind, feeling like nothing but pain and the promise of fire. But it’s distantly familiar and free flowing, so you turn your body into a conduit for it and direct it desperately upwards. Your hands explode into roman candles of pink lightning that part the septic power above you, forming a skittering dome that manages to last just long enough to keep you safe. The smoking ruins of your hands flake and crackle, but somehow manage to look more human.

You turn, as you feel Caliborn’s attention turning, taking in the the rising, blinding source of your sudden power spike. White tendrils like eddies in the world follow her rise and a crown of non-euclidean geometric shapes dances around her head. Pink lightning courses through her and pink eyes gaze at you with love, support and concern.

“...Roux,” you whisper, feeling her essence still tingling through you. Something like awe with a touch of puppy love washes through you as you take in the graceful not-wings and the sparking, sparkling band. You swallow. Oh, but for another place, another time. Before this being, you want to hide your misshapen form.

“And Roxy,” they answer, their voices clashing and intertwining in a perfect analogue for their being. A gleaming sphere of steel and ceramic is lowered to the roof, and something like malice and hunger emanates from it. Fantastic. As if you there wasn’t enough of that in the air.

“Thank you for the assistance, both of you. But you should not-”

“You’re welcome and shove it, Kans. It was our/my/your plan you don’t get to offload this on me that brought us this far. And we will see it through. And our daughter and lover safe and restored.”

The ripple of expressions and emotions that skitters across their face in that delivery is almost too much for you. It ripples across a face familiar and perfectly, sublimely alien, warping it into something discordian, distraught. Indeed, you know that fell; were you not suffering from this bone-deep tiredness you probably would have started breaking down some time ago. But as it stands, you still have a goal, and you’re already here.

There is the now-familiar pressure of another onslaught, but the angelic form before you sparks and growls, “Aren’t you going to introduce yourself before trying to dance with us, Callie-born?”

Oooo, look, some angel mind-fucking a mortal, look at me quake in my boots. You’re all one to me: food and playthings. Maybe you’ll last longer as a toy than the rest of the dust worms on this planet.

The leer is palpable and revolting; your body bears less and less resemblance to human, and that line is the most defiled you’ve been forced to feel this entire time. You want to reach out to them, ask them if they’re okay, if it’s time yet. Blood and bone, you wish it were time already.

Aaaahahah, you didn’t like that, did you? Better test that hardiness out hmm?

The assault this time comes from too many avenues to defend against. A psychic spear stabs your mind, and you feel like you’re being pulled inside out, while that vile green lightning weaves
together above you and crashes down, tearing at the surrounding buildings and air and-

-gets eaten whole by Roxy’s sphere. You collapse in relief, bits of building and and road raining down upon you as you claw your way to a ruining wall to prop yourself up.

*That… that’s a lot of fucking gall you got there, mortal mindslut. The angels know you’re playing with their fire?*

“Excuse yourself, Callie-born, but we *are* an angel.”

*Don’t kid yourself.*

He strikes again and RoxyRoux tries to respond. The crown brightens, spins and rises into a haloand their body disappears into blinding lightning, a cosmic coil in human shape. The energies of creation meet the consuming hunger of entropy and you nearly raise a hand to shield yourself before you remember your role and absorb as much as possible.

Through your body roil the combined, combining energies of the Furthest Ring, the host and this world-eater and they are erasing you, erasing those symbiotic cells that let a little girl from Rainbow Falls stand on this stage. Bit of you dissolve into the ether, blackened carapace begins to flake off and despair begins to eat at your heart.

Your gaze finds a sparking drone, crashed on its side, its quadcopters shattered, its camera whirring and spinning, trying to find an angle. With a too-long arm you reach out and right it and that dark eye snaps to you, to your ruined face.

You look back and do not know what to say. The words come any way.

“Terrifying, isn’t it? Your world in jeopardy, being fought over by beings you can barely see, let alone comprehend. And even if… even if I look like one of those monsters, let me tell you, I am scared too. I was two steps removed from mortal, but still dust compare to these beings. And yet, here I am. Because people believed in me. Mortals, immortals, cosmic beings and monsters alike.

“And one of those cosmic beings believed in you all. She gave you the means to fight back against these things, to… to bind them to you in sacred ritual, advance them and you.

“Listen, listen to me. Three billion of you have the book in your possession. You can reach her. You can… you can bring her here. Her and the Noble Circle. Say the words, believe in your worship and we… we will handle the rest.”

The little red light goes dark. The words helped. You think you can stand now, face what is coming. Hopefully they helped… everyone too.

Everyone.

As you stand, that little word blossoms in your heart. Yes, everyone. Butterflies erupt in the vile maw that is your stomach and the gash in your face that is your mouth curls into a smile. A feeling of unity with everyone on the planet overcomes you. Acidic tears well up from your night-black eyes and a choking, burbling laugh burst free of your throat, venting through your mouth and the sides of your neck. You take a step forward and that’s when the pressure of Caliborn’s presence suddenly warps, splits and *rears.*

You have a barest fraction of a second to think *hydra* before RouxRoxy is screaming your name and your eyes and mind and soul all shriek into lime green with pain.
There’s a girl, gibbering and crying in the dark, in a tumescent cocoon of roiling self-hate and piteous dejection. Barbed, invasive tendrils of crepuscular darkness hold her down as the will of new gods presses into her, erasing the girl, and leaving behind the gaping, welcoming vessel. She cries because everyone has left her and nothing she did - not a single, desperate act - mattered.

Words of disappointment and anger filter through the dark cocoon, side-by-side with assurances that all will be forgiven when she finally gives in and becomes what she was always meant to be.

*We all make mistakes, they say, and it was singularly unfair to you that you had to be one.*

But that cocoon exists in a place burbling with the unmitigated worship of millions, billions and as a spined blade of psychic malevolence moves to make its incision, those billions of voices, waver, quaver and *shift*.

In that painful light, you think you see a figure stride into view, challenging and open-armed.

Chapter End Notes

The story continues in *The Ghost Girl's Tale*, an entry in the Writings In the Spaces Between.
Finally

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

And suddenly the soundscape of the dreaming dark is not a quiet, darkly pastoral burbling. It shifts to a roaring, demanding cascade. What was once a choir is now a riotous concert, chanting, screaming and most of all, demanding. Like the advancing mass of humanity it represents, the roar presses into and through the Noble Circle.

As Oglogoth was once powerless before the mental evisceration of a mortal, the assembled horroterrors find their consensus being forcibly overwritten. It has been millennia since they have been worshipped, but never have they been called to account.

And as the roaring, mortal cacophony ripples through the Furthest Ring, the single mortal on that plane, uncurls, unfurls and opens her arms to the torrent of voices.

Your arms were open, ready to accept the searing, multi-planar radiation torrent, but it never came, not in its entirety. The millions of microscopic maws that make up your body now slurped up the physical and your mind and soul are tender from the blowback, but you still stand. Whatever stepped in and took that shot for you knew what it was doing, knew the exact moment to intervene. Was it an ally of Rose’s, of Roux’s, some other immortal being judging the exact-right moment to intervene? Was it pure luck, and maybe just a hallucination? Your fevered, fractious mind is dissolving into unconsciousness, like your overworked form drips and sizzles into the air.

She said you’d know when the time was, but you’d imagined it as some kind of revelation, a bit like the kourvikoum Rose spoke of. Maybe if you somehow survive all this, you’ll tell Roux it was less like revelation and more like surrender. More like “now or never.”

A breath as the world still burns around you, as the last syllable of your name, screamed, leave leaves the lips of Roxy, voiced by Roux, as your disintegrating form steps forward one last time and you commit.

The sickly light that imbues the scene with such cancerous despair suddenly dims, darkens. Every pore, every cell, every slavering maw in your body gapes open all at once and the raucous winds of the end of the world are swallowed by their silent screams. It’s some kind of perverse sonar, and you feel that scream reverberate through the planes, seeking, ringing, folding back in on itself to push further, deeper into the universe.

Until it reaches its destination, knocking, crashing on the ephemeral walls of the Furthest Ring. A breath let out as a cry to trace the path that probe carved through existence, a call to return, the whole of humanity’s demands in a single syllable shouted down that dark channel:

“ROSE!”

The convulsions your body made to force that noise out pale in comparison to what comes next. Your parasites, your mutated symbiotes understand, can feel that path and they begin to rework you again. Your flesh peels off in great strips of meat that warp and splatter to the ground in eye-aching patterns of aphotic ink. Blood spurts forth, twisting and whipping through the air as if on its own accord, carving a circle in the dusty concrete. Shards of bone explode forth from limbs to lodge in that stony ground and grow into pillars wrought with ancient entreaties.
You hold your dripping, skeletal arms up, marvelling at the lack of pain. Your vision swims as you consume yourself to complete the work that this dark power was put on this planet to accomplish, but bent to the will and needs of humanity. As your legs collapse and the bony framework of your torso drives your spine into the center of the circle, your existence explodes into a constellation of viewpoints. For a moment, you see your arms held out before you, your misshapen skull regarding them. But only for a moment, before those points explode outward, upward, inward and through, riding the path you opened.

An engine, you called yourself. Quite apt. You take in the atramentous power of the Horrorterrors, the dazzling lightning of the Host, and the putrid discharge of Caliborn and you use it to power the Gate.

You never get to see your arms clatter lifeless to the ground, or your skull loll back, held on only by thin fibres that were once muscles. You are rushing to a destination you will likely not survive, but your heart swells because you know what you’ve done.

“Oh, Dolorosa, what have you done?” Equius mutters under his breath.

Nepeta’s hands cover her mouth in shock and Duena has run for the toilet to lose her lunch. In truth, disgust makes Equius want to turn the TV off, just wait for the end, whatever it may be but duty makes him watch. Duty forces him to look at the situation with a strategic, critical eye. And that eye notices things.

The shifting growth of the bone pillars. The rhythmic pulsing of the circle. And the free, circular flow of that black liquid through the carven rivulets.

He stands, taking up the phone and calling the shelter’s trauma center.

“How much blood do we have stockpiled?”

“Sir?”

“Answers, doctor. NOW.”

“Uh, um. Protocol dictates 3 months of blood for all residents with-”

“And in quantitative numbers, that is…?”

“Oh jeez, I don’t know… probably just shy of a hundred thousand litres?”

“Excellent. Prepare at least ten thousand for immediate transport.”

Equius?” Nepeta asks as he puts down the phone. “What are you up to?”

He turns, taking off his jacket and rolling up his sleeves. “A leader must be ever cognizant of the resources and people at his disposal. While I cannot materially improve our chances of surviving the disintegration of this planet, there is one person who can improve our chances of surviving the disintegration of the Game in the hypothetical following months.

“Given that she is the one who put us in the position of having to survive such an eventuality, i feel that bringing her to task for it is simultaneously the right thing to do and deliciously… apropos.”

Nepeta’s eyes dart between his and the TV, widening.
“Holy shit.”

Roux and Roxy watch the Kanaya’s sacrifice unfold into the horrific scene before them. Neither were prepared for it, Roxy having only an inkling of what was supposed to happen and Roux not being nearly old enough to remember the profane practices of ancient humanity. A gagging noise escapes their throat and before Roxy can devolve into a repeating chorus of “what the fuck’s” Roux propels them into flight.

“Come on what the fu-we need to get the Attractor in place—before Caliborn ruins everything again, gotcha.”

Not for the first time, Roux has to admire the sheer mental resilience and adaptability of her host. From maddening first contact, to this culminating moment, to share a brainspace with Roxy Lalonde was a singular pleasure. “I’d blush if I weren’t about ready to kill you.”

“Yes, well, that’s off the table now.”

Their body electrostatically hurls the enormous sphere that follows them, pinning it to the sky beneath Caliborn, and just in time. With reflexes born of a nervous system functionally replaced by electricity, their union unleashes an eye-searing nova of cosmic power as the still-forming hydra of Caliborn vomits forth another planet-eating blast. The Attractor thrums to life as the opposing energies close with it, and with an ear-shattering crash, amplifies and attenuates both into a form that it can simply… absorb.

what the fuck

“Yeah! Stick that in your cosmic ass careful we wouldn’t want and rotate to give him any ideas he might like!”

Behind their outward bravado, the pair communicates with mental shorthand, conceptualizing and understanding their next step. If they time it right, they’ll be there to see their girls again. The device at their hip is old, but still functional. Sure in the Attractor’s somewhat temporary protection, RouXRoxy turn a dial and with an actinic BANG slide into the path Kanaya carved through existence.

They are not there to see the shadow of Kanaya’s corpse fill out, nor to see a pair of luminous violet eyes open in its twisting darkness.

______________________________________________________________

Your mind and soul have no reference points for what it they seeing as your hurl towards the Furthest Ring, but they understand pain. For an untold time, you suffer the attentions of the universe in cosmic form, blotting out all rational thought. A passage meant to strip identity, mortality, consciousness from you succeeds admirably until…

You remember.

You are the Dolorosa, and you fear no power.

And like that, the pain is… well, not gone. It passes through you, but cannot take hold. You become a conduit of perfect energy, an shifting, unbound thing, stuck in the spaces between dimensions, between reality and everything else. As you become aware, you understand that before you spreads the deep, abyssal realm that houses the Most Noble Circle of Horrotters. Its shores are too short and its depths too dark, and you can feel the roiling of unknowable minds beneath its glassy waves.
Then there is something you understand as thunder, and you are not alone. A bubble of reality, here where there should be none, and two-in-one very familiar forms within.

“Oh thank godoh good you managed you’re not some kind of sacrifice to not do something incredibly selfless and stupid. Well, Again. more than you already are.”

You try to communicate, but fail. Discrete language is impossible when you still do not understand your existence. You attempt to project confusion, amusement and a little love, but suddenly something entirely capable of communicating does so.

“If she were the sacrifice, she would be rejected,” it burbles from the abyss in time to bubbles that froth up and begin to form. Familiar and terrifying is the shape that stands from the stygian foam. The bubbles pop like tiny eyeballs as she puts forth a facsimile of who she once was.

“A sacrifice is supposed to end up here shorn of the trappings of mortality, but I suppose no one ever accounted for the depth of character that defines a Dolorosa.” Rozh’l’onde murmurs, an unsound like a burbling stream. Under a thin sheet of ice.

“Heya Rosie,” whispers a suddenly singular voice.

The black orbs meant to represent eyes slide slowly over to the jittering form of that union.

“Hello, mother. I see you’ve finally forgiven Roux.”

“Yeah well, it turns out that family is a two way street. You don’t have to be related to herme but you do gotta put up with me.”

The face of the simulacrum ripples in anger, hurt, confusion, before settling into something like hauteur. “I don’t need to put up with anything any more.”

You’d been quiet, mentally and communicatively, trying to draw yourself inside your being, make yourself small that she wouldn’t notice you. Foolish and pointless, especially as wisps of sadness leak out at her imperious declaration.

“Ah, Kanaya. Congratulations. You arguably survived the opening of the Gate better than I would have. That, combined with the eventual success of Roux’s rude, profane plan, is the only reason I don’t-“

Her face ripples again, warring with itself as you leak sorrow and sobs into the aether. I tried. you think I tried and I did it all for you, all that you’d never totally disappear, never scatter across universes like so much sacrificial dust, never go where I’d never see you again never

The facsimile cracks, loses form, splashes into the water, sending waves and ripples back into that imagined place. They crash into oncoming waves and forth in dark surf, before surging back towards shore and crashing forth. The abyssal waters of the Furthest Ring cease to be sensible, cease to be liquid and fill the interdimensional space around your once-mortal forms. The Circle is in motion, breaking forth and the implications of that sets you to shivers.

“And so stabbed me in the deepest core of my being, tried to drive the humanity from me, killed me in the end, all so that I might survive for you? Do you expect me to forgive you?!”

The Ring roars around you, mad, rolling eyes blinking into and out of existence, gaps in nothingness standing in for mouths. The pressure of it is like nothing you’ve experienced before, like how you imagine the depths of the oceans. In this tiny pocket of in-between, you all begin to be crushed. The electricity of RouxRoxy skitters familiarly over the space of you and outlines the beginning of a form. Desperately you reach out, repentant.
No. I expect to earn it.

The roaring intensifies, adding to the psychic pressure, like rolling tremors up from an unknowable deep. Polyps and prehensile probosci strike out and lash around you, slipping and slithering inches from your forms, held back by holy power, but not burned, not any longer. And then the riotous noise and furor begins to still.

In the burgeoning quiet, violet eyes open before you. A form like the facsimile, yet somehow more human, more intimate, more correct, emerges. Shapes like human hands reach up and out and cup your forming face into shape. Dark power, her power, bleeds around and into you. It is painfully familiar, for all that you embodied it briefly.

“I believe you, somehow. Somehow, my faith in humanity has not yet been erased. Else why would I do this, commit this death march of an aeons-old power?”

There’s a thought like a kiss across your brow, and for a moment, Rozh’l’onde’s - Rose’s - lips appear pink instead of black.

Then, like a stream becoming a river, the roaring picks back up and countless, horrible eyes and orifices open, screaming and screeching their need and goal. Sickening, burbling forms writhe into and out of existence before your eyes, growing canted limbs, buzzing, inseclile wings, and impossible anatomies. To Earth they will go and in a whirling, wonderous tempest the Furthest Ring vomits forth its ancient brood and their progeny.

In the stillness that follows, around you and in your heart, a lingering fear remains. It is them who voice it.

“Uh. Death march?”

Below the howling maelstrom of the confused cherub and from the scattered bones and transfixed skull a darkness begins to pool. In the shadow of that skull, violet eyes blink slowly and. It pours up from between the still-flowing blood runes, stealing here and there the tenebrous energies from those unholy liquids. A silhouette begins to take shape, but nothing sensible to mortal eyes, though human and cephalopodic implications cannot be unseen.

**ohohoho the backstabbing slut didn’t fail after all! Hello Rosie-girl, back so soon to your doom?**

The form opens something that could be a mouth, or just as easily a cavern, and suddenly bloats, swelling to two, three times its size. A frisson of a kind shudders through it, and suddenly a low voice is speaking from the shadows of the ruins. It echoes from shattered windows, curls up from sewers exposed to the sky, howls through ruined doorways.

“Good evening, Caliborn. I would say that I hate to interrupt your meal, but we both know that’s not the case.”

**ehehe well shit i suppose asking for a little bit of courtesy was too-**

It doesn’t even finish its sentence before unleashing a storm of sickly energies into the still-building horrorterror. The cascade swallows the building whole and tears down, down into the bedrock below. But when it relents, the tower is still there, covered with the oily sheen of dark magics, standing precipitously like a needle on a plinth in the middle of that hole gouged into the earth.

“Did you think that I wouldn’t come prepared, you idiot child?”
the fuck are you calling me, you heinous bi-

“Silence!”

And the city, the state shakes with her power, with the command in that tolling voice. The winds die down, rubble stops its shifting and the air stills in people’s lungs.

“Three billion worshippers fill my being with power now, Caliborn. No longer am I constrained to that frail mortal body and no longer do I fear my fate.”

ehehehahahahaah oh that’s good Rosie-girl because as phat and juicy as you are now, you’re still nothing compared to me

“We shall see.”

And that unholy body dribbles off the building to join the roiling shadows of the city, shadows which Caliborn just now realizes aren’t shadows at all. Jaws open and slavver, pseudopodia grasp and gangle, and, like a beast from the worst dreams of humanity, the night moves.

“I don’t think she thinks the horroterrors are going to be strong enough.”

In the inbetween space, immune to its reality-tearing unenergies, three women confer. The formless one emanates anxiety and confusion, the pink lightning and dark ether that make her up flickering erratically.

“I don’t know sweetie dear heart, but we’re sure Rose wouldn’t want to waste your efforts sacrifice.”

Denial and hope.

“We’d be a drop in a bucket compared to the ocean of power that those putrid the Noble Circle represents.”

Urgency and conviction.

“We’re sorry, Ishe doesn’t understand and I don’t-”

With great focus Kanaya binds the lightning and dark tendrils together, forming a discrete, recognisable arm. She reaches out for their face, through the reality bubble. RouxRoux moves to let their face be cupped, but that is not her goal, not now at the end of the world. Curling elemental fingers form a pointing hand, focus above their head.

The shattered halo. The implication thereof.

“Oh As I said, I don’t my god. Of course. We have you don’t understand to go No, they won’t allow we have to TRY!”

RoxyRoux’s voice is raw and mortal, filled with tears and determination. There is an interminable silence in which the two minds sharing that body argue, before they speak.

“Very well. I’ll WE’LL go. Like hell I’m letting you gogo alone.”

Relief and joy. Kanaya moves her flickering form through the bubble, straining to keep her disembodied form together, and wraps them in a hug. It feels like sharp static and slimy seaweed, but the warmth and love pouring off her is unmistakable.
“Ha ha, alright, thanks kiddodear heart” they say and gently push her back. “Where we go now you absolutely must not can’t follow. Like, seriously. That much entropic energy will not be taken to kindly survive.”

Sadness and loneliness.

“I will NEVER abandon you.”

A blown kiss and they are gone.

The darkness of the city below surges and a claw made of stuff deeper than night reaches up and tears at the radioactive mass.

The psychic scream that emanates from the thing quickly turns to mocking laughter as the boiling darkness sears itself on the cancerous energies leaking from the monstrosity.

stupid fucking bitch! bring the whole furthest ring with you, i’ll fry you all up nice and crispy before EATING YOUR ENTIRE BACKASSWARDS SPECIES. ALL TWO OF THEM!

Nine prongs of hate and bile made real separate from the core of the monster and from them spews forth sickly cosmic power. The noise that the mass of horroterror makes is not so much a scream as something lower, something more primal. Buildings warp and bend away from the sounds or shatter into psychosomatic constructs of the pain that are sucked into the midnight morass before being vomited back out. The towers of steel and glass that once made up New York breaking, mutating, melting in response to the psychic legion of the Noble Circle.

Only the distant background of growing prayer keeps them real, keeps them anchored to this plane. As much as the Gate let them through, their powers and an ancient Seal call them back. But firm is the will of Rozh’l’onde and growing in strength are the chains of worship.

In the darkened rooms of the faithful paperbacks and hardcovers float and glow, the Gospel whispering, giving up the names of creatures that existed before this universe coalesced into shape. Bare minutes before they watched a thing out of myth and storybooks, a vampire, melt while whispering promises of salvation to them. The untold thousand names of what some humans would call Old Gods roll and wrack out of billions of mouths as a full third of humanity take up their places on the spiritual battle line. Like a virus made physical the Gospel erupts from tablets and phones to corrupt public screens and signs, its scrolling litany exhorting praise or displaying the battle.

The pain of the Noble Circle is clear, but in the manner of new converts, the people’s fervour only grows. And so too does the desperate hope that this is all enough.

They blitz through the planes, mortality bundled up in a lightning wrapper. The sensation is so unlike the initial transference that the part of them that is Roxy is reduced to gasping giggles at the influx of new sensation, new perspective. Roux does not fare much better - it is her first transit bound in a biological, chemical shell, but at least she knows to expect the changes, the weaving and warping changes to their personal reality as they transition from reality ruleset to reality ruleset. It takes some coaxing and combing on both their parts to smooth out their mental ripples.

You likely will not, but when we arrive, I advise you let me do the talking.

It’s cute that you’re trying to manage me, and good that you’ve managed your own expectations.
And then they come before a barrier that seems absolute, completely barring their path. Waves of cosmic energy batter at them as they attempt to pass, but according to the part of them that is Roux, this is to be expected. But by their power and technology, they attempt to push through, focusing their wills to find the realm of the angels, a place that could be Heaven. But as they up their exertions, a voice:

**YOU TRADED GRACE FOR A LIFE, CHILD. WHAT BUSINESS DO YOU HAVE HERE NOW?** It comes from everywhere, yet before them. It reverberates through their mind, but leaves their body cold and unfeeling.

“I think you know, Gatekeeper. Your source of worship is under dire threat. I suggest you follow the lead of the Noble Circle—**

**INCREDIBLE. TIME ON THAT MATERIAL PLANE MUST HAVE DULLED WHAT SENSES YOU ONCE HAD. YOU COULD NOT POSSIBLY HAVE MADE A WORSE CASE FOR OUR INTERVENTION.**

“Yeah? Wow, here I thought accus—**

**QUIET. WE ARE NOT INTERESTED IN THE RATIONALE OF A MORTAL SINNER.**

“What of that of an immortal one?”

The sneer is palpable. **LEAST OF ALL THAT.**

“Funny, that, because it is what you are going to have to face deal with.”

**EXPOSING YOUR MONUMENTAL LACK OF JUDGEMENT TO US LIKE SO IS NOT GOING TO—**

“Exposing? You think this is exposing?” A hand trailing bright lightning moves to their hip, where their first collaboration hangs. A dial is turned and the bubble **inverts—**

The cosmic power that was Roux’s inheritance, those energies of creation, now tap into a thing that all angels feed from, slowly, but slowly. The reality-born soul of Roxy Lalonde burns like fuel in the engine of Roux’s mind and like a mountain under pressure, they **erupt.**

**WHAT BLASPHEMY-?!**

“No blasphemy here, fuckwit! We’re doing this of our own free will!”

The barrier, made to block prying eyes and the slow-but-steady erosion of the inbetween, **creaks.** And that is before they reach out with arms of burning lightning, with mind-forged prosthetics and dig into it. They think of the world burning back home, and they **heave.** A great psychic noise crashes through a heaven as the barrier, those pearly gates, is parted by the wills of Roux and Roxy. In the light of creation that spills forth from before them, they cry,

“Your most ancient foes throw themselves at a fucking child of the apocalypse defending your shared sustenance! And here you all cower, doing nothing! Rationing yourselves like the Noble Circle you displaced, already admitting defeat. Were you going to wait aeons for another species to evolve and dwindle here? Or were you going to get off your asses and fight?”

A presence rears up before them, a glimmer in all the brightness, clearly meaning to strike them down for their affront. But they are having none of it, and as Roux identifies it as that Gatekeeper, Roxy delivers the spiritual equivalent of a backhand. Powered by her blazing soul as it is, the blow winks the Gatekeeper almost out of existence, casting him to the bright nether, far into the
depth of that heaven. A sense of implacable vengeance wells up from within the depths of the barrier and the intertwined pair brace to beat some sense into angels.

**Would everyone kindly stand down,** a new voice interjects.

*Fuck,* thinks Roux.

They ache and they burn, and they are tearing him down, but Rozh’l’onde’s grip on the Circle is waning in the face of their united inability to defeat Caliborn. Consensus is building against her, along with a surprising countermotion that, well, We are committed, now.

In the face of another wave of bilious radiation that renders chunks of the north-eastern seaboard uninhabitable, it is the best that Rozh’l’onde can hope for. That, and more converts, more belief. She firmly believes that one good, solid strike will off-balance the thing in their sky - their sky! - *horror* *terror* *believing* Earth to be theirs, will wonders never cease - allowing them to swarm the beast and carve him to pieces.

So she gathers up what masses of atramentous power she can and forms a facsimile to blot out the stars. Dark but glorious is the humanform of Rozh’l’onde, a curving, expansive woman who echoes the ancient sculptures but for the abyssal bits that no human wants to consider. Eyes like a constellation of liquid sapphires, hair unbound and white like the foam of the ocean crashing against an obsidian beach. A hole that is a maw that is not a mouth or orifice opens and she gives the only sermon she ever will.

*F*uck? What’s- oh. OH.

**I see you feel strongly about our intervention. Given the strength of your previous and willful rejection we did not think that you would return.**

“The potential destruction of the human racemy people should be enough to motivate anyone who can help!”

**Indeed? But it is a mere potential by your own words. Those creatures that dwell in the Furthest Ring may very well prove triumphant. Even now, that creation of your base loins attempts to drive their energy stocks higher with-**

“That sentence made nono sense.”

...regardless, why should we risk our number on a fight our age-old enemy is primed to win? Would you have a second War in the Skies? Do you really-

“Oh my god! Oh my fucking non-existent God! Can you- Do you listen to yourself Roxy- you patriarchal piece of Roxy! Fine. Fine. But seriously. You know enough about Rose and what’s going on down there that you know what the Gospel is.

And that it is the Gospel Bright and Tenebrous.”

Desperately she continues, through the now-unceasing green rain that burns away them and their firmament. The dark that crashes against Caliborn like waves in a storm replenishes itself with each prayer, each desperate word of praise. But Caliborn’s hate appears to be unending, his earth-tethered star waxing and waning according to his own tides. At times lower, at times higher in the sky, he boils the seas and those of the Noble Circle that he can catch.
So she continues, filling airwaves and minds,

“We can win, and we can survive, but the Noble Circle must be summoned in full and in order to manage that we—”

It strikes like hateful lightning, the message from her mother and one half of her betrayers. It sears, it hurts, but it reminds her of her purpose, the purpose of her human, mortal writings.

“-we must remember that we are not the only ones who worship.”

A silence, in that place with the gates they made. No sound where there should be no sound. But immense psychic weight, an apprehension.

*You believe we can co-exist with the Noble Circle? After three aeons, after wars, after starving them in their hovel?*

“Nine billion people worshippers. How much energy is that? Do you even remember was the first new soul in Roux? ten thousand years. Millennia of regular reproduction and then nothing. Why then was I conceived to this time? Oh, I know I had a purpose, but clearly you all held back for one as well. Was it this? Or some other play beyond my ken? You needn’t remind me that I did not turn out as expected, but at those birth rates, with even halved rates of regard…

They let the implication hang in the air.

*It does not escape us that you derive your sustenance from a single soul all to yourself now.*

“A single soul that’s heading back there to fight, drop in the bucket that we are may be.”

The weight lessens then, and presence behind that voice retreats. The energies of that heaven dim and bloom, as if great clouds had drawn up to block it. They burn before it, a tiny pyre of pink lightning before gates, before the first and only hole to be torn in that colossal barrier. In their shared shorthand, they worry, discuss and agree. With the dilation of time in this realm, they have time to wait, but not for very long.

But with that thought comes a shifting from beyond the fog. A tiny light sparks, then another, and another. In disorganized ranks the sparks spring up, slowly getting larger and larger, closer and closer, close enough that when one hisses to life before them, the suggestion of a hand could be imagined around the base of them. The mortal part of them shivers, and the angelic nearly screams for joy at the sight of the firey swords coming to life.

*Very well. Let us ensure a fruitful harvest, and see about a peace with our oldest enemy, forevermore.*

*And please, turn that device off. I’d rather my youngest daughter get the most out of you.*

The rift they tore begins to shut as the lights of heaven dim once more. No, not dim. They set, as if all the stars were going down all at once. With the barrier mending itself shut and their purpose accomplished, they gather a last nova of energy from Roxy’s soulyyre, orient on the brilliant signal of the Attractor and shout a message down through the planes. Down to Rozh’l’onde, down to Rose.

She can feel the swell of modern worship, the call to neglectful deities and angels and spirits. A part of her sneers at it, hates it instinctively. They drove her kind from the earth in the dark days
before civilization, but when humanity was still aware enough to look to the stars and wonder. But there’s something different about it, and her many maws split in night-spilling grins when she realizes it.

Their old enemies are being bound as they are. The same contracts she wrote for the Noble Circle are being offered to the Host. Offered on a silver platter, garnished with such desperate worship, praise and regard as has not been offered in centuries. And as she feels their reluctant, unwelcome answer, kourvikoum suddenly returns to her. Like black adrenaline it courses through her and through the Circle and the many mouths and eyes begin to laugh.

Caliborn demands an answer from them, but they retreat, shadows becoming shadows once more, leaking back into holes that he gouged in the Earth and reality. Retreating before him, but cackling in his face, maddening him with gleeful, knowing whispers. Their unending, incomprehensible voices dangle a bit of prophecy, no, a bit of inevitability before him but just before he reaches out for it, a dark dawn blossoms forth and the rearing mass of Rozh’l’onde’s simulacrum fills the sky again, reaching out, bleeding, dropping, fusing with the night.

Because she’s realized that it’s not Caliborn that needs one good blow. As the stars begin to shift, breaking apart constellations, winking out and re-appearing, she pulls. Deep from within the tenebrous chasm of her soul, she pulls at the dark above, at the membrane between worlds, and at the Gate. As the membrane tears and pops and the Furthest Ring begins to leak from the night sky in full, the distant ritual site sparks. A brief sputtering of holy energies crackle across the ground as the Gate’s final purpose is accomplished and the Beast realizes the stars are taking up formation. Rank upon rank, the stars begin their march down to earth. Row upon row, starfire swords blaze to life, their harsh light revealing the colossal, grinning abyss opening up beneath and around Caliborn.

And finally, the world-eater knows true fear.

Chapter End Notes

There is, of course, an Epilogue

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