I Could Kill You With This Spoon

by godtiermeme

Summary

Your name is Karkat Vantas.

You are an Alternian.

You are the equivalent of twenty-three Earthly revolutions around their weak sun.

And you are an assassin for the artificial planet colony of Skaia. Your job, as handed down to you by the Great and Honorable Derse King XVII, is to befriend a famed human rights activist under the pseudonym of the Knight of Time. Learn his secrets, uncover the future movements of his renegade group, The Prospitians, and kill him. By means of many pulled strings, you are now his most trusted bodyguard, as the last was assassinated by the Great and Honorable Derse King XVII's own hand.

Seeing as he's already been injured by a failed previous attempt to kill him, you fully expect for this to be a very, very easy job.

Notes

The title is very silly, but, if I actually finish this (99.9999% chance I won't), this will be vaguely serious. It's like a space opera, but more gay and with 50% more DaveKat than...
your average space opera. (According to scientific studies by the International Space Soap Opera Regulatory Board.) Also, the titles are Mozart symphonies by Köchel catalogue number. I'm a nerd. Mozart for you! Mozart for you! Everyone gets MOTHERFUCKING MOZART!

See the end of the work for more notes

- Inspired by Ever After by Miss_Nihilist
The Fifth Day of Dark: 11:00 PM: LOG 0001

It was cold when you arrived at the sealed chamber entrance to Skaia. The fact that you had to be frisked for weapons, explosives, and other potentially deadly paraphernalia when you arrived didn't exactly help.

You hate the dark seasons.

You've heard that, on Old Earth, they used to call this "winter", and there would be this white "snow" substance, which coated everything and made the landscape beautiful. You've seen paintings. Trees and forests covered in this "snow" and sparkling white. Little hoofbeasts pulling flimsy wooden transportation devices, each filled by a couple. It's what sparked your interest in Human art, and it's what prompted you to begin working as an assassin. After all, only the richest and most outrageously corrupt live on Old Earth, with its carefully recultivated lands and protected wildlife.

But that's beside the point.

Right now, you're standing in front of a run-down shack made of rusted, corrugated metal and poorly welded beams. Rain leaks through the shoddy overhang above the front door, and you had to smash the doorbell a total of five times before it rang.

Now, with the door open, you get your first glimpse of your target.

A human male. From his files, you know that he's the same age as you. Blond hair, styled into a messy version of what you believe the Humans call a "quiff", pale, with relatively broad shoulders. An injury from a previous and clearly less competent assassin's attempt left him with some unknown degree of medical complications. Logically, you can assume this is why he's (a) using a bulky wheelchair, the sort with the larger wheels on either side, and (b) being presided over by some dorky-looking Human with black hair and thick, rectangular-frame black glasses.

Understandably, neither of these men are screaming "I trust you wholeheartedly" to you, but it's your job to change that. With a solid ten kills under your belt, you're certain that this will be a simple task.

After all, the one with the glasses already seems more accommodating.

In fact, the one with the glasses is the first to speak. He even offers to shake your hand, though, you politely refuse. "Name's John," he says, his voice slightly higher than you're accustomed to hearing from a male Human. "I'm Dave's resident best bud and physician. In that order. I'm guessing you're the new bodyguard. I'm right, right? You're not some creepy hitman here to kill my best friend. That would be weird, huh?" Though the statement makes you nervous, he punctuates it with a literal snort of laughter. Then, he waves the comment aside and nudes Dave
by the shoulder. "Move out of the way, dude. You're being rude."

"Well excuse me for not wanting to get shot again," responds the blond, his vocal pitch artificially heightened with faux offense. You watch closely, noting every motion. His left hand, which you can only assume is his dominant one, nudges at a joystick controller, which is crudely secured to the right armrest with a mass of duct tape and what seems to be a singular stray piece of chewed gum. At the same time, his right hand buries itself in the front pocket of his oversized red sweatshirt. As he backs away, he eyes you over. He puffs his chest up, like a frightened bird, before speaking. "I can kill you," he mutters. As if looking for the most innocuous thing in the room, he darts over to the still-set dining room table. After picking up a spoon, he continues, "I can kill you with this spoon."

(You highly doubt he could kill so much as a bug on his own, but you're a decent enough individual to keep this to yourself. Knowing your luck, the bastard'll turn out to be a combat master and he'd beat the shit out of you.)

John, in return, laughs. Another series of dweeby snorts. "Have some manners, Dave," he playfully scolds. Then, he turns to you. "I apologize for my friend's behavior. He's not too keen on strangers. Or, surprisingly, people. He hates most people. At least, he hates actually being around them. He'll write and philosophize all about it, but he'll run like a fucking leopard if you invite him to a party." A shrug. John gestures towards the table, from which Dave had taken the spoon, and tacks on a final addendum. "We've set a place for you. I've got some eggs and bacon ready. Dave, go get those, would you?"

"Sure thing, loser." Somehow, Dave squeezes his makeshift chair through the narrow gap in the makeshift wall. He returns a few seconds later with a tiny, depressing egg and some shriveled bacon scraps. With all the charisma of a dead cockroach, he drops the still-simmering pan onto the table. "Eat up, bodyguard. The High Jackass has been upping his campaign against me."

(If you were a Skaian native, or had any sort of loyalty to the King beyond his hefty paycheck, you'd punch this smug asshole in his stupid face. But, you aren't. And you don't. So, you let it sit. Instead, you prod at the meager offerings in front of you.)

Obviously, life is hard in Skaia. At least, for these two nitwits it is. You almost feel bad eating their food, but you're aware of the fact that you'll be living off of them for a good, long while. And, to be honest, you're not sure how you feel about that. You've always hated buddy missions. Getting to know people tends to poke a hole in your steel armor, and you'll be the first to admit that you're a bit of a soft one. It's just the Vantas way. What else can you expect when your older brother was executed for standing up for genetic mutants, like yourself? Compassion is in your blood, and your only reason for overriding it is that tiny chance that you'll one day manage to see Old Earth.

It's like one of those cliché old romance books. Though, you've always loved those.

Not that you'd admit it to anyone.
After a brief nap in a bed that was little more than a soggy straw-stuffed potato sack, you figure you might as well get to learning about your target. The faster you get this personal half of the mission done, the easier it will be to kill the bastard. Sure, you might agree with his cause, but money talks. And the amount of money the King is paying you does more than that; it screams.

You wander downstairs, out of your shitty room, and into an equally pitiful living room. It seems that no one is there, so you meander through the house. As far as you can tell, everyone is either gone or asleep. Not that you care. If you can get information about your target, that's what you're going to do. It doesn't matter much to you if it's by snooping around. And, when you find Dave's room completely empty, you begin doing just that. You enter quickly, and close the rotten wood door behind you.

The first thing you notice is that the place is less of a bedroom and more of an archaic makeshift hospital room. The mattress is far more expensive than you'd have ever thought someone living in a Skaian district literally called Beggar's Court would be able to afford. It's one of those fancy foam ones. According to the commercials, it conforms to Human bodies like some sort of creepy, claustrophobic recuperacon. A soggy box of likely contaminated (at this point) oxygen masks and tubing is in the corner, and the dirty faux wooden surface of the dresser is covered in bandages, pill bottles, and what you're fairly certain is a poorly hidden stash of illegal anti-monarchy publications. (You're not here to report his crimes, though. You're here to kill him.) Otherwise, personal touches in the room are sparse. The sling lift hanging from the ceiling has a bright red length of fabric suspended in its grasp, and the walls are covered in photos. A lopsided easel with a canvas painted solid grey is at the foot of the bed.
All things considered, it's a space that thoroughly creeps you out. If trolls had hair on the back of their necks, it would be standing up by now.

Still, you've got a job to do. Being creeped out is not a valid reason for failing. So, you proceed to investigate the bed. (The red bedclothes make you wonder whether this Human has some sort of odd sexual attraction to the garish, ugly color. It also makes you file away a mental note to never let him see your mutant blood.) Beneath the sheets, you find little to get excited about. There are pillows, what seem to be molded pieces of plastic with straps, and an inexplicable collection of coupon clippings for ice cream. Specifically, it's for a flavor known as "Ultra Chocolate Blast," which sounds like another sickeningly sweet Human concoction to you. Nonetheless, it's something. You pocket a coupon to save in your file on him.

From there, you wander over to a dusty desk. It seems as if it hasn't been used in ages, and the computer on top is a solid ten years old. Probably used. Since it seems to be either dead or broken, you decide to investigate the contents of the drawer. Here, you find possibly the most useful thing yet. It's a crumpled up, water-damaged piece of lined paper—the sort that they use in notebooks or at school—with a schedule written out on it. As far as you can tell, Dave's day starts at 8:00 AM every day, and ends at 10:00 PM. You try to get deeper into the details, only to hear the sound of the doorknob turning.

You panic, shove the note into your pocket, and slam the drawer closed.

And, as soon as you're finished, Dave enters. The black-haired dork from earlier seems to have left him alone for the time being, seeing as he's alone and not too pleased to find you in his room.

Not that you're afraid of him. A pissed-off bastard can only be so threatening when he's inching towards you at a snail's pace in a sputtering, cobbled-together electric wheelchair.

"I don't trust you," he comments, his voice flat.

"Okay." You shrug. While you can usually judge people quickly, you're finding Dave harder to crack. So, you stick to your gut reaction.

He, meanwhile, passes you. He immediately approaches the desk, which he begins to visually scour. After apparently judging it to be undisturbed—or, maybe, lacking enough fucks to care—he turns himself to face you. It's an odd maneuver, and he seems to hold himself in place with his right arm, which is thrown over the backrest of his chair. "I'm guessing you've seen the whole shitty place, right?"

"Does it matter if I did?"

"Yeah. It does." With some more awkward maneuvering, he turns back around.

"Well, you're not kicking me out."

"I'm tired and don't really give a fuck."

"Understandable."

His eyes narrow. His lips press together, forming a straight line. Something's definitely going down in his mind, and it finally comes to a halt when he speaks up. "If you kill me, there'll be a hell of a lot of people pissed off with you."

"Why bother saying that now?"

"If you haven't noticed, I'm not exactly capable of doing everything by myself. I mean, if you
"I'm flattered. Most people bug me about shit the minute they meet me." His sudden chattiness is offputting, and you consider that it might be something that happens when he's under stress. "It's a shit deal, y'know? It's not exactly what anyone would say their dream life is, but it's how the stale cookie squishes. It's got perks, though. And I'm not about to waste the rest of my time crying over it. It's great for time management, though. And I—"

"God fucking dammit. What's your point?" you snap.

He freezes. The tension in his shoulder dissipates, and he seems to deflate. "Oh. Yeah." He sounds embarrassed. "My point is..." He frowns. If this is supposed to be the well-put-together and completely coherent leader of some sort of anti-monarchy movement, he's doing a shit job. In fact, you're amazed that the propaganda can make him seem like anything more than an absent-minded jackass. "I don't actually remember. Shit. That went badly."

"It did."

"You're right, meat shield," Dave nods.

You, in return, take this as a signal to leave. You gather your wits about you, edge around him, and try to keep your distance. Hands in your pockets. Stomach sucked in. Back pressed against the wall. As far as you can tell, Dave is about to drop dead with a strong gust of wind. Even if he's not, you're not up for a pissed-off tirade if you end up bumping into him. "Good night," you mutter.

"I'll sleep with one eye open," he responds.

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**The Fifth Day of Dark: 10:30 PM: LOG 0003**

As you lounge around in the living room, John enters the room. He flops onto the sofa, wipes some sweat from his brow, and offers you a small smile. "He can be a real handful sometimes. Sorry for his manners. He was in a bad mood today. Literally fell out of the wrong side of the bed and broke his favorite shades." A pause. Rubbing his chin, which is covered in tiny bits of black stubble, John continues, "Actually, they're his only shades."

(What a vain jackass.)

"What does he needs shades for?" you ask.

John shrugs. "He's a genetic fuck-up. Dork of reality and nerd of genetics." Apparently, this joke is amusing enough for John to let forth a quiet snort of laughter. "His eyes don't do well with bright light, so he keeps them on to prevent headaches. And, trust me, you don't want to be around Dave when he's got a headache. You'd already know. He had one all day today."

"I figured," you lie. With the most casual tone possible, you steer the conversation in a new direction. "So, medically..."

John groans. He rubs the back of his neck and chews on his lip. "Yeah, that'd be a big thing for the bodyguard to know, right?" (This guy is so fucking gullible. You could probably get him to admit Dave's darkest secrets with a quick question.) "It's all pretty complicated, but he's got most of his daily activities down. Don't worry about that, dude, I've got it. He's got some breathing problems, though, so that's important. It won't kill him, though. I mean..." John shrugs. He gets up, wanders off, and returns a few seconds later with a bottle of cheap beer. After taking a sip, he picks up from where he left off. (It's as if John is the put-together one and Dave is a scatterbrain with a few good ideas.) "It'd be pretty shitty of you to not help him out if he starts having
problems, but it'd take some pretty bad air or him missing his medications to kill him that way. Not that you would. You seem like a pretty cool guy."

You nod slowly, though a tiny pang of regret hits you. "Thanks."

"No problem." Another toothy, stupid grin. "Look, I'm tired. I'm going to bed, so..." Here, he chugs the rest of his drink. Considering the fact that he looks pretty damned innocent, you're surprised. "I'll see you tomorrow. Get some sleep, because we'll be going out early in the morning."

Chapter End Notes

comments, feedback, concerns, and pointing out my typos are all welcome and appreciated. if you made it all the way down here, kudos to you.
The Sixth Day of Dark: 9:00 AM: LOG 0004

It is far too early for you to be awake, but you must be. Damn this job. Damn it to the Human concept of hell and back.

On the bright side, after purchasing new shades for Dave before the sun actually rose, thus apparently avoiding a headache, it seems that your target is far more open and willing to speak than he was when you first met. And that's fucking awesome, seeing as it means you'll get more information. So far, though, it's been little more than asinine chatter.

"So... What're we out of?" Dave inquires, relaxing in his chair as John pushes him. "I know we need more juice. We always need more juice."

"I'll pee in a jug and spray some cheap apple scent on it."

(Disturbing.)

Dave laughs. It doesn't take much to see the chemistry between the two. "Look, jackass, I know the difference between fine apple juice and literal piss." He stops, cranes his neck to look at you, and frowns. "You don't know much about around here, so I might as well fill you in. We've got all your standard amenities, but they're probably not up to your snuff. I'm guessing you're from the nicer side of Alternia."

"Mhm." You lie. You fled Alternia before you were even six sweeps old.

"Well, it's probably a big..." He stops to squeeze out a few weak coughs. Then, as if nothing happened, he continues, "A big culture shock. Get used to it." From your vantage point, you can't see his eyes. You can't even tell what his passive expression means. For all you know, he knows what you're here for. It's unnerving as hell, and you don't like it. Even his words are delivered in the most infuriatingly unaffected tone. (Only to you, though. Never to John. With John, he's less of a robot.) "First stop's the grocery store. Keep your eyes peeled like naked grapes, meat shield, because it's fucking wild in there." He tends to drop the "G" at the end of words. You note that much, but you've got little else to show for the hour you've been with him.

In regards to Dave's words, you're skeptical. Nonetheless, you definitely won't be paid if he ends up being shot by some random mugger. So, you heighten your guard.

The Sixth Day of Dark: 1:00 PM: LOG 0005

Not surprisingly, the whole deal about the market being a vicious back alley free-for-all was a lie. It was a massive, filthy lie, but you had to take it at face value. After all, if you pull this off, you'll be the assassin everyone wants to hire. You'll be the de facto killer of the cosmos, which might not be the job of the executioner you'd always dreamed of, but it's pretty damned close.

That aside, you still haven't managed to squeeze any useful information out of Dave. It's getting ridiculous, and you're on the verge of giving up when he practically sticks an apple in his mouth and sprawls out like a stuffed pig on a platter.

"So, hey," he begins, having appeared in your doorway only moments ago. (You say "doorway" because your room has no door. You suppose it's an occupational hazard; a bodyguard with a
door between them and their intended charge would be pretty useless.) He clears his throat and offers an anxious half-smile, an expression that somehow manages to make you consider the fact that he's pretty attractive. For a Human, that is. "I was a huge ass yesterday. Chock it up to a killer headache and the fact that I felt like I was having the worst hangover ever. Do... Do trolls know what a hangover is?" He pauses, seemingly filled with genuine concern.

Clearly, this asshole has some strange priorities.

"Duh," you respond. "I've been drunk plenty of times, sir." (Rule number two. Formality, professionalism, and etiquette. You've never been good at the last one, but you do your best to fulfill these rules as often as possible.)

At this realization, Dave breathes a sigh of relief. Then, without mentioning hangovers again, he continues, "Well, I feel bad about it, and I wanted to know if you maybe wanted to come have lunch with me. John's out picking up some things, but he fixed some toast and jelly." Dave frowns. His head tilts so that he's not longer facing you, and he rubs the back of his neck. His voice drops, turning to a muddled mutter. "It's not much, but... Sorry. I'm not that great at making money. Kind of awful at it. Can't hold a job to save my ass." Another sigh, this one more pensive than before. "We have butter," he adds, seemingly considering this a major development.

Somehow, the sheer fact that he thinks butter is some sort of luxury worth mentioning astounds you. In fact, it bothers you. You want to pull out the king's hefty down payment on your hit and give it to him, if only for the hopefully short amount of time he'll be around to enjoy it. Of course, with your profession, such attachment is bad. Horrible. Awful idea. So, you do your best to smother it to death with a moldy pillow. "Thanks. That sounds like a good idea, sir."

"Quit calling me 'sir' while you're at it."

"Understood."

As you step forward, Dave inches back. You follow him to the living room, and sit down at the rusty metal slab that serves as a dining table. As you sit down, Dave speaks up. "Anyhow, I never got your name. It's real shitty of me to be calling you a meat shield all the time, so..." Again, he turns until he's no longer facing you. Something, somewhere in his past, has made him as skittish about a personal connections as you. But, what was it?

"Karkat Vantas," you reply. "Pleasure to serve."

"You sound like Sollux when he showed up," Dave laughs.

You freeze.

You know that name.

Before you fled your home planet to escape culling, you were friends with someone named Sollux. On the other hand, it's not an odd name... "Captor?" You ask.

"Yeah," Dave continues, smiling all the while, like the oblivious fuck he is. "You knew him?"

(Shit.) A long, deep breath. In.

Out.

In.

Out.
"Nope," you lie, "Never met a guy like that in my life. Heard about him, though." You know you pulled these false statements off, but you can't help wondering what became of your former friend. Sure, getting close to people is an occupational hazard, but that can't apply to dead people, right? "What was he like?"

"Pretty cool guy, actually." Dave shrugs. He sets his right hand on the table, and you watch absentmindedly as the fingers seem to tremble constantly. Slight, tiny, sharp movements. "He programmed my chair for me and maintained our old security system. Made it out of old computers and stuff. I'm trying to figure out how he did it, but it's not as easy with one full functioning hand. Two would be ideal, I guess."

"Hm." By now, you've managed to beat your feelings to death. Your mind is once again focused on your primary task. "That explains the hand, then."

A casual nod. Dave takes a few bites of his toast, though he seems thoroughly uninterested in actually eating. "Side effects of being shot in the neck, dude. Kind of mean of the bullet manufacturers to not include a fucking warning label, though."

You have to snicker at his comment. He's got a dry sense of humor; you can already see that. (You've always admired that in people. Personally, you can't even tell your own jokes with a straight face. Even after all these years of straight up murdering people for money, you're a fit of giggles in the middle of a shitty knock-knock joke.) "Yeah. You and John... Are you two...?"

"No, we're not."

"Ah." A pause. You note how quickly he answered. That's not something to bring up anytime soon. "So, you lead the Prospitians?"

"John does. I used to, but it's too much for me to handle, now. I write the pamphlets, but John does the public engagements. It's actually nicer that way, though. I've always hated doing that sort of shit." At this point, Dave pauses. He curses under his breath, and it dawns upon you that the juice he'd been drinking is now all over the table. Some has also dripped onto your lap, which means your pants will be sticky as fuck until you can find a proper place to wash them. "Fuck. Sorry."

"What happened?" You know you sound clueless, but you were studying his facial reactions to your statements and analyzing his every word like some frazzled, burnt-out old psychologist.

"Reached with the wrong hand. I just forget shit sometimes and... Jesus. Fuck. Really, dude, I'm sorry. I know better than anyone what a pain it is to get apple juice out of clothes. Especially around here." By now, Dave's face has turned a vibrant pink. The fingers of his right hand twitch, seeming to unconsciously pick at the fabric of his admittedly ugly, tattered black sweatpants. His left hand busies itself with navigation. In a way, it's almost nice. As someone who usually does his best to stay unnoticed, it's a refreshing change to have someone so concerned about inconveniencing you. On the other hand, it tells you that Dave is as soft and stupidly sentimental as you are. And that's a problem.

"It's fine," you reassure him. "I've got some more clothes upstairs."

"No, really." Returning with paper towels, Dave proceeds to wipe up the resultant mess. After handing you a dirty dishrag, he averts his gaze. "This went... Badly. Sorry."

"You're fine." At this point, you're actually trying to reassure him. It's not some sort of disconnected jig around a target practice dummy anymore, and you're genuinely starting to feel sorry for this twit. Sure, he's a clumsy douchebag, but he's beating himself up over nothing. And,
on a certain level, you can relate with that all too well. "It's a mistake. Happens to everyone. I'm not even the same species as you, and I've done some shit like this before, too." (Again, you're not too great at maintaining a perfectly professional and respectful tone. The point is that you try.) You dry yourself off, then proceed to help him wipe off the rest of the table. When it's cleared of all traces of juiced tree produce, you offer him a smile more sincere than any you've ever offered before (especially to a future victim of your occupation).

And, in return, he offers you a similar expression. It's slightly lopsided, but oddly charming. "Thanks. Sorry. I just get... Certain people I know don't take mistakes so well. He..." A sudden pause. Then, as if the past few minutes never happened, he adds, "It's nothing. Don't worry about it."

You, following instructions, do not. You don't have time to, anyhow.

Right now, all you're worried about is how the *fuck* you're going to kill this bastard.

You can't kill him. Hell, you can barely bring yourself to think about pulling the easy out card and poisoning his damned juice. There's just something about him... He's not some crime lord or murderer or shady corporate boss. He's just a guy with a life doing what he thinks is right. And it *is* right. But...

Money.

You want that money.

Shit.

This is going to be harder than you thought.

This is going to be *much* harder than you thought.
After a few more days of Dave Strider, you can most definitely say that this will be the hardest job you've ever accepted. For the sake of your life and wallet, however, you hope it will be the hardest job you've ever completed. But, again, you can't be too certain of that. What with his stupid Human antics and his surprising amount of charisma, which you had initially believed to be a thing he didn't possess.

Now, at this ungodly hour of the morning, you find yourself staring at the Skaian moon. An ugly, fake little grey thing. You consider that you are one of billions of dots inside of a rotating, reinforced, glass-capped donut in space, and you feel tiny. So tiny. You're like those little pests on humanoid planets, such as this one, that steals food. In fact, you can see a line of them forming to claim your amassed three days of uneaten breakfast. (Soon, it will be four days.) You want nothing more than to rip your contract to shreds, shove it into your mouth, fully digest it, and release it as steaming shit in the king's front yard. After this hypothetical act of defiance, you would then rocket yourself into space with the sheer power of your apathy, and remove yourself from all future affairs of Dave "Problematic Target" Strider.

Alas, this is mere fantasy.

Instead, you're contractually obligated to the king, and you're legally bound to serve Dave until you finish collecting information and intelligence on him and The Prospitians. As the Humans say, life's a bitch.

"You need to eat up, Karkat," John chirps, his voice as puke-worthily chipper and bright as always. "Gotta work up that muscle for punching would-be-killers in the face."

"Hm," is all you can muster.

Dave, meanwhile, has something more to say. Not that this is a surprise. Dave always seems to have something to say. "I know you've been hoarding your breakfasts in your room, by the way. John might have manners, but I don't. I checked your place over." He smirks. "By the way, just throw it out if you don't eat it. They attract ants."

(Ants. That's the word you were looking for this morning.) "Got it." You eye your breakfast for today, and find that it's more appealing than usual. It's a flat but fluffy-looking pancake with some vinegar on the side. You can tell that they've dealt with trolls before, because they have the whole "troll palettes prefer bitter and sour" thing down to an art form. Uninhibited by your previous lack of appetite, you eagerly dig in. Human etiquette be damned; you shovel it in with your bare hands.

"I told you he just didn't like what you were making," Dave says, his voice dripping with cocky pride. "I've got you, Karkat."

"You only remembered my name yesterday," you mutter through a mouthful of food. "I might as well thank you, though."

A nod from Dave and a huff of mild dissatisfaction from John. You're too busy eating to really pay attention to either reaction.
The Tenth Day of Dark: 12:00 PM: LOG 0008

She looks a whole lot like Dave, albeit with a slightly more rounded build and longer hair. Her clothes are more refined, and she seems to be of a slightly higher standing than Dave, though it's not by much. The bag over her shoulder is enough to tell you that. "Oh." She eyes you over with a particular brand of attentiveness you've never before been subjected to. You feel as if she's staring into your person, digging into your soul to find any flaws. (And there are a lot of those.) "You must be the new bodyguard." She speaks with a careful attention to her words, and it's obvious to you that she doesn't trust you as far as she can throw you. "I'm Rose, Dave's cousin. He called me over for our usual poker match."

"Great, so I'll just leave you to..."

"You're the designated card holder, sir," Rose interjects. It seems as if she's smiling, but you honestly can't tell. She's as enigmatic as her cousin.

The Tenth Day of Dark: 12:30 PM: LOG 0009

This is not what you were trained to do. You were never trained in holding some blond jackass' cards while simultaneously dealing hands to the rest of the table and keeping track of damned near everything. Hell, you barely know how to play this stupid Human game.

And, of course, Dave won't let you forget that you're clueless. "Four of a kind beats two of a kind," he mutters, eyeing his cards. "I'm well aware that we're technically playing for bragging rights, but I'd love to actually get my chips."

"Ugh." (Maybe you can kill this guy after all.) You pluck three red chips from Rose's stack and drop them unceremoniously atop Dave's.

Then, you deal the next round of cards.

This continues for a while, and you get little useful information out of the ordeal. You do, however, notice a few peculiarities about Dave. He seems to be able to grab lighter items with his right hand by flexing his wrist back, a habit you've never seen another Human cultivate with such unnatural skill. He's also observant. He's outrageously observant, which means you'll have an even shittier time when it comes to killing him.

Eventually, though, the affair comes to an end, and you're damned ready to sing praises to the world about your newfound freedom. While John retreats to his room, Dave sticks around to help clean up.

"I wasn't too tough on you, was I?" To your surprise, he seems to be truly concerned. His lips are curved into a tiny frown, and the lines on his forehead are indicative of furrowed brows.

"Nah," you lie. You tend to lie a lot. "It's cool."

"Fucking awesome," Dave nods. "I'd never want to be like... I mean... I hate coming off like a hardass, y'know? You probably don't know, since I've never told you until now." He shrugs. "Anyhow, thanks for sticking around. Rose lied, though. John usually deals and does that shit. Sollux used to actually play with us. And we conned him out of oodles of sweet, sweet cash." A nostalgic smile punctuates the statement, though it quickly fades. In its stead, there's another small frown. "In retrospect, that was real shitty of us. Um..."
(He sure can talk a lot.)

"Anyhow, thanks for playing. You're a real trooper. Shit. I sound like those shitty old television shows from Ancient History." A sheepish grin denotes the end of this sentence, and it also manages to make you feel... Strange. You feel as if you want to get to know more about Dave. Not about what you're supposed to be learning—no, that would be too simple. Instead, you have the sudden urge to know more about him as a person. What was his childhood like? When he was little more than a fleshy, vaguely offputting Human-grub, what was his life like?

(Shit!)

If your mind were comprised of tiny versions of you, then many of them would be wielding pitchforks and torches and beating down the emotion-controlling sector of your brain.

You're so engrossed in these thoughts, that you barely register the fact that he's long gone. In fact, when you finally manage to drag yourself back into the real world, you find yourself alone. The dining room table is empty, and the only trace of the strange gambling game is a stray red chip, which seems to have wedged itself in a space between the concrete floor and one of the rusty walls.
The Eleventh Day of Dark: 3:00 AM: LOG 0010

Having gone nearly two weeks without much useful information to report back with on your first progress report, you've grown desperate. Once you were sure everyone was asleep, you crept from your room into Dave's. If there's one thing you can count on, it's that groggy people say a whole lot more than when they're actually awake. Besides that, you can get a better look at Dave's room. Honestly, the latter is preferable; trying to wake people when they're sleeping can end badly. For everyone.

Right now, you're hunched over the desk you'd tried to raid earlier. Having failed that time, you hope to succeed now. After all, Dave's asleep. The wheezing of the formidable tank of a machine by his bed is enough to keep anyone from hearing you. Hell, at this point, you could probably beat out a drum solo on his walls and he'd stay asleep. If he sleeps through that monstrosity, he'll sleep through anything, right?

Squinting at things in the light of a dim flashlight is clearly the most adrenaline-pumping activity you could ask for. This is exactly what you trained for. Looking at old, crumpled documents in the dark.

Wanted! Reward of $5,000,000 to be issued directly from the Great and Honorable Derse King!
To be returned dead.

Name: Dave Strider
Age: 20
Hair Color: Blond
Species: Human
Crime: Treasonous provocation of unlawful anti-government agencies

(Clearly, that bounty went swimmingly.)

You shove the crumpled page of weather-worn paper to the back of the desk drawer and unfold another page. This one looks newer, and it has a sloppily written message on it in bright red ink. The letters are tiny, cramped, and several spots on the page have been scratched through with enough vigor to rip through the paper.

To Whom it May Concern,

Due to recent developments, all Prospitian visits to the Tin Can are to be discontinued immediately, pending investigation of suspected dissidents certain individuals. Medical personnel, mail carriers, and publication distribution officials are permitted to enter after a two-day forty-eight hour notification in advance. No one will be allowed on the premises without this notice.

Additional regulations are also taking effect as of today: The First Day of Dark in the Year of 67 of [obscured word] Glorious Rule.

1. All requests to visit with the Knight of Time have been suspended indefinitely due to recent health problems. From the Knight of Time's own hand, the Prospit leadership issues a sincere apology. Visitation will resume soon.
2. The Prospit leadership must respectfully request the immediate cessation of all fundraising efforts. Increased income is bringing undue attention to the movement, and most of the money seems to be going to unknown places.

3. Funerary arrangements, as usual, will be made at the end of the month for all reported deaths within the movement. Please forward the names of the deceased to the Tin Can. Mail carrier officials will deliver them.

(Jackpot.) After making sure Dave hasn't woken from his slumber, you pocket the notice. This is recent. It's relevant. Hell, you're sure you'll be getting a nice bonus for delivering something this juicy. As you do this, another page—presumably one that was somehow attached to your intended target—flutters onto the desk. Picking it up, you find yourself faced with a list of tiny names. Most of them have been smeared or scratched out. Some, however, are still legible. There's also a title on the page. (You guess Dave would need one, seeing how little he actually organizes things.)

**List of Personnel Killed during the Year of 67 GR**

1. [Obscured]
2. [Scratched out, then blotted out with what looks like an errant smear of old peanut butter.]
3. Sollux Captor, 27
4. Rufioh Nitram, 43
5. [Scratched out and illegible.]
6. [Blank, presumably waiting for someone to fill the space.]

(Shit.)

Though you don't want to take something like this, you know it's your occupational duty. If anyone found out that you passed over something this important, you'd be fired and back in another seedy galactic rest stop bar faster than you can say "shit". You quickly fold the paper, doing your best to push the third name out of your mind, and add it to your still-meager stash of evidence against Dave.

You suppose the evidence is also against John.

Thinking about that makes you feel uncomfortable. John seems like a nice enough guy. He's annoying, but he's got a good heart. If you were a guessing sort of troll—and you are—you'd say he's only in the movement because Dave is his best friend. He doesn't seem that much into the intricacies of the ideology. Hell, from what you've seen, he's too busy making godawful jokes and performing kitschy magic tricks to read any of Dave's lengthy pamphlets.

A long, drawn-out sigh escapes you.

You figure at this point that you've lingered too long, so, gathering your things, you depart.
The Fourteenth Day of Dark: 9:00 AM: LOG 11

To your chagrin, you've been allowed to see the entrance to the underground base, from which all of the illegal pirate broadcasts are streamed to Skaian television networks, but you've yet to be allowed to enter. You've also never been allowed to see how one turns the otherwise unassuming metal wall into anything beyond just that. You suppose it's only logical. They can't trust you yet. You haven't proven yourself. If anything, you'll need to arrange an attack to fend off. Then, you're sure you'll have their trust.

But, until that can happen, you're stuck watching the broadcasts—which consist of little more than colorful bars on a screen and static-filled audio—from the shitty cathode ray tube television in the kitchen. It's one of those ancient things that you're genuinely surprised still works. You've seen things like these in history museums, often broken beyond repair. That's what tends to happen when millions of people are suddenly purged from one planet and exiled to live in space.

"Welcome back to your biweekly Prospitian Movement Report, hosted by the Knight of Time and Heir of Breath. The past two weeks have been pretty boring," John's the primary narrator. This is the first time you've watched the broadcast so close to where it's being recorded, but you've viewed the older ones sent by the king in your briefings. If he wasn't part of a massive rebellion, you're pretty sure John would do well as a television host. By Human standards, he's attractive enough; he's also got the required amount of animation and charisma. "Today is the Fourteenth Day of Dark. Nine on the dot. Fourteen days of cold season down, seventy-six to go. If you go by the triplet calendar, it's one-hundred twenty-six days."

"We're a revolutionary underground television broadcast, Heir of Breath, not some shitty weather station." True to form, Dave demonstrates far less tact and immensely more personality (albeit not exactly television-sweetheart-worthy) in his commentary. "Updates, publications, new locations. That's all we're doing."

"Someone's grumpy," John hums.

Dave groans. "Updates. I misplaced the original note, so I'm going to wing it. Feel free to shoot me if I miss something." He pauses, clears his throat, and begins, speaking in the most disinterested voice possible. Either he's not feeling like being very personable today (likely) or he just doesn't give a damn (also likely). "Due to some complex medical bullshit going down with me, I'm cancelling all visitation to the Tin Can as of now." (You've come to learn that the "Tin Can" is a rather apt name for the place you're living in.) "Mail people and essential personnel are still allowed in."

A buzzing noise follows this. You can pin the noise down as Dave's chair malfunctioning. (It's been doing so for the past two days, with John making several I'm-not-suggesting-but-I-am comments to you that it's time for something that's not a literal stack of garbage glued together and mounted on wheels. Not that you're going to spend your money on a new chair. For one thing, Skaia's not too accommodating. Finding a place that sells them will take a while, and buying one will put a huge dent in the advance pay you received. And, right now, you're planning on keeping that for yourself. At least... That's the plan.)

After an audible utterance of a string of profanities, Dave continues. "Also, you all need to quit sending funds to the wrong place. Don't send them at all. Pass them off. We'll get them here. I promise. Otherwise, you're attracting unwanted attention. We don't need another repeat of the thirtieth day of dusk. We've lost enough fucking supply locations as it is."
Here, John hastily jumps in. "And that's all of the announcements, thanks for listening."

The channel lets forth a loud, ear-piercing screech before returning to its usual broadcast of solid static.

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**The Fourteenth Day of Dark: 11:00 AM: LOG 0012**

As per usual, you were dismissed in the hours immediately following the broadcast. As scatterbrained as these two twits are, they aren't total strategic idiots. They know what they're doing, and they clearly don't trust you enough to let you in on it. Again, you can't blame them. The king issued you an official badge of indemnity to present in the event of a sudden raid on your location.

You've been brainstorming ways to win their trust without involving others or having to call in a favor. Setting up a planned and ultimately harmless attack to "defend" against is the most surefire way, but it's risky. Secrets don't go well, it seems. The next option is the slower one, and that carries the same hazards. Hell, it carries even more; you can't get attached to anything in your profession.

So far, you've yet to come up with a solid plan.

Well, you have, it's just not the most moral of plans. You planted tiny wireless microphones throughout the space. You've learned that Dave and John prefer to use the living room as their designated spot for discussion, so you've bolstered that area's surveillance with your singular camera. Right now, you're utilizing these tools and spying on them through your computer.

You've never felt comfortable getting information this way, though. Despite your profession, you have a set of standards, and one of them is to avoid invading privacy whenever possible. You only do so in order to kill or if there's an emergency, and you deem this job enough of a problem to classify this as an emergency. It's shaky logic, but you take whatever you can get.

"Look, John, you have good ideas sometimes, but now ain't one of those times," Dave grumbles, leaning so far back in his chair that you're certain he'll tip it. "Right now, the best idea is to lay low and keep building up steam. We're down to one supply base. We need more before we plan on anything."

"Point taken." John shrugs. He scoots his empty plate around on the table. "We'll need to consult with Rose first, though."

"Mhm." Dave nods. "Any money in the reserves?"


"And the Prospitian Vault?"

"Enough." Now, John begins picking at the crumbs on his plate.

"Then I think we're good for now." With a bit of coaxing, Dave's chair turns and begins heading out of the room.

You immediately shut down the computer and shove it hastily beneath the mattress you're using as a bed.
The Fourteenth Day of Dark: 2:30 PM: LOG 0013

Apparently, John has the fifteenth through twentieth days off of every season. It seems about accurate. From what little you know about Skaia, it has some odd labor law that requires so many days off for employees. A mandatory absence of, if John's is anything to go by, a paltry amount of time per year. (John, being his employer's good friend, seems like a reliable source for finding out the absolute minimum requirement for such a law.)

By now, John's packed up and you've all piled into a taxi. You've been on plenty of these. Hell, you've even been on one of the cheap manual-drive ones, but whoever arranged this trip has spared no expense. It's one of the larger ones, complete with a good amount of space to move around in and even a small bed above the seats. The forward portion of the self-driving vehicle is stocked with a fridge and a shelf of snacks.

Honestly, you're suspicious. How could either of these two doofuses afford this?

"It's nowhere near Wintertide this year. Break, I mean," John mutters, twiddling his thumbs.

"You picked the days," Dave shrugs. "So, what're you doing?"

"Beating the shit out of you for booking such an expensive taxi," John answers matter-of-factly, but the grin on his face gives him away.

"Fair enough."

You, having had enough of this banal conversation, speak up. "So, I'll be alone with Dave?"

"Don't worry. He can take care of himself," John reassures you. Unfortunately, he misses the mark completely. You're not concerned about what you'll need to do, you're concerned about...

Dave interrupts your thoughts. "It's good time to get to know the new meat shield, I guess."

Another shrug, though this one seems to cause the fingers of his right hand to curl into a tight fist. He winces, but shows no other signs of discomfort. "Don't worry, Egbert, I can shoot a needle off the Imperial Tower's point if I need to. I did train with this galaxy's finest sharpshooter. Remember?"

John scoffs and rolls his eyes, which you only not recognize to be a brilliant blue. "Jade's not that great."

"Whatever."

The taxi slows to a stop, and the door opens.

Customary human farewells are exchanged, including the odd "hugging" ritual. Then, after the allotted ten minutes, the doors slide closed. The Taxi lurches back to life, and it dawns upon you that you'll probably be spending the next five days doing elaborate mental jigs to avoid forming any sort of attachment with a man you're supposed to kill.
Chapter Notes

lol the köchel number for the piece i picked lines up with the chapter number also
mozart wrote this when he was six or eight and wtf how

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Fifteenth Day of Dark: 8:30 AM: LOG 0014

The first artificial snowfall of the season is scheduled for today, and damn does it come. It's white, fluffy, and colder than the last bastard you offed, but it does nothing for the already bleached industrial landscapes of Skaia. You don't feel that same rush of excitement looking at grey concrete buildings and black asphalt streets coated in snow as you do from the paintings of rolling hills and massive trees capped by Earth's natural white precipitation. And you sure as hell weren't going to feel that way this early in the morning, anyhow. But, Dave is your legal employer, and you have to do everything you can to get onto his good side, and that includes listening to him as he chatters the auditory centers of your think pan into oblivion.

For the past thirty minutes, he's been anti-beguiling you with tales of his life. When he was five, he pickled a frog. When he was twelve, he figured out how to make a clock with a battery and those ugly brown starch beans (you believe they're actually called potatoes). You couldn't give less of a damn. At least, that's what you continuously reassure yourself. In truth, it's interesting to hear about his past antics. His injuries and occupation seemed to have done nothing to his eccentricity.

Not that you know that much about Human behavior. You rarely interact with them beyond the necessities. Your usual course of action is to find your target, eliminate your target, collect your dues, and depart for a new planet or celestial body.

"So... Um..." For the first time in a half an hour, Dave stops talking, without his stupid shades on, you can see his eyes. They're a brilliant, vivid red. The same color as your mutant blood or the sunset on a distant moonbase planet. (You can't recall which planet this was, but you remember staring at the sky for some time.) As usual, the fingers of his right hand scratch against the table. His left hand is busy rubbing the back of his neck. "I..." Another pause. His gaze moves away from you, focusing, instead, on a fly buzzing around the flickering light between the two of you. "It's... Ah." He chews on his lower lip. "It's kinda cold. Sorry about that. Let me... Um... I'll get a fire going. Just let me..." He backs away.

A low electronic hum fills the room as his chair lurches around like a drunk galactic cargo hauler at a bar. The motor sputters. The sounds echo in your mind, which you're doing your best to keep devoid of any sort of meaningful thought.

After a few moments, he returns with a metal pot—the sort Humans brew stews and soups in—and a box of old paper scraps. After dumping the scraps into the pot, he begins to fumble with a box of matches. With the box held loosely in his shaking right hand, he makes a few absolutely awful attempts at getting a flame going. "Sorry," he mutters, "My right hand's pretty useless," he clarifies. (As if you hadn't noticed.) "Fingers don't really work at all, so... Um..." The fifth strike gets the flame going, and he hastily drops the lit match into the accumulated pile of paper. (The
speed he dropped it with tells you that he hates fire. Perhaps he fears it.) "I'm not that great at
talking with people I... Um..." For the leader of a revolutionary movement and a guy who talks
when he's anxious, he's shit at actually socializing. On the other hand, he does well with John
around. Maybe he's just not keen on strangers; he barely spoke to you on the ride back from the
station. "You been anywhere outside of Skaia? I mean... I know you have. You've got the
Alternian accent. So..."

"Plenty of places," you answer honestly.

"What're they like? The other planets?" By now, Dave is busy warming his left hand over the
flames. You notice, however, that he keeps his distance. He also seems to neglect warming his
right. From what little you know, you're guessing he can't feel it.

"Some are fucking trash," you grumble. "Others are kind of nice."

"Mhm." Dave nods. "Before I got caught up in the revolution, I wanted to travel. Fuck around
and maybe settle on a different planet or colony. That'd be a pain in the ass to do now, though."

"Probably," you admit.

He laughs, and it's a sound that, for some reason, makes you feel... odd. Calm? Happy? You're
not sure what the feeling in your gut is, but it's soft and warm and you don't like it. You want to
puke it up like bad food, but you can't. "You're supposed to tell me it's super easy to travel when
all you can move is one arm. Nice change, though. I'll admit that you're original."

You nod slowly. "They have surgeries and suits for that sort of shit, you know."

"Oh, yeah," Dave agrees. "But it's fucking outrageously expensive. I'd spontaneously regenerate
my spinal cord and grow a third head before I could afford that."

Again, you merely nod. Thinking about it, Dave's got nice hair. It's an odd color—a sort of orange
golden-blond that you've never seen before.

"Rose says she thinks you're a creep," he comments, seemingly fishing at random for things to
say. "She definitely doesn't trust you, but... I know I said I didn't on the first day, but I guess I
have to. I was never this trusting before I got shot, but it's kind of hard to ask people to help you if
you don't trust 'em, right?" He offers a small smile, and, for the first time, you notice that he has a
singular dimple to the left. (You believe that's what the Humans call them.)

You mentally kick yourself.

You've killed attractive people before. Why is this bastard so different? He's just a Human, after
all. "So, you trust me?"

"I have to." With what seems to be a relatively large amount of effort, he lifts his right arm, raising
his hand off the table, and lets it drop at his side. "I can theoretically do everything by myself, but
it's a waste of energy. I figured that out pretty fast." Again, he flashes a hint of that stupid smile.
(And, in all honesty, you only call it "stupid" because it makes that unidentified feeling flutter in
your gut again.) "Getting shot and almost dying in some seedy hospital kinda changes your
perspective. For the most part."

You nod, unsure of what else to say. Until now, the most emotional conversation you've ever had
with a target was when you tried to convince a drunk, corrupt executive to give you his drink.
And that was only so you could poison it.

Shit. You deserve a raise on this hit.
"So, people have to do shit for you. Sounds like a fucking nightmare," you say offhandedly.

"Don't have to. Most people I'd meet on the street probably wouldn't, seeing as Skaia hates anyone who can't so-called fix themselves. And it sucks sometimes, but it's probably more productive to live with it than spend all my time being the dog shit everyone walks in and trails into the funeral home." He frowns and rubs the back of his neck again. "I'm probably boring you to fucking death, right?"

"No, you're fine." As much as you hate to admit it, you're not lying at all. He's interesting. His voice is nice. It's neither that low, guttural growl that some Humans have, and it's not the mind-melting screech at the other end of the Human vocal spectrum. It's soft, mid-range, and somewhat breathy. "Do you have any Vtricol here?"

Dave backs away, parks in front of the fridge, and pulls your desired beverage out. As usual, it's a hideous lime green can, but it contains a cola specifically formulated for the troll pallet, so you can't complain that much. He tosses it to you with a surprising amount of force, prompting you to note that any attempt to physically kill him will need to come from the right.

"Thanks."

"No problem." He smirks. "I've got an article to work on for the Prospitian Pamphlet, so I'm going to go. It's been pretty cool getting to know you, though."

"Same," you grudgingly admit aloud.

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The Fifteenth Day of Dark: 10:00 AM: LOG 0015

You were always considered a traitor of your planet. It was more honorable to face your fate and be culled as a mutant than to run and escape persecution by fleeing the galaxy, as you have. But you've put enough distance and time between yourself and the planet to stay safe. At least, you did.

Now, you've been caught. You've been thrown to the stone floor of the execution block, and you see the glistening black blade as the threshecutioner brings it down to meet your neck. You squeeze your eyes shut and—

"Hey." A surprisingly nice voice greets you.

You find yourself draped over the sofa. You can only assume you somehow ended up asleep. When you open your eyes, you find Dave parked beside you, his left hand outstretched to offer you... something.

"It's a King's Fruit. They're native to Skaia. Pretty expensive, but they're good for winding down after a bad dream."

You frown. After a few moments of hesitation, you take the offering and bite into it. Its lumpy brown skin and soft inner pulp has a rich, bitter taste. It's pleasant and admittedly relaxing, as the smirking blond had claimed. "Thanks?"

He waves aside your question of appreciation. "You were yelling about shit. Making a big fucking racket, so I came in and figured you were having a bad dream."

You remain silent. It's never a good idea to tell anyone of your weaknesses. Besides that, you're now considering the fact that you'll have to kill this Human at some point. Even after he helped
you, you're going to have to make sure he's dead. For perhaps the first time since you began
murdering for a living, you feel bad about what's to come.

"Anyhow, I'm going back to my room." With a hasty wave, Dave turns and departs.

And, in the pit of your stomach, you get that stupid warm, fluffy feeling again.

Chapter End Notes

comments, feedback, and suggestions are always welcome!
The Sixteenth Day of Dark: 10:00 AM: LOG 0016

"You said something about being a pretty fucking good shot," you mention offhandedly as you pick out the sweeter bits of cereal from your bowl. "Were you just shitting about that, or?"

"I can't shit," Dave answers with a completely straight face. Then, in no direct relation to his comment, he pulls a gun from where it's hidden beneath his right armrest. It's one of the laser ones, which means that reloading it only requires popping off the battery pack and putting on a new one. They're dangerous, quick, and cheap. The gun of choice for criminals and thieves. He clicks the safety off before setting it on the table. "Tell me what you want me to hit."

Not exactly anticipating this development, you shrug. At the sound of buzzing, you look up to find a particularly fat fly circling the light on the table. Perhaps it was the same one as yesterday. It probably feasted on your uncertainty and growing anxiety.

"Got it." In one swift motion, Dave picks up the gun and fires.

As if the world has turned into some stupid cartoon, the fly drops onto the table. (Admittedly, though, it was the size of a nickel. Skaian flies seem to run large. Not that it makes the feat any less impressive, since the fly was moving quickly.

"Impressive." (Don't try to outshoot him.)

"Hmph." Dave smirks. It reminds you of those images of Human western movies. The ones with the hoofbeast wranglers...

The Sixteenth Day of Dark: 1:00 PM: LOG 0017

The banks are always some of the most elaborate places on any planet. Why wouldn't they be? They're run by extremely wealthy assholes with an eye for the most gaudy, extravagant interior and exterior décor. In this one, the walls are embellished with golden, flowery depictions of Skaian flowers. The floors are made of polished and obviously imported marble, seeing as no artificial colonies are home to such stone. Dark wooden panels divide each section, and it's so damned cold that you're ready to light yourself on fire. The least the rich could do would be to install adequate heating for this hellhole.

"My name's Dave Strider, and I'm here to deposit... um..." At this point, there's a pause. Both you and the clerk behind the finely polished glass counter stare at Dave as he fumbles around in his jacket pocket. After a few moments, he pulls out a severely wrinkled piece of paper. "I'm depositing my welfare check. Not that it's much." He snickers.

The clerk behind the counter, a greenish skeletal alien known as a cherub, offers a grunt of disapproval. "By order of the king, all welfare checks have been discontinued."

"Oh, yeah. I know. But this one is before the king did that." The innocent smile from Dave does nothing to warm the heart of the clerk.

Another huff. "Look, I don't make the rules. None of those are being accepted. Now, get out of here and let useful members of society cash their well-earned money."

"Someone's got a thorn up their ass," Dave mutters, gesturing for you to follow.
"That sucks," you say once the two of you are outside of the bank.

Dave shrugs. "I figured as much. The king's been getting pretty hostile towards the Prospitian Movement. He knows what's going down, and he knows how to pick it up. If that makes sense."

"Totally," you lie, nodding.

There's a short lull in the conversation and you and Dave begin to head back home. (Home. You've never called a place that you stayed "home" before.) "So, what? You're fucking screwed for money now, right?"

"Not really," Dave hums. "I do odd jobs and sell art."

(That explains the easel.) "That's neat."

"Mhm."

A silence falls between the two of you. Unlike usual, it's a calm silence. You're not trying to hide from anyone, nor are you trying to keep yourself from making any noise. Instead, it's a simple, conversational break. Considering your job, though, you don't get many of those. Having one is nice. You'd almost forgotten what it was like to talk to another sentient being—to talk to someone instead of something.
The Seventeenth Day of Dark: 7:30 AM: LOG 0018

You wake earlier than usual.

Perhaps it's because of the cold. The temperature has dropped considerably in the past few days, and soggy straw atop concrete encapsulated by metal walls isn't a very warm place to sleep. In fact, it's a downright awful place to sleep. You feel as if you slept in a bog, except the bog was filled with the tears of the frozen damned.

Or, maybe, it's the wind. It whistles through the cracks in the metal, sounding like ghostly whispers. Utterances of your past and future misdoings.

It might have even been the fact that your dreams strayed into the realms of nightmares. They've been doing that a lot lately. Your unconscious conscience strolls through familiar landscapes. Blood covering your hands. Soaking through the soles of your shoes. Matting your hair into thick, unmanageable clumps.

It may have been all three.

Whatever the reasons were, you're awake. And it seems you're not the only one, because Dave is parked at the table. His fingers are tangled in his hair, and his shades are clipped to the collar of his plain red undershirt.

"You couldn't go to sleep, either?" you ask.

"We've got a bad seed in the ranks," Dave mutters, never turning to look at you as you sit across from him. "Three mail couriers have disappeared, two bases have been raided, and were starting to get pretty low on funds."

You nod slowly. You suppress the urge to turn away as you present yourself as nothing more than a concerned confidant. "Sounds fucking bad."

"Not the sort of news I can sleep with," Dave mutters. Without his usual higher-collared shirts, you can see a small plastic piece at the base of his neck, which seems to have a bright red cap with an odd sort of pinwheel design. Perhaps noticing your interest, he eyes you with a wariness you haven't seen since the first day. He tugs at his undershirt until it's been displaced enough to cover it. "Why're you up so early?"

"No idea," you lie.

"Hmph." For the first time, you realize how heavily he breathes.

Or, really, that might not be the best word to describe it. His breaths are short and shallow when he's not speaking. They come at an interval only slightly faster than you're accustomed to with Humans. When he speaks, though, his words tend to come quickly. You'd thought it to be out of anxiety or awkwardness, but you're starting to wonder if it's an act of necessity.

"You talk a lot faster than most Humans I know," you point out.

He frowns. Finally, he looks up at you. Dark shadows stand out around his eyes, and it seems as if he's aged. "My lungs are weak," he explains, his voice flat and unaffected, "It's easier to say a lot in less time than to say the same amount of shit but take longer to do it. It's also awkward. If I
pause too often, people speak over me. So, I trained myself to be fucking certain that everything I want to say gets said."

You nod. "That makes sense."

"Mhm." Dave frowns. He backs away from the table and lets forth a pained groan. The chair comes to an abrupt halt as his left leg bounces rapidly, slowly sliding him out of place until he's hunched over to the far left. After nearly a minute, the rapid up-and-down shaking slowly subsides.

You're sure this isn't a normal thing, but you're not about to question it. You've had enough Human body lessons for one day. Instead, you silently approach Dave and offer your hand, which he rejects in favor of pulling himself back into place by himself. "You seem to be having a whole constipated assload of problems today, aren't you?" you mutter, fully intending for the comment to go unheard.

However, it seems your intents are ignored. Dave snickers, smoothing out his pants over relatively thin legs as he responds, "Nothing gets past you, jackass."

"I didn't actually mean for you to hear that," you admit. (If trolls blushed like Humans, your face would be bright red.)

"It's fine," Dave says. As if to reinforce this, he tacks on a surprisingly powerful playful shove. It takes nearly everything you've got to avoid stumbling.

"So... If you caught the rat, what'd be the punishment?" You ask the question purely out of curiosity.

"Interrogate, jail, and kill." Dave responds with a vigorous vengefulness. Almost as if this has happened before.

You make a mental note to be even more cautious from this point forward.

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The Seventeenth Day of Dark: 10:00 AM: LOG 0019

Having followed Dave around for a few hours through the rotten wood and rusted metal facades of what you can only assume to be the lowest socioeconomic part of Skaia, you're more than happy to enter into the warmth of a slightly nicer-looking place on the edge of town, seemingly on the border between the lower class and the upper class.

"The Golden Greyhound is a pretty historic hangout," he explains as he holds the door open for you, parking his chair in front of it. "I figured you might want something more than toast to eat."

"That's pretty decent of you."

The words are said offhandedly, as you're too busy enjoying the warmth of the space. Outside is like the coldest reaches of some ice planet.

And Dave seems to take the remark with his usual brand of oddball grace. "I'll take that as a compliment," he says, straightening his shades. "The place runs kind of funny. You stand in line and order, and then you choose a table." Here, his right hand—its fingers forming a loose fist—rises slightly in the direction of a line of about ten people. "You can go sit down, if you want."

"That would make me a pretty shitty bodyguard," you shrug. "I'll stick in line with you."
Dave nods approvingly, as if you've passed some sort of test. "Well, then, let's see what you want to order." As he lowers his right hand, the fingers extend and contract with unnatural stiffness.

For some reason unbeknownst to you, but perhaps due to your dislike of the sound of nails scraping against textured plastic, you set your hand atop his, flattening it against the armrest of his chair.

And, in this moment, many things hit you, like a sack of frozen fish across the face.

Dave's hands are warm. Surprisingly warm. And they're just slightly larger than yours. You're certain that his left hand is different, being the dominant one, but this one is also surprisingly soft. Or, perhaps, not so surprisingly. He doesn't seem to use his right hand often. Finally, that strange feeling—the odd, fluttering, all-encompassing warmth, which rises from your gut and seems to spread throughout your body—returns.

All of this combines, and you quickly withdraw your hand. Nonetheless, the strange sensation remains. "Sorry. I didn't mean to... intrude on your personal space.

A small consolation is that Dave seems as flustered as you are. He pulls his right arm so that his hand rests loosely in his lap. He clears his throat, though the sound is more akin to a harsh breeze than a solid "ahem." He sighs. "It's fine."

"What sort of pallet-numbing Human trash do they serve here?" Your inquiry is the most forceful attempt at changing the conversation that you've made in a while.

And, not to your surprise, Dave takes the bait. You notice, though, that he's now preoccupied with straightening his shades. "Lots of things. They've also got some troll food."

"Mhm."

He looks away.

You look at him. You study his jawline, which is strong and pronounced. You note the cluster of stubble on his face, which is concentrated on the far right side. You glance at the lines on his lip, marks from where he's bitten into the skin again and again.

And, for the first time in your career, you realize that you'll be erasing the stories this Human could tell the universe with his murder. The immensity of the task suddenly weighs upon you. This bastard—this asshole with enough positive traits to make you question your morals—has experiences comparable to only his own. He has memories only he can share.

Who are you to decide whether or not he should be able to share all of it?

Who are you, beyond a desperate, greedy murderer?

"Karkat! KARKAT!"

You frown.

"What're you ordering?" Dave looks at you expectantly. Perhaps it's only your imagination, but he seems to be genuinely interested in your choice.

Unfortunately for him, in your panic, you simply order the first mildly tolerable item in the list. "Curried Jupiter Sandcrawler," you sputter.

Dave laughs. And the knot in your stomach tightens, pushing even closer to its snapping point.
After everything you've been through and seen—all the people you've killed, some of them quite violently and with your own hands—you'd think you'd never be fazed again. After being soaked through your clothes with the blood of someone you just stabbed to death, you'd think you'd never be uncomfortable again. But, it seems that assumption was incorrect. Because you're uncomfortable as *fuck* right now.

Being unfamiliar with Human anatomy, you're unsure of anything about the specifics of Dave's injury. All you know is that—in accordance with the sparse medical files you received upon being hired—he can move little more than his head and his left arm. As he's demonstrated, he can use his right arm, but it seems to you that it takes a fair amount of effort.

That said, you arrived to breakfast to find that Dave had already eaten. He hasn't moved, though, and he seems to be making a haphazard attempt at the newspaper's daily crossword. The plastic bit at the base of his throat is exposed, and he doesn't seem to care much about covering it today.

For the first time, you notice that the skin of his right arm, particularly on the upper portion, is marked by unaltered burn scars. Tiny details you'd never noticed, but find disconcerting now that you have.

Who is Dave Strider?

What happened in his past?

"You're ogling at me like I've got twelve fucking heads," he says aloud, snapping you from your thoughts.

"Hm..." You frown. "Sorry."

"I'm not fishing for an apology," he shrugs. His right shoulder seems to rise little more than an inch or so. Perhaps even less. "I'm just pointing it out."

You nod.

He responds with a sigh. "John's coming back tomorrow," he says, probably trying to find something to talk about. "Hopefully he'll be back in one piece. He's not the best as keeping his whereabouts under wraps." He taps the fingers of his left hand against the table, creating a rhythmic 4/4 beat. "Not like they'd target John. They barely know he exists, right?"

You freeze, though it's only for a fraction of a second. "Yeah. That'd be weird," you say, even as you recall forwarding a detailed report on John to the Skaian king.

"I should call him, though," Dave muses, backing away from the table, "Just to check and see he's okay."

"Mhm. Sounds like a good plan." You offer an artificial smile, and he seems to take the bait. Nonetheless, it occurs to you that the plan was—as your mission briefings informed you—to dismantle the organization from the bottom and work to the top. Take out the lower levels, and, once they were gone, kill the leader. It's a logical strategy. If there are no more subordinates left, then the leader has no power. When the leader dies, no one is left to take their place.
The Eighteenth Day of Dark: 8:30 AM: LOG 0021

So far, Dave has yet to reach John. It's only been thirty minutes, but you have to admit that even that much time is too much. For someone with such a high-risk position and the knowledge that such a position is dangerous, John would have answered by now. If he could. Nonetheless, you continue to quell Dave's anxieties by feeding him bullshit about shoddy phone connections and unreliable networks. You feel absolutely awful doing it, but you have to. Unless you decide to come clean to being an informant, which is an awful idea, then it's what you have to do.

Meanwhile, you write to the king. If anything, John is a secondary target. Any guilt you have about having to kill Dave is only doubled with John, whom you're certain only got into this because he's Dave's friend.

To the Great & Honorable Derse King XVII:

I redact any former intelligence previously sent which indicts Johnathan Egbert as a figure of any importance in the Prospitian Movement. The individual is of little value to the organization, and his death will neither harm nor benefit its continued existence. Please accept my sincerest apologies for this grievous oversight.

My investigations have yet to reveal any people of major importance.

I thank you for your time and hope for a prompt response.

K. Vantas

Somewhere, in your gut, you have a feeling that your plea is too late.

The Eighteenth Day of Dark: 4:00 PM: LOG 0022

Out of absolute desperation, you gave Dave one of your beers. You brought many; as much as you hate Human alcohol, you admittedly enjoy the buzz. It's certainly a pleasant but rare diversion from your usual day to day life.

Unfortunately for you, he ended up consuming a fucking solid amount of them. If your current tally is correct, you've lost three to his thirst. And, despite his appearance, he holds his own. He's yet to vomit, at least. Of course, everything has a negative. Perhaps unsurprising, given his personality, he's a chatty drunk. He's an incredibly chatty drunk, and you've yet to convince him to shut the fuck up in the past however many hours. (Too many, as far as you're concerned. Far too many hours.) The only plus that you can possibly draw from this is that you're getting some information.

"John and I went to school together. We even went to college together, but I got kicked out with Rose when I formed a human welfare club," Dave explains, his words slurring together, "Don't tell him I told you this, but we even dated at one point. He didn't feel it, though, so we broke up." Here, Dave nudges you with his right elbow. It's little more than a light tap, though the booze-scented breath that ends up in your face as he pulls his upper body closer to you is more than enough to make up for it. (You're not being paid enough for this.) "I'm still single, too, you alien cutie."

You, now thoroughly creeped out, nudge him away from you and back into a proper sitting position.
He continues speaking. "We pulled so much shit together. Me and John. John and I. Fuck." A snort of laughter. "This one time, I climbed up onto the statue of the king at the center of our high school campus, and I shat on its head. Big fucking dump right on top of the king's head. Not like he uses his head for anything, right? And add in Sollux." Dave whistles. "That was some wild shit. Fucking shame the king had to publicly hang the guy."

(Now that's something you didn't know. And it's definitely not going in the report, but you'll keep it in mind.)

"Damn. You're just so... Fucking... Nice. Karkat, bro..." There's a brief pause. Dave eyes you over and smirks. "You really are pretty cute. Mm. I don't get those freaky troll quadrants, but I would be down to quadrant with you." A drunken belch. "John was right, man, I should totally go for it. We should, like, hang out some time. Just. Us. You and me. Chill out at Headquarters or some shit. We gotta hang out." He emphasizes the last two words by drawing out the vowels.

You, meanwhile, begin to formulate a way out of this situation. You might have instigated it, but you sure as hell won't be sticking around to see it through to its conclusion. Besides, as much as you'd (admittedly) be fine with taking him up on his offer, there's no way you're going to date your assassination target. That's just asking for all sorts of trouble. Moral, emotional, mental, legal trouble. Every fucking sort of trouble there is, that's what you'll be getting if you follow through. Nonetheless, you figure he's too damned smashed to remember any of this in the morning, so you laugh awkwardly and agree. "Sure. Whatever, Dave."

With a still-surprising amount of force, he slaps his left hand against your back. As you choke back a yelp, he offers another of his stupid smiles—the sort that makes your heart flutter and causes that weird, unwanted feeling in your stomach. "That's the spirit, my extraterrestrial bro. Go with the flow."

"Mhm." You fake a yawn. "Look, I'm tired. I'm going to go to bed, so... If you need me, call me."

From experience, you know the gesture he's shooting you is supposed to be done with both hands. You believe it's called something akin to "double pistols and a wink," but you're not sure about it. You're not going to stick around to find out, though.
Intermission: Albinoni, Op. 9

Chapter Notes

[slides in, air guitaring] guess what i plan to be long enough to require intermissions!?

From the journal of Dave Strider, The Nineteenth Day of Dark, 67 GR

Note to self: Discipline the bodyguard for getting me fucking smashed yesterday.

I woke up with one hell of a hangover. The whole package. But, without John to help out, I still had to go through with my usual routine. Get out of bed, make sure there's no gross shit building up in my throat, and all that. Same as usual, but with a hangover.

Anyhow, it hit me that I never managed to reach John, so I decided to catch the next train to Coldridge, where John's Dad moved to after we decided to fly the coop and get the hell out of parental Dodge.

...Now that I think about it, we were pretty stupid to do that. I bet we'd be living the high life if we stayed in Coldridge. Living it up as standard-issue businessmen like everyone expected. I'd have a nice, cozy blue collar job with my own desk and my own holotop and a nice, reliable salary and a completed college education. Instead, we moved to Quasar's Wharf and went to college there. I got expelled, and it all snowballed into this massive clusterfuck.

To be real honest, I'm not even sure if I even meant for it to get this big. I ended up on the Skaian news, probably because nothing better was happening, and people started mailing me to pledge their allegiance to the cause It was weird as fuck, and I'm 100% certain some of those letters were people shitting around.

Back to the main point, though. I dragged Karkat onto the 10:00 train, and it sped us onward like a trusty steed. We got to Coldridge at noon, and I still remembered where John lived. Right down to the street number. 413 King's Court. Now, of course, I filled in Karkat. Poor dude. Putting up with all this nonsense. I'm not even sure where his application came from. The envelope was unmarked, but his resumé was solid as fuck, so I hired him. Anyhow, I told him all about John's Dad and what a cool guy he is. Sure, he's got a bad habit of making way too many cakes, but he's a nice guy and he probably wants to kick my ass for assimilating his son into a dangerous revolutionary movement.

Not that he showed that when he answered the door. Nah, he was all manners and hospitality, as fucking usual. He even helped Karkat lift my ass over the three steps leading to their front porch. The standard spiel, too. "How're you?" and "I've been thinking about you lately." All that lovely, flowery bull. It was a nice change from the usual "go get a job, you lazing sack of human filth" that I usually get, and it's not exactly my fault that I'm legally labelled as an unemployable. But, it had to end eventually.

I asked about John, and his Dad informed me that he hasn't seen the slippery shithole in a day or so.

Of course, that's not good. That's super not good. Awful, even.
Panic mode, except I don't really have a panic mode. Shout out to my shitty brother.

Now, John can take care of himself. He might be a giggly dork, but he can do real damage with a good, heavy bludgeoning weapon. Hammers are great. He could probably melee his way through an armored guard with a claw hammer. The real problem is that he's shit at realizing whether people are trying to kill him. Someone could be actively stabbing him, and I'm pretty sure he'd still be chatting them up like some acquaintance from school.

Anyhow, we got back onto the train and I called Rose.

"John's been abducted" is the basic gist of what I told her, and, in her usual Rose way, she reassured me that she knew a person who could help me. Apparently, her girlfriend, Kanaya, is an Alternian-born troll with a background in straight up murdering fuckers for cash. I'm saying that she's a former assassin, and she said she'd be happy to help. Queue the dramatic music as naked winged babies play harps in the clouds. We've got ourselves a saint.

We rode the overnight train to Rose's house. Kanaya was out when we arrived, and she'll be back around noon tomorrow. Until then, Rose has presented me with a better chair, citing the use of a different ride as a possible means of throwing off quick attempts at identification. It's one of the nicer ones, and it's got controls to tilt the chair to relieve pressure on my back and ass. It's also got straps, so that's an improvement. Rose has been breathing down my neck about posture, so that will help. I'm tempted to ask how she got it, but I honestly don't think I want to know.

Hopefully, Karkat will get along with her. I've heard that trolls can get super violent. Some sort of hierarchy based on blood, which sounds pretty damned kinky to me.

I think he will. He seems like a nice guy.

Really, I have to hand it to him. He's a bit of a nosy asshole, and he's loud, but he seems to have his heart in the right place. (I think trolls have hearts.) He's funny enough, and he's not afraid of verbally accosting me like everyone else, which is a plus. He even has moments where he's a pretty big sweetheart. Like, fuck, man. You can't go playing my emotions like a rad guitar. And he seems to be somewhat interested. He asks me about a lot of things, so I think he's trying to figure out how to help out and get involved. It's above and beyond. Pretty neat.

He reminds me of Sollux, except without a lisp and minus the whole "computer wizard" thing. He also doesn't raise bees, so there's that. But he's as involved and personable as Sollux, so he'll probably be earning a spot on the list of best bodyguards. And that's saying a lot, because I've managed to go through some. (They have this bad habit of either being thieves, assholes, or downright creeps.) I mean, sure, they're there to take a bullet for you, but I don't want some silent meat sack. I want to be able to hang out with my bodyguard and not feel awkward as hell, and Karkat succeeds in that respect.

I think I might have asked him out while I was drunk.

I'm not sure.

If not, I definitely should. He seems like a pretty chill guy. Well... Chill in a shouty and vaguely aggressive way.

Another note to self: Pistol low on ammo, need to get more. Big Bob's Bullet Bazaar is having a sale.

From the journal of Dave Strider, The Twentieth Day of Dark, 67 GR
Kanaya and Karkat seem to know each other, and they definitely get along.

Rose said I'm stressed.

I hate to do it, but I have to agree.

The dark season is starting to get to me. It's a bad time for that.
one of my favorite mozart pieces, but let's be honest i love all mozart mozart could fart an entire song and i'd be like "wow absolute masterpiece give me more 10/10"

The Twenty-First Day of Dark: 3:00 PM: LOG 0023

Rose's property is larger than Dave's, and she seems to be in a remote enough part of Skaia to have considerable free reign over it. She's landscaped some of it, and created a small island of flowering bushes and elegantly curving trees. Right now, it's covered in light grey artificial snow.

You've come here to be alone. To think about things.

For one thing, it seems to get harder to bring yourself to even think about killing Dave with every passing day. He's sung your praises to Rose, convinced her you're a trustworthy person, and admitted secrets (albeit while drunk) to you. He genuinely trusts you, and you have to admit that you can't just shrug that off. You can't help but recall what it felt like to be turned in by Eridan on your home planet, the act that made you flee. You'd helped the bastard, and he just submitted you to be culled.

Perhaps Kanaya was right. Maybe you were never cut out for this.

Still, you'll be paid handsomely. You'll be set for life. But, then again, what's the point of having so much wealth when you'll most certainly be banned from yet another planet? (If not legally, you'll have to leave to avoid unofficial retaliation. There's no way you'll go unnoticed by other members of Dave's movement.

Besides, you like being around Dave. You feel oddly comfortable around someone who, in many odd ways, reminds you of yourself. He's an outcast on his planet, a bit of an oddball, and surprisingly dorky. (You say "surprisingly" because he looks like the biggest Human tool you could imagine.) He's nice, genuinely caring, and an all-around decent guy. It's definitely a break from the bastards you're used to killing, and it's not exactly a good break.

And, now, you're being dragged into the conspiracy. You've been enlisted to follow Dave on his quest to find John.

You could leave. Say nothing and flee into the safety of the massive expanse that is space. But, then, you'll be running from the king for the rest of your life. You'll also be running from guilt, probably, knowing your stupidly soft personality. Why couldn't you be more like the other trolls? Aggressive, tactful, and generally able to hold their own when faced with something like this.

You sigh. Reaching into your pocket, you withdraw a carton of cigarettes. They're a Human thing, but you've found them to be good for relieving stress. They also have no proven harmful effects on trolls. Then again, most trolls don't smoke. You light one, stick it into your mouth, and breathe in. You let it burn as you ruminate, and it eventually works itself down to a mere stub. The burning end is close to your lips, and you're forced to put it out by shoving it into the snow. You consider leaving it there, but ultimately decide against it. (Littering on someone else's property is a pretty shitty move, after all.)
"Rose said you'd be out here." The voice is softer and breathier than usual, but it's definitely Dave's.

When you turn, you find him bundled in a thick, hand-knit red sweater. Puffs of condensation rise from both his throat and his mouth, and you're torn as to whether the novelty of such a feat is disturbing or intriguing. Perhaps it's a bit of both. "What's up?" he mutters, having received no response to his first comment.

You shrug.

"Well, then, you won't mind me joining you, right?"

Again, you shrug.

He parks himself beside you. From the expression on his face—a wry, almost knowing cross between a smirk and a smile—you can picture him as some cocky bar frequenter. A man who says something, plasters a shitfaced grin onto his features, and knows he has you cornered. A man who laughs loud and without a care in the world as he pulls up a chair and straddles it like a haughty teenager.

Now that you think about it, you can see him as someone else. A younger person with radical thoughts but little incentive to act. A teenager with no sense of direction, no one to turn to, and the ever-looming danger of becoming irrelevant.

Wait. No. That was you. Not so long ago, that was you.

Still...

You clear your throat and focus your gaze on the tree directly in front of you. A Virgo snow weevil—an ugly, hairy thing with too many whiskers for its face and tiny, beady black eyes—pops briefly out of the ground before burrowing back into its subterranean home. "Were you always this way?"

"Hm?" Dave quirks his brow expressively.

"So... Interested in other people?" you clarify.

He offers a hoarse laugh. "Nah. I used to be a massive dick. Every tries-too-hard-to-be-cool stereotype in the book."

You nod. Now that he's said it, you can totally picture it. Maybe it's the shades, but he definitely has that sort of vibe to him. And, now, you're curious. "What? A big flirt with women hanging off each arm?"

"More like hyper-masculine douchebag," Dave says, shrugging. "It's a long, complicated story. I'd rather not explain it, but you'll probably find out about it over time. Enough about me, though. What emotional parasite's eating at you?"

"It's nothing," you lie. Then, after a moment of thought, you make an impulsive decision. Like every trapped asshole you've ever seen in a show or read about in a book, you spin a tale, "I just know this guy... Back on Alternia..." (You're really stretching it, but Dave will never know, right?) "He's got to do this thing, right? But the thing he has to do is real shitty—I won't bore you with the specifics. Alternia is a fucking mess. He doesn't know what to do and he asked me about it."

"Would you like to know what it is?" you ask, leaning closer to his face. "I mean, it's not like I'm going to stop you from doing whatever it is you spend your time doing. It's just..." You trail off, unsure if you should continue. "It's just... interesting."

Dave's eyes widen, and he leans back, suddenly looking nervous. "You know what? I think I'll just..." He clears his throat and straightens his back. "I know what I'm going to do. I'm going to go find out what you're talking about."

You nod, grinning. "Good. Because I was going to tell you."
"I'm not a fucking shrink," Dave says, feigning offense. Nonetheless, he still gives his opinion. You have a feeling that he never really passes up an opportunity to tell someone what he thinks. "But I'd tell your friend to go with his gut. I do it all the time. It usually works out. Unless it's food. Too much food ends real badly. Trust me."

You nod slowly. If you were to follow Dave's advice, you'll be going against an entire planet's government. You'll likely end up on the shit list of many, many places, and you'll likely be banned from most reputable planets for the rest of your life. But, at the very least, you wouldn't have guilt burning a hole in you forever. Maybe Dave has a point... "Thanks."

"No problem." A lopsided smile. "Kanaya told me to tell you that she brought some Alternian slug shakes from a local street vendor. She claims they're really tasty, but I'm not about to take her up on her offer of tasting some. Not my thing, but I thought you'd be interested." With this, he passes you the Styrofoam cup from his cup holder.

You accept, take a sip, and proceed to eagerly down the entire thing before speaking again.

"Damn," you eventually exclaim, "That was good."

"I'll go tell Kanaya you died barfing your alien intestines out all over the snow in Rose's backyard," Dave says dryly.

You roll your eyes. "I'll go tell Rose you died being strangled for being a fucking smartass," "Crude, but an acceptable response."

Despite your professional side telling you not to, you can't help but laugh.
i once tipped a glass harp player $20 because he was playing this and i love mozart and my mom was like "why did u do that" and then she took my wallet. I was 18 at the time and I am a responsible adult

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Twenty-Second Day of Dark: 9:00 AM: LOG 0024

You’ve heard of them before, but you’ve never been in one. They only operate on artificial ring planets, such as Skaia, and run on tracks cutting through the center of the open space of the ring. They’re called CrossSpeeders, and they’re supposed to be the absolute shit.

You have to say that you are not disappointed.

The journey, even with the specially designed transport, takes a week. So, two- and four-berth cabins are provided. Each has a small kitchen and an encapsulated viewing area. Beyond the cabins, there are also shops and restaurants. Shows and entertainment are also offered, but those only come with the more expensive tickets. You're not complaining. This is much better than your usual traveling arrangements.

That's not the point, though. The point is that you're helping Dave plaster missing person posters on every available surface, where they join likely pointless announcements and lost pet notices from the past.

"So," you say, grabbing another paste-soaked page from Dave, "You think you know where John is, but you're still forcing me to get glue all over myself putting up these fucking posters?"

"Totally." Dave nods. "Spot on. I'm doing this to torture you, Karkat. Fucking suffer."

You roll your eyes. By now, you've managed to plow through a solid twenty posters. Where Dave got the money to produce these posters concerns you, but it's something you're not really that concerned about. You are, however, concerned about the look in his eye. There's a suspicious spark. A lively glimmer. And you're sure as fuck not ready to face what's behind it.

"I've been to Peakston. It's not really that interesting," you speak to distract Dave from whatever it is that he's thinking about.

For now, he's taking the bait. He offers you a slow nod before responding. "Yeah, right. It's probably a whole lot more interesting than the shit we were in." A breathy snicker. "That's what Kanaya says, too. They did say that it'll be hard for us to get around, though. Well..." He clicks his tongue a few times before handing you another poster. "For me, anyhow. From what I've seen in historical photo databases, there used to be these really outrageous wheelchairs that could climb steps. They were pretty much personal tanks, and they looked rad as fuck. From what I've heard, they're pretty common on other planets. Skaia doesn't really care about that sort of shit, though.

"Actually, I'm pretty sure that it's illegal to bring in that sort of stuff. Really, this planet hates everything that's not your supposedly standard-issue able-bodied human male." Dave tips his
shades up, revealing his eyes, and you watch as they roll dramatically. At this point, you've grown interested. You want to know more and, perhaps above all, you want to know how he knows all this. So, when he keeps talking, you can't help but listen. "It's kind of weird, y'know?" He picks at the fabric of his red sweater. "I know that I could live a better life somewhere else, but there's no way for me to get there. And, if I'm going to be completely honest, I don't want to leave. I know people here. I know what it's like. I'm not rocketing off to another planet in the foreseeable future."

You nod. "Where'd you learn about all that?"

"I was born here, you fucking doofus," Dave snickers, "What else would I—?"

"No," you interject, "Where'd you learn about all that shit from the past?"

Dave frowns. He turns his head, something that seems (to you, at least) to be a means for him to avoid your gaze. With his shades, turning his had is definitely the most purposeful method of doing this. "It's a complicated thing..."

"Seems like a lot of your life is complicated," you mutter.

"Ha ha," he huffs. There's a few moments of silence. Then, after handing you the final poster, he speaks. "Fine. I'll cut it down to the basics. I was depressed after I got shot, spent a lot of time fucking around online, and found some stuff. That's it. There's nothing more to it."

Clearly, there's more to it, but you're not about to push him. "Fair enough."

"Did I ask you out?" Dave inquires.

Inwardly, you groan. Outwardly, you manage to maintain a modicum of agreeableness. "Yeah. But you were really fucking drunk."

"Well," Dave hums. He rubs the back of his right hand, wincing when the action causes the fingers to tremble. "I was thinking about it, and I was wondering if... Maybe... You... D'you maybe want to take me up on the offer? I've got some money from home, and I figured I might as well... Um... If you want to." A sheepish smile punctuates his inquiry.

And you, with his advice from earlier in mind, nod. Against your professional better judgement, you agree. "Sure. Why the fuck not?"

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The Twenty-Second Day of Dark: 11:00 AM: LOG 0025

The atmosphere of the on-board burger joint Dave brought you to is rowdy enough for you to speak with him openly. No one is paying attention to either of you, save for the occasional set of stares.

In a way, it's nice. You've never had the chance to sit down with someone and just chat to them. Sure, you've done it before, but it usually ended with you poisoning a drink or straight up shooting someone. The only deviation might be if you stabbed the bastard instead. So, getting some downtime to just get to know Dave is nice. And, if you're being completely honest with yourself, you're seriously considering dropping the job. You'll cite some outrageous but technically indisputable reason. Maybe your nonexistent alien father died.

For now, you're just enjoying the ride. You believe the Humans call this "going with the flow." It's something you've never done before, and you're honestly amazed you haven't. It's uncanny how fucking enjoyable it is.
Chapter End Notes

comments, feedback, and suggestions are always welcome
The Twenty-Seventh Day of Dark: 11:00 AM: LOG 0026

Queenstown is as opulent and mind-bogglingly overdone as you'd expected it to be. The streets are paved in the finest artificial marble, and the roads are lined with walls of the finest imported trees and shrubbery. Everything is pristine, orderly, and perfect. It makes you want to shit on the ground just to piss someone off. Or, perhaps, you could chip off the tiniest edge of the natural wood road signs. King's Street. Aristocracy Avenue. Royalty Court. Everything is as pompously maintained as it is named. All the while, perfectly poised members of the highest upper class of the planet parade like the world's most outlandishly ugly peacocks, wearing the finest in cutting-edge fashion and adorned with sparkling jewels and precious metals.

Theoretically, it's a world you could be part of if you were to complete the hit, but you sure as hell aren't interested in this sort of fuckery. You have better things to do with your time than flaunt wealth and spend on frivolous, stupid things that won't matter once you're dead. If anything, you'd invest in changing Alternia and, perhaps, even altering the systems in place on this bullshit planet, too. Of course, you'd still spend on yourself, but that would be secondary to your goals.

Rose and Kanaya split from you and Dave the minute of arrival. Their goal is to scout out the city on foot and in a way leagues faster than you could ever go with Dave.

That means that you get the pleasure of watching Dave. You, a troll with no medical knowledge or training, now get to care for some bullheaded bastard you're technically supposed to be killing. And, beyond that, you're getting more and more pressure from the king to do so. And to do it fast.

It's not as if it's a hard task. It's freezing cold in a vast, winding city, and just leaving Dave alone for a day or so would likely be enough to kill him without any direct involvement. But, you're in too deep. You've gotten yourself into a massive, complex clusterfuck of emotion, and this isn't anything like what you've ever dealt with before. You've never actually gotten this close to a target and, now that you have, you're realizing that you picked what might just be the worst career path possible for you. You're no cold-blooded killer. You're as soft as your stupid brother, albeit (as you like to believe) much less annoying. You're an awful troll, and you're an even worse assassin.

Beyond that, you know where John is. You know that he's alive, being fed, and even being cared for in the royal prison. But you can't just say that. You'd sound suspicious as fuck, and everyone would know you were some sort of spy at that point. You'd be removed from the group you've come to view as your odd, surrogate Human family (plus one troll), and you're not exactly keen on that idea. Sure, the professional within you is in total agreement with the idea. Betray Dave's trust, kill him, and collect your reward. But, then again, the majority of you wants to stay within this cozy, awkward little family.

So, for now, you elect to keep your mouth shut. The king still has use for John, and you're confident the dork won't be in harm's way for quite a while. Until then, you're keeping your mouth shut and your dealt hand hidden from the other players. When it's time to show your cards —be it of your own volition or due to some sort of revelation—you will, but now isn't the time.

A sharp whistle draws you from your thoughts. As your mind crashes like a burning spaceship against the grounds of some foreign planet known as reality, it dawns upon you that Dave has been calling for your aid for the past few minutes. Only now do you recognize it. "Dude, I'm freezing my ass off. My jacket's in my bag. It'd be fucking wonderful if you could help me get it on."
You nod and step forward. After Dave has his left arm in, he pulls his upper body away from the backrest. You wrap the jacket around him, lift his right arm, and gently maneuver it into the sleeve.

A satisfied sigh escapes him as he leans back and readjusts his shades. "Jesus fucking Christ, dude, where'd your brain take off to?"

"Nowhere important," you shrug.

"I can tell," Dave grunts, zipping up the front of his jacket. "It's okay, though. Everyone has those days. Your heart says 'yes' and your brain says 'no, this is too much to deal with today' and it checks the fuck out, right?" As if to reinforce this, he offers you another of his surprisingly strong smacks on the back. "Don't sweat it."

"I'm not," you reply.

"Of course you're not." A shit-eating smirk. As he turns and moves forwards, you follow.

As you reach the edge of the shuttle platform, you're greeted by a stern-faced man in a standard-issue Royal Guard outfit. White gloves, khaki suit, and a brown stripe marked by two white stars on the mandarin collar. He eyes both you and Dave over before asking exactly what you expected him to. "Documentation," he demands.

"Huh?" Dave hums.

"Documentation," repeats the harried guard.

You, meanwhile, react how you've been trained to react. You reach into your pocket, pull out a bottle, and surreptitiously pour it onto your knit gloves. From your other pocket, you produce a blank card—the sort that identification documents are printed on across all Galactic Union planets—and step forward. As you present the card, you grab onto the guard's shoulder and pull him forward, into the wet glove. A few seconds later, the guard drops.

From here, two things happen.

One. You realize that there's no going back. You've irrevocably fucked yourself over, and any benefit you could have reaped from this job is gone. There's no taking back assaulting an official, and you're certain that your certificate of indemnity won't cover this.

Two. Having completely blanked—your mind blocking out most of the reality around you—you sprint.

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The Twenty-Seventh of Day of Dark: 4:00 PM: LOG 0027

In a cold, dark, and completely shitty alley, it dawns upon you that you're cornered. A gate blocks one exit, and an exasperated Dave Strider blocks the other.

"What the hell was that?" he asks, removing his shades. Now, even in the dimming light of the setting sun, you can see how confused he is. "I had fake papers, dude."

You shrug.

"That was some shady fucking shit." Dave folds his arm across his chest and quirks his brow. "I mean, even for a bodyguard, that was—"
"I'm not a bodyguard," you interject. "I…." You pause. Do you really want to say this now? Certainly, there'll be another time to let this news drop. You can throw the grenade later, let it explode in your face, and escape at any time. Now, though? "I'm a criminal. I used to steal shit for a living," you lie.

Dave, to your relief and your disgust, takes the bait as if it's written in the stars. "That's cool," he shrugs. "I'm not judging. I'm a wanted activist, and I may or may not have hired people to hack into the monarchy's systems, so…. Doesn't matter to me."

"Great." You force a smile and nod. "I figured."

"Didn't know you could run that fast," he says, pulling a paper bag from a pocket on the side of his chair. "Anyhow, I got some food. Not much, but it's edible."

"I'm not hungry."

"Fair enough." From the bag, he pulls two sloppy, gross-looking salads. What you're hoping is chicken is spread out on top. "You mind if I eat yours?"

"Knock yourself out."
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Twenty-Ninth Day of Dark: 8:00 AM: LOG 0028

The place is quaint. A standard, central square bar with stools surrounding it. Small tables are scattered about the rest of the room, and stairs lead to a restaurant upstairs. From what you've seen, the place upstairs is a more formal affair than a standard-issue bar. Not that you care. With Dave, you're not going there, anyhow. With your wallet, you'd be kicked out even if you did get up there. You never much enjoyed fancy food, anyhow. Too stuffy. Too cocky. Too little.

"Nothing?" Dave frowns and sips at his hot chocolate. After his last brush with alcohol, you've banned him from consuming it. Rose has also advised you to do as much, citing genetics. You're not entirely sure what that means, but it seems that he's got an addictive personality. That must mean something.

Rose, too, seems to avoid alcohol. However, she prefers coffee. "Nope," she says. "We've got nothing. Kanaya?"

Kanaya agrees. "Nothing."

You purse your lips. Nothing will come from you. Nothing.

"Well, then, I'll just have to start looking." After downing a massive gulp of hot chocolate, Dave slams his cup onto the table. Not enough is left to produce a dramatic splash, but the dull clop it creates is effective. "I've heard rumors that the prison system here is fucked up. Lots of little groupings of cells all around the city instead of a massive prison."

Rose nods. "Yes. It seems to be an experimental setup. The theory is that separating prisoners dramatically reduces the risk of collective uprisings. From the history books, it seems that the system works."

The Twenty-Ninth Day of Dark: 10:00 AM: LOG 0029

It's not exactly like you like this job. You didn't sign up to squat in a cold alleyway, trying to use a dying cigarette lighter for warmth. Fuck blankets. Where the hell're you supposed to get those? Nowhere. Nowhere around here, anyhow. You can't afford them and no one would sell them to you. Your goddamned face is already on posters plastered all over town. "Wanted for assaulting a uniformed officer!" That's a fucking great way to end the biggest hit of your career.

You can't even smoke a nice cigarette. It's too damp, and Dave complains about the smoke.

"So... You sure made a splash here, right?" Dave mutters, snickering at his own joke.

"It's nice to see someone enjoying my fucking massive mistake," you huff, arms folded across your chest. "Here's an idea! Why don't we just not talk about it?"

In hindsight, you'd probably feel a whole lot better if you'd just told Dave the truth in the first place, but it's too late for that now. So, instead, you refuse to meet his gaze as you rub your hands together. "Fucking freezing out here."
"Never noticed," hums Dave.

"Don't be a smartass."

"I'll keep your advice in mind for later, pal."

"Whatever." You roll your eyes and fold your arms across your chest. "If we leave him alone long enough, won't John break out on his own?"

"John's not going to break out," Dave laughs. Apparently, your suggestion is the best joke of the night. You're almost honored to be the impetus for so much inexplicable joy. "No offense against John, but he's not the brightest LED in the box. He's creative, though. He's got that going for him."

"I guess that's something." You breathe a long, heavy sigh and kick at some of the snow on the ground. Beneath is solid ice. You're truly amazed that you haven't slipped and broken something by now. Alternia is a warm planet; you don't take well to ice and snow. Sure, you enjoy it, but you're not that graceful on it. "Well, he's probably fine for now."

"Oh, yeah. He's definitely fine now. The point is trying to get him before he's not fine, you deflated blimp."

"True." You nod. "So, what? I guess we start looking?"

"Mhm."

Chapter End Notes

really, comments and feedback are appreciated. so are suggestions.
The Thirty-Third Day of Dark: 8:00 AM: LOG 00030

How long have you been out here, wading through ice and snow? You're guessing it's only been a few days, but you're certain that it's more like hundreds of years. That's what it feels like. A century of wading around balls-deep (and trolls don't even really have balls to begin with) in a massive moral crisis. And the freezing cold doesn't help, nor does the fact that your current place of residence is an old mausoleum. Sure, you're happy to have something over your head for once, but you do not appreciate having to sleep next to a coffin with some long-dead dude inside. It's not as if he can do anything to you; again, he's dead. But it's bothersome and off-putting. The rat skeletons piled in the northeastern corner don't really help, either.

Waking up to Dave dangling a rat skull above your head also isn't doing wonders for your currently sour disposition.

You swat the skull away with more force than needed, and its brittle structure cracks once it hits the stone wall. To this, Dave responds with a pout. "You probably just fucked up Great Great Great Great Grandrat's remains, dude." He tuts. "That's not cool."

"Neither is instigating me before I'm awake," you grumble, rubbing the back of your head as you sit up. If you've learned anything from this experience—which you have—one of the major things you'll know for the rest of your life is that stone floors are the fucking worst to sleep on. For each level of discomfort, the stone floor raises a masochistic bet of freezing cold.

Dave, of course, doesn't have to sleep on the ground. Rather, he tilts his chair back and lounges like a king. Not that you're complaining; the alternative is you getting him onto the ground. Still, it gets your metaphorical hoofed bleatbeast (you believe it's called a "goat" in Human terms). From his current spot, Dave offers a flash of a smile. A sort of there-and-then-it's-not thing. "Rose and Kanaya said that they found some shit about John, though, so it looks like we'll be going back to the Tin Can soon."

"And you find nothing wrong with referring to your own house as a fucking article of commonplace garbage?" you mutter.

After a moment of faux thoughtfulness, Dave shrugs. "Not really." By now, the battery on his chair has long since died, though it seems that he instinctively tries the joystick. Sure, it's solar powered, but that only operates the tilting mechanism. Apparently, moving was low on the developer's list of priorities. "Mind pushing me outside?"

You stretch your leg out as far as it can go and nudge the chair with your toe. It's just enough of a push to get it up to the door.

But, obviously, not enough.

A loud groan escapes you as you stumble to your feet and wheel Dave forwards. Being that you still have to pee, you slam the door of the mausoleum shut behind him.

"That was fucking rude," he says this loud enough for you to hear it inside. His voice is thick with clearly artificial offence.

You, playing along with his odd game, roll your eyes. Deep down, you're amused, but your bladder is too full to truly appreciate that amusement. "Get over it, Strider."
"Theoretically, someone could jump me right here and I'd be defenseless."

Shit. The realization hits you and, after finishing your work, you open the door. "Whatever, jackhole. I'm so done with your bullshit at this point." You fold your arms across your chest and lean your back against the mausoleum's outer wall. "It's been days. I hope Rose and Kanaya have some good shit for us."

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**The Thirty-Third Day of Dark: 9:30 AM: LOG 0031**

"He's at the Southeastern Royal Prison," Rose announces her finding only after downing an entire large cup of coffee. Honestly, you're amazed Humans can tolerate the stuff. It causes digestive problems and headaches in trolls. Besides that, it tastes like you licked the ass of the nearest incontinent senior citizen. Nonetheless, you know that her words are false. At least, according to the last intelligence report from a week ago, its inaccurate.

So, in the interest of speeding your return to the so-called Tin Can, you speak up. "I heard he was at the central prison," you suggest. Clearly, you can't just admit to having such inside knowledge without giving yourself away. Rather, you commend yourself for posing it in such an inauspicious way.

"He was," Kanaya interjects. She sounds confident of her statement, which brings up the question of where she got such intel, but that is ultimately beside the point. "He was recently moved to a lesser security prison."

Confirming her girlfriend's declaration, Rose nods. "They're thinking of releasing him soon."

"So we can go back to Dave's place!?!" You ask the question on a whim, and you know it's whimsical as fuck. Still, you would happily submit your genetically screwed self to the High Alternian Council in exchange for somewhere to sleep that didn't include ancient Human remains.

"Not yet!" Rose says this cheerfully. And you would expect her to; she and Kanaya have some choice rooms at a local motel. Sure, they might have cockroaches, but they don't have motherfucking dead people next to them at night.

You, meanwhile, react with a loud groan.

In his usual brand of tactlessness, Dave pats you on the back. "There, there. I'm sure this will be done in less than a year."

You can't tell if he's serious. If he is, you just might end up killing the bastard.

Fuck morals. You are a pure and simple troll. All you want is a nice, warm place to lay your head and to not have to shit in the ice.
Chapter Notes

The Thirty-Fourth Day of Dark: 11:00 AM: LOG 0032

By now, you're fairly certain you've been kicked from the job. After all, your face is on wanted posters all over town. Not that's you're exactly torn up about being disqualified from the biggest payday of your life. Well, no. You are. But you're not as emotionally fucked as you thought you'd be. Sure, you're pissed that you've lost the biggest payday of your entire goddamned career, but you no longer have to contest with those odd feelings of guilt.

Still, you have to act as if you're taking the job seriously. Until you can get back to Dave's place and get your hands on your computer, you can't confirm anything indefinitely. And, until you know your shot at a massive haul is gone forever, you're going to hold onto a glimmer of hope that the chance is still there. At the very least, if you're still on the job, slacking off isn't going to go over well if the king, in all his jackass power, has some surveillance trained on your ass.

Anywho, that's not really the point.

The point is that Dave has somehow gotten it into his head that a balls-to-the-wall, guns-blazing raid is the safest way to get John out of prison. Now, you've never been much of a tactician, but even a strategic blunderer such as yourself can figure out that this idea is akin to slathering a Human in the hottest hot sauce you can imagine. Hell, this idea might just be bad enough for you to elevate that hot sauce to straight up hypothetical lava.

Not that Dave is even listening. "It's a great idea," he insists, repeating something he's been saying for the past however-many hours.

"They will execute everyone the minute they get so much as a fucking whiff of the tiniest goddamned fart of suspicious activity, you twit." You reiterate your own point.

Dave scoffs. "Stealth is so last millennia." He toys with his laser pistol. "Go big or go home."

"Whatever." He seems intelligent enough to realize how absolutely batshit his plan is, so you're baffled as hell as to why he's still insisting on it. Still, you decide to present your plan. "My idea was to take a uniform, sneak in, grab John, sneak out. Easy, quick, and painless."

To your amazement, Dave seems to consider the idea. He chews on his lip for a few moments and taps his fingers against the armrest of his chair. Then, after a few minutes, he nods. "Sounds reasonable. I'll let you do it, but you're not getting paid if you end up dead."

You pause.

You're not sure if he's telling a joke or informing you of some sudden change in your royally obtained contract as a bodyguard. Nonetheless, you feel obligated to inform him of his massive oversight. "I don't need to be paid if I'm FUCKING DEAD."

The Thirty-Fourth Day of Dark: 1:00 PM: LOG 0033

Now this is more along the lines of what you've trained for. Knocking out a guard, stripping him down to his underwear, and donning his outfit. Sure, a close look will quickly reveal to the world
that you're not supposed to be here, but the fact that you easily lured the now-unconscious guard with little more than a promise of free cigarettes tells you that there won't be much attentive scrutiny of your person.

Head down. Shoulders relaxed. Casual.

That's how you get through jobs like this. Never raise an objection to anything. If someone tells you to massage their disgusting Human feet, you fucking do it.

"Hey, bud," a voice beckons you. Turning reveals the source to be a large Argonian—a sort of odd reptilian race—glaring at you. In hindsight, the slight gurgling behind the voice should have tipped you off. "You got any gum?"

You shake your head. "Sorry. You know where I can find someone around here who knows where the fuck the prisoners are?" You eye the grimy map behind the lizard-person. "I need to speak to a bastard named John Egbert."

"I'm the goddamned warden, you fucking twit." The lizard spits up a slimy wad of something, and you're ready to knock her out if she asks you to so much as take a step in the general direction of the unidentified pile of shit. Fortunately for you (and for her) she doesn't. "He's upstairs. Second floor. Cell B6. Last one up there."

"Thanks," you nod and flee. The longer you stick around, the more likely it is that you'll have to clean up lizard phlegm.

Of course, you have to create an alibi. You drop by the cafeteria, taking advantage of the multiple posted reminders to feed prisoners lunch no later than 2:00 every day.

You're given a metal tray of some sort of strange slop. From what you can tell, it's mashed potatoes and puréed string beans.

With your alibi in hand, you proceed without incident up the stairs and down the short hall to cell B6.

There, you're greeted by what you can only call the most Egbert-esque greeting possible. Now, by that, you mean that it's tactless, loud, and jarring. "Karkat!"

"DAMMIT!" You set aside the tray, grab a slice of bread (the only edible solid you were given) and shove it into John's still-open mouth. "Are you trying to get us both killed?"

He snickers, chews the unceremoniously presented bread, and shrugs. After a few moments, he offers a simple answer, "I was excited to see you, dude. So, what? You're here to break me out?"

"Yeah, sure," you respond with a dramatic roll of your eyes. "Why don't we say it louder and let everyone know?" You kneel down, fish a lockpicking set from your pocket, and make short work of the admittedly cheap lock. You're genuinely amazed that they'd use a lock as shitty as the one you just broke. At the very least, you thought it'd be more than two minutes before you got in. Nonetheless, you're not here to nitpick security choices. You're here to get this clueless, raven-haired dork out of prison.

"That was fast." John seems to admire your handiwork.

You, having trained specifically to pick locks of almost every type, shrug off his compliment. "Put this in," you command, tossing him the uniform you looted from an unlocked supply room. "We're getting the fuck out of here."
"Amazing. You're my hero, Karkat Vantas," John hums, pulling on the plain grey jacket. (Unlike some other planets, Skaia doesn't go for gaudy when it comes to military uniforms. Some of the others use stupidly bright colors, like red and bright blue; the effect is almost comical, making officials look like some sort of strange, exotic featherbeast.) "Sorry for the whole 'getting arrested' deal, by the way. I've probably taken five years off Dave's life with stress."

And what about the years you've taken off my life? Resisting the urge to slam your face repeatedly into the concrete wall next to you, all you can settle for is a deep, hearty sigh. You force yourself to smile and, once John is dressed, hightail it the fuck out of the prison.

To your amazement, the whole thing goes over without a hitch. It's suspiciously easy, but, then again, the whole place was filled with underpaid and overworked prison guards who really just seemed interested in bumming cigarettes off one another. Considering how many times you were asked for one, you'd be amazed if a single guard even owned a pack of cigarettes at any given point in time. Maybe they just had a cycle of asking someone for a cigarette and being denied. Whatever the case was or is, it's one shoddy security system, and you've got a hunch that the place you smuggled yourself into wasn't anywhere near the highest security place.

Chapter End Notes

yes. it's skyrim. that is what the reference. Comments, feedback, suggestions, and pointing out my typos—always appreciated!
The Thirty-Fifth Day of Dark: 10:00 AM: LOG 0034

It's not as if you can just waltz back to the Tin Can the way you came. There's you, with your goddamned face on wanted posters everywhere, and John, the escaped convict. The entire planet is literally trying to find you, and that doesn't bode well for using massive public transport. Thus, it seems that you either have to whip up some masterful disguise, which would be difficult to do with Dave, or you could take the extremely long and fucking annoying route back to Dave's place. Considering how hard it is to disguise a goddamned tank of a wheelchair, the unanimous decision is to go back the long way.

All of this is why you find yourself sitting in a cramped little manual-drive car. One shoulder bounces off of the door, and the other shoulder bounces off of Dave. The taxi driver, meanwhile, whistles blissfully as he speeds over every massive bump and considerable dip in the road.

"You two seem like respectable folk. Seems strange that you'd be coming from this side of town. The folk up here ain't all that kind," the driver takes a break from whistling to address you and Dave.

You, meanwhile, stifle a rising sense of guilt. Yeah. You, a killer-for-hire, a nice guy? In a million fucking years.

Dave, of course, have no such qualms about his morals. He offers an immediate answer and a smirk. "We're not locals. We're going back to the lower side of Skaia."

"Well, you all have a long way to go." The taxi driver sighs as the car slows to a stop. The door slides open, and you begin to undo the convoluted array of straps holding Dave's chair in place. "Hope you two have a nice, safe journey."

"We will," Dave hums. He makes a few attempts at helping you, but he's too high up to really get a hold on any of the straps.

Not that it matters. By now, you've managed to get him freed. You push Dave out of the car and onto the cracked country sidewalk. "Where the fuck are we?" you hiss into his ear.

He swats you aside. "I have a friend out here. She's going to pick us up here and we'll stay with her for a few days." He offers a wry smile as he folds his left arm across his chest. Perhaps unconsciously, his right arm falls across his lap. "I've told you about her. She taught me how to shoot. I'm sure you'll love her."

Meanwhile, John stumbles from his spot, having been jammed into the trunk of the car. Once he's out, the taxi driver waves. The vehicle departs.

John offers another of his stupid smiles. If you had to be honest, you'd say that those smiles are somewhat charming. "She's my cousin."

"I'm not sure how comfortable I am staying with a sharpshooter," you admit, rubbing the back of your neck. "I mean... I never liked guns and shit, but..."

"She's harmless as long as you're on her good side," Dave laughs. "I promise."

Soon after Dave's finished speaking, a tiny, lime green car comes rattling down the dirt road. The dust being kicked up behind is dispersed against the bottom of a hastily thrown-together
wheelchair-sized trailer.

The Thirty-Fifth Day of Dark: 11:00 AM: LOG 0035

"I don't appreciate being thrown in the back like a slab of fucking rotten beef," Dave's voice buzzes over a makeshift intercoms system.

From up front, Jade laughs. "Well, it's better than John's idea of making you drive all the way to my house."

"I can't. The battery's dead. You're all insensitive teabags." You can picture Dave's expression as he says this—lips turned downwards into a pout, brows furrowed. It's almost frightening that you know him well enough to do that. You've never known anyone that well until now. And, against all of your training, you like it. You like the feeling of familiarity, something you've never had before.

You love the friendly bickering. The sense of having a place where you belong. In fact, you believe there's a name for that. Humans have a name for this—family. You have a family now, and it's oddly nice to have one.

Maybe you will renounce your life of murder and wayward wandering. Just maybe...
The Thirty-Sixth Day of Dark: 9:00 AM: LOG 0036

Despite the fact that your usual time for waking up is around 10:00, you found yourself unceremoniously roused earlier by the sounds of jovial conversation. Earlier, in the car, it had been cute. Charming, even. Now, though, it's a source of annoyance. How dare they wake you up now, and after all you've put up with? The fucking nerve of some people.

Nonetheless, you feel vaguely obligated to follow the sounds. You wander down carefully hewn wooden stairs and into a room with walls literally covered by vines. Plants and wildlife are rare on many planets, especially colonies such as this, and it's a startling sight to see. Honestly, you've never seen so much indoor foliage, aside from specially designed buildings.

Clearly, this Jade character is quite the gardener.

In fact, you find her and the others gathered around some sort of odd, flowering plant. A tooth-studded head pops from the top of a thick vine, and the leaves are large and wide.

"It's from Earth, actually. It's called a Venus flytrap, and I got the seeds off of some kinda' shady guy at the market a few years back," Jade's voice is as chipper as ever. When she speaks, her eyes light up with enthusiasm. It shocks you that the planet's best marksman is such a carefree person, but you suppose you shouldn't judge people by their occupation. You, after all, are a pretty soft guy to be a killer-for-hire. "It's a pain in the butt to keep here, seeing as the planet doesn't have its native dietary needs. It eats insects, though, so that's pretty cool. They get stuck on the tongue and melt away."

"That's pretty fucking hardcore," Dave hums, nodding in some sort of strange approval. "Earth is weird as hell, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't know," John shrugs, running his fingers through his thick, wild, black hair, "I've never been there."

Dave snickers. "None of us have been there, you nerd. Fuck off, twit."

Despite your initial annoyance, you have to smile. An odd warmth stirs within you. It's not the same as the wild, burning, radiating feeling you get when you're around Dave. Instead, it's more pleasant. It's mild and comforting, not overpowering and passionate.

And, as this feeling rises within you, Dave's eye catches yours. He smiles. "Well, it looks like we woke the goddamned dead! Get in here, you lazy asshole. You missed breakfast, but I saved you a plate. It's in the kitchen."

"Yeah?" you scoff. "And where the hell is the kitchen?"

"It's through the archway. Pink Galaxy Moths all around it." Jade motions to it and, through dense leaves and interwoven vines, you can see crudely shaped metal supporting its form.

"Lovely," you say, your statement sincere. To offset this sincerity, you immediately add a jab at Dave, saying, "You think you can come decorate Dave's house? It's fucking ugly."
"I prefer the term 'fugly' to be used," Dave interjects.

Both John and Jade laugh.

John punches Jade on the shoulder, slipping his own comment in before she can begin hers. "I told you. Karkat's a cool guy."

She responds by shoving him aside, snickering as she does so. "You have a point, good sir, but it unfortunately cannot be done. I must maintain my lovely garden with the utmost care."

By now, you've entered the kitchen. Like the main living area, its walls are covered in lush greenery. The entire place inspires you, and reminds you why you took up this job in the first place. With the money you'd make from it, you'd have certainly been able to afford property on Earth. Of course, you're probably fired at this point, so there's no point in lusting after something you can't have. Instead, you continue to listen to the conversation as you eat a plate of odd, red, juicy plants.

Dave gags. "You sound like Rose. Quit it. I've already had enough of my dear cousin for a month."

"You're right. I'll cease and desist." Jade chuckles. It's a light sound, something like the tinkling of bells. "Hey, Davey, you said you asked the bodyguard out, right? How'd it go?"

When the reply comes, it's dripping with discomfort. You can see him in your mind, rubbing the back of his neck and turning his head away from the Jade. From experience, you're guessing the fingers of his right hand are starting to involuntarily twitch; it's an odd, unconscious indication of nerves. "It was only once, and it didn't go anywhere." He forces an unconvincing laugh. "I'm too busy with the whole rebellion deal to work it out, anyhow."

"You've got enough time to drop by here and dick around, though," Jade says. Her voice is confident—the sort of voice a person uses when they know they've got you cornered. "But, yeah, sure. All that blah-blah-blah shit about the rebellion is a nice cover story."

"Aw, Jade, don't tease him. Little Davey has a crush," John snickers.

Dave groans.

"We're just trying to help you," says Jade. "Besides, from what you've told me, he's got some neat tricks up his sleeves. And he seems interested in you, too."

You almost choke on one of the odd fruits you're eating. After some quiet sputtering, you regain enough composure to resume your eavesdropping.

"He's so into you, Dave," Jade says, presumably having been asked for the reasoning behind her comment. "He does that dreamy-eyed stare whenever you're around, and he only seems to smile when you're around. I mean, I've only been around him some, but John's reports back me up."

"Ugh." Dave's sentiments echo your own, and you're on the fence about if you're relieved or frightened by this fact.

"Just ask him, dude." Here, Jade lowers her voice. You're guessing that she's trying to whisper, but, like you, she's awful at it. "I left you some flowers on your bed. They're super pretty, and you should totally use them."

"Fine! Fine!" Dave huffs. "I'll think about it." There's a quiet whirring noise, and it dawns upon you that it's the sound Dave's chair makes when it moves. It also hits you that this sound is
You hastily down the last few odd fruits before feigning interest in the prickly green thing on the windowsill.

And, just as your faux interest reaches its peak, Dave enters the kitchen. He begins rummaging through the fridge, an action he continues as he speaks to you. "They're good, huh? Another freaky Earth thing Jade picked up from her shady market buddy. She says they call them strawberries, and they taste fucking delicious, right?"

"Mhm," you hum. You nod. You know it probably looks fake as hell, but you're also certain that Dave isn't paying much attention.

"Anyhow," the fridge door slams shut and, when you turn, you find that Dave has emerged from its depths with a bottle of apple juice. After downing a few impressively large gulps, he continues, "We'll be leaving tomorrow. I love staying with Jade, but we've got to get back home. Lots of rebellion bullshit to sort out, y'know?"

"Mhm."

"Is that the only word you know today?" Dave laughs.

"Mhm." You're not trying to be funny. You're just unsure of how the fuck you're going to handle when and if he follows up on Jade and John's advice.

You guess you'll do what you're best at and go with your gut.

Chapter End Notes

it's almost 2017. be the awesome you carrie fisher would want you to be. ♥
(oh my god i wasted *die zauberflöte* too soon and now i can't reuse it. this is a real tragedy.)

The Thirty-Seventh Day of Dark: 8:00 PM: LOG 0037

A few hours ago, you bid a fond farewell to Jade. She was an exuberant, caring woman, but you're admittedly glad to be leaving. She was a bit too much for you to handle right now. Although, later, you'd definitely be up to meeting with her again.

For now, though, you've joined Dave and John on an odd thing that seems to be prominent only on these artificial ring colonies, such as Skaia. They're called overnight bed cruisers, and they're essentially double-decker busses with rooms. Each bus has five rooms—three up top, two on the bottom—and access to these rooms is granted via a narrow hallway running the length of the bus. You're in the second first-floor room, wherein there is one single bed and a double.

( Due to the narrow passage and the limited space in the room, Dave has volunteered to stay in bed unless there's something that necessitates him leaving it. You'd already had to carry him down the hallway, and the chair was grudgingly parked at the front, essentially forcing the driver to climb over it to get out.)

John immediately laid claim to the single bed. This means you get to share a bed with Dave.

Not that this is a problem... Or, at least, it *shouldn't* be a problem.

Now that you want to go the fuck to sleep, though, it is.

"I... Um... Tell me that's not a bag of urine in the bed," you begin to address the various problems.

Dave, in return, shrugs. With the most infuriatingly sarcastic smirk possible, he responds, "It is not a bag of piss in the bed."

"But it is," you grumble.

John, unhelpfully, continues snoring. Clearly, he's a deep sleeper.

"It's a medical thing. I don't control my bladder, so this is a better option than piss all over the bed, right?" Dave hums, his smirk widening. "You know I'm right."

"Fine." You edge yourself onto the bed, going bit by bit. "I just... Humans are fucking weird. Recuperacoons are so much nicer, and they take up less space."

"From what I hear, those things are messy as fuck."

Shrugging off this insult to your natural sleeping arrangements, you inch even further, closing in on your spot on the bed. "You're not going to do anything creepy or stupid, right? Like cuddle me or something?"
"The only reasonable control I have over my body is from shoulders up, barring one arm. I'm not exactly going to smooth-snuggle you into some sort of weird relationship," he laughs, though it's obviously fake. The fingers of his right hand, which he's positioned on top of the covers, begin to twitch.

You keep your mouth shut about knowing that he's nervous. "Whatever."

"Yeah." Dave sighs. "Whatever."

"Good night."

The Thirty-Seventh Day of Dark: 11:00 PM: LOG 0038

Usually, you wake up around now to use the bathroom. At this moment, however, you're woken by the lack of motion. Before, the gentle swaying and occasional bumping of the car's chassis had lulled you off to sleep. Now, it's completely stationary, and it seems you're not the only one concerned about this.

"We're not supposed to stop for another few hours," Dave mutters, the plastic piece at the base of his neck bobbing up and down a few times before he speaks again, "What the fuck is going on?" A grunt of discomfort punctuates this statement. "Help me sit up, dude. Please?" He tacks the final word on as an afterthought, though the situation lends itself to your quick forgiveness of his social oversight.

You push him up a bit and lean him against the metal wall of the chassis. Outside, you can see uniformed guards speaking to the driver. A flashlight beam hits you square in the face.

"That's not good," Dave mutters.

Now, John stirs. He sits up, rubs his eyes, and frowns. "We here already?"

You and Dave shush him simultaneously.

"We have reason to believe that two wanted rebel instigators are on this bus, and our orders are to take them into custody." The guard outside presents a badge, and the driver eagerly obliges. He even rushes inside and delivers Dave's chair to the waiting squadron of stern-faced officers. (So much for your bribe money.)

"Shit."

"Fuck."

"Damn."

At the very least, everyone is on the same page.

The bright white light of a flashlight casts a long anti-shadow on the floor of your room.

A loud bang, followed by the door sliding open.

From there, time seems to slow. The guard draws his gun and aims it at you. Another comes up behind him, and points a gun at Dave. Orders are shouted, but you're in too much shock to understand them. You raise your hands upwards, just in time to be shot in the shoulder.

You think you hear Dave tell John to run, but you're not sure. Regardless, John bolts; you're sure
he wouldn't have without Dave's permission.

A bag is thrown over your head, a needle stabbed into your still-bleeding arm, and time...

Just...

Stops.
From a report on Case R9064 by the Skaian Royal Court...

Dave Strider, leader of the Prospitian rebellion movement, seems to be of little physical threat. A gun was found and confiscated upon arrival, as was the wheelchair he used. Galactic regulation requires us to provide a standard wheelchair, which we have done. His left arm has been disabled through surgical intervention. The surgery discovered a crude muscle stimulation implant. Despite being completely unnecessary to do so, he has been cuffed. All documentation on him from prior intelligence has been changed to match his current physical state.

Karkat Vantas, formerly hired by the King to assassinate the aforementioned Dave Strider, has been apprehended. He has been cuffed, gagged, and tied down. He is extremely dangerous, and should not be approached by any unarmed personnel. It seems that he has defected from his former noble duty.

Medical officials have determined that the level of care required by the pitiful excuse for a revolutionary leader is far beyond its worth, and, as such, no care shall be provided. No special accommodations shall be rewarded to prisoner Dave Strider.

Both prisoners are to be housed separately, though it would be psychologically detrimental to place them in adjacent cells. As such, each reside, respectively, in cells B1 and B2. Both cells are to be guarded at all daylight hours by the most experienced of prison personnel, and will be under video surveillance at nighttime.

Orders from the King have been passed unto us to ensure the least pleasurable conditions possible without killing either inmate.

Chapter End Notes

I know this one is short, but the next few will (hopefully) be longer. The viewpoint is going to switch to Rose for a while, at least until Dave and Karkat can get their shit together. (Or, you know, women save the day or somethin.)
Fifty-Fifth Day of Dark: 5:00 PM: LOG 0039

Your name is Rose Lalonde, and both your cousin and his bodyguard are missing. If the
last entry on this drive is correct, it's been a solid week since they disappeared. You've
found little to go off of, though this drive is obviously a useful tool, viable as a means of
keeping track of what you and your girlfriend, Kanaya, have learned.

You suppose you should enter some basic information onto the drive for the purpose of
identification and comprehensive recordkeeping. Thus, you input the following to the drive's
database as your first entry:

The following is to certify that the former owner and recordkeeper for this drive, Alternian native
Karkat Vantas, has gone missing. Until his return, I, Rose Lalonde, will be maintaining records.
Maintenance of such information will be further facilitated by my lovely girlfriend, Kanaya
Maryam, whose experience as a former assassin and Alternian troll will be indispensable to the
mission.

This drive was found at approximately 4:30 PM today, the 55th Day of Dark in the year 66.
Location noted to be on the side of an isolated stretch of Mass Transit Route 1. Other items,
including wilted flowers and empty cartons of apple juice, were also found with this drive.

Three spent laser pistol cartridges—determined by Kanaya to be for the StarLord 86 automatic
model, commonly used by Skaian officials—were found on the road. One had been run over and
crushed, but the other two were intact.

Our initial plans were to travel separately, and Kanaya and I departed earlier than Dave. Dave,
John, and Karkat were to maintain steady lines of communication, which was abruptly cut seven
days ago, thus prompting our suspicion. We backtracked and discovered these items as well as an
unaltered bloodstain on the pavement of the road. The amount of blood was inconsistent with a
fatal wound.

Aside from the contents of this drive, Jade informed us that she had provided flowers to Dave.
Apparently, she's in the process of trying to hook him up with his bodyguard. The flowers
described match the wilted bouquet.

No other conclusive evidence or useful information has been discovered.

The Fifty-Fifth Day of Dark: 7:00 PM: LOG 0040

The usual nonsense station utilized by Dave as the means of broadcasting revolutionary messages
has been dead for the past few hours. This is unsurprising, though, as its broadcast schedule is
sporadic. Nonetheless, considering recent events, you've tuned the television in your motel room
to the correct channel.

And, now, through the haze of static, a familiar voice emerges. "This is an emergency broadcast
by the Heir of Breath. Repeat: This is an emergency broadcast by the Heir of Breath. The Knight
of Time has been captured, and his identity is now known. As a witness, I can definitely say that
this is not good."

At the very least, this tells you that John made it back to Dave's place.
"My name is John Egbert, and I'm pretty desperate right now. If anyone is listening, please report to the Tin Can. I will be organizing search parties to try and find the Knight of Time. His name is Dave Strider, and he should be accompanied by a troll named Karkat Vantas. Anyone with information should report to—" Here, the broadcast begins to fade. Buzzing static overpowers John's voice.

After a few seconds, there's a loud beep. Then, an unfamiliar voice begins to speak. "By direct order from the King, all of Skaia is now under absolute reign. Rejoice, citizens of Skaia, for we have cast away the shackles of the Galactic Regulatory Union, and their tyrannical laws are no longer our burden!"

There's a pause, as if the voice wants those listening to the broadcast to take in the meaning of the message. You, certainly, do. Rejecting the Galactic Regulatory Union is an action historically associated with an impending iron-fisted rule. Why wouldn't it be? The Regulatory Union exists only to enforce human rights laws and ordinances upon planets and artificial colonies.

"I, your beloved Derse King, would also like to announce that all of Skaia is now under the rule of my honorably royal military." Out of curiosity, you change the channel. The television screen remains a sea of dotted static. The next channel is the same. And the next. Clearly, something big is going on, and the continuation of the king's message only confirms your worst fears. "Effective immediately, all members of the Prospitian revolution are criminals. Your district Regent will reward the generous sum of one-hundred-thousand dollars per revolutionary turned over to their care. Any contrary action will be met with extreme force, as Skaia is now entering a new and glorious period of prosperity."

As if nothing had happened, the usual programming returns—in the case of this channel, it seems to be some sort of advertisement for a zero-gravity safe pressure cooker.

Kanaya speaks before you have a chance. "Permission to bring my old assassin gear out of retirement, Captain Lalonde?" she says.

You respond with a firm nod. "Without question."

A gentle hand rests on your shoulder, and a soft, familiar voice whispers in your ear. "I'm sure everything is fine. Karkat was quite the fighter in training. He may be a bit of a softie, but he's got the potential to cause a lot of damage, should the need arise."

"I'm not worried," you respond honestly. "My primary concern now is the safety of our great and honorable king." To emphasize your points, you roll your eyes.

Kanaya, however, would have understood the meaning without your addition. In fact, it seems she might already be aware of what you're about to say, as a wry smile now graces her features. "Any why would that be?"

"Because no one messes with the Strider-Lalonde family and gets away with it."

"I don't doubt that for a second," Kanaya responds, knowingly. She pulls a concealed knife from her boot and hands it over to you, saying, "I believe you'll want this?"

"Definitely."
The Fifty-Sixth Day of Dark: 7:00 AM: LOG 0041

We have boarded a standard high-speed monorail, colloquially known as the Skaia Speed Transport System (SSTS), and have been seated in economy class. It seems as if the seating arrangements have been revamped since I last rode on one of these, as I have much more space than I remember having.

Each seating arrangement consists of two chairs, each facing one another, with a small table in between. These pairs are set three abreast per row, with our columnar cabin consisting of seven groups.

Aside from Kanaya and I, the train is empty, and I would expect it to be so. It is currently the Skaian Feast of the King's Benevolence, and the irony of such an event does not escape me. Currently, a majority of citizens are off of work. Our train is expected to arrive by the Fifty-Seventh day of dark, around midnight. Of course, the last time a train was on time was when the King was not a massively inflated ass, so the time is not set in stone.

I shall provide further information when it is available.

The Fifty-Sixth Day of Dark: 8:00 AM: LOG 0042

"Presumably, the administration's withdrawal from the Union is also having an effect on prisoners," Kanaya thinks aloud as she scratches a long, jade-colored talon against the table between the seats. The wood sloughs off, leaving behind a shallow line. "I have yet to substantiate my theory, though, so it will remain a concept until proven to be true."

"It makes sense to me," you say, folding your arms across your chest. Idly, you tip your chair back on its rear legs. You stare at the dingy ceiling above you, and distract yourself from unpleasant thoughts by focusing on the gentle sway of the unsteady monorail. A crude but relatable statement has been graffitied onto the grimy surface: Fuck the King. "They wouldn't kill Dave, though. They'd use him for information."

"From what I know of your cousin, that will be an invariably arduous process." Kanaya hums. Her long fingers run through her thick, black hair, brushing it back into place. "He seems to me to be exceedingly stubborn."

You can't help but roll your eyes. "He is."

"Well, that's not exactly a bad thing. He won't be exposing the secrets of the Prospitian movement any time soon. His determination is admirable."

"It can be." As much as your cousin annoys you, there's little doubt that you'd be devastated if he was killed. You believe that trolls call the sort of relationship you have with him blackrom, though it's not as intense. Both of you annoy each other, but will also help one another when the need arises. Aside from that, he's your cousin.

"I'm sure he's fine," Kanaya reassures.

You nod. "Like I said, he'll be safe for a while. The problem will be when they figure out that they're not getting any useful intelligence from him."
Kanaya, too, nods. She chews on her lip and joins you in staring at the ceiling. "I rather enjoy the graffiti."

"Same." You snicker.

A calm silence settles between you and your girlfriend. Times such as these aren't uncommon, and they're always enjoyable. This one, however, is underscored by an understandable sense of dread. While Kanaya isn't as fond of Dave as you are, she's aware of how much he means to you. Thus, she's invested in his safe return.

"This isn't working." A garbled voice buzzes from the drive inserted into one of the ports in your holotop. "There's no way a signal can be transmitted through a fucking flash drive, Dave."

You and Kanaya both freeze. Your gazes meet.

"Does this happen to be a two-way system of communication?" Your girlfriend is the first to speak. Her voice is as authoritative and distinguished as always, which provides you with a sense of comfort. "If it is," she says, having heard nothing in response to her commentary, "That would be exceedingly useful."

"Kanaya? What the fuck!?!" The voice answers. Then, after a momentary silence, it continues. "No time to explain. Guards will be coming back soon. I have no fucking clue where we are. We could be in goddamned space, but I know we're at a maximum-security facility. Not that that's surprising. Dave and I are fine, but they're questioning the hell out of the blond douche."

You breathe a sigh of relief at the news. "Has Dave said anything to them?"

"I don't have time for that. The guards are back."

The soft static cuts out.

When you look up, you see Kanaya's knowing smirk. You mirror her expression; what reason would you have not to? "Well," she says, her voice tinted with a vague sense of confusion, "That was a development."

"A weird development, but I'm not about to complain." You shrug. "By the way, Jade says she'll be coming, too. Apparently, she's hired someone to look after her place for a while. Probably that Argonian down the street from her. She'll be there before we are, though. John's already there."

"I knew that John was there, Rose. He sent the broadcast." A small smile punctuates Kanaya's statement. "Where else would he be?"

"He could be on the satellite station, and he may have suddenly acquired the skills to hack the advanced security systems of the royal censor." As you usually do, you deliver your joke as if it's the truth.

Kanaya sees through this, and responds with a quiet laugh. It's a soft, breathy noise—more akin to a snicker—that's always made your heart flutter, as it is now. "I have a feeling this is the beginning of something beyond the scope of a singular rescue mission."

"Well, if we're breaking a revolutionary figurehead out of prison, we might as well go the whole way and overthrow the government, right?" you say this with a confident smirk.

Right now, the public is upset. You know this. In the few crowds you've passed on your way to Dave's, you've heard it—the dissonance and disillusionment. A revolution is coming, and you're unsure of its specifics, but you're not about to try and quell it as you have before. No, you're going
to egg it on as much as possible.

Kanaya seems aware of this, too. She's yet to say so in explicit terms, but you know her well enough to be certain that she knows.
The Fifty-Ninth Day of Dark: 10:00 AM: LOG 0043

Over the past few days, we've yet to receive any further contact from Karkat.

The Tin Can, as Dave so affectionately calls it, has grown considerably in size. At least one hundred people have shown up to aid in the effort, and many are now camping throughout Beggar's Court. Of course, this has drawn a good deal of suspicion from local authorities. Some people have been arrested. One has been publicly killed as a so-called show of force.

Jade has volunteered her herbology skills; using available materials, she has created many sleep darts. These plant-based darts can be fired from standard hunting rifles and contain a sort of toxin, which acts quickly and reliably.

Technicians have traced the point of origin for the call to the drive.

Acting upon this information, both Kanaya and I have departed for the provided coordinates. The location ended up being somewhere within the boundaries of Regalston, on the eastern edge of the upper-middle class section of the Skaian Ring. Our mission is small, being staffed only by us, but we are equipped with ample weaponry and medical supplies. On John's advice, we also have supplies for Dave's wellbeing.

The entire planet has been strung up with large speakers, which are armored and often hung in the center of busy public spaces. They're typically black and red, though their appearance matters little. The primary function of such devices is to broadcast propaganda and messages from the king, who seems to be actively attempting to quell the rising tides of change.

As is customary, more information will be entered later.

The Fifty-Ninth Day of Dark: 1:00 PM: LOG 0044

The Imperial Penitentiary, housed in Regalston, is the highest security prison on Skaia. It's also the largest, housing approximately one hundred prisoners. The may not seem like many, but the system of scattered, smaller prisons across Skaia makes such a trivial number important. By day, guards swarm the place; by night, sentries and turrets join a smaller guard force to maintain order.

From the window of the inn, in which you and Kanaya have started living, you can see the structure's façade. Imported Old Earth marble forms the base for the structure, while gold leaf accents the window trimmings. Oak wood—a luxury of the highest sort—is also imported from Old Earth, and its sculpted, curvilinear forms flow around the steel doors.

Looking up from her laminated copy of the inn's provided yearly publication of A Traveler's Guide to Regalston, Kanaya provides you with even more information. Most of it is useless, but you're not about to turn down a chance to listen to your girlfriend's enchanting voice. "It says here that the visual style of the Imperial Penitentiary is drawn from an ancient and archaic Old Earth style known as Rococo. Despite the antiquated appearance, the inside of the prison is equipped with all the amenities of the era in which it was built, cited here to be the tenth century."

Licking one of her clawed fingers, Kanaya turns the page. Her golden-yellow eyes—with their catlike pupils—slide across the page. Then, she speaks. "The Imperial Penitentiary has been updated throughout the ages, with its most recent major renovation in 61 GR. This is known as the
Derse Remodel, in honor of our Great and Honorable King. Over a period of five years, state-of-the-art sentry bots and turrets were added, as were glass-metal windows. These windows now provide tourists a safe way to observe some of the prison's most famous inmates." A hum of interest punctuates this statement.

You look up, meeting Kanaya's gaze in the process. "You have something to say?"

Nodding, Kanaya reads what you can only assume to be the next part of the excerpt. "Tours of the prison are offered for free. Daily tours run in one hour groupings, and occur between 11:00 AM and 6:00 PM, regardless of weather or season." She closes the book and returns it to the drawer in the bedside table. A pensive sigh escapes her as she flops against the fluffy pillows of the double bed. "It would make sense to me that Dave, at least, would be on display. Showing off the leader of a rebellion as a prisoner seem like a decent way to lower the morale of a burgeoning rebellion."

"Agreed. I propose we make a preliminary visit to the prison later tomorrow. For now, we should assess the situation." You fold your arms across your chest and stare upwards, towards a fly buzzing around a flickering overhead light. The flickering is timed, as the light is supposed to mimic the natural ambiance of a flame. It's a stupid gimmick, at least in your opinion. After a few minutes of this, you grow bored. You stand, wander over to the bed, and sit down beside Kanaya.

A yawn. Kanaya stretches her arms above her head and, in a smooth movement, tucks one of them behind you and around your shoulders.

Your immediate reaction is to withdraw. You don't have time for this, after all; you're trying to rescue your thick-skulled dimwit of a cousin. Then again, Kanaya's scent—a sort of floral aroma with no immediate and convenient description—lures you in, as it always does. You rest your head against her shoulder.

Your eyes slide closed.

Not long afterwards, you're asleep.

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The Fifty-Ninth Day of Dark: 7:00 PM: LOG 0045

The crackling of the propaganda loudspeaker just outside your inn room's window wakes both you and Kanaya. It's followed by a mid-range humming noise, indicative of it powering on. After a few seconds, the standard propaganda announcer's voice begins to drone forth.

"The king would like to extend his sincerest gratitude towards cooperative citizens. An invitation is being issued to all for the event of the season! Five dissidents, from the Prospitian movement, have been arrested. They will be publicly executed tomorrow, at noon, in the Regalston prison courtyard. The event will also be televised live, on channel 5, for all to see. Thank you."

This message loops thrice, as is standard, before the speaker powers down.

You and Kanaya exchange glances.

Suddenly, you're acutely aware of the distant sounds of gunfire. You hear a faraway explosion.

He might not know it yet, but your cousin has started a political revolution, and you're going to punch him in the goddamned face. This turmoil is only going to make getting him out of prison umpteen times harder.
The Sixtieth Day of Dark: 2:00 PM: LOG 0046

We've planned to visit the prison under the pretense of wanting a tour. I am uncertain of the logistics of this, and our safety isn't guaranteed; the violence has been escalating. The fighting is growing closer, and military occupation is growing dense.

I have, however, confirmed that Dave is in the prison. Shortly after the live execution was finished showing around 12:30, another half-hour broadcast was shown. Dave was the primary focus of this broadcast, during which he pleaded for an end to the so-called insurrections. He was obviously coerced into such a speech, showing little emotion, and often looked at what I assume to be a cue card.

It's apparent that he's not being treated properly, if at all. His breathing has worsened to the point that he's been placed on a ventilator, seemingly full-time. Due to this, I question the reason for the broadcast; his voice was barely audible. They did a poor job of covering his wounds, the most prominent of which was a gash just above his right eyebrow.

Prolonged exposure to this sort of neglect will lead to certain death, which means that the priority of our mission is now to rescue Dave.

Nonetheless, I can't say that I'm confident Karkat is faring any better. My best guess is that Dave appeared only to prevent them from causing harm to him.

The Sixtieth Day of Dark: 4:00 PM: LOG 0047

Getting into a tour group is easy enough. You show up at the prison, claim your names are Porrim and Roxy, and get paired with a heavyset man in his late sixties. He's sweaty, armed with a camera, and creepy in every possible sense. For the past twenty minutes, he's been taking photos of the most morbid museum exhibits—dioramas of jailcell murder scenes seem to be his thing.

So far, you've passed through the prison museum, which housed information about past inmates and the building's history, and several viewing rooms, which offer views of some of the most violent and infamous inmates. To you, it seems like a crude and strange way to spend a vacation, but you're not exactly here to judge.

You're here to find your cousin, which you have yet to do.

And, you're beginning to doubt that you will. Yet, as if that doubt powers some sort of luck-generating mechanism, you're offered a glimmer of hope.

It comes in the form of a not-so-distant bang. The floor shudders, the walls shake, and what you can only assume to be years of dust flutter from the rafters above you. A chorus of sirens and bells heralds the beginning of absolute chaos. Guards rush past, some trying and failing to get you and Kanaya to move with them. Prisoners scatter as chunks of ceiling begin to crumble and fall.

As groups move and disperse and flow like an agitated swarm of insects, Kanaya speaks up. "Karkat?" As the word escapes her, she begins to shove against the crowd.
You let her go. She can take care of herself. If her blade isn't enough, she'll just grab a gun from a guard. Not that she'd ever get to that point.

You move eastwards, against the flow, like Kanaya. You pass her.

The best way to find the cause of something is to trace your way backwards, against the grain. And, the further into the fray you go, the more chaotic it gets. Bloodied, battered corpses begin to line the corridors. Walls are collapsed, ceilings caved in, cells completely destroyed.

Without hesitation, you loot the corpse of a guard. His head seems to have been wiped out by a fallen slab of concrete. Not that you care. You're taking his flashlight and gun, regardless. You pocket both items before pushing onwards, using the light once you reach the point at which the electricity has ceased functioning.

Here, the walls are almost completely blown away. If you look up, you can see through the ceiling, up to the floors above. The walls of various cells are covered in blood, their occupants crushed or blown to bits.

"Leave the bastard!" An unfamiliar male voice grabs your attention. You flick off your flashlight and scramble for a hiding place, eventually settling on squatting behind a bloodied slab of ceiling. "Does it look like this fucking freak could have done this?"

"Well..." Another voice stammers. "But we have orders to make sure this one stays alive."

"He's already half dead, you idiot. We've got to get out of here!" As if on cue, the end of this statement is punctuated by the rumbling thud of more of the building crumbling. Shortly thereafter, the soft plodding of a pair of retreating footsteps echoes up and down the wreckage of the corridor. You stumble back into the hallway, turn on the light, and work your way deeper into the fray.

A few feet in, you hear something. A mechanical sigh, followed by a few moments of silence, and a hoarse wheeze. It's a noise you're not accustomed to hearing, though you remember it from not-so-long-ago. Sweeping the beam of the flashlight back and forth, you begin to follow the noise.

Eventually, it falls upon a rusted wheelchair. In it is Dave, held in place by little more than rough, knotted rope. Blood colors his normally blond hair, and the disgustingly dirty tube sticking from the plastic port at the base of his throat connects to a ventilator mounted haphazardly to the back of his chair.

You have little time for shock, though, as your arrival is marked by another powerful shudder. You approach him and, as your hands touch the handles of the chair, the building sways. A loud crack comes from above you, and you have just enough time to realize that the remainders of the cell you're in are crumbling around you before—

_Fucking. Shit._

Chapter End Notes

and i'm out of ideas. oops. i will continue this, i promise, and it won't have a sad ending, but i'm working on other stuff right now. ALSO! fun fact! i will be getting ALL FOUR wisdom teeth forcibly removed at the end of janurary, so i promise i'm not dead if you don't see me for a week after january ends. comments, feedback, and
suggestions are appreciated!
Beethoven Opus 43 is The Creatures of Prometheus and I don't care if it's not perfect mood music, check out that goddamned NAME. There is violence in this chapter, you've been warned.

The Sixtieth Day of Dark: 4:00 PM: From the Biologue of Kanaya Maryam, Entry Number Unknown

I am most certainly aware of the fact that biologues needn't any physical intervention in their coding to produce readable records of a certain designated period of time. However, in light of recent events, I have reviewed the data from this particular day. This journalistic entry is to verify that I, Kanaya Maryam, have tampered with the contents of this day's log, but the evidence within is still presentable.

Notable changes include the removal of any excessive or unnecessary information, as well as the addition of biological scan data from Dave Strider. This is to certify the authenticity of the account recorded within this log entry.

Playback should not be impacted by my tinkering.

The Sixtieth Day of Dark: 4:00 PM: From the Biologue of Kanaya Maryam, Entry Number Unknown

Despite being thinner than you recall, the troll before you is most definitely your friend, Karkat Vantas. He has the same furrowed brows and a familiar air of perpetual disdain. His eyes—the pupils rimmed with a thin line of red—meet yours, and he offers you a simple nod. Elbowing through the crowd, you rush forwards to meet him. You wrap your arms around him, pulling him into a hug, before quickly releasing.

"Where's Dave?" you ask, opting to skip the formalities of reacquainting yourself with him. You'll have time to do that later. Right now, you have to figure out where Dave is. Wherever he is, Rose, too, will be.

When he responds to your inquiry, however, your heart sinks. "He's in the back. I'm not sure how great of an idea it is to go rushing back into there, though, the whole place is blown to fucking shit. I'd—" He sputters into silence as you shove a knife into his hands.

Its blade is long and thin, perfect for stabbing, but not so great for blocking or cutting. You, too, have two of these. This third one, you had stowed in your boot. They're the standard issue sort of blade for assassins, and it's more discrete than your preferred weapon (a chainsaw). They lend themselves to the combat style of assassin training. Act without hesitation, kill without regrets, and keep your blade clean and free of notches.

"Rose is in the back," you explain, your voice low. "I'm going. You can follow, if you wish, but I'll be going with or without your additional support."
You needn't say this twice. Karkat, the blade in hand, follows.

Both of you shove your way through the crowd, and it eventually thins out.

By this point, the walls are beginning to show obvious structural damage. Huge sections are caved in, and the concrete floors are cracked. The surface is uneven.

"Both of you!" a voice calls from the darkness as you near what seems to be the flickering light of a growing fire. Outlined against the red-orange fog, you see a guard. His gun is raised.

Before he can react, Karkat sprints forward. One hand shoves the guard's pistol hand upwards, and the bullet fired from its barrel presumably buries itself in the concrete ceiling. With the other hand, Karkat spears the guard through the side. As the man drops, a bloodied Karkat steps aside.

You, rushing forward, gaze down at the fallen man. Upon closer inspection, you find that he, too, is a troll. His horns are both broken off, and the pupils of his eyes rimmed with a light purple. As you pry the gun from his hand, Karkat speaks up.

"That shouldn't have been enough to kill him. Someone will find him." He shrugs, grabs the gun's holster from the guard's belt, and attaches it to the belt loop of his prison jumpsuit. He uses this to hold his knife.

From your experience, you know that Karkat has never been big on killing. His motto is to kill only the essential people. Targets, and perhaps their guards. You, however, know that this is irrelevant, now. This troll knows both your and Karkat's face. After unzipping your jacket, you pull from the formerly hidden sheath your own blade. You swiftly slit the troll's throat, then shove the corpse aside. As you rise back to your feet, wiping the purple blood from your hands against your black skirt, you notice the look of horror on Karkat's face.

"You killed him," he sputters.

"I had to," you shrug, then move onwards. You grab Karkat by the wrist, and he follows. "Don't look back."

As he catches up to you, he nods. "You've always been able to do..." he searches for a word, only to come up with nothing. Eventually, he concludes, "That."

"If you're in my way, I'll warn you. If you're in my way when there's an emergency, you don't receive that courtesy. This was the latter," you say, wiping your blade against your skirt. While it doesn't bother you, keeping blood on your blade is against code. You don't really follow much of this anymore, but it's easier to use a sleek, un tarnished blade than one caked with dried blood.

As if showing up purely to demonstrate this, another guard—this one an Argonian—stumbles from the wreckage of one of the cells. Upon seeing you, she drops the corpse she'd obviously been looting, and fumbles with her gun. Before the holster is even unlatched, your blade is through her stomach. A singular, powerful yank dislodges it. Again, you wipe away the blood.

There's a heavy thud behind you, as you've continued walking. "Keep walking, Karkat. You've forgotten your training."

"I was at the bottom of our class," he huffs. "Don't talk assfuckery about training, you goddamned valedictorian."

"How does one carry an injured ally from a dangerous space?" you demand, knowing from the increasingly ruined building around you that you might need to use these techniques.
Karkat, after a few moments, responds with a fair amount of hesitancy. "Preferably on a stretcher, because I'm not a goddamned cretin. But, we don't have one. I'd guess over the shoulder."

You nod.

After grabbing a slightly cracked but still operable flashlight from the corpse of a fallen inmate—something that rouses a look of disgust from your fellow troll and assassin—you continue searching.

Eventually, you approach an area that's little more than pile upon pile of rubble and dust. Looking up, there's a straight view upwards, to what you estimate to be the third floor of the building. From beneath one of the piles of concrete and cement debris, there comes the sound of sputtering hisses and groaning wheezes. When you shine your light on the pile, however, you see nothing more than an average pile of ruined building.

Karkat's reaction, however, says otherwise. He shoves past you, and immediately begins tossing aside the smaller bits of debris.

Nearby, there are two fallen guards. While Karkat is distracted, you remove their uniforms. After slipping into one, you save the other for Karkat. These will be useful when you escape. The chaos of this event is clear, and no one will pay any mind to two guards carrying out prisoners.

"Dave?" By the time you turn your attentions back to Karkat, he's begun calling through the cracks in the formerly solid shell of wreckage. Through these gaps, you can see that there's a dark space within. "You in there?"

Against all odds—and your expectations—Rose's voice speaks up. "I've dislodged a bit of rebar from my shoulder. I know Kanaya's out there, so I would like to humbly ask that you prepare some bandages. Again, I know you have these. Dave should be the priority."

"How fucking noble of you," Karkat huffs, struggling to dislodge a fairly small boulder.

Around now, it occurs to you that the thinness you observed earlier is likely due to him being underfed. You rush over, easily remove the slab of cracked concrete, and find yourself peering into what might be some sort of miracle. While a good amount of debris has surrounded the pair, the large chunks have been kept at bay by deformed rebar. Considering the visible remnants of the cell's construction, you can only assume that it's a maximum security one.

Rose, clutching a bloodied shoulder, gazes up at you, bruised and bloodied, but perfectly alive.

Your heart swells. Yet, it aches for your friend, whom you know to have since grown fond of his former target. (This fact is what has prompted you to act on his behalf, quietly pushing the pair together. You've done this to encourage Karkat to leave the assassins, as it's not the most viable lifestyle. Aside from that, you know it's not for him.)

Dave is in far worse shape than Rose. Aside from the fact that there's far more blood staining the shreds of his light grey jumpsuit, he reeks of literal shit. He remains slumped forward, his chest heaving as he gasps for breath.

Some more time—at least an hour—passes before you and Karkat finally clear enough of the wreckage away for Dave to be wheeled out. He's unresponsive.

Rose remains as controlled and calm as ever.

Karkat, meanwhile, seems to have turned to stone. He remains silent, his lips pressed together and refusing to move. His eyes are locked forwards.
"Some local Prospitian supporters have cleared a way through the subterranean transport system," you explain, parroting what Rose had debriefed you on this morning. "We'll exit through there."

Rose, still able to walk, nods.

You dress her wound, allowing for Karkat to rush forwards on his own. You're confident in his ability to find where he's going, and your concern, right now, is your girlfriend.
perfect mood music right there. I wonder if Mozart knows that I'm using his music for gay fanfiction. [shout out to Mozart in the afterlife]

The Seventieth Day of Dark: 12:00 PM: LOG 0048

A brief entry.

Just confirming that I'm finally back in control of this thing, fucking hallelujah. Biologues are pretty rad, and it's nice to have it back. I need to get myself a stronger necklace chain to hold this fucker on. A sharp tug from a guard shouldn't have been enough to pull it off.

The Seventieth Day of Dark: 12:00 PM: LOG 0049

The place where you're staying is nothing short of the pipe fantasy of some cave-dwelling race of eyeless elves. The stone walls are lined with sconces, each powered and illuminated by a generator, whose fumes are redirected up and out of the space by a towering metal funnel, which presumably runs to aboveground. The furniture is sparse, and most of it is carved straight out of the stone.

You've seen photos of this in chapters on ancient Old Earth. Pre-technological people carved massive, awe-inspiring temples and dwellings out of pure stone, just like this. You're surprised to even be in a space like this.

But, the novelty and ingenuity of such a feat is dulled by the fact that you've completely wrecked any chances of getting your haul from the kill. You're a rebel, now, and there's not much you can do beyond rolling along with whatever happens. You've been publicly exiled from the order of assassins for which you worked, and any sign of you in assassin territory is grounds for immediate death.

Whereas Kanaya and Rose have tried to dissuade you from becoming an around-the-clock helper for Dave, you've taken it upon yourself to do so. Beyond the fact that you realize you're now inexorably linked to this fucker, you also feel a huge serving of fresh-from-the-oven guilt. If you hadn't shown up and wrecked everything, like the incompetent, bumbling bastard you are, none of this would have happened. If you hadn't been so greedy, you wouldn't have taken the job. To some extent, you're also mourning the loss of your former future. You could be living like a king, now, if you'd just offed Dave earlier. You could have the world at your fingertips, and be none the wiser for ignoring the plights of Skaia.

Now, though, you're caught in some sort of huge conspiracy. You're a wanted criminal, and an enemy of an entire shitty artificial planetary colony. (Or, as it stands now, absolute monarchy.)

And, you need to tell Dave.

At some point, you know you have to tell him. But, you can't bring yourself to do it. Not now. Not any time soon.
"It's dinnertime, fuck-o," you announce as you step through the curtain separating Dave's room from everyone else's. "Rose fixed the most surprising goddamned thing ever. Want to take a shot at what it is?" As you say this, you set aside Dave's plate.

You, personally, have recovered nicely. You're nearly back to your usual self.

Dave, however, is still out of it. He's been in bed most of the past week, and the cave floor has ended up causing more problems than you'd imagine it would for his chair. You're starting to suspect that he's depressed, but he's been switching between states of outrageous lucidity and distant disconnect.

Today, judging by the spark in his eyes, is one of the better days.

You sit on the side of the bed, help him sit up, and prop him up with spare pillows. With the hissing machine—apparently known as a mechanical ventilator—plugged into the port at the base of his neck, he can speak only a few words every few seconds. His chest rises and falls at regular intervals. His hands shake often, like what you've seen in some older Humans. "Canned peas," he wheezes, brows furrowed.

"How'd you guess?" you ask, shoving a spoon into the bowl and sticking it into Dave's open maw. You recall how grubs are fed by their lusii.

He, in response to your commentary, offers a small smile. He promptly spits out his meal. "Ugh. There's really nothing else?"

"Look, jackass, you're leading a movement comprised primarily of people on the lower end of the socioeconomic shit-train and people labeled as unemployable. What do you expect, a goddamned steak?" Your counter comes as you drop off of the bed and scour the floor for fallen peas, looking like the perfect image of a starving orphan, you're sure. Eventually, you return. You pull from your pocket a sealed packet of peanut butter crackers—something you'd been hiding for a special occasion, and reluctantly open them. "Fucking fine. Just... Don't tell anyone I have these."

"I can't," Dave's voice begins soft, barely audible above the hum of the machinery and the groaning of the overhead pipes (you can only assume someone is starting to take a shower). As he continues, the volume suddenly rises to a normal level. It fades again, then rises. It's another cycle, and all these patterns are starting to drive you up the wall. "Still too weak to yell. Or do anything, really."

A long, conflicted sigh escapes you as you shove one of the orange crackers into his open mouth. "This is fucking stupid," you mutter.

Dave frowns. He swallows, grimaces, and then looks towards you with expectant eyes. "What? Being trapped in an underground cave, or the fact that you've been hiding peanut butter crackers?"

"Nothing," you snap. You silence him by shoving another cracker into his mouth.

You note that he doesn't protest.

Meanwhile, you consider your options. You'll need to tell him eventually, and you're certain it will wreck him. On an emotional level, it'll be devastating. But, what you're concerned about is the trust. How the fuck are you supposed to earn back the trust of the only person you can feasibly work for at this point? "I was hired to kill you" isn't a fine admission to be making. In fact, you'd rank it just below having to tell a company that you've been embezzling 99% of all its profits since you were hired.
"Want another?" you ask, dangling one of the crackers in his face. You make sure it's just out of his reach. If you're going to be doing this, you might as well have some fun. "Hm?"

Dave, however, outsmarts you. He shifts his right arm slightly—barely enough to be considerable, yet just enough for the rest of his body to react. You know it's involuntary, but the fact that his left knee jerks, slamming into your ass like an unwelcome slap, is obviously planned. You release the cracker in shock, and watch as he catches it in his mouth, smirking. "Fuck you. That's not fair."

"Neither is smuggling in actually decent food," he responds. "I have a few tricks."

"I fucking noticed," you respond, promptly removing yourself from the bed. "That was fucking rude."

"So are you." He grins. He waggles his brows at you then, after a few weak coughs, he nods towards the entryway. "That's all I needed. Get your grey ass out of here. I want to take a nap."

"You've been napping all day," you retort.

He snickers. "You're not my mom. Fuck off."

Feigning offense, you turn on your heel.

The Seventieth Day of Dark: 2:00 PM: LOG 0050

Jade has since joined the efforts, and she's also amongst the ranks of the twenty-odd people who share the underground living area with you. This also includes Rose, Kanaya, and John. The others, as far as you're concerned, are mostly faceless Prospitian supporters.

Except for Edgar, the eccentric artist. He's spent most of his time cobbling together decorative items from scrap metal, and you admire that he's taken to leaving inappropriately placed nude statuary everywhere. Your favorite is the most recent addition—a piece modelled after the ancient David, complete with a penis made of an electric mixer's detachable whisk. "I call it The Grace of Man," he had informed you, before promptly skittering off to whatever strange corner of the cave he lives in.

Returning to Jade... Today, she seems perkier than usual.

And, of course, there's a reason.

"I've made this," she announces, showing you what seems to be a retainer.

You, naturally, are unimpressed. "What the fuck is that supposed to do?"

"It's a remote control," she says, looking vaguely upset that you didn't realize this initially. "I know it sounds super gross, but it actually works with your tongue. I've had John working on Dave's chair, and we think we might have invented something that will let him drive it."

"You think? You didn't test this?" Here, you pause. "How do you know it won't just blow the whole fucking place to bits?"

"We don't!" Jade grins, "That's the fun part."

Before heading off to check on Dave, you mutter, "I'm surrounded by airheaded fuck-wits."
The Seventieth Day of Dark: 4:00 PM: LOG 0051

It works.

Your mind is blown to shit and back, but the little retainer Jade hacked together *actually works*. You, of course, have a few questions. The primary one is how she got a mold of the inside of Dave's goddamned mouth, but you're not about to press this. For now, you're content with finally having slightly more free time, as you no longer have to be Dave's escort.

And, it seems that Dave is fond of this development, too.
Over time, the underground cave grows. Merchants, artisans, engineers, technicians. All sorts of people. As word of the continued survival of the Prospitian movement grows, so, too, does the size of the subterranean community. You'd once thought that having sixty rooms was excessive, but it's turned out that it's not enough!

New rooms are under construction, and there's a legitimate waiting list to live in the same space as Dave goddamned Strider.

Then again, you'd be the first to say that you're not quite sure why people do this. He's a normal person, aside from his health problems, he's the average human. You might even call him substandard. He's a bit dry when it comes to humor, and he's definitely not the sort of person that everyone can get along with.

Health-wise, Dave has remained fairly steady. He's neither improved, nor regressed. One problem is solved, another pops up. It's the most frustrating thing you've had to deal with, and it's not just because you might like Dave.

No.

Fine.

You like Dave.

You'll fucking admit it. After nearly an entire season of living with him—a season, during which you were supposed to kill him—you have to admit that you've fallen for the bastard. Rose knows this. And, since you told her first, Kanaya also knows. And, now, you're faced with two conundrums. You still haven't told him that you were initially hired to kill him. And, now, you have to figure out how the hell you're supposed to be romantic in a literal cave hell.

Everywhere you turn, there are people. Trolls. Carpacians. Argonians. Humans. Every species from the Galactic Alliance is in this cave, and they all seem to want nothing more than to meet Dave Strider.

And, to his credit, he's a gracious host. Even fourteen days ago, whilst battling (or, perhaps, a more apt description would be "beating the shit out of") a bout of some sort of strange human respiratory infection, he was more than happy to offer his time and advice. And, you have to admit that he's got linguistic skill. He knows how to say things, though, knowing him personally, he often uses this skill to say strange, incomprehensible bullshit.

As a whole, though, you're amazed. He might have appeared to be nothing more than a massive tool, but Dave Strider is smart. He has brains, and he's got skill. The fact that his face is damned nice to look at is only a bonus. The equivalent exchange-style takeaway is that he acts like a college frat boy most of the time. If he could stop being a foolhardy shithead for more than five minutes, he could have made it as a preacher or motivational speaker.

"Date me," you say aloud, pacing back and forth in your empty room. "No," you huff, addressing no one, except for yourself. "No. That's too straightforward."

You turn, set your hands on the stone surface of the carved-out vanity, and stare in the mirror...
mounted against the wall behind it. "Have you ever thought about us? Together?" For a few moments, this idea seems great. Then, you shake your head. "No! Fuck!" You're tempted to punch the mirror, but you know that will bring unwanted attention. (Living in a cave without doors sucks ass.) "Too vague."

Maybe you should go extreme? Just straight up kiss him. When you see him, just grab him by the shirt and pull him to you, and put your fucking clumsy-ass lips against his, which are so damned kissable that you know they'll deliver the perfect result. This idea is, quite possibly, the worst one yet.

A loud, frustrated groan escapes you. "I just want to fucking date you, you fucking twit!" you exclaim, spinning around to face—as if summoned by Satan—a confused-looking Dave Strider. Trolls don't blush. You know this. You remind yourself of this constantly. However, the color of a troll's horns will subtly shift towards their blood color. This isn't something that most humans notice; then again, Dave Strider isn't the average human; you wouldn't be surprised if he picked up on that sort of thing.

"Really?" Dave smirks. He quirks his brow. Clicking his tongue twice locks his chair in place, preventing him from accidentally hurling himself at random objects or people. (This was a later development, born from Dave being too impatient to pronounce around the retainer.) "That's really nice to know, dude." Again, he clicks his tongue. He pulls up beside you and waggles his brows. Clearly, he's prepared to annoy the shit out of you today.

"I'm going to fucking dump you onto the goddamned ground," you grumble, staring at your feet. At the far edge of your peripheral vision, you can see Dave's bright red shoes, which rest on the metal footplates of his chair.

"There are a few flaws in that logic." Dave inches closer to you, and the footplates gently bump against your shins. "First of all, that would probably kill me if you weren't keen on helping me plug back into the thing that literally breathes for me," he says this in a way that's half joking and half matter-of-fact. "Second, you'd have a whole lot of angry people raring to kick your ass afterwards. So, while I acknowledge that it would probably feel awesome as hell, I don't recommend it."

"Fine," you admit, folding your arms defiantly across your chest. "You might have a point. So, what?"

"Nothing." He shrugs. "I'm just saying. Also, if you want to know, I'll date you."

"Really?" you respond, flabbergasted by this development. "You're shitting me."

"Nope." Dave smirks, winks, and bumps your shins again. "You want to start with a kiss?"


Thus, you can conclude this experience with at least one life lesson.

Dave Strider gives the best kisses on the entire goddamned planet. The absolute perfect kisses. It's unnatural how good he is at it, and you're almost certain it would take a decade to find someone to even rival him, much less beat him in that category.
The Fifth Day of Dusk: 5:00 AM: LOG 053

It's far too early to be doing any sort of heavy mental work, but it seems that your opinion isn't the most popular one. The hidden community thrives early in the morning, with people bustling to and fro like ants. Meals are prepared, messages delivered, and strange sculptures left in even stranger places.

Today, you wake to find the effigy of a three foot tall penguin sitting in the way of the exit of your room. It's made of melted metal cans, and bears the indescribable but distinctive smell of Edgar's workshop. The past few days have been chaotic, with much of the chaos focusing around Dave. You haven't seen him in days, despite practically living in the same room, and you've only recently heard of what's happening. Apparently, he's refitted with various technological miracles. Though no one could figure out how to reproduce the chip removed by the Skaian Royal Court, some of the scientific workers have reworked his ventilator. A smaller, lighter, and more energy efficient one has been formulated. It offers him far more independence than before, and he seems more than a bit excited to be using it.

Today is, quite literally, the first time you've seen him since the last season. Aside from the array of wires jutting from the base of his skull, he's exactly as you'd seen him before. His voice, however, is something you still haven't gotten used to. You're not sure you'll ever get used to how quiet it is, and the constant pauses test your patience. Nevertheless, you're excited to see him in good health.

"Put some of that..." He winces. His voice trails off, becoming little more than a strained wheeze. His shoulders hunch forwards. When it's done, though, he continues as if nothing had happened. "Pour some of that dank soda out for me, would you?"

You, naturally, oblige. You pour some of the obnoxious human sugar beverage into a cup, stick a straw in, and extend it towards him.

Dave takes a few sips before nodding to show he's done. "There's a new report from one of the bases. Something about some arguments in the Royal Court about how to deal with the movement."

"I've heard that, too. Any particular reason you're spilling this spoiled shit on me?" you counter, adding a good-natured smile to show your insincerity.

"We need to get out of this place, at least. The movement needs more supplies, and I need to get some actual medical equipment." Here, Dave pauses. He clicks his tongue, moves himself a bit closer to you, and parks before continuing. "You'll obviously stick around with me and John, being an escort. We were going to start moving in two days. I know it's short notice as fuck, but I'm..." here, Dave stops. He grits his teeth, and his right hand curls into an unnaturally tight fist. The fingers rapidly extend, then tremble. "That," he hisses, "We need some actual medial supplies, and we won't be finding them down here." Slowly, the movement stops. After some time, Dave's hand falls limply into his lap. He leans his head against the headrest, ignoring the constant, seemingly instinctive hunching of his shoulders with every inhale. "Damn. I wish we stocked some alcohol."

"We might have, but I'm pretty fucking sure the art guy would have it all." You smirk.

Dave offers a weak laugh. "Get these stupid shades off of me."
You nod and reach forwards, gingerly removing the sunglasses. You clip them to his shirt collar, taking a great amount of time to avoid the tubing jutting from his throat.

His eyes are closed, and it's now apparent that they're underscored by dark shadows.

"Have you been sleeping at all, you self-destructive dumbass?"

"We're out of painkillers," Dave grumbles. "I can't sleep."

"Oh." You pause. "Well, would having someone with you help?"

"Are you trying to sleep with me?" Dave asks, smirking. (You've noticed he's become far more expressive, though he's lost his ability to use gestures to convey more meaning.) "I mean, it could. It would give John a break, at least. Poor bastard has to watch me every night, so my vent doesn't just decide to kill me."

"It's worth a shot," you shrug.

He nods in agreement. "I guess it is."

**THE FIFTH DAY OF DUSK: 5:00 PM: LOG 053**

You lay beside Dave in his bed. His body is warm against yours, a fact which fascinates you. Trolls aren't warm to the touch, and that's something you find yourself resenting more and more with every human interaction. His hair is soft, and strands brush against your face from time to time. Though he can't feel it, and it seems he doesn't care about it, you hold his hand. You're not particularly sleepy, but you agreed to follow him to bed.

Earlier, you watched John go through what seemed like a long, ritualistic process to get Dave in bed. Beyond cleaning him and dressing him in more appropriate attire, John inflated a rubber cuff around the tubing from his throat. Before doing this, Dave warned you that he'd be unable to speak. Nonetheless, he seems rather chatty right now.

"Should I still be paying you as a bodyguard at this point?" He enunciates his words as best he can, and you read his lips. "We might as well be dating."

"You can if you want to," you shrug. At this point, you no longer care for the pay. You've damned yourself to a lifetime of either being hunted by an entire planet's government, or overthrowing it.

"You know, no one else trusted you as a bodyguard. Rose sure as hell didn't." Dave frowns.

You, too, frown. The guilt rises again, waking from its slumber like an angry bear. You were originally ordered to kill Dave...

"I trust you with my life, you know. I'm still not used to this, and I'm sure as fuck not used to being completely down as support for the movement."

"Mhm." You bite your lip. You know that you'll need to tell him, but you can't bring yourself to. How could you? He's admitted secrets he's presumably told no one else. He loves you, and you love him. How *would* you tell him?

Dave, meanwhile, opens his mouth to say more. Instead, he lets forth a grunt of discomfort. A weak cough follows this, and his hand, the one intertwined with yours, begins to twitch.
You massage it gently, and take the opportunity to redirect the conversation. "Get some sleep, jackass. You'll feel better in the morning."

Dave nods. He closes his eyes and moves his head to be closer to yours.

Within a few minutes, he's asleep, and you're wallowing in freshly resurrected guilt.
The Seventh Day of Dusk: 4:00 AM: LOG 054

When you leave the cave, it's dark out. The artificial sun at the center of the ring colony hasn't even managed to rise past the ever-rotating nighttime barrier. Then again, time is irrelevant here. Time is irrelevant everywhere, really, and it's a fact that you try to spend as little time as possible dwelling upon. Instead, you occupy yourself with the tasks at hand. You scramble into the back of a heavily modified transport trailer. The back has been modified to include a hidden compartment, which is just big enough to hold three people: you, Dave, and John. A small table is at its center, and a flickering bulb provides light.

Dave enters first, followed by John, then, you. It's an odd circus act, filled with cursing and bumping against one another. Inside the compartment isn't any better, either. There's no room to move, and the only source of communication you have with the outside world is an old-fashioned walkie-talkie. It's a predicament you realize would never have happened if you'd just killed Dave like you were supposed to, but you find yourself dealing with it, now.

The door is shut, the passage sealed, and the vehicle lurches into motion.

Whereas John quickly falls asleep, you and Dave both seem to share the same weakness.

"You can't sleep in cars, either?" you ask, quirking a brow.

Dave shrugs. "I can, but I don't like to. Especially not after the last time I fell asleep in a vehicle."

You pause. It suddenly dawns on you that the last time Dave was in a car, he was abducted and imprisoned. If your understanding of the Human act of blushing is correct, you'd assume you would be doing so at this moment. "True." You frown. Casting your gaze downwards, you find a dent in the floor to stare at. "So, is there any sort of plan in place?"

"We're going to arm the Prospitians to the teeth and go kick some ass. I'd been trying to avoid going to war, but it looks like we might as fucking well."

"Sure. Makes sense to me." Karkat sighs. He looks up, and finds himself staring at his own reflection against Dave's shades. "John's out, right?"

"Yeah." Dave laughs. "That asshole could sleep through a literal alien invasion. There's a lot of good reasons he's not a body guard, and only one of them is that he's shit with weapons."

You nod.

The vehicle hits a large bump, and your stomach churns. You haven't eaten lately, and your guilt has only multiplied in the past few days. Now would probably be a great time to tell Dave, though you'd rather not be stuck in a confined space with him for umpteen hours afterwards. You chew on your lip and twiddle your thumbs, watching with little interest as Dave stares at a fly, which circles the unreliable bulb hanging from the ceiling. "So... What's it like?"

"What?" Dave startles. He turns his face towards you, and quirks his brows in confusion. "Sorry, I was watching that little fucker up there. He's pretty chill."

"Yeah..." You don't comment further on the fact that the fly will probably be dead before the ride is over. Instead, you continue trying to force some semblance of a conversation. "Being a... I guess it's not the best way to fucking say it, but you're practically a Human mutant."
"Sure." Dave shrugs. A smirk flashes across his face, though he quickly readopts his usual look of apathy. "I can dig that. Nothing about me works shoulders down, so that's pretty fucking weird, right? Spasms are great pranks, though. Everyone shits themselves. 'Damn, it's a verified goddamned miracle over here.'" Apparently amused by his own commentary, Dave laughs. Then, he pauses. Though you can't see his eyes, it seems that he's no longer looking at you. "Uh... It sucks ass, really. I'm fine with it, seeing as there's no changing it, but I'd love to be able to just jump out of bed and walk to Galactic IHOP."

"IHOP?"

"You've never heard of IHOP?" Dave tuts. "They serve pancakes."

"Pancakes?"

"Damn, dude, have you been living on a meteor? They're those fluffy, flattish things you get for breakfast sometimes."

"Ah." You act as though you've understood what he's said. You can vaguely picture the object, but you don't feel like trying harder to fully comprehend it.

"Yeah. I wouldn't call it mutant, though. It's pretty common, what with all this fucking space junk. Most people just have enough money to have their spines repaired with the newest and greatest tech." Dave frowns. His right hand twitches, though he seems unaware of this. "I'm broke as hell, though, so I'm not getting any of that shit any time soon. Not sure I'd want it at this point. I'd probably get my arms back and be like, 'Aw, shit! What the hell are these noodles?'

Though you try your damnedest not to, you can't help but laugh. "Yeah, I can see it now. You'd wake from your spontaneous miracle and punch yourself square in that insufferable mug of yours."

Dave, too, snickers. "Well, while we're on the topic, my nose has itched like hell for the past few minutes. John's useless, so I'd be in your eternal debt if you could handle the situation."

You nod. You reach across the table and scratch his nose, though you have to take great care to avoid actually scratching him with your claws. His skin is soft and warm, and it's as pleasant a sensation as it's always been to feel that against your skin.

Dave, meanwhile, lets forth a soft sigh. "We'll be here for a while, so I'm not exactly sure what sort of shit we could do."

"Those books that you color in," you sarcastically suggest.

The response you receive is a snort of laughter, followed by a barrage of weak coughs. Though they subside, you can't help but be concerned, and Dave seems to pick up on that. "It's fine," he reassures you, "It happens sometimes. I need to get this tube out sooner rather than later, though. They should have something at the base for it."

"Hm?" You feign interest, though you now find yourself taking interest in the fly from before. It's starting to slow.

"It's this thing that stimulates your lungs. I don't fucking know. I'm not a science person, and I don't think I really care enough to be one. The point is that it's better to use." Dave shrugs.

The fly, meanwhile, lands on the light bulb. There's a quiet hiss, and the insect falls to the table, dead.
"Well, fuck."

After this enlightening comment from Dave, an awkward silence falls between the two of you. (You suppose it's three, though John is still asleep.)

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**The Seventh Day of Dusk: 12:00 PM: LOG 055**

The truck has made it through three security checkpoints without any problems, and the third was the final one on this route. John has woken from his slumber, and he's currently occupying his time by doing shitty magic tricks.

"Pick a card," he declares, fanning the deck of cards out between his hands.

Dave smirks. "Me? That's going to be harder than a space rat's dick during mating season."

John rolls his eyes. He shoves the cards towards you, all while countering Dave, "Shut up, Dave, before I shove one of these in your mouth."

"That won't stop me from talking, you know."

You, too, roll your eyes. Though you're reluctant to encourage any more of John's shenanigans, you draw a card. It's an ace of spades. "Okay? Now what?"

"Put the card back, you ignoramus!" His smile widens, and it's honestly quite cute.

You oblige, return the card to the deck, and folds your arms expectantly. "So, what? You going to guess my card?"

"No," John says, sticking the deck into his jacket pocket. He waves his hands in the air, wiggling his fingers in the dorkiest, corniest way possible. "I'm going to show it to you!" He waggles his brows, reaches behind his ear, and pulls forth a card. He flashes it proudly in your direction, his grin growing ever wider. "And this is your card?"

It's a queen of hearts, but he's so damned happy that you can't tell him no. You nod. "Yup, Egbert, you're spot on."

"Of course I am!" John returns the card to the deck.

Dave, meanwhile, interjects before another trick can start. "Here's a new idea. Why don't we all play a game of charades?"

"Really, Dave?" John snorts with laughter. "You're going to fucking suck."

"Well, dumbass, I'm not going to be the one doing the charades."

"I'm not subject myself to that human humiliation ritual."

"Then, we can do icebreakers."

"Or we could not do that," John volunteers.

"Fair," Dave shrugs.

The three of you, now out of things to do to entertain yourselves, end up watching the dead fly in silence.
**Intermission: Tchaikovsky, Op. 59**

Chapter Notes

**CHAPTER CONTENT WARNING: Ableist language**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**From the pages of Skaian Royal Court Families: Volume 12...**

*Skaian Royal Court Families* is a long line of digital records, which serves to ensure an accurate and unbiased preservation of the history of those who make Skaia the sovereign force it is today! Copies are available in all major and reputable Skaian bookstores, as well as public libraries across the planet.

**ROYAL DUKE DEREK STRIDER**, born in year 31 of King Brujon's Glorious Rule, is descended from the honorable ranks of the Strider lineage. He is proceeded in blood by his brother, **DAVID STRIDER**, whose royal ranking was stripping in the year 59 of King Brujon's Glorious Rule. Unlike his grievous failure of a sibling, **DUKE DEREK STRIDER** is a shining example of what every Skaian Citizen ought to aspire to. His actions are of nothing but noble intentions and patriotic fervor, both exemplary qualities in any individual.

**DUKE STRIDER** continues the **STRIDER LINEAGE**'s legacy of dutiful service to protect this planetary colony's sovereign status. Though blinded in one eye during the Carpathian Dogfight (54 KBGR), he continues to serve as a high-ranking military strategist. His contributions have led to the creation of the **Skaian Action Force for the Prosecution and Execution of Traitors** (SAFPET), which has rid our effulgent colony of those who seek to extinguish our light.

Conversely, **DAVID STRIDER** is a disgrace to our colony. His revocation of rank was spurred by his decision to form the Prospitian Movement, which is little more than a zealous terrorist organization. Through deception and crime, he evaded our forces until 67 KBGR, when he was discovered in a hijacked public transportation vehicle. Upon capture, he was revealed to be little more than a vile cripple, whose existence has undoubtedly leached massive amounts of money from honest, hardworking citizens. Prospitian efforts released him from his imprisonment shortly thereafter, and he is currently wanted.

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**From Skaian Royal Times, 9th**

*Skaian Royal Times* is the planet's premier news source, featuring the articles that matter to YOU!

In a recent and rare release from the otherwise tight-lipped Duke Strider, the celebrated veteran rightfully condemned the actions of his brother, former Duke Dave Strider. His statement was published in the **Skaian Military Bulletin**, a quarterly publication recently distributed to members of Duke Strider's own Skaian Action Force for the Prosecution and Execution of Traitors. The briefing was buried amidst many reports of other terrorist, anti-Skaian activities.

"The actions of my younger brother are of the most abhorrent nature, and his existence continues to plague both my personal life and the health of this planet," began the statement. Later, he eloquently expressed further derision, saying, "David Strider is our top priority right now. All
members of SAFPET should keep a watchful eye out for him, and his whereabouts should be documented. Anyone suspected of sheltering or aiding this criminal is to be interrogated, and their homes and business are to be searched without delay."

Though we are not allowed to print the entirety of this moving piece, we can supply the public with some important information. As acknowledged by Duke Strider's declaration, another conspirator has emerged. Alongside well-known physician, Johnathan Egbert, a "fat, ugly troll, by the name of Karkat Vantas," has been spotted aiding the leader of the terrorist Prospitian movement. Sightings of this troll should be taken very seriously, as he is a trained assassin. Members of the general public are not to approach him, but to report his whereabouts to their local SAFPET chapter.

Chapter End Notes

i stopped trying to plan this and now i'm just fucking winging it. if for some reason you're inspired to do art of this fic, feel free to, and hit up my blog with a sick link. i'll feature it on the appropriate chapter. while you're there, feel free to check out my art blog. as always, comments and feedback are welcome. i never beta read.
Chapter Notes

So I realized that a futuristic Jake would probably use "old timey" language like surfer lingo, so I had to FUCKING DO IT.

The Ninth Day of Dusk: 2:00 AM: LOG 056

Somehow, all three of you managed to fall asleep. Only the cessation of the car's incessant swaying wakes you, though it doesn't seem to have done anything for Dave. It sure has fuck hasn't done anything for John. Considering the fact that he's the highest priority, though, you go for Dave, first. You reach across the table and prod his shoulder. When this fails to elicit a reaction, you shake him by the shoulders.

He rouses with a grunt of annoyance. "What? I was—" He pauses. "Oh. We're here? John. JOHN!!!" Again, he pauses. He shrugs his shoulders a few times, until the tubing at his throat comes loose, and an ear-piercing alarm begins to echo in the soundproofed space. (Admittedly, it's a clever move. It's dangerous as hell, but it's clever.)

John wakes immediately. He replaces the tube, frowns, and slowly registers the lack of motion. "We're here?"

"Yes, Egbert. You're now the third person to make this amazing discovery." You roll your eyes, though you add a smile. "I'm guessing we would be, because the car isn't twitching like a dying insect."

"Makes enough sense to me," John hums. He stretches his hands above his head and lets forth a loud yawn.

"Well, hello there, dudes. That was a totally radical ride, was it not?" A man, who looks a whole lot like John, greets you. A wide grin is spread across his stubble-covered face. "Name's Jake, and I hope you enjoyed your ride. It wasn't too gnarly, was it?"

"I..." you begin. You pause. You lean over, just as Dave makes it out, and mutter, "What the actual fuck is this man saying?"

"Don't mind him. Jake's a little strange. You just have to address him similarly." Dave smirks. "The ride was totally tubular."

"Cool!" Jake's grin somehow widens, and he extends the ramp from the back of the truck.

The Ninth Day of Dusk: 12:00 PM: LOG 057

There are three things you need to address right now.

The first and largest (literally) of these is your location. You're apparently within an abandoned medical facility. As it stands, the planet you're on has been around for roughly a thousand years. In those thousand years, things have changed. This is one of the first hospitals built on this
godforsaken colony, and it was later abandoned due to lack of space and equipment. (At least, that's what Jake, the resident historian and eccentric squatter, who maintains this property, says.)

The building is nestled in the middle of a dense forest, which, itself, is intersected by no more than one road. One singular, sad, lonely road. It's about a half a mile beyond this road, though, so it's not well known. Most people don't even know the place exists, save for what's now the entirety of the Prospitian movement. It seems everyone is content to share old hospital rooms, and the whole place has the exact same communal feel as the cave. It's a strange, foreign thing to you, having lived alone for so long, to see such a convivial atmosphere. As a troll, it's even stranger to see everyone caring for one another.

Secondly, you have to address some of the new people.

There's Jake, the man who drove the truck. He's an eccentric historian and archaeologist, who apparently comes from one of the Earthen Martian colonies. He dates a man named Dirk, who is an unacknowledged bastard son of the Strider family. Confusingly enough, Dirk is also related to Dave as a half-brother. It also happens that Dirk is a robotics expert. Both of them seem nice enough, but you're doing your best to stay out of their business.

With all of that out of the way, you can examine the third thing: where the hell you are in all of this.

You're in the first floor ICU room next to Rose and Kanaya. It's a relatively large space, stocked with a refurbished ventilator and an army's worth of medical supplies. The leaky ceiling has been repaired with corrugated steel, which captures the water seeping in and redirects it to a water catchment system. The floor is plain, cold concrete, and the water stained walls are plain. The door remains in working order, and even features a button to open it. There's only one bed, though, and it's clearly for a single person. It's a fancy bed, one you'd expect to see in a hospital. It can adjust itself with the press of a button, conforming to any desired angle. This would be extremely cool, if it weren't for the guardrails on either side. It's a tight squeeze, and you finally decided to steal another mattress and just sleep on the floor.

Right now, you're in the operating room. You sit on a small wooden chair, which is painted in faded rainbow colors. Your best assumption is that it was stolen from the former pediatric ward. Dirk sits on a nearby stool, his legs crossed, his feet propped against the nearby counter. The halogen bulb overhead flickers sporadically, and the hastily repaired fridge in the corner hums awkwardly. Jake seems to be occupying himself by eating a bag of plain potato chips, branded as Crunchy Boys.

Dave is next to you. Some sort of device was recently implanted in him, which allows him to breathe without the use of the ventilator during the day. (John explained the inner workings of this to you, but you didn't understand anything about it. You lack the knowledge of Human anatomy to really grasp anything beyond the fact that he seems much happier without the tubing weighing him down during the day.) The wires extending from the back of his skull have been connected to a cobbled together exoskeleton, which wraps around his right arm.

"Okay," Dirk says, glancing at the cell-phone-like device in his hands, "It looks like I've got all the settings down. Hopefully this doesn't backfire horribly and fry you to a crisp. That would suck, right?"

"You still haven't told me what I'm supposed to be doing," Dave says, his voice hoarse and soft. (John says it'll return to normal over time, and it's slightly louder than it was immediately after the quick procedure.) His left eyebrow arches upwards, extending a bit above the lenses of his shades.

Dirk, meanwhile, offers an embarrassed laugh. He pulls his own sunglasses, which are shaped like
stupid anime shades, from their place atop his head, and begins to toy with them. "Yeah. That would've been helpful, right? This is more experimental than the first nuclear bomb, so I can only theorize what this is going to do. I'd say that moving the whole arm is a bit of a stretch right now, so just try..."

At this point, a low hum echoes through the room. Dave's middle finger shoots up, and a cocky grin spreads across his face. "Fingers work. That wasn't too hard." Clearly pleased with himself, he lets the exoskeleton reset itself, forming a loose fist. "What's next?"

"Damn." Dirk shrugs. He approaches Dave, studies the machinery, and rubs the back of his neck. "How'd you do that?"

"I just sat here and thought, 'Man, fuck this guy. I know what I'm doing.'"

A quiet groan escapes Dirk, though he quickly continues his introduction to the machine. "It should be neural, so it measures electrical impulses from your brain. So, next, let's..." Here, he pauses. He glances around, stopping when he spots a dented old can. He picks it up, plops it down on a rolling cabinet, and pushes the cabinet forwards, until it touches the left side of Dave's chair.

Dave, meanwhile, frowns.

An anticipatory silence falls upon the room. Nothing happens. The silence shifts to being awkward, and begins to verge on painful.

Finally, Dave speaks up. "Is this shit broken, or am I doing something wrong?"

Yeah, I..." Dirk bites his lip. He studies the device in his hands, and finally looks at Dave with an apologetic smile. "This is going to hurt. I'm not going to lie, you're going to want this." He pulls a wad of gauze from a plastic bag in his pocket, shoves it into Dave's mouth, and kneels down. He begins to fiddle with the wires.

Dave lets forth a poorly stifled yell.

"I warned you, bro," Dirk mutters, diligently continuing his work. You're amazed at his focus, considering Dave's pained protests. His hands work with remarkable speed, and he has the precision of an award-studded sniper. "This isn't as great of a setup as the old implant, but it's all we've got. Maybe you should have tried mobilizing the millionaires."

Understandably, Dave isn't in the mood to quip back. By the time Dirk steps away, he's sniffling. He spits out the gauze, leans his head against the headrest, and groans. "Jesus. Fuck. Just kill me next time you do that."

"You can probably work the—" begins Dirk.

With an uncharacteristic sharpness, Dave cuts him off. "Just give me a minute. God. That felt worse than getting shot."

Dirk steps back, and you follow his lead. You've never seen Dave in this sort of mood, and you're not keen on finding out what happens if you push him further. Instead, you pull a juice box from your pocket. It's one of five you had stashed away before the trip, and it seems this is a good time to use it. You stab the straw in, and inch carefully towards Dave. You rest the straw against his lips, and he seems to drink eagerly.

After consuming the entire box, he nods. "That was the best shit I've ever tasted. I've reached maximum refueling. You're an absolute saint, Karkat," Dave huffs. "Okay, yeah, let's try this
again. What am I doing?"

"Just grab the can," Dirk explains.

Dave nods. This time, it seems to go smoothly. The arm moves exactly as it should, though it takes a few seconds for Dave to adjust to controlling it. Nonetheless, he's grabbing the can in his hand within a minute or so. A wide, confident grin is spread across his face.

"Awesome. We fixed that, so..." Dirk steps forward again. He opens up the outward facing side of the controls for Dave's chair, which are on the left, and does some quick work there. When he replaces the plastic panel, he offers an approving nod. "I rewired this to work as your new way to move. I'd keep the retainer for now, though, because there's no sensory feedback for how much power you're putting behind your movements."

"Mmm. That's fair," Dave concedes. He cautiously presses against the arm rest, pushing himself into a more upright position, before continuing. "Thanks, Dirk. You're a fucking genius."

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**The Ninth of Dusk: 9:00 PM: LOG 58**

You end up falling asleep shortly after returning to the room, following the session with Dirk. The last thing you remember was John coming in to help Dave. Now, you wake to the sound of muffled music. It's lively and upbeat, celebratory, even. Seeing as you're on the floor, Dave towers above you. Since you last saw him, he's been redressed in a pair of slacks and a button up shirt, the top few buttons undone. A red vest accents this, and his usual look of apathy has returned. From what you've gathered about him, this happens when he's nervous. Another tell of his is that his right leg bounces rapidly. From this angle, you can see beneath his shades; his eyes are directed upwards, away from you, and metallic plods sound as his left hand taps against the armrest of his chair.

"You slept real late," Dave mutters, his voice adopting a thick southern accent. "You missed the beginning. We're celebrating making it here. No casualties. Fucking miracle, right?" He turns his head away from you. "Everyone's out there dancing and getting drunk, and I was wondering if you wanted to join me."

You let forth a snort of laughter. "I'm wearing my pajamas, you dense fuck."

"Doesn't matter to me." He shrugs. "Come on. We made it here, we might as well celebrate."

"No offence," you say, still a bit groggy, "But how the actual fuck do I dance with you?" By now, you've managed to stumble to your feet.

Dave, meanwhile, flashes an awkward smile. He nods to his shaking right hand, which rests in his lap. "Just take my hand and follow me, you fucking buzzkill."

"I'm not drunk enough for this," you grumble. Nevertheless, you agree. You grab his hand. It's soft, and the muscles beneath the skin continue to shift even as you hold onto it.

With this, Dave takes off. You end up jogging to catch up. You follow him through the door to your room, into the general entrance area. The space is crowded with festive partying, and the participants are as diverse as before. Every possible race is here, and, to an Alternian refugee turned assassin, it's an odd sight. Unity is still a strange concept to you, though you find yourself drawn to it.

Likewise, you're drawn to Dave's voice. "Okay." He reaches out and grabs your other hand with his left. The metal around his hand is cold, though it's not unpleasantly so. He shrugs his
shoulders, pulling his right hand from your grasp, and bumps the footrests of his chair to your shins. When this fails to elicit the correct response, he tugs forcefully at your arm.

You stumble, fall into his lap, and let forth an almost obligatory obscenity. "What the fuck, Strider?"

Worming his right hand free, Dave begins to fiddle with his chair's controls. Somehow, he manages to make it move and sway in what could pass as dancing. A cocky smirk is spread across his face. "I don't know. I just felt like having some fun. Shit gets boring when you're one of the heads of a political revolution. You need to lighten up sometimes, right?"

"I guess?" you grumble. Looking up from your odd landing place, you can see Dave's face. The smile on his face tugs at your primary circulatory organ as nothing else has ever done before. You can feel the warmth of his body against yours, and you can feel each rhythmic breath. When you manage to readjust yourself, you rest your head against his shoulder. His hair is soft and light, and strands tickle your face with every motion.

You're not quite sure how you got here, and you certainly don't understand how this man has managed to worm his way into your heart like a stubborn computer virus, but you're fairly certain you like it.

No...

You are certain.
The Thirteenth of Dusk: 1:00 PM: LOG 59

Slowly, the abandoned hospital begins to gain a second life. The corridors fill with laundry lines, the leaking ceilings are repaired with plaster and wood, and formerly uninhabitable spaces are cleaned to perfection. Music fills the halls. Songs of joy and resilience reverberate from dawn to dusk. This seems to be in direct opposition to the ongoing conflict. Every morning, a handful of scouts survey the area. Every night, reports of Skaian military presence grows.

On the first night, the movement was alone. The second night, two snipers were spotted. The third night, ten were seen. Rumors spread of a worm in the ranks, yet people continue to trust one another. It's strange, and it goes against everything you've taught yourself. People shouldn't be trusted, yet they continue to trust you, an alien sent to kill their leader. It weighs against you. You recall reading about an ancient Earth civilization, whose myth told of a god of the afterlife, who would weigh a heart against a feather. Somehow, you feel that yours would fail to pass this test.

Still, you shove the thoughts to the back of your mind. For the first time that you can remember, you're happy. People like you, and they respect you. You can't just throw all that away for something that never actually happened. You'll tell him eventually, but now isn't the time...

The Thirteenth of Dusk: 2:00 PM: LOG 60

The first casualty is recorded.

A single bullet to the head. One of the Carapacians is dead.

The music has stopped. In its place, there's fear.

The Thirteenth of Dusk: 6:00 PM: LOG 61

Dinner with Dave is always a private affair. John always enjoys going outside, socializing with members of the movement. Dave, however, prefers to eat either alone or in a small group. Today, he's chosen to eat in his room. You sit with him at a small wooden table, cutting the meat into manageable chunks. When you're done, you slide the plate to him.

He eats eagerly, and you'd expect him to. He hasn't had anything to eat since this morning, when he ate a single blueberry muffin. By the time he's done, you're only halfway through your plate.

"Someone was hungry," you mutter.

Dave shrugs. "Habit. I never had the luxury of knowing my food would stay in place when I was a kid."

You open your mouth to say something, only to think otherwise. Instead, for no reason beyond wanting something to discuss, you bring up a completely different topic. "So, I don't get much about the fucking shitbundle that's Human anatomy, but... Hm. I can't think of a good way to put this, either... What happened to you, exactly?"

"I was shot." Dave shrugs. "I went outside to get the newspaper, and ended up on the ground." Here, Dave pauses. He hums thoughtfully, then adds the least insightful comment possible to his
response, "Did you know that pavement tastes like shit?"

"I've never had to lick pavement, so I didn't. Thank you for that fucking enlightening insight, Strider," you respond sarcastically, though your curiosity is starting to rear its ugly head. "Really, though, it wasn't that long ago, was it?"

"About six months. I'm no pro about this, that's for sure. I mean, I don't really know what happened. John kept me alive until I got to an actual medical facility. They gave me the most fucking abysmal prognosis possible, and shut me into one of the recuperation pods for a while. A week later, John woke me up and told me to go by the name of Joe Smith." Dave shoves his empty plate aside and sighs. "I did a week or two of occupational therapy, then got sent home. John taught me the rest, but he's no expert, either."

"He's a doctor, though, isn't he?" you ask.

Dave laughs. "He was trained as a standard issue pediatrician. He's not supposed to be taking care of this sort of shit."

"So, then, how the fuck are you so damned casual about all this? I'd be fucked up to the next Star system and back," you say, bluntly.

There's a moment of silence. Dave hums thoughtfully. After some time, he seems to find the words he wants to say. "I'm not. I'm good at acting. I learned it when I was a kid. Nothing's really worth crying about, because my brother would kick it out of me, anyhow. I mean, I'm already fucked up beyond belief. You could get a PhD in getting fucked up, and I'd teach the course. It's just something that happened. There's nothing I can do about it, and there sure as fuck ain't anything you can do about it, so I don't see a point in worrying."

"Fair enough." For all the shit he usually spews, you find Dave's words to be poetic. They stir something deep inside you, though you can't tell what. Hope? Revelation? Whatever it is, it churns inside your gut. "Had anyone else tried to kill you before?"

"Not really."

"So... Isolated incident?"

"Presumably." Dave frowns. "I mean... You were asking about how I deal with all this. I don't. That's my thing. I don't deal with anything. The biggest thing now is probably lack of actual medical care."

You nod.

"What I really need is someone who knows what they're doing. No offense to John, because he's my literal best bro, but he knows about as much about this as I know about brain surgery. My muscles just do their own thing most of the time, and it's starting to twist things out of shape. I'm not sure it matters, but it annoys me. I'd like my feet to remain at the correct angle, at least."

"That's fair."

At this point, Dave seems to lose interest in the discussion. He waits a few minutes, then offers a sly grin. "Are you planning on finishing that, or can I eat it?"

You respond by cutting up the rest of your meat. You slide the plate across the table. "Fucking yuck it up, you shameless dickweed."
You can't sleep.

You find yourself pacing to and fro, sometimes taking glances through the thin gap between the plywood over the window. The night sky is clear, and the low light levels of the area allow you to see the stars. They're the same stars you've seen from every planet you've ever been to. Yet, they seem to shine brighter here. Perhaps you've never thought to sit and look. Perhaps you've never stopped and taken time to think about what exists beyond you. Beyond your survival. You've never thought of anyone but yourself, not after Eridan betrayed you, and you never thought you would.

Now, you are. You're thinking of Dave, of John, of Kanaya, of Rose, of Jade, and of all the members of the Prospitian movement. You worry about them. You feel their joy and their pain, and it's something that you haven't felt in a long time. You're part of a larger thing, and you realize you're not the only person you have to look out for any more.

And one thing can ruin it all. If you tell the truth, you'll be damned.

How are you supposed to even start?

More importantly, why would you start? For all the guilt you know it will cause you, something else inside you wants to keep running. Why tell anyone? You're a free person, and you can choose to do whatever you please.

Yes, it's shitty, but you can't bear the thought of going back to the assassin headquarters. First of all, they'll kill you for failing such a crucial assignment. And, if they don't, what's the point? You don't know any of them. You don't care about any of them. You know these people. You care about the Prospitians. For once in your life, you can do something good, and you're not about to fuck up.
**CHAPTER WARNINGS:** A tooth is ripped out. I'm not sure what that'd be called, but it seems like possible squick. Dental horror?

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The Fifteenth of Dusk: 9:00 AM: LOG 63

A death count has started. It was five, and now it's seven. Two teens, a Human and a Carapacian, were killed earlier. Both had gone out to fetch food supplies, and both were shot within a yard of the door. You helped to bring the bodies inside, though little could be done beyond wrapping them and storing them in a sealed room. Burials are too risky, and cremation isn't going to happen in a run down hospital.

The atmosphere has shifted. The fear is spreading. Few people wander the corridors, and every remaining window has been boarded up. Small holes remain for Prospitian snipers, but little damage has been done to the gathering army. Food supplies are already running low, and there's little that can be done about it. The only option is to run, which is obviously risky.

"There's another," Dave declares, handing his pistol to you to reload. "So, what? We're winning, twelve to seven."

"They have at least fifty snipers out there, you dumbass," you grumble. You hand the gun back, then glance through the slot between the boards. You see another soldier, though he's hit in the head by a well-aimed shot shortly thereafter. He falls to the ground, dead, and a series of shots ring out from the dense undergrowth. "Look, this seems like a really shitty idea."

"What other choice do we have?" Dave sighs.

A nearby walkie-talkie relays a myriad of information from around the hospital. Multiple voices chatter, all of them covering one another in static, but it seems that Dave understands what's said. "They're down to fifty-six known snipers." Dave sets his gun aside and rotates his right shoulder. He scribbles the information onto a poorly cleaned whiteboard. As the radio continues to chatter, he roughly maps out the information. Due to the limit's of the arm's reach, it's a rather small, cramped map, but it makes sense to him. He studies it closely, tapping his fingers against his armrest and humming thoughtfully. "Most of the group can get out to the southeast. There aren't that many snipers, and we can draw fire with decoys."

"Decoys?" you ask, incredulously.

Dave nods. "Rose has been working with Kanaya to make fake clothing. We'll place it on some old IV poles, top it off with some mannequin heads, and shove those shits down the hill to the northwest. That way, the gunners will be distracted."

"For how long?" you scoff. "Five seconds?"

"We're only evacuating the fastest and healthiest right now," Dave declares, his brows furrowed in thought. "The rest will be evacuated later."
You consider protesting, though the plan sounds solid enough. There's obviously no real way out, and lives will be lost either way. "Fine," you grumble, "So, who's going where? I'm not leaving you here."

"I figured, you stubborn ass. No, you're staying here. John is, too. Most everyone else will be leaving." With this said, Dave backs away from the whiteboard. He grabs a nearby bottle of water and chugs. When he's done, he returns to his post at the window. He grabs his gun and fires off a few more shots. "Everything should start in the next few days, once the decoys are ready. Dirk is working on some new robotics. He says it should give me a better chance at making it out if the worst happens."

You nod. You don't ask for details. Honestly, you don't want to know. You don't want to think about that scenario.

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The Fifteenth of Dusk: 11:00 AM: LOG 64

Somehow, you find yourself alone with Kanaya. You'd run off to get some more water for Dave, and she was in the supply closet. It seems she had been reorganizing some things, packing others, and discarding what wasn't needed. When you enter, she greets you with a smile. Nevertheless, when she speaks, her voice is cool. "Karkat! Nice to see you. I've been meaning to speak with you about something."

"Hm?" you ask, rather stupidly, as you grab a bottle of water.

"You joined the assassins, did you not? We trained together. I know you did." She speaks with her usual eloquence, though it's quick. It's as if she doesn't want you to be able to interrupt. "I was wondering if you've checked your oral health lately."

You pause. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"Well, if you remember correctly, we were required to get that procedure done when we were trained. They never disclosed the purpose, but I have a hunch." She ends this statement with a cryptic sigh. After glancing at the package of chips in her hands, she throws it into the growing pile of garbage at her feet. "I recently discovered a tracker in one of my teeth. A molar, specifically. It was well-hidden, appearing much like a filling. However, I have impeccable oral hygiene."

"A tracker? For what?" you huff, growing increasingly suspicious of this line of questioning.

In return, Kanaya sets down the package of water bottles she's holding. She takes a long, graceful step in your direction, and leans in, whispering her next comment, "You are well aware that they are still tracking you as a traitor of the planet, right? Whatever you did to wrong them, it's pissed them off, and they're not going to stop following your trail." With this said, she steps back to her previous spot. She resumes her work, as if nothing happened, and offers you a cordial smile. "I'm just offering a bit of advice, Karkat. A favor for a friend, shall we say."

Slowly, you nod. You clutch the bottle of water close to your chest, and sprint from the room as fast as you possibly can.

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The Fifteenth of Dusk: 11:00 AM: LOG 65

"You look pale. You feeling okay?" Dave comments as you enter the room.
Remaining silent, you open the bottle and offer him a drink.

He sets aside his gun long enough to drink a fair bit of the water. He hands it back to you, picks the gun back up, and prods you further. "Really, dude, are you okay? There's been a stomach bug going around. I'm not sure if trolls can get human diseases, but you don't look so hot."

You force a smile. "I'm fine," you lie.

The Fifteenth of Dusk: 3:00 PM: LOG 66

You follow Dave into Dirk's room, which is less of a room and more of an operating theater. Computer parts are strewn across the floor, wires litter the space like cyberpunk confetti, and various monitors display a myriad of information. A strange visor is set upon a rolling cart. The front sporadically flashes red, and wires hang from it like electronic intestines.

After you arrive, Dirk sets about setting the device up. He secures a plug to the end of the frayed wires, wraps it in tape, and approaches Dave. He plugs the new device into the exoskeleton arm, and sets the visor on Dave's head. "I've tested this myself, but I'll have you take a few shots. This calibrates the arm to shoot at objects you choose by blinking. There's a sensor inside, which detects where your eyes are. You'll have to calibrate it, first..."

Now, Dirk steps back. He approaches you, holding a cobbled together controller. There are only two buttons. One is red, the other, green. You're fairly sure of the meanings, but you allow Dirk to explain.

"Red is an emergency shutoff, and green is to recalibrate. Hit green now, and we'll see how it goes."

Naturally, you obey the command. You press the green button.

"When calibration is complete, you'll see a popup message," Dirk says, now leaning against the wall. His arms are folded across his face, and his facial expression is infuriatingly passive. "Let me know when that's done."

After a few seconds, Dave nods.

Dirk pulls out a foam ball, which is tied to a makeshift parachute. "Okay. Lock onto this, and we'll confirm everything works."

You find yourself questioning the safety of this. Nonetheless, you don't mention your concerns. You have little to lose, and Dirk seems confident in his invention. Instead, you watch what unfolds.

Dirk throws the ball into the air. It reaches its peak, then begins to slowly descend to the ground. Motors hum. Gears grind. Dave's arm lurches into action, seeming to track the ball, before a single shot is fired.

The ball veers off course, and this is all Dirk needs to confirm the device works. He offers a thumbs up, then approaches Dave. He unplugs the visor and removes it. "Karkat, you understand how to set this up? There's three ports on the arm, and all three will work. Besides that, you just need to make sure it's secured in place."

"Yeah." You mirror the thumbs up, though your mind is still elsewhere. You're still preoccupied with what Kanaya said.
The Fifteenth of Dusk: 11:00 PM: LOG 67

When everyone is asleep, and the building is dark, you enter the bathroom closest to the room you share with Dave. You switch on the lights, and watch as they flicker to life. They hum, the noise droning on in your head like a pesky insect.

Approaching the mirror over the sink, you pull a flashlight from your pocket. You open your mouth, shine the light in, and examine your teeth closely. Each is worn down, probably by your lack of a consistently nutritious diet, and there are sporadic fillings. Yet, amidst all this, you see something strange. In the back of your mouth, on the right side, is an unusually large filling. Unlike the others, it's not black. No, this one seems to be a slightly pulsating green. It's conspicuous as fuck, and you're confident that this is what Kanaya warned you about.

Now, despite your natural distrust of others, you trust those you care about. You trust your friends and, as your former classmate and pseudo-tutor in assassin training, you trust Kanaya. You trust her enough that you've come prepared. You pull out a pair of pliers, a roll of gauze, and a bottle of straight vodka. You take a deep breath in.

You've been injured before. You've broke bones, been shot, been stabbed, and taken substantial falls with ease. You have never, however, been fond of dental work. You actively avoid dentists, which is likely why you have such dubious oral hygiene in the first place. In fact, the last time you saw a dentist was on Alternia, before your assassin training.

One final deep breath. In... Out.

You clamp the pliers around the tooth.

Five...

Four...

Three...

Two...

One...

It happens swiftly. Your training allows you to resist the urge to scream, though the pain is far below the pain tolerance threshold you've built for yourself over the years. You stuff gauze into your mouth, down a good amount of alcohol, and examine the tooth. It's chipped, and it's now obvious that the green piece is pulsating. You're absolutely positive that this is a tracker, and you're not about to let all this work be for nothing. You drop the bloodied tooth into the toilet and flush, sending to to who-knows-where. Then, you wash off the pliers. You clean the room, wiping up the traces of candy red blood you've left behind, before finally feeling the alcohol kick in.

After replacing the old gauze, you stumble out of the bathroom, down the hallway, and into your room. You drop onto the mattress, and fall asleep, as if nothing had happened.
Chapter Notes

This one's a bit short, but it'll be followed by a longer one.

The Sixteenth of Dusk: 9:00 PM: LOG 68

When the sun has set, and the fields around the hospital are shrouded in pure darkness, the plan is set in motion. A large amount of decoys, all made of stuffed clothes lashed to Styrofoam topped IV poles, are set loose. You and Kanaya lead them to the appropriate exit, remove the boards from the door, and let them go. They're released in groups of three or four, and their timing is coordinated by relayed messages.

"Another group has left." This is your cue to release more decoys.

And, each time you do, the snipers fall for it. Shots ring out. Like morbid confetti, burnt crisps of Styrofoam fly into the night, dislodged by mixtures of bullets and laser blasts.

Within the hospital, there are roughly two to three hundred people. They leave in waves of twenty, slowly trickling from the building like ants fleeing from impending doom. You know that, across the building from your current position, Dave is covering them with his own fire. John is also helping, but you're guessing John isn't as accurate as Dave. Then again, Dave is also using the visor, so his already high accuracy will be bolstered even further.

Each wave goes perfectly on your end, and you quickly reach the final wave.

"Try not to die, Karkat," Kanaya says, placing her hand on your shoulder.

You nod. "You do the same."

She offers you a thin smile, then departs.

You release the last of the decoys.

When you're done, you return to where Dave and John have been stationed.

"Well, we can't really see the results right now, but we seem to have gotten everyone out of here," John greets you with the results of your efforts. He sets aside the scoped rifle he'd been using, and smiles. "They're down a good twenty snipers, though."

"Thanks mostly to me," Dave proudly announces, a wide smirk spread across his face. "You got, what? Two?"

"That's more than usual," John shrugs.

You, meanwhile get the visor off of Dave.

Once he's free, he maneuvers away from the space he'd used as a sniping spot. "They'll probably have more back by tonight. No doubt they'd rather kill John and I than any of those Carapacians and whatnot."
"Take out the leaders, and you take out the movement. It's a solid theory, but they never consider that more than one fuckhead can have an idea at a time, and one of those bastards is definitely going to be charismatic. The movement will just form again, presumably under a different name. If both of you are dead, then it'll definitely be a different leader, too," you say, thinking aloud.

Dave, meanwhile, seems to realize something. "Look, if both of us get offed, you've got to keep this shit going."

"What?" You pause. You've never considered yourself particularly charismatic, and you certainly don't think of yourself as a leader. If anything, you consider yourself a bit of a coward. After all, no one besides a coward makes a living murdering unsuspecting victims. Hell, in your line of work, you often do it when their backs are turned. And, you feel the need to say as much. "I can't even handle myself. How the fuck would you expect me to handle anyone else?"

"You're more compelling than you know," Dave shrugs. His right hand trembles slightly as a result. "You're the vice to my president, you feel?"

"Not really," you grumble.

John, meanwhile, seems to have grown disinterested in the discussion. He occupies himself by drawing funny faces in the dust settled on the windowsill.

Dave, however, seems to have only just begun. He moves forwards, until the footplates of his wheelchair ram into your shins, and smirks. "You're loud, you're opinionated, and you've got enough hot air in your head to float a hot air balloon. Trust me, you'd make a perfect successor."

Sensing that you'll never convince Dave of your lack of leader-worthiness without telling him your real goal was to kill him, you concede. A reluctant sigh escapes you, and you redirect the conversation's topic. "So, we'll be going tomorrow?"

"Same deal as tonight," Dave nods. Clearly, he's taken the bait.

And you, realizing that you can now easily reel Dave in, continue, "And is there a set meeting place?"

"We're heading for a place called Alcor. It's one of the original settlements on the colony, but it was abandoned later. It's part of the park we're in, actually." Dave explains this all so matter-of-factly, and you have a hunch that he's obtained this information from Jake. You have no doubt, though, that he and John both picked the location. And, as this consideration crosses your mind, he explains, "It's located on a small hill. It's not that large, and it's surrounded by a dumpy little wall. Easy to defend, and a bit more private than this place. The downside is that there's more open space, so we're banking on having some time to set up before the Skaian army arrives."

You reply with a nod. "We're in a park?"

"Yep! Skaia Historical Forest. It's a protected park, mostly because they kept cutting trees down, and people started to get pissed. So, they made a huge ass chunk of land, and said, 'Here. This is all going to be some trees. Wild animals can fuck here.' They probably didn't actually say that last bit, but you get the idea, right?" Dave shoots you a wide, lopsided grin.

And you can't help but smile back. "Sure, Strider. Whatever you say."
The Seventeenth of Dusk: 10:00 PM: LOG 69

"You actually think those things will fool anyone?" you ask, staring at the strangely dressed IV poles. Clothing, stuffed with a mixture of rocks and bandaging, hang loosely from each. Spray painted Styrofoam heads, each adorned with hair made of straw and grass, top the creations off. "These look like some godawful art project."

Dave shrugs. He studies the last of the thirty monstrosities, which is being set up by John. "Take your complains to Rose and Kanaya. They made them."

At this point, John interjects. He offers one of his overly hopeful smiles. "That's why we're launching these at night. It's the opposite of a surprise attack."

"Wonderful," you mutter, "We're throwing them a fucking surprise party."

"Hm. That would be the opposite of a surprise attack, wouldn't it?" John frowns. He rubs his chin thoughtfully. Over the past few days, it seems he hasn't had time to shave, as fine black stubble is beginning to show. Notably, he doesn't seem to have any signs of a mustache. (You consider revising your concept of humans. Apparently, mustaches are not a thing that always accompany beards.)

Dave, meanwhile, moves around the cluster of decoys. He studies each, sometimes making small adjustments. "I think we have a solid chance of making it out of here alive. These are all the leftovers, and they should cover for three people. And it worked well last night, didn't it?"

"Actually," John mutters, tugging at the sweat-stained collar of his coat, "There were five casualties."

Dave frowns. He runs his fingers through his hair. "Well... Five out of a few hundred isn't too awful, right?"

"I guess not," John, too, frowns. He pulls his glasses off and wipes them on his shirt. "We'll need to get moving soon, though. Hopefully, they don't follow us."

You keep your mouth shut.

The Seventeenth of Dusk: 6:30 PM: LOG 70

You finish tying the knot, securing the final decoy in place. John, apparently having taken up the hobby from Rose, wove a sort of pseudo-net around the poles. They'll stay upright, which should further the illusion of them being actual people.

"There." You declare aloud your successful completion of the task. Then, you step towards Dave. You set the visor up, plug it in, and go through the appropriate calibration procedures. When it's all through, he nods.

You, meanwhile, take out your pistol. You know that it's little defense against snipers, but it helps calm you. It gives you a sense of control, and it reassures you that you have some sort of chance against a faceless enemy. Then, you push. The first of the dummies rolls out, followed by the rest. You sprint for the other side of the building.
John and Dave are already prepared. They're loaded into a makeshift Humvee, with Dave's chair laid flat in the back. Dave has his gun ready, resting the barrel against the passenger side door, and John, like you, has a pistol. You've made all these observations by the time you reach the car, and you clamber in as fast as possible. You land on your stomach, in the trunk of the car, in front of Dave's chair, and, before you have time to readjust yourself, John floors it.

The car lurches forwards, speeds through the already removed glass entryway, and onto the rough terrain ahead. The sound of gunshots surround you, and it makes you recall the constant sounds of strife on Alternia. Humming shrieks echo from laser rifles, and resonant clangs sound from traditional sniper rifles.

You manage to catch a glimpse of a few snipers amidst the underbrush, and you prepare to fire at them. Before you can, however, Dave has taken a shot. To your complete lack of surprise, he hits every one.

Trees and underbrush breeze by, blurring together as the vehicle's speed increases. The safety glass of the windshield shatters, and an intricate spider web design crackles outwards from the point of impact. No one seems sure of the source, though no one is really speaking at this point. It could have been an errant branch, a bullet, or a rock. Whatever it was, it's gone, and it's no one's problem at the moment.

Eventually, the gunfire fades. The world becomes silent, and the air fills with the burring of the Humvee's motor. From time to time, an Earthen owl will coo. Otherwise, there's nothing but a dense, tense silence.

**The Seventeenth of Dusk: 11:30 PM: LOG 70**

The adrenaline—or whatever the troll equivalent is—fades as you near the location. A singular light at the top of an old town hall signals your destination, and the car slows. When it comes to a stop, you finally have time for a breath. It's knocked out of you quickly, though.

"John, you're bleeding." Dave says this flatly, and his expression is enigmatic. There's no sign of concern, but you know that it's there.

Your gaze, naturally, lands on the subject of the statement. Sure enough, blood stains the right shoulder of John's shirt. It spreads, forming a fairly large blob, though it obviously didn't hinder his ability to drive the car. He has, however, dropped his pistol.

"It's nothing," John says, offering a characteristic grin. He stumbles from the car, clutching the injured limb, before looking to you. "I'm going to go find the first aid station. You can get Dave out, right?"

You nod.

Understandably, John sprints off.

Meanwhile, you unload Dave's chair. It's heavy, but it's lighter than you thought it would be. After some awkward maneuvering, you manage to get it on the ground. You push it around to the passenger's side, and open Dave's door. Leaning in, you lift his left arm over your shoulder, and lift him in a rough bridal style. Once you set him down, you help him readjust.

Only now does he look to you. His shades are clipped to his collar, and his eyes are wide with concern. "You think John's okay?"

"John's fine," you say. It's not a lie. He was still able to walk. Nonetheless, you have no idea what
the extent of the injuries could be.

Dave seems to sense this uncertainty. He nods in reply, though he doesn't say much else. Instead, he begins to survey the area.

The buildings are crumbling, but they're made of stone and brick. Thus, they're sturdy. Shattered glass windows have already been covered with plywood, and vines grow through unmaintained sidewalks. The road is covered in cracks, and chunks of asphalt break apart beneath your feet. Nevertheless, the town is obviously being put to good use. Children are playing, and the joyful atmosphere of earlier has returned.

"Oh. Fuck," utters Dave. You turn, and find him stuck in a pothole. One wheel of his chair is sinking into the asphalt, while the others spin in a wild, fruitless attempt to move. "Why can't we have cool, high tech bases? Something spacious and flat, like those outlandishly expensive military training areas."

Pressing your shoulder against the back of Dave's chair, you lift it out of the hole. "I'm not the one who picked the base. Besides, we can't exactly take over a heavily armed location in the middle of a city, now, can we?"

"If we had a death wish, we could," Dave replies. His eyes are now locked on the ground, though it's apparent by now that traversing the terrain will be difficult. "Rose and Kanaya are at the city hall, where we'll be staying." As he says this, he looks forwards. Noting the elegant stairs to the front door of the building, he groans. "Of fucking course that's where we're staying. This planet is just a hunk of bullshit floating in space, ain't it?"

You're inclined to agree, considering everything that's happened here, but you keep your mouth shut. Instead, you step forwards. "You want me to help, or are you going to act like a stubborn jackass?"

"Go ahead." Dave sighs. He taps his fingers against the armrest of his chair, and his left leg bounces as you begin to push him forwards.

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**The Seventeenth of Dusk: 1:00 PM: LOG 71**

Dave, John, and Rose are all gathered in a meeting room. Presumably, they're discussing the current situation. From what you've heard, there aren't any signs of the military. The weather is supposed to be fairly steady, though rain might be coming in the next few days, and it's going to be cold.

You, however, have another priority. You wait outside of the room Rose and Kanaya are in.

A deep breath in... Then... Out.

You knock on the door.

Kanaya answers. "Ah. I see you've made it here safely. It's a shame John was injured, but he'll be back to usual in the next few months."

"You know what I'm here for, Maryam," you mutter. You had intended for this to be a more aggressive statement. You were going to growl this to her, using your most intimidating voice possible. Instead, it comes out as a timid huff. You're vaguely aware of the fact that your horns are likely turning a subtle red.

Kanaya, meanwhile, maintains her composure. She offers a thin smile, steps aside, and invites you
into the room.

It's a small space, presumably an old office. A double mattress is thrown on the floor, and the dirty mattress has been rolled up and stored in the corner. On top of an old office desk, a solar powered portable fan hums away.

"What do you know?"

Kanaya shrugs. She folds her arms across her chest and sits on the desk, either unaware of or indifferent to the accumulated dust. Her legs are crossed, and a thin smile masks her emotions. "That depends on what you're asking."

You groan. "Do you know what I'm... What I was doing here?"

Though you know it's likely only a few seconds' pause, the time between your question and her answer seems too last forever. Your primary circulatory organ pounds against your chest, threatening to burst through. Eventually, though, she offers another shrug. "I'm aware that you were hired to kill Dave. You forget I also know how to access biologue data."

"Fuck." You run your fingers through your hair. A huff of frustration escapes you. "So, why the fuck haven't you told everyone?"

"Well, for starters, I have no intentions of betraying you. That's your information to tell Dave, not mine. Secondly, I haven't seen a reason to." Her answer is succinct, and everything about it is genuine. That's just who Kanaya is. You learned that quickly after meeting her.

"But, you know it all?"

"Rose is completely unaware of the situation. I doubt she will need to be informed, but, yes. I know everything."

"Thank you." You chew on your lip. You're split as far as reactions go. You feel relief that Kanaya hasn't told anyone, and that she won't. However, your natural instinct is to panic. And, right now, you're doing a poor job of covering for that instinct. "I... I think I'll go back to my room."

"That sounds like a good plan," Kanaya says. "If you need to discuss things, I'm always here."

"Thanks..." Again, you can't tell what you're feeling. Are you truly thankful, or are you being threatened? Either way, it's time for you to tuck your metaphorical tail between your legs and skitter back to your room.
The Eighteenth of Dusk: 10:00 AM: LOG 72

You're still reeling from the realization that Kanaya knows it all. You'd thought you'd covered your tracks. You thought you'd hidden your motives. In every other hit, you did it all without a hitch. In every other hit, you'd killed without second thought. Why, then, is this the one to break you? What was it about Dave goddamned Strider and his toothy, dorky friend that thawed your heart?

You stand outside, leaning against the faux marble railing around the balcony of the room you share with Dave, and stare at the ruins of the city before you. People go about their day below, unaware of your inner turmoil, and blissfully ignorant of the fact that a man sent to kill their leader is living among them. Birds are perched on long disconnected power lines, their singing more ominous than uplifting, and your mind races.

Is there a point in continuing a relationship with Dave if you're not who you think you are? Are you who he thinks you are? Have you become the man you were supposed to be posing as?

On Alternia, life was dictated by a simple motto. Kill or be killed. Take or be taken for a fool. Crime was part of daily life, and your mere existence was cause for death. Yet, here, you're elevated to an almost godlike status. You guard one of the most important people in a noble revolution. You're respected.

But, it's not real respect. It's based on a lie, and there's nothing you can do to change that besides admitting the truth.

A long, bitter sigh escapes you. You reach into your pocket, pull your assassin's blade from it, and stare at it. The sheath is made of hardened leather, and the handle is wrapped in soft cloth. When you pull the blade free, the metal surface shines brilliantly. Not so long ago, you'd feel a rush when you saw it. Now, you feel only disgust.

You don't belong here. How can you, who has made so much off of nothing more than murder, live with honest people like the Prospitians?

You can't.

You can't, unless they accept you. And you doubt they will.

Again, you glance out, at the scene before you. An uncovered manhole is directly beneath the balcony and, after a moment of thought, you sheathe your blade. You hold it in your hands, dangling it over the edge, and drop it. After a few seconds, there's a dull, hollow splash.

The Seventeenth of Dusk: 12:00 PM: LOG 73

Today's lunch is about the same quality as any other. It's subpar food served straight from a can, and it still tastes like shit. Today, however, you force yourself to enjoy it. It is, after all, what will probably be your last meal with Dave. Or anyone with the Prospitians, for that matter.

Dave, meanwhile, is dressed as he would be any other day. A tattered leather jacket covers a dirtied red shirt. His jeans are covered in patches, and his hair is perfectly groomed. He picks at his food hesitantly, though he seems to be enjoying it, and glances suspiciously at you. "Everything
okay over there, Kar? You look like you're going to die."

You take a deep breath. You set down your fork and wring your hands together. Last night, you spent hours formulating what to say. You'd written it down. Now, you think all of it is bullshit. You discard the plan, and start speaking. "So... I've been lying to you," you begin, making the statement seem innocuous.

Dave, meanwhile, responds with a skeptical smile. His brow furrow. "About what? You're using more toilet paper than you say you are?"

You shake your head. You lower your eyes, locking them on the watery slop on your plate, and continue, "I... I'm not actually a bodyguard."

"Mhm..." Dave nods. He seems intrigued, though it's obvious he thinks you're leading him into a joke.

You know, however, that this isn't a joke. As much as you wish it was, it's not. "I'm an assassin. A professional assassin."

"Oh!" Dave snickers. "And you're here to kill me?"

"I was," you admit. "I was hired by the king to kill you. I got a massive payment for it, too."

"Well, you're doing a terrible job at it," Dave laughs.

You bury your face in your hands. "No, you fucking dense shithead, I'm actually an assassin. I'm not dancing around some proverbial bush. I'm being completely fucking serious. I was supposed to kill you."

"Oh." The amusement in Dave's voice drops immediately. He stares at you blankly, his expression incomprehensibly apathetic. "You... That's bullshit."

"No, it's not," you insist. "I was legitimately supposed to stab you to death. Shoot you in the head. Anything. I was supposed to come here, leave your dead body behind, and go live a cushy life on Earth."

Here, Dave seems to grasp the meaning of your words. He sets his fork down and rubs the back of his neck. "So... You've just been doing all this shit for me to kill me?"

"I mean..." This sounds so bad. This sounds so, so bad. "I was. But, I ended up liking you."

"And you can conclusively prove this?" Dave asks, frowning. Though his eyes are hidden behind his shades, you can feel his gaze. It's accusatory. It's angry, and it's rightfully suspicious. "How do I know you're not just going to kill me right now?"

"Because I... I fucking love you, Dave. It's probably really hard to believe at this point, but I'm flushed as hell for you." You continue to wring your hands together. Your claws begin to dig into your skin. "Please, believe me, I'm telling you all this because I want you to trust me."

"Yeah. And I'll just let you stay here, setting up your little stabby chess board." Dave's frown grows. He spits, and it lands in front of your plate. "I stood up for you when no one else would, and you're just here to cash in on me. I'm not your fucking paycheck. I have enough to look over my shoulder about without you."

"But..." you begin to protest.
"I don't have time to deal with this. No, fuck you. Fuck you, you goddamned bastard. I was right the first time I met you. You're a snake in the grass." By now, Dave's voice has changed. The usual softness is gone. The friendly, cordial drawl is replaced by bitter resentment. "I'll give you ten minutes to get out of here, and I'll shoot you myself if you come back."

You feel as if you should protest. You want to tell Dave how you feel, but you know it won't work. You've destroyed his sense of security. You've ripped away the last shred of tenuous safety he has, and you know there's no way to reason with him. Instead, you simply nod. You gather your things, which you'd packed in your bag earlier, and leave.
The Eighteenth of Dusk: 10:00 PM: LOG 074

You've been wandering around for hours. The old settlement is far behind you. Stopping was not part of your agenda. No, you intend to go straight to the nearest spaceport and leave this godforsaken planet. You've had enough of Skaia, and you never want anything to do with it ever again.

Of course, you'll probably be captured, but you're under the assumption they'll just kill you. You're perfectly fine with this. You figure you deserve it.

You've finally reached a road. It's the only road out of here, and you're certain you can't just hitchhike. Thus, you follow it. You pick a direction, and keep walking that way. Eventually, you'll hit civilization. If you don't, you'll starve. And you're fine with that outcome, too. You see little point in continuing as a refugee of Alternia, Skaia, and the assassins' guild.

Nonetheless, you take the time to sit down and open your bag. You pull out a package of crackers, eat a few, return it to your bag, and keep going.

You've done things like this for years. You've been alone for your entire life. But, after feeling what it's like to be loved, you're now able to really understand what it's like to be alone.

The Eighteenth of Dusk: 12:00 PM: LOG 075

It's started to rain.

You wonder how the Prospitians are handling the situation. They probably haven't had time to waterproof most of the structures, and there's no way for them to have known the rain would come early.

You suppose Dave is rightfully trashing you and your reputation. He has no reason not to.

Thunder rumbles in the distance, and you begin to seek out some shelter.

The Eighteenth of Dusk: 4:00 PM: LOG 076

By now, you're soaked. Your clothes cling to your back, and it feels as if you'll never be dry again.

You found a ramshackle groundskeeper shed, and you've used some wet straw to make yourself a bed. It's uncomfortable, but, above all, it's lonely. There's no one around you for what you can
only assume to be miles. If you died here, no one would know. No one would care.

You draw your bag tightly to your chest, and do your best to pretend it's him. You do your best to pretend it's anyone, really.

You can remember when being alone was exhilarating. You used to savor being alone. Now, it's abysmal. It's a massive, looming specter. No one cares, and nature is a cruel, fickle bastard.

Alone, surrounded by the pounding of rain and the overbearing rumbles of thunder, you cry.

Chapter End Notes

Ey whatever this one's short anyhow.
The Twenty-Fifth of Dusk: 9:30 AM: LOG 077

You're not out of the woods yet, and you mean that in the most abysmally literal sense. The park is far larger than you could ever have imagined, and you're beginning to wonder if anyone will ever know you were even out here. Alone, surrounded by more greenery than you've ever seen on anywhere besides Earth. You're a twig in the constantly shifting sands of some sick, twisted desert, and you're certain you'll die here. Your food supplies have run low, and it hasn't rained since you left. The weather is beginning to grow bitterly cold, and nights are an ordeal unto themselves.

At this moment, however, you have the fortune of coming across an old, abandoned house. Numbering on the side seems to indicate that it was once a private dwelling, as 914 is emblazoned in bronze beside the threshold, where there was once a front door. Inside, you find some rusty but unopened canned food, a can opener, and some assorted odds and ends. Some clothes, a few blankets, and a bit of useless, worn out money. None of it really interests you, as you simply pack the food and settle in for a rest.

However, as you sit down, you notice a radio. It seems unharmed by the elements, and you happen to have spare power packets. You pop open the back, jam in the required power source, and turn it on. To your mild amazement, you hear static. With some effort, you pick up a radio station. The music quality is poor, and the station is primarily cracks and pops and electric hums, but it's something. As you've lacked any real source of amusement in the past few days, you find yourself drawn to this little curio. You play with it, seeing what channels you can pick up.

There's some Old Earth Style Country, some pop, a classical channel, a news station, an Intergalactic Variety channel, and some rap. You find yourself forgetting your worries, and you're beginning to unwind when you hit a clear channel. When you pick it up, it seems to be fading from a music broadcast to some speaking.

"Hello? Is this on?" the voice is familiar. It's unmistakable. The speaker is and can only be John Egbert. "This is PH, coming to you with an important news bulletin. Please refer to your Broadcast Encoding Guide for more information."

There's a bit of electronic popping. Then, there's another voice. Also familiar, this voice goes right for your primary circulatory organ. It pulls at you, and an aching sensation rises in your chest. "So, y'all, we've figured out the whole deal on that ant farm. They're moving their food stores from point G4 to point A3. Some possible colonization has also occurred, causing infestations at the following locations: Highridge Court, Guldrug, Trachak Alley, and Fort Zythrop." (From your knowledge of the way the Prospit movement works, 'ants' are in reference to royal military. Infestations are regions where it is unsafe to take any sort of rebellious action. When they move food, it's in reference to the relocation of weapon stores. The alphanumerical strings correlate to certain locations, but you were never interested enough to learn them.) "No ants have been seen nearby the main colony, though, so it seems that it's all clear." At this point, Dave stops speaking. Without warning, the music cuts back in.

And, at this point, you hear something. Bushes rustle nearby. You turn, and end up facing the pointed end of a bayonet, which is attached to a long range laser rifle. The person behind the gun is a stranger—a Keplerian in Skaian Royal Military fatigues. Their face is obscured by a helmet visor, though their large, scaly, three-fingered hands reveal their background. Though this person stands a solid two inches shorter than you, their stature does little to lessen your fear. When they
speak, their voice carries a gargling quality, as all Keplerians do. "Where're the rest of you?"

"The rest of who?" you stammer. You know your ganderbulbs are wider than the Milky Way, and your primary circulatory organ pounds away in your chest. "What the fuck're you talking about?"

The bayonet moves closer to you, threatening to take a ganderbulb with it. "You're the traitor, Karkat Vantas, are you not? We tracked your location to here, and we're here to apprehend the rest of your group. All Prospitians must die for the Glorious Derse Throne to reign as the true power of Skaia."

"You're fucked in the head, aren't you? I'm alone. I..." You consider spilling your whole sad story to this stranger. At the very least, it'll let you vent off the confusing mix of emotions brewing within you. Ultimately, you decide against it. "I left," you conclude. Then, you lie. "I have no fucking idea where the hell the rest of them are. Why would I? I'm a galactic vagrant, I don't need to know locations."

The soldier grunts. They lower the bayonet. "Then, you are of no value. Return to your pathetic home, and the Honorable Derse King will pardon your crimes." Then, turning their back to you, they speak into a walkie talkie. "He's alone. Go for the settlement."

If you were human, your blood would run cold. As it is, you think it might be running even colder than usual. As the soldier trudges away, you panic.

You may have been kicked out of the settlement, and you may be a traitor to both the Prospitians and this entire hellish planet, but you can't let everyone get killed. You can't let them wipe out everyone, and you sure as hell can't bear the thought of letting them destroy the movement. It's come too far and done too much to be obliterated.

Nonetheless, you know the army can reach them before you can.

You open your bag and rummage through the contents. Ultimately, you only find an old, likely useless walkie talkie, and some discarded wiring.

Clearly, you'll need to think of a plan.

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**The Twenty-First of Dusk: 4:30 PM: LOG 078**

After a great amount of jerry-rigging and hand wringing, you've hooked your biologue up to the radio. While you know little about the intricacies of either of these devices, you do know that both have signal transmitting capabilities. The biologue's is more hidden, but your hypothesis is that, by wiring it to the radio, you'll be able to activate these built-in functions.

Now, this approach is dependent upon many factors. The first and foremost is that there is only one other person in possession of another biologue within the radio's broadcasting range, and that the person actually still has hers. For all you know, Kanaya threw it away when she dropped from the organization. If anyone else were to have a biologue, this message would also be broadcast to them. Still, it's a risk you're willing to take. You know you're no longer safe anywhere. The assassin's guild will murder you the minute they know of your failure, and your reputation as a traitor has certainly spread across the universe. Beyond that, you find little comfort in maintaining your safety in exchange for Dave's.

"Is anyone out there?" you mutter, speaking into the speaker of your biologue in as quiet a voice as you can muster. "Please respond."

"I'd rather not," the answer comes swiftly, and the soft voice articulates each word with pointed
"While I hold nothing against you, Karkat, I risk quite a bit talking to you. If you had anything more to say, you should have said it sooner."

"No, I have something to say now. Fuck." You groan. You tangle your fingers in your hair. "Kanaya, please, you fucking need to hear this. I'm not calling for some convivial conversation over radio wave tea. I have to tell you—"

Kanaya sighs. "You need to find another way to transmit the information, Karkat, or I can't help you. I'm truly sorry."

"Kanaya!? KANAYA, GOD FUCKING DAMMIT!" Though you yell, you know it does little good. She's probably muted her biologue, and your pleas are going unheard. You're wasting your energy, and you're wasting precious time.

You throw aside the radio, pull the biologue free of its wired trappings, and sprint. You grab only what you can fit in you pockets, and what you deem to be useful. A pen and some paper. Clothes and food don't matter to you any more. Now, your only concern is finding a way to relay this message.
The Twenty-Sixth of Dusk: 1:00 PM: LOG 079

You haven't slept. You can't sleep.

You've been walking for hours, retracing your steps, and vainly hoping that you'll be able to beat a full-fledged military. You find yourself contemplating your life, and considering what could have been. Who are you? How did you end up here, as a rejected former assassin, charging to certain death at the hands of a revolutionary movement you were supposed to quell?

When you were younger, a mere grub, you'd learned of tales of rebellion. (You read them yourself. Your lusus, a giant crab insect, was unable to speak in any capacity. He was, after all, a crab.) At the end of every one, the inevitable happened. The rebels were killed by drones, their bodies gleefully ripped apart by callous machinery. Conspirators were arrested, then publicly executed.

When you were but two sweeps old, you witnessed the first of many executions. (In more general galactic years—calendars based on traditional Earthen systems of time measurement—you were six.) A rebellious lowblood troll was paraded through the crowd, his horns broken off and his clothing stripped. His back was covered in lashes from whips, and his chest branded with the seal of the Heiress. He was placed at the center of the stone stage, and tortured gratuitously. After all of it, as he stood in a puddle of his own rust-colored blood, he was swiftly killed. An axe took only one swing to behead him, and the standard spiel about being subjugates of the Heiress was read.

When you were five sweeps old, about ten years of age, you fled the planet. Your friend, Eridan had turned on you, reporting your mutant blood in exchange for a massive fortune. You were warned beforehand by a friend, Nepeta, and took the first ship out.

When you were seven sweeps old, only fifteen by most standards, you saw a poster. A man, clad in radiant silver armor, stood against a black background. A golden sword was clutched in his hand, and his red cape was the same color as your blood. "Join the Assassins Guild! Keep our universe safe," it read. You fell for it. You took the first shuttle to Ganymede, a moon within the Milky Way galaxy, and trained to become a knight. Or, at least, that's what you believed you were to be. At the end, you were awarded your biologue, your blade, and a few sets of armor.

At the age of eight sweeps, or seventeen years, you killed for the first time. It wasn't thrilling, it wasn't glorious, and you returned to your room to vomit afterwards. The job had been fairly straightforward. A woman was beyond any sort of recovery as far as overdue payment was concerned, and that particular galaxy's drug ring wanted her dead. You went in, found that she was the single mother of six children, and hesitated. Ultimately, faced with the possibility of being ousted from the only family you've ever really known, you killed her. You lured her to the narrow alley behind her house, and slit her throat. Her blood stained your clothes and covered your hands.

Your second hit was less than a month later. You dropped a crate of heavy Disolian metals on an
Argonian weapons dealer.

From there, kills were easier. Still, you never felt comfortable with them. You were never like other trolls, especially highbloods. An urge to brutalize and kill others was the pride of many trolls, but it never happened for you. Even after so many hits that you'd begun to lose count, you could never look a victim directly in the eyes. You couldn't do things as some other assassins would, walking boldly towards a target and viciously murdering them.

Somewhere nearby, a pigeon coos. It draws your attention, and you look around to find it. After a few seconds, you see it. The feathered creature is perched on a rock, and a small note is tied to its leg. You approach the bird, grasp it carefully in your hands, and unravel the small piece of paper.

Karkat,

Rose informed me recently of this intriguing method of communication. One acquires a featherbeast such as this, and attaches a letter to its leg. The creatures tend to naturally gravitate towards their home, and additional training grooms them to be discrete mail delivery systems. Aside from Rose and I, John also supports you. He advised me to send this note as quickly as possible, as this particular featherbeast has never been tested. We are unsure of when this will reach you, but ask you date any returning correspondence.

Kanaya Maryam
Twenty-Fifth of Dusk

The weight on your shoulders lifts. A sigh of relief escapes you, and you pull out the paper you'd brought with you.

Kanaya,

You're a fucking genius. I've never met anyone with as amazing a think pan as you, and I owe you the most horrifically huge favor. I'm not entirely sure I will ever be able to deliver on this favor, seeing as Dave seems intent on shooting me the next time he sees me, but I'll do my best.

Please inform Dave that the military knows where you are. An unknown quantity of soldiers is heading your way, and they passed me yesterday. I don't know how far you are, but I left heading southeast. The orders given to the military seem to be to kill rather than capture, so anyone they get to will be unbelievably fucked. I hope to every possible imaginary deity that this gets back in time, and I would happily lend my support if I could be there in time. Keep some weapons ready for me. When I get there, I'll help fight.

K.V.
Twenty-Sixth of Dusk

You tie the note to the bird's leg with the provided length of twine, and set it free. Its wings beat, lifting it aloft, and it seems to be consumed by the clouds.
From Rose Lalonde's diary entries, dated the Twenty-Seventh of Dusk...

Occupants of this derelict location seem to have settled in well. Everyone is in good spirits, the morale is high, and there have been no reports of enemy sightings. Dave, however, has taken to locking himself in his room. He appears to be working on something. No one is allowed in, so we're unsure of what it could be. The most plausible explanation is another address or speech.

This afternoon, we received Karkat's response to our inquiry. He confirmed our suspicions, and we have alerted the appropriate people. I spoke with Dave, who seemed crestfallen for some reason, and he has begun evacuating everyone to safer areas.

The safety plan is in three parts. The first part deals with combatants. All able and willing to fight have been given guns and stations at highly defensible and strategic points. The upper rotunda of the city hall, the clock tower, and the roofs of some buildings have all been appropriated for this purpose. The best shots of the group are stationed near the center, with a high concentration directly around the city hall.

The second part of the plan deals with those unable or unwilling to fight. A safety bunker was found in the city hall, complete with an iron door and thick stone walls. It's a basement space, and it can hold a good amount of people. Many are now residing here.

Finally, a small handful have been selected for transport to their hometowns. If the worst case scenario occurs, these members are to continue the revolution. To his protest, John was included in this category.

With all this taken into consideration, the current occupancy of the area is roughly 400.

From Dave Strider's diary entries, dated the Twenty-Seventh of Dusk...

We haven't seen anything. No enemies. No army. Nothing. We're stretching our men, making them work in hellish twelve hour shifts, and we haven't seen jack shit. It's beginning to piss me off, and I'm starting to wonder if this is some sort of false report.

I'm wary of my forces. Our location shouldn't have been known, and it fucking was. This place isn't somewhere you go hiking and accidentally stumble on some ramshackle old hospital like a clueless Goldilocks. You have to try and get stranded out here. We're surrounded by miles of the same goddamned green forest scenery, and someone still found us?

If all else fails, I've been using Dirk's research to create something new. It's a large, modified laser gun. It's heavy, but powerful, and it fires an array of blasts instead of a single beam. Energy weapons are the best to use against the military, seeing as they have so damned many themselves. I'll keep it for myself, and I intend on putting it to good use if it's needed.

I haven't had much sleep lately, though. I'm not exactly the best person to go out and fight right now, but I'm one of the top marksmen, and there's no way in hell I'd just mosey on off and leave everyone fending for themselves.
The Twenty-Seventh of Dusk: 5:00 AM: LOG 080

You're asleep, with your back against a formidable tree and your ass planted firmly in a pile of wild animal shit, when you hear it.

An army truck rumbles past. It's going fast, moving steadily in the same direction as you. Presumably, this is at the end of the caravan.

You look around, and the line of headlights catches your eye immediately. Creeping towards them, and hidden in the darkness of night, you watch. Each truck moves with considerable speed, and each seems to be lashed to the next. The trunks of each are armed with a mounted and unguarded assault cannon.

An idea pops into your head. It's risky and stupid, but that's a bit how you feel right now.

For a few minutes, you continue to watch the armed caravan. Then, when the time comes, you back up. As one turns a corner, you sprint. You jump, land roughly on the back of one of the trucks, and dig your claws into the metal. A sensation akin to nails on a chalkboard runs up your spine, but you continue. You clamber into the back, and lay flat against the bed of the truck. Though the headlights of the car behind you shine in your direction, the trunk door keeps you from being seen.

Clearly, these aren't the smartest people. They're not tacticians, at least.

"We're positions A25-A27," a voice says. You can't find the source, but it appears to be the truck behind you. The windows must be open. "We'll be near the northern entrance. Got that, Don?"

The other man responds, but you have little interest in it. You're more concerned with the logistics of your escape.

If you simply climb out, you'll be spotted. Your ass will be shot dead in seconds, and your entire ordeal will be for nothing.

There were, though, many trucks. You assume they'll be parked in a circle to surround the area. Depending on the spacing of these, you can wait until the people in your truck get out. When they approach, you can ambush them. From there, you can either make a run for it or steal the truck. As the metal is firm beneath the weight of the massive gun, you figure that stealing the truck is a more bulletproof course of action.

The Twenty-Seventh of Dusk: 11:00 AM: LOG 081

The sky is a brilliant, vivid blue. Clouds roll by, making loose, lazy shapes. The sun shines brightly, though it's not too hot. All of this adds up to it being a perfect day, if it weren't for the fact that you're sleep deprived, dirty, and hungry. Some wild nuts had fallen into the bed of the truck, and you've eaten all the ones you can reach. Still, you're not going to get a full stomach on something like that. So, you find yourself digging through your pockets.

You find a protein bar, which is quickly consumed, and some stale chips. Rather than opening them the usual way and letting forth a cacophony of awkward, squeaky crumpling noises, you slit it open with a sharpened claw. The entire bag is emptied in about ten minutes.
Though you remain hungry, you’re now full enough to function properly.

The Twenty-Seventh of Dusk: 8:00 PM: LOG 82

The car is beginning to slow. It’s a gradual process, and you’re certain the base is still a distance away.

You assume the attack will take place at night. An ambush by day is a shitty ambush. Midnight would be an opportune time to strike, as the settlement will be asleep. The occupants can easily be swarmed, taken, and killed. You hope this isn't the case, but you’re not sure if the note made it back. For all you know, it was intercepted.
The Twenty-Eighth of Dusk: 12:00 AM: LOG 083

The truck stops. There's a click as the doors open, and the truck's bed shakes slightly as the weight shifts. Soft plods disrupt the quiet night, and they grow louder as they come near.

You roll onto your stomach and face the hatch at the back. Soon thereafter, you see a silhouette of a person. You grab them, launch yourself from the truck, and pin them to the ground. Before they can scream, you use a claw to slit their throat. It's a swift, easy action, leaving you to guess you've killed a human. That aside, the next attack is predictable. You turn around, catching sight of a man sprinting at you with a knife, and easily dodge his attack. When his back is turned, you push him down. You take the knife, kill the attacker, and leave the blade in the grass as you claim the two soldiers' guns for yourself.

Though they're enemies, you still feel bad about your actions. You take the time to roll them over and cover their faces with some scraps of their jacket fabric. You've seen other Humans do this, and assume this is how they would rather find a body.

Then, you clamber into the truck. You fiddle with the controls for a few seconds, and finally manage to find the gas pedal. Admittedly, you've never bothered to get a license. Driving is intuitive enough, and many planets don't even have manually driven civilian cars any more. That said, you're not too worried. The vehicle is sturdy enough that you figure you'll be able to get out after a crash. You put the pedal to the metal, and hold on as the car speeds forwards.

As you near the city, you start hearing gunshots. They seem to come from both directions. A few pierce the back windshield, some hit the windows, and others come through the front windshield. You realize how outrageously stupid this was, but continue onwards. You're too far in to abandon this, and you're not exactly keen on trying to run to safety without the added insurance of an armored vehicle. For now, you keep going, and hope that you survive long enough to make it to the base.

And, as this thought crosses your mind, there's a loud pop. Smoke begins to rise from beneath the car's hood, and you decide that it's time to bail. You spot a spare vest in the passenger's seat, don it, and tumble from the vehicle.

Perhaps due to the difficulty of spotting you in the dark, sprinting through a densely forested field, the gunfire dies down. You keep running, and your goal draws nearer.

After a few minutes, you reach the edge of town. You breathe a sigh of relief, draw one of the weapons you collected, and begin to back into the city.

As you do, you feel as if it watches you. From time to time, you see gunners aiming their sights at you, yet none seem to want to shoot. Perhaps they figure you're not worth their time in the middle of a literal military attack, but you find it odd. Against everyone, you should have been dead the minute you entered the area. Your head should be filled with more holes than ten golf courses.
Where is the resistance?

A loud bang. Smoke rises in the distance, close to the city hall. A building crumbles, and the rumbling collapse echoes up and down mostly empty streets. Small bits of debris rain down, beating like raindrops against you. Panicked, you drop the gun you're holding. You turn and sprint, heading straight for city hall.

It was probably a mortar. Both traditional and energy shells can do massive damage, even to a structure as well built and fortified as that city hall. Knowing Dave, he's still in that city hall, and he's fighting. You know he doesn't want to see you, but you want to see him. Before he undoubtedly puts a well-deserved bullet through your head, you'd like to know he's okay.


You can see the building, now. The many intricate roofs are covered in debris, yet it remains standing. Some windows are shattered. Up at the top, in the balcony surmounting the rotunda, you can see a collection of snipers. You recognize many of them. Dave, however, is not among them. Rather, when your eye wanders down, you see him elsewhere. He's perched on the balcony outside of his room. Though he wields a standard sniper rifle, a large, odd-looking gun sits beside him. You don't take time to question this, though. Instead, you head inside.

You sprint down the main hallway. As you reach the stairwell, however, there's another boom. The world shakes. The lights, powered by a formidable collection of generators, flicker. Once. Twice. Then, they go out. The world shakes beneath your feet, and chunks of the ceiling crack. Shouting. Loud, panicked shouting. The sound of crumbling stone and marble and the ungodly screech of twisting iron fills your head. In the darkness, you stumble forwards, into the stairwell.

For a while, you're not sure if you're alive or dead. The world is an inky black. However, the smell of smoke and the putrid stench of burning flesh quickly reassure you that you're alive. The darkness clears, and the dust of pulverized architecture settles on you. The entire center of the building has collapsed, and bloody pulp remains the only evidence of the upper rotunda snipers. Fire spurts from the center of the tower's rubble, its tendrils and sparks reaching for the flammable decorations of the second floor. The heat is intense, and the pillar's flickering lights cast twisting, winding shadows all around. Yet, somehow, in the middle of all this, the stairwell remains.

You push onwards, clambering up the unstable steps, only to find the majority of the front of the building has also been ruined. Most of the walls have collapsed, much of the ceiling is caving in, and the remaining structure groans uncertainly.

Following what you remember, you run to the room you shared with Dave. While the interior seems to be holding up, you can see that the front wall has given out. You can see Dave, mostly buried beneath the debris, and your heart races. You stumble forward, and find that he's unconscious. Blood seems to come from a wound on his scalp, which is visible thanks to the red stain in his otherwise light hair. Glass shards from his now-broken shades are embedded sporadically across his face.

You figure this is as good a time as any to try and make up for what you've done. You begin removing the debris. It's a slow process, and the balcony trembles uneasily. Still, you continue. The sounds of gunfire are quickly drowned out by the task at hand and, after what feels like forever, you find that enough has been removed to pull him free. His chair seems to be indefinitely stuck, and you're inclined to leave it. However, the exoskeleton arm comes free easily, and you dedicate yourself to preserving it, despite the weight. With the robotic arm over your shoulder, you
carry him bridal style. You stumble a bit beneath the weight, but quickly regain your footing.

A confidence rises within you. Perhaps you can do something good for once. You have a chance to save Dave, and maybe even your reputation with him. You could be a hero, as you've wanted to be. A symbol of a noble revolution.

Yes!

You're going to become the person you've always meant to be. To hell with murdering for a living. You'll...

A loud, low crack breaks your train of thought. The ground beneath your feet shudders. You know exactly what's happening, and you try to run. The effort comes too late, though, as the balcony collapses. You tighten your grasp on Dave, brace yourself for death, and reassure yourself that you'll be seen as a martyr. As long as Dave falls on you, you'll take the brunt of the impact. You might be a traitor, but you at least died trying to save your reputation and your leader.

The world spins. As if in slow motion, you see the sky. The stars, blithely unaware of the war and violence below, twinkle serenely. You see the thoroughly fucked facade of the city hall, and you consider all the things that have happened here. History was made here, and these people are destroying it without second thought. You see the ground, rubble-covered cobblestone. You see the top of the building beside you, and you see the look of shock on the gunners' faces as they watch.

There's a thud, a loud crack, and the rumble of unstable debris.

Then...

There's...

Nothing.

It's warm. No... Warm isn't the right word. It's hot. Somewhere, something radiates a strong, steady heat. Yet, at the same time, it's cold.

Distant murmurs. The sound of voices. They seem to call your name, but you can't understand what they say. Their words are familiar, yet foreign, and their presence seems unreal. In blurred vision, you see shapes. They appear human, though some trolls and Carapacians also appear, and they waver in and out of existence. Their forms move slowly, as if drifting across the surface, never touching the ground.

There's a light. It's obscenely bright, and it overpowers your senses. You might groan to react to this, but you're unsure of where you were.

Something cold presses against your chest. Something long and thin slides beneath the skin of your arm.

The world spins. The light fades, and the people do, too. Their voices become a hushed whisper. Then, it disappears entirely.

You are someone, but no one.

You are here, and, yet, you're not.
You feel alive, but that cannot be.

There's something soft beneath you. It gives way near the middle, and you feel your body swaying to and fro. Though your vision is still blurred, you can see the sky. Stars appear as blobs of sporadic grey against a sea of black.

The warmth is gone, now, but a singular voice is speaking to you. You don't understand the words. You can't focus on them. You're sure that, if you focused, you'd understand, but something else is holding your attention. A lightning bug flits about in your face. Its glow pulsates gently, and it seems to want you to touch it. It makes you think of the days you'd spend in your hive's lawn ring. You would catch luminescent insects with Sollux, and you'd both pile all of them into a jar at the end. You'd take the jar to your respiteblock, where you'd place it beneath a thin veil of fabric. Within their confinement, the bugs glowed brightly. The light shined through the sheet, casting playful shadows across the room. And, by that flickering light, the two of you would talk and laugh into the earliest hours of the morning.

You feel as if you should smile, but you're compelled to reach for the bug, instead. When you do, it disappears. Pain overpowers your thoughts, ripping through every fiber of your being, and you feel something cold sliding into your arm...
A familiar voice speaks to you. Its vowels are drawn out, and the words it speaks are marked with a charming twang. It's soft, hoarse, and a bit breathy. "You know, when I was a kid, John and I loved reading stories about shit. Well... I'd read them, and he'd listen. He was more of a video game guy. We'd read anything, but our favorites were about knights and kingdoms of fuck-knows-when. We ate that chivalry bullshit up with a spoon for some reason. We couldn't get enough..."

There's a pause.

You open your eyes, but your vision remains out of focus.

"I don't know what it was called, but our favorite was this old story about a guy from ancient Earth. He led a revolt against the rich. He didn't win, and most of his buddies died. He did, too, but we liked it. Like the stupid little shits we were, we'd always make up endings. We made things better, I guess. We wrote an alternate ending, where everyone survived and the revolution was a slam dunk." There's a quiet chuckle.

Your vision clears. A man, his hair golden blond and his face covered in small, sporadic scars, is visible. His eyes are hidden behind dark shades, though he doesn't seem to be looking at you. Somehow, he seems familiar...

"I never wanted to be part of a big movement. I just wanted to help folks out. We're all squabbling for some scraps down here, while some other clueless fucks yuck it up with their big, fancy dinner parties. I never thought I'd be enough of a target to be targeted by the government. I..." There's a pause.

You come to remember who you are, and who he is. You open your mouth, but find yourself unable to speak. The word is on the tip of your tongue, but it won't come out.

"Karkat!" Dave's looking directly at you. A nervous smile is spread across his face, and he nods at someone nearby.

John steps forward. He pushes Dave's chair forwards.

You realize Dave's electric chair is gone. He seems to be using a standard hospital style one. It looks uncomfortable, and he seems to slouch to his right rather than sit upright. The movement causes his hands to shake, and his left leg twitches. Nevertheless, he looks unharmed. Again, you open your mouth. You mean to ask him what's happening, and why he hasn't killed you yet. And, again, you come up blank.

"You've been out for a while. Twenty days, I think? I... Fuck. Shit. Fucking shit. I've been worried about you, dude. Everyone's been saying you're dead, but I've been saying you're not. The scans showed life, and you're breathing on your own, and you react to stimuli. No, you weren't dead. You were just fucked up, and you needed some time to take a breather, right? I mean... You're... You're fine, right?" Dave frowns. His brows furrow.

By now, you've given up trying to speak.

John intervenes. "He's groggy, Dave. He's just waking up after being knocked the fuck out for
over two weeks. Maybe we should give him some time to rest?"

"Yeah. That's... That's a good plan, John. You're just kicking medicine's ass, aren't you?" Dave rambles. His hands shake harder than before, and his fingers curl into fists.

John, meanwhile, offers you a knowing nod. He wheels Dave out, and you're left alone.

The Forty-Eighth of Dusk: 11:00 PM: LOG 085

You wake to the sound of the door closing.

Dave sits in front of you, his hands now encapsulated in what you can only assume to be white form-fitting plastic. His fingers still twitch from time to time, but they're otherwise still. He refuses to look at you, and his expression is one of his old, usual, enigmatic apathy. "I... I'm sorry for threatening to kill you. That was real shitty of me. You didn't deserve that."

You try to speak, and it seems to work this time. Your voice is hoarse, though you'd expect it to be if John was telling the truth earlier. "Sorry for being hired to kill you. I mean, if I hadn't been, we never would have met. And, maybe that would've been for the fucking best... I really don't deserve being around here, honestly."

"You saved my ass, Karkat. You're as much a Prospitian as I am. Or John. You're a goddamned certified badass, now. You could get a belt buckle and all that shit." Dave tries to smile, but it comes off as a grimace. "I..."

You try to sit up, but pain forces you back down.

Dave interjects, "No! You're... I'm sorry for landing on top of you. I really kind of fucked you over. Your ribs are pretty iffy, and John had to pretty much staple your back together. I mean, your weird alien spine is fine. You're not in my boat yet, but the skin was hanging off like some sort of shitty cape. You've got interesting blood, though. Is it weird to say it's my favorite color?"

"Kind of," you mutter. "Ugh... My fucking head..."

"Yeah. The exoskeleton was fucked. Your skull is pretty damn hard, though, because it only cracked when the massive hunk of goddamned metal hit it. You'll probably need some painkillers for a while, though..." Dave pauses. He winces, squeezes out a weak cough, and sighs. "Really, I'm sorry. I was an ass. I'm always an ass, I guess."

"Nice ass to look at, though," you mutter. After this escapes your mouth, however, you pause. You realize your horns are probably showing bright red.

Dave, meanwhile, laughs. "Well, I guess that means I'm forgiven?"

"I mean, I'd be pissed if the guy I was dating ended up being an assassin. I get it. You're still not completely ready to trust random fuckers, and I understand that. I just needed to tell you. And you'd find out either way, anyhow."

"True." Dave nods.

"So... How're you?" you ask.

Dave shrugs. "My face was like splatter painting with the shades shattering everywhere. I broke a few bones in my arm, dislocated my hip, and snapped a rib in half. So, I'm fine. I can't feel any of it, so it doesn't really matter to me. I was patched up pretty fast. You, on the other hand..." Dave
pauses. He looks down, staring at his feet, as he continues, "You worried me. I was awake when they found us, and I was pretty damn freaked out. I mean, I was stuck laying on top of what I thought was a dead guy. I tried to talk to you when we were getting carted off to the hospital."

"I don't remember that," you admit.

Dave nods. "I figured you wouldn't I just... I never would have told anyone to kill you, I was just... I was pissed and I wanted you to leave me alone. I never meant to make you go through all this shit..."

"Well, I told you about the army, so it ended up being good for everyone, right?"

"I guess." Dave shrugs. A frown crosses his face, and you feel like he's trying to figure out if your statement really is true. Eventually, he shakes his head. "I've been talking to you since you were stable enough for me to visit. I though you'd like it. I mean... I know you didn't hear it, but it felt nice."


Dave, meanwhile, shifts his shoulders a bit. You can tell that he's not too keen on having John move him around. "I'll let you get some more sleep, okay?"

You nod.

He calls for John, and, after a few minutes, he leaves again.
You wake to the smell of warm pancakes, an Earthen delicacy you've heard a great buzz about. The source is a plate on the bedside table, which is accompanied by a glass of warm grub juice, and a porcelain cup filled with a warm, sticky liquid sits at your bedside. You reach for the food, and find your injuries to be far less painful than before. Though it hurts, you're starving, and you're willing to do whatever it takes to get something to eat. With the plate on your lap, you eat eagerly. You roll the pancakes into cylinders, and dip them into the sticky substance.

As you're finishing the last one, the door opens. John stands in the threshold. A wide, quizzical smile is spread across his face, and his brows are furrowed. "You're supposed to pour the syrup over the pancakes, Karkat."

"Syrup?" you ask. You've never had much to do with human food. While you find it to be delicious in most cases, you're generally not a fan of trying to learn the names of the food. There's already enough species in the galaxy with named delicacies.

John snickers. "It's the stuff in the cup," he explains.

You nod, and stare at the viscous substance. "Okay. That's useful information."

"Anyhow, I came to tell you that we fought back the attackers. We had a fair amount of casualties, but we're still fine on numbers. We took out a chunk of the army, so everything seems fine for now."

"Fine?" you scoff. "You wiped out a shitload of soldiers, I'm guessing. That's going to piss the monarchy off, and they're going to come running straight back here with more people to turn your asses into streaks of blood on the fucking ground."

"We left," John explains. "Right now, you're in Jade's lab company's hideout."

"Oh." You pause. It dawns upon you that the surroundings are far nicer than before. The walls are all in perfect shape, and there's no rubble to speak of. "So..."

"Dave's asleep right now. He might try and act like some big, tough guy, but he got his ass kicked." Again, John snickers. He tugs at his sling, which seems to be made of reinforced denim scraps, and looks you over. "You're doing pretty well, considering the damage. I'm trained for human medicine, so I conferred with Kanaya. She told me to remove one of your teeth, so I did. It was one hell of a thing. Had this big black thing inside of it, sort of like a computer chip. I didn't care enough to ask her what was up with it, though. I gave it to her, and she said she put it on a fluffy-tailed treemouse."

"A squirrel?" you ask.

John shrugs. "Hell if I know. I don't understand half of what you trolls say sometimes."

That's a fair enough thing to say. You can't always understand human naming conventions, either. "Kanaya and Rose are fine?"
"Yeah. Dave evacuated them before the attack began. I was also evacuated." John pauses. He glances at one of the monitors by your bedside for a moment, then seems to lose interest. "Anyhow, you done with all that?"

You look at your empty plates. "I don't fucking plan on eating the plates, so I guess I am."

John laughs. He takes the dirty dishes from you, offers a small wave, and departs.

You, noting the television in the corner and the remove at your bedside, decide to watch some television.

The mindless drivel currently playing seems to be a film about cross-species romance. An Argonian and a Troll running from the law of their oppressive planet. You think you've seen it before, and you're fairly certain you hated it. *Lovers from Another Galaxy*, you believe. It was a cliché romp in the most proverbial, insubstantial woods possible, and it has remained as such. You hate it the second time as much as you hated it the first.

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**The Fourty-Ninth of Dusk: 12:00 PM: LOG 087**

The next time you wake up, the television is still broadcasting useless shit. Now, however, Dave is beside you. When he notices you're awake, he offers a small smile. "You watch some shitty television, Karkat."

"I wasn't watching it, dumbass. I was asleep," you protest.

Dave shrugs. "It was on, so you were clearly doing something with it."

You roll your eyes at the commentary. From experience, you know that responding will only encourage these shenanigans. So, you change the topic. "What's happening with the movement?"

There's a brief pause. Dave's leg shakes, and his chair squeaks with its movements. "Not much. We're back in hiding, waiting to see what the government is going to do. They've deemed us a real threat, so we shut down all the broadcasts. For now, we're just twiddling our fucking thumbs."

"How're you feeling?"

Again, Dave pauses. He turns his gaze away from you. "Well, thanks to you, I'm in decent shape. It's not like I can really feel that much, so I'm not complaining about anything. John said I had some broken ribs and fucked over bones, but that's about it." Now, he looks to you. "I... I'm really sorry about all of this, dude. I honestly didn't mean for any of this shit to hit the fan."

"It's fine," you reassure him. "I'd do the same thing, too."

From the frown on his face, Dave doesn't believe you.

So, with a sigh, you continue, "I know what it's like to get stabbed in the back, too. Maybe not literally, but you know what I mean." From here, you tell him of your life on Alternia. You recount your days with Sollux and Eridan, playing together as blissfully ignorant children. You tell him about Eridan's betrayal, and of how you fled your home and ultimately came to be an assassin.

He listens eagerly. He nods and comments from time to time, but lets you tell the entire tale before saying anything substantial. "So, we've both been royally fucked?"
"If you want to put it in such a crude, inarticulate way, yeah," you snicker. You sit up in bed, wincing slightly at the pain, and offer a small smile. "Look, no one goes their entire life without fucking up some. I've probably fucked up a lot more than most people, but the point's that everyone is going to make mistakes. Some of them will come back to bite you with pointed, venom-filled teeth, but it happens."

"Yeah," Dave mutters. He seems slightly more cheerful than before, and his leg has calmed. "I guess the real question is where to go from here."

"I can't see the goddamned future," you say, rolling your eyes. "If you'd like me to help, I'd be admittedly delighted."

Dave snickers. "Cute."

"I'm not trying to be cute, you shit-fondling asshole," you scoff. "I'm just proposing that I offer my skills to serve your cause." You're fully aware that your horns are likely turning red, though you don't care enough to stop it.

A smirk crosses Dave's face. He nods. "Yeah. I'm not opposed to accepting your help. John won't be, either, so I guess I'll have to give you some sort of title."

"That's really not necessary."

Dave shakes his head. "I'll think of something. Official Court Jester, maybe?" Amused by his own joke, Dave chuckles. "Anyhow, I know John is out there shitting himself in anticipation. I've got to get back to my room. Something about maximizing my recovery."

John, meanwhile, enters the room. He does exactly as Dave predicted, and wheels him from your room.

Chapter End Notes

Hey! So the one-a-day update schedule is ending here. I've got stuff to do and I'm mulling over how I want this fic to end. Possibly soon, possibly not. Thanks for reading! Keep your eyes open for future updates.
"You have a new roommate, buddy." The words wake you from your slumber, and your eyes are drawn to the source. To your right, you see a hospital bed. This is a new addition, as is the smug blond laying in it. "I convinced John to move me in here."

"Perhaps dying would have been the most merciful option after all," you jest.

He rolls his eyes. "Or you could consider my offer," Dave counters, smirking. "How would you like to be promoted to the third member of the leading team of the Prospitians?"

You pause. As tempting as the offer is, you've never really considered yourself a leader. You're not the best strategist, and you're definitely nothing akin to a masterful speaker. Perhaps, you could learn to be these things. Dave is already the compelling voice of the movement, and a small selection of people act as the strategists. So, where do you come in?

"We're looking for someone with a nice face to get their face plastered on posters like spaghetti on the wall of a nursery on spaghetti day," Dave explains. "What do you say? You'll get all the perks, which is to say mostly nothing... Then again, you'll be respected."

You refrain from answering. Each comment draws you in more. You've never been the subject of great respect. Normally, assassins aren't considered the noblest of professionals. Beyond this, you've never been looked up to. You graduated at the bottom of your class, and your career is nothing close to illustrious. You've mostly done small, petty jobs. People with too much debt, senior citizens with too much of a mouth for their own good, and run-of-the-mill criminals were your usual targets.

And, perhaps, Dave knows that he has you on his hook. He reels you in, his smirk growing wider with each passing minute, "Come on," he says, "We'll get to hang out with me all day. Doesn't that sound like one fuckin' sweet perk?"

"I think you just murdered your chances," you snicker.

Dave rolls his eyes, but makes no further mention of your jab. "When the current regime falls, you'll be one of the top picks for the new leader. You could rule a whole planet. You'd be a fuckin' hero, dude."

At this point, you snap. You can't resist the temptation. "God fucking dammit. What other choice do I have?" you say, speaking with plain honesty. "If I leave, I'll just be killed by the assassin's guild. So, sure. You've got yourself a new co-conspirator."

A triumphant grin spreads across Dave's face.

However, you feel the need to add something else. "I don't want this shitty planet, though. That's your job, or maybe John's." At this point, you heave yourself into a sitting position. Dull, aching pain radiates throughout your body, but it's not enough to stop you. To emphasize your next words, you lean over the side of your bed. You adopt the most innocent smile you can manage, and continue, "I'd much rather have a handsome partner in crime."
"Well, I have to agree with you there. Not that many of them are available, though, so you'll do in a fuckin' pinch," Dave retorts. His smile grows wider.

Driven by a deep desire, and by your stubborn nature, you slip out of your bed. None of your lower extremities are damaged, and you easily walk up to Dave's bedside. You lean over the guardrail, offer a subtle smirk, and quirk your brow. "So, would the handsome, insufferable asshole be opposed to a kiss?"

Dave pauses. He feigns a few moments of deep thought. Then, he shrugs. "The fuckin' irresistible leader of the soon-to-be-historical revolution accepts your offer, decent-looking cohort," he declares. His voice adopts a lofty, nasal quality. As he continues, however, it returns to normal. "You've got my back?"

"If I understand that human metaphor correctly, I certainly do," you reply. You lean over, press your lips to his, and allow yourself a moment of quiet amidst the revolutionary fray. All around you, there's movement. Hurried steps and important discussions come from the other side of the door to your room, but you ignore them. For now, you're focused on Dave. You're focused on the fact that, for once, everything seems to have worked out perfectly. You have what you wanted, even if it's not what you'd always thought you'd want. It seems that power and wealth weren't your ultimate goal. Instead, what you truly craved was affection. You've spent so long clawing your way up a fruitless ladder of influence, only to find true content at the bottom.

Eventually, you pull yourself away. "You ready to overthrow some motherfucking jackasses?" you ask.

Dave's grin mirrors yours. His enthusiasm is as contagious as it's always been. "You fuckin' know it."

For once, everything is in place. Everything is as it should be, and you believe that the world will sort itself out in time. What it needs is a push, and you're confident that the Prospitians can provide it. Pride rises, swelling within your chest like an expanding balloon. You've become far more than you'd ever thought you could, and you're certain that the revolution will, too.

Chapter End Notes

**Okay! That's it! That's the end! Thanks for reading!** I might decide much, much later to come back and continue, but that won't be any time soon. For now, I've decided to leave the ending up to you. Feel free to take this as you wish. If you want to continue it yourself, go ahead! Just be sure to link back here. I hope this wasn't too much of a sudden shit-we-ran-out-of-budget ending, and thank you so much for sticking with this fic for so long!

End Notes

(don giovanni's scene with the man in the funny hat is my favorite mozart piece get fuckin rekt everyone here comes the man with a taco for a head)
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