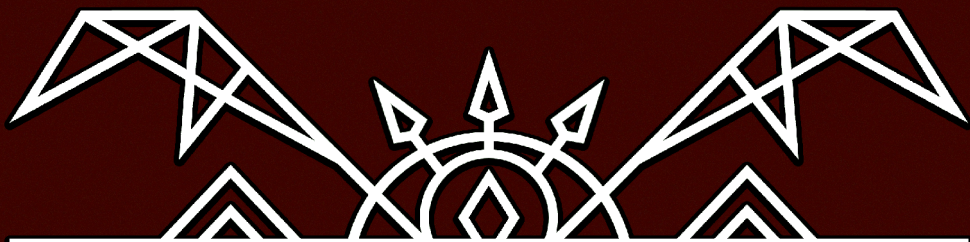




OUROBORISTA PRESENTS

DEICIDE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES



The curtains part on Earth C, five years after the return of its gods.

Behind them, to the audience's dismay, lies the dead body of someone who was supposed to be immortal, and you have no idea what that means. Jane Crocker is gone, and all the smiles suddenly look a whole lot faker.

It's a story as old as time, really:
Investigation, revolution, grief,
regret, powers beyond
comprehension and mysteries
beyond the veil. Too many things
swept under the rug and anxiously
ignored. You know what they say:
It takes a village to kill a god.

*"You may not see things yet on the
surface, but underground,
everything is already on fire"*

*-Reza Negarestani
(you are almost certain Reza
Negarestani said that)*

*"Our deepest fear is not that we are
inadequate. Our deepest fear is that
we are powerful beyond measure
and rapidly growing inhuman."*

-A troubled God

"A whodunit that features little actual crime investigation, DaiCon instead interrogates the personal growth of Homestuck's surviving cast and how they shape society as living gods. The work is part self-indulgent fanfiction and part political manifesto, but in combining the two ascends beyond being merely either."

- Henrietta

"This will appeal to a limited subset of a limited subset of people and demands familiarity with more material than some collegiate courses."

- Jen Xie

"Every word is True, and Relevant, and without a single doubt Essential."

- JuniperAmnesia

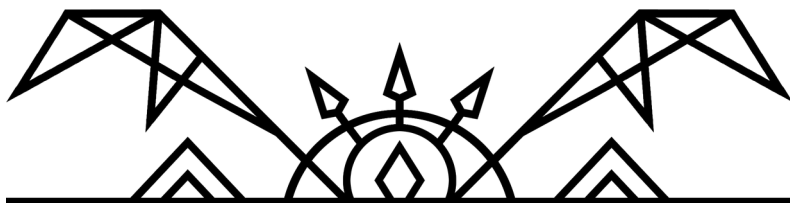
"In which author Ouroborista keeps a deft pulse on the characters and machinations of Homestuck and extends them with impeccable attention, inventiveness and kindness"

- Uranium Coffee

Other versions of the text:

[AO3](#) | [EPUB](#) | [Audio](#)

Find me at [ouroboros.cafe](#), whether you want to recommend fics to me, hire me for group projects, flag a typo, or just to talk.



Dedicated to all the writers, artists, and musicians in fandom, who have sacrificed time and labour to give their love for a piece of media shape, and who have enriched it in doing so.

Dedicated to my lovely friends, who put up with my rambling about a fiction project that they had absolutely no context for over the course of half a year. I'm sorry.

Dedicated to the girl I met at a German anime convention in 2012, who first told me about Homestuck and gravely derailed my life in the process.

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Act 1

The Day On Which Eternity Ended

Dave

A Damoclean sword dangles over Earth C.

Looking for a victim.

Looking for a lynchpin.

A release valve for all the unsightly turmoil simmering and swirling and bubbling in the restless minds of its unsuspecting inhabitants.

Bubbling in yours, preventing you from sleeping.

You imagine the blade right above your head, massive and keen, leaving shallow cuts across your brow as it passes by. That way at least you don't have to imagine it above his, while he snores peacefully beside you.

Behind closed eyes you trace the sword's path –tick, tock– rhythmically back and forth like a clock's pendulum perfectly synced to your breath. Why is it always clocks?

Karkat says it's just your hyper-vigilance: This feeling that any minute now, any second, any instant, everything's gonna explode around you and that you'd better have thought of a direction to dodge in well in advance if you don't want to sustain a nasty scar or worse... Ready your muscles, keep your hand near your weapon.

Just like in your Bro's apartment. Always simultaneously lifetimes ago and exactly like yesterday.

Tick-Tock.

Back-Forth.

A blade swinging, a countdown unceasingly decrementing.

You know the feeling of that friction, of that build-up –exactly like yesterday– of that anxious quiet which isn't really peace but no more than the preamble to an imminent storm. Of a flurry of shuriken flying out of some dark corner you hadn't scouted carefully enough. Of a plushy assault from above or the sudden cold steel of a katana at your throat. Any and all. Whenever you aren't looking.

You know it.

You know the feeling of impending danger so well that you can't pretend not to notice it. Can't ignore the incessant nerve pulses digging your fingers deeper and deeper into the mattress with every miniscule sound from outside. The worst thing is that you can't even pretend like you don't know that Karkat is merely trying to convince himself when he says it's just your hyper-vigilance acting up. He knows the soft lull of a pillow which looks comfy right up until it's suddenly on your face smothering you... And so he sees the sword as well. You know he sees it, but you can't address that fact without playing into his own anxieties and (Jegus!) where is Rose when you need her? Not that she'd actually be helpful.

You tense your thigh a little, which has in some awfully Pavlovian way become an unspoken signal to the dog-girl splayed across both you and Karkat. Jade hugs around your leg without waking and begins to drool onto your calf. It's embarrassing. It's silly. You hope she never finds out about this, but you also immediately feel safer. Behind your eyelids the sword passes on. Away from your hive, away from the troll kingdom, away from this beautiful little speck of actual safety you fought so hard to earn.

Land anywhere. Please. Anywhere.

Just not here.



And the sword of Damocles really did move on. Round and round and back and forth.

Many of Earth C's gods could feel its malignant presence, though perhaps not quite so acutely. They sensed that something was wrong. That the gears

weren't quite interlinking correctly. That the unaddressed friction just kept building and building and that any day now, any minute, any instant, it would all explode around them.

They were wrong, of course.

When the blade came down upon its chosen head, well outside the troll kingdom's borders four hours later, the resultant sound was not a bang, but a thud.

Jane Crocker, CEO-philanthropist, cake aficionado and conditionally-immortal deity of this world was found dead by her fiancé beneath the foyer's internal balcony on the following morning.

And so, naturally, quiet turned to storm.

The day on which eternity ended smelled like crisp magnolia in the cool morning fog. It was pleasant, serene even, and yet that same temporal interval housed classrooms full of sobbing, incredulous school-children learning how to spell the word "Deicide". Few had the requisite interest in old-earth history to know what a 9/11 was, though it would undoubtedly have been a useful cultural reference-point. Dave Strider had said so during the press conference. Then again: Maybe the defining feature of a 9/11 was an absence of cultural reference points. A paralysing, insurmountable unprecedentedness. Dave Strider had also said something along those lines mere moments later before being interrupted by his boyfriend. Either way: Something precious, a perhaps naive, but nonetheless foundational notion of stability had irreparably cracked in many of these young minds.

Surprisingly the scenes looked very similar in the generally more progressive schools of the troll kingdom, where discussions of Jane Crocker used to have a somewhat derisive or at the very least suspicious tenor. The children there might never have guessed that they'd bawl their eyes out over her death, but only because they never really conceived of the scenario. In truth, personal affection was entirely immaterial to the precedent's horror. You don't need to like the god who passes to be dismayed by the simple realization that gods can be killed. You don't want the god of bad harvests, the god of chatty neighbours or even the god of unexpected migraines to die, because that fundamental sense of security will inevitably vanish down the drain right along with them. If gods can die then nothing is certain. Nothing is safe. If

Jane Crocker could die then so could Jade Harley. Uncertainty swirled about its many crucibles, digging itself into newly formed cracks and lending an oddly sinister quality to the otherwise serene morning fog.

Rose

"Of yet, we have a hopelessly inchoate picture with regard to yesterday's events, but rest assured that the incident will be exhaustively investigated with all means at our disposal. For Jane's sake, that of her family and of her friends. In this dismal moment however, I fear that we are privy to no particulars which you do not already possess and to no insights which we may relay. All we have is grief and questions."

These were the words you had found for the cameras. You'd been poised and calm, but not to the point of appearing aloof, at least not by your standards. The ten of you managed to present an astoundingly united front during that conference. A front which was almost certainly insincere to some degree –a literal front– but the whole affair also couldn't help but elicit a feeling that there was still more connecting your disparate group than anyone had realized.

The others must also understand that the killer is unlikely to be an outsider, and yet no accusations were made or even implied. No fingers were pointed, no tribes crystallized. It was an ordeal of tears and helpless hand gestures. Of carefully worded statements and humanizing anecdotes. Still, the phrasing of your closing paragraph obfuscated a rather pressing detail: What concretely were these investigative means at your disposal that you so adamantly sought to exhaust? Thankfully no one had posed that question yet, but it would only be a matter of time until they did.

CALLIOPE: what aboUt flatfoot dick?

Like their personal protective shield, Callie envelopes an almost catatonic Roxy on the opposite side of your little hemicycle.

ROSE: The consort detective from "*a nak for observation*", known for his heterodox methods and surly attitude?

ROSE: Surely that's just a character. An adorable escapement in the intricate clockwork of entirely fictitious mysteries.

In any other context you would have taken it to be a joke, but their grave green eyes tell a different story. No one laughs. Dirk furrows his brow.

DIRK: Nah, flatfoot's legit.

DIRK: By which I mean as legit as it gets when you're talking about essentially non-verbal crocodiles who try to eat your garbage when you aren't looking.

DIRK: Little guy's great for confidentiality, but I'm not gonna entrust Jane to a reptile. Before it comes to that I'll lead the investigation myself.

And like so many times throughout the morning, no one says the thing you're all thinking: "No. You won't. Nobody here can do it because we are *all* suspects". Luckily Jake steps in with a pitcher of freshly brewed tea just in time to prevent another uncomfortable silence. In his fuzzy, nemorous-green robe, the now sole occupant of this Art Deco palace looks a bit like a shell-shocked worm on a string to you. A feat, considering his impressive statue. The man shuffles across polished marble, perilously unsteady, attempting not to drop anything despite his still visible shaking. By the point when Dave and Karkat get up to support him on either side, Jake had already cleared the foyer halfway, but the gesture seems to nonetheless be appreciated. For a moment their uncertain gait comes to a standstill as they silently decide whether to pass between the hemicycle and the dead friend at its centre or to awkwardly take the long way around. Who knew what the rules of etiquette dictated for situations like this? You were figuring them out as you went. Dirk had come without his shades and Dave had taken his off the moment that he saw. Jade didn't wear any neon-coloured accessories for the first time in years. After a second's hesitation, the mismatched trio settles on the latter option and hands out cups from behind before rejoining you on the floor.

JADE: there HAVE to be competent detectives on this planet who arent consorts :\

JADE: not that i have any issue with flatfoot.

DIRK: Oh shit, really?

DIRK: And I'm sure half of those are board-certified experts at solving unexplainable crimes which have never happened on account of being impossible.

DIRK: Diplomas for investigating god-slayings littering the prestigious walls of their cramped offices.

DIRK: We are absolutely not settling for "competent".

The folded-steel texture of his words is only mildly undercut by the characteristic Striderite lack of eye contact. Jade instinctively freezes up.

It was almost funny in a way: Had it been anyone else, under any other set of circumstances, Jane would have been placed in charge of such a task without second thought. She was the great cake detective after all. Author of a number of critically acclaimed murder mysteries, all of them lovingly adapted to screen by Dirk's production company. Yes, they tended to justly catch flak for their less than sensitive portrayals of troll culture, but even detractors had to grant a meticulous construction. The Crocker heiress had an indisputable genius about her when it came to puzzles and sleuthsmanship. She would have certainly been the one for the job if she weren't lying dead before you.

Capax investigare nisi mortua.

KARKAT: OKAY, MY ALREADY STRAINED THINK PAN IS GOING TO EXPLODE IF WE CIRCLE THIS BLACK HOLE OF A CONVERSATIONAL LOAD GAPER ANY LONGER.

DAVE: yo karkat

KARKAT: WAS I MERCIFULLY NOT INVITED TO A SECRET PRE CONFERENCE CONFERENCE WHERE IT WAS UNANIMOUSLY SETTLED THAT PRETENDING TO BE BRAINGLESS IMBECILES CHOKING ON THEIR OWN SALIVA WAS OUR BEST STRATEGY?

DAVE: karkat chill

KARKAT: OR IS THERE ANOTHER *EQUALLY AWFUL* REASON WHY NO ONE IS ADDRESSING THE HIDEOUSLY OBVIOUS CHOICE FLOATING SOMEWHERE OUT IN PARADOX SPACE LIKE A FUCKING PIECE OF GARBAGE LOOKING FOR ITS MELODRAMATIC SOCIOPATH OF A GIRLFRIEND?

KARKAT: YOU KNOW, THE BLIND JACKASS SHAPED TRUNKBEAST IN THE ROOM.

John seems startled by the proposal. You hadn't paid too much attention to him, what with how fervently he was trying to melt into the background, but

now your eyes have met. Since you last saw him in person, Egbert has grown his hair out to about shoulder length, though you somehow doubt that this is a conscious decision as much as neglectful self-maintenance. He'd gotten better at responding to your messages over the past months, but in retrospect you suppose it was naive to extrapolate a general improvement of his mental health from just that. You sigh. From beside, Kanaya gives a knowing look of the "you can't help people who don't want to be helped" variety, as though any part of her actually believed that. The woman was a phenomenal liar when she didn't know she was lying. A thoroughly attractive trait.

Even though he looks absolutely miserable in it, John wears a plain black suit unlike at every single formal event you have ever seen him attend. It was always either his casual outfit or a silly joke attire like the ectobiology suit. In some ways you would have preferred that, but he too is just following these strange new rules of etiquette you are discovering for an entirely unprecedented event.

JOHN: terezi's a lawyer, not a detective.

JOHN: probably not even a real lawyer.

KARKAT: OH. OF COURSE. LEGISLACERATORS AREN'T *REAL LAYERS*. ANY MORE FLAGRANT HUMAN RACISM YOU WISH TO ENLIGHTEN US WITH, EGBERT?

JOHN: i-

KANAYA: Unless There Are Still Imperial Courts Floating Idly In The Stygian Depths Of Paradox Space She Is Not A Real Legislacerator Either

KARKAT: YES, HOW EVER WILL SHE MANAGE WITHOUT THE EXTENSIVE TRAINING IN SOLVING *IMPOSSIBLE CASES WHICH NEVER HAPPEN* THAT ALL OF THESE VOCATIONS CUSTOMARILY HAVE CRAMMED DOWN THEIR FEEBLE MEAT TUNNELS?

KARKAT: YOU KNOW, THIS REAL THING WHICH ACTUALLY OCCURS.

KARKAT: SO ONCE YOU'RE DONE STABBING ME IN THE BACK, COULD YOU MAYBE BRING YOURSELF TO STEP THROUGH THE PUDDLE OF MY GRUESOME METAPHORICAL VISCERA AND FEAST YOUR OBSTINATE GANDER BULBS ON THE CENTRAL POINT THAT THESE ARE ALL *CRIME THINGS*?

KANAYA: Crime Things

KARKAT: YES. AND IN ADDITION TO BEING THE PERHAPS ONLY INTELLIGENT PERSON WE KNOW, TEREZI *HAS* INVESTIGATED MURDERS ON THE METEOR.

KANAYA: I See

KANAYA: Need I Remind You That Her Somewhat Motivated Examination Of The Evidence Led To Her Being Wrong About Who Had Committed Those Murders

KARKAT: SHE WASN'T OBJECTIVE THEN. IS THERE ANY GOOD REASON WHY SHE WOULDN'T BE NOW?

You can't tell to what degree Karkat is merely finding excuses to reunite with a friend, but you can't describe his proposal as entirely meritless either. Terezi is simultaneously not a suspect and moderately suited to the endeavour, though there would still be the issue of actually recalling her from her mission. The group exchanges glances.

JAKE: Um...

JAKE: I dont mean to hasten.

JAKE: But does anyone have a better idea?

Dirk grunts, but doesn't outright dismiss the motion like all those preceding it, and so your concurrence is as silent as it is unanimous.

You tilt your head wordlessly in the direction of Roxy, and your wife gives an approving nod. She always closes her eyes when she does it. Back when you were a lonely child drowning yourself in thesauri, you could have never expected that communication might one day be so effortless, but here you are. As you cautiously walk over, the cherub gives you a look of suspicion mixed with concern. A look which desperately repeats "Don't hurt them. I won't let anything hurt them" in an endless loop. It is obvious that Callie too is on the verge of crumbling. Stripped of isolation. Only holding their composure because they have someone to protect, so you try to summon a reassuring smile to your lips and softly place a hand on their trembling shoulder.

ROSE: Please. I just want to give them a hug.

It is difficult to read the skull-like features of cherubs, but you feel like their expression relaxes slightly before lifting an arm. You silently mouth "thank you" as you crawl under it to join your ecto-sibling on their partner's enormous lap. Roxy doesn't say anything. They don't have to.

The prosecution is called to the stand.

Human Corpse Party

Jake

Wednesday passed. Then Friday. You don't recall what happened on Thursday apart from the fact that there were cameras and that you eventually collapsed exhausted on a chaise only to awaken to another indistinct morning. Somehow Time is eating itself as it waits for Miss Pyrope to arrive, chewing so slowly that you keep losing track. Funeral's today. You think it's today.

There's an open coffin in the foyer, which tends to suck you into its orbit whenever you pass by. Around and around, spiralling closer until you can catch yourself. Inside the pine overcoat: A lifeless fiancée, rested upon pale blue satin and covered in assorted flowers. Every day a few more, as though she should drown beneath them. In front of the pine overcoat: An old friend, lying curled up upon the marble with vacant eyes drained of tears. They're not here for your support, you know that. Your little group was never very good at talking about feelings. You in particular were always exceptionally proficient at not talking about them, in fact. At deflecting and postponing and avoiding. It's really no wonder that no one's attempting to lean on your shoulder. You've never given them any reason to believe that you wouldn't give way and you can't even address that frightful state of affairs without making her death about you... Still: seeing Roxy like this is devastating. You feel rotten for not possessing the tools to say anything to them which wouldn't sound like a platitude. All despite the fact that you are going through the same thing. You're scaling the same mountain by different routes and you don't know how to talk about it. Inside your mind, shapes gather to form the picture which haunts all of your recent dreams: A number of vast stone pillars standing in a circle upon a hill. All of them damaged and ancient, marked by deep grooves and cracks, so perilously unsteady and ruined by time that you can almost see them swaying with the wind. If only they fell towards the centre, they would hold each other –steading one another mutually with their own instability–, but the dream never ends like that. The pillars fall away from the centre and your heart is torn to shreds by another morning. You catch yourself a little closer to the coffin again. Gravity.

How did you become so isolated? Roxy has had more visitors than you in your own home over the past days. One of them is their partner, but the

point still stands. Strider has not shown his unnecessarily angular face, and while Jade's visits are splendid as far as distractions go, you'd like to have more than one, lest you feel like a miserable hermit. Every time she tells you that you should carry more guns, no matter how many you are already carrying. Another revolver. Another blunderbuss. You've joked that she'll only trust your safety once firearms fully cover your body like armour and for a moment there was an expression in her face which told you that she didn't find that proposal quite as silly as you would have liked her to.

You've become painfully aware that you didn't have many people you frequently talked to aside from Jane. Amidst all the friendly strangers and five-minute acquaintances you collected on movie sets and expeditions, you somehow failed to notice the loneliness creeping in from all sides. Had Jane felt similarly? She was certainly also preoccupied enough with her work to neglect social contacts from time to time, but... no, you shouldn't be thinking about this. Not when she rests there so peacefully. None of the flowers show any sign of wilting. Utterly pristine. They even started to look fresher once placed upon her body.

You take a deep breath as you look at the clock before lying down next to your friend.

JAKE: Hey Roxy.

JAKE: Are you okay?

JAKE: You dont exactly look up to dick if you dont mind me saying so.

Their eyes were open the entire time, but you can tell that they only now started perceiving you. In response rings the hallowest and most incredulous *lmao* you have ever heard, but since they haven't spoken at all in a while you'll take it for progress.

JAKE: The funeral starts in a while.

JAKE: We best primp now lest we cause the others unnecessary botherations.

Slowly they nod, pressing their cheek into the cold stone.

ROXY: jake

ROXY: ...

ROXY: she's really dead isnt she?

Jake: ...

JAKE: Yes. I fear janeys gone for good.

You'll cry. Then you'll get ready. Then, afterwards, you'll probably cry again. Perhaps you should heed Jade's advice and look for a therapist once your eyes have dried enough to see clearly.



Two figures drifted about the endlessly recursive disordered loops of paradox space that day.

Or rather: They would have, if “that day” were a remotely meaningful phrase on the outskirts of ontology. In actuality they are, were or would be occupying a shared non-location in which they serendipitously received a message. This message, in turn, truly had been sent “that day” in a spot where chronology was ever-so-slightly more sane, though admittedly not by much. Circumstantial simultaneity proved itself an odd puppetmaster as always, connecting seemingly unrelated events with fate-coloured string and dragging them across its dimensionless chess-board like deranged cheese critters in search of predictably unpredictable stratagems. Incomprehensible to most.

As such, the non-moment in which this communication went through was arbitrary but not random. One of the two apocalyptic tourists instinctively understood all of this. The other did not care enough to try. Neither of them was Terezi Pyrope and neither of them was particularly shocked by this fact.

SOLLUX: whats it say?

Something like a squeal rang out into the void while an outward-creeping grin revealed blunt tooth after blunt tooth between her lips. Quickly the smile grew too wide for comfort.

SOLLUX: aa, whats it say?

ARADIA: you wont believe this

SOLLUX: highly d0ubt it. just tell me.

ARADIA: we have been invited to a human corpse party!

SOLLUX: ...wait.

SOLLUX: you're actually thinking ab0ut leaving your bel0ved metacosmic eschat0n unattended?

He could already tell that the answer was yes from her positively unhinged facial expression, but it was surprising enough to merit asking either way.

ARADIA: do you know what i like about this place?
SOLLUX: heh. trick question. y0u're infatuated with every facet of this r0aring, pointlessly 0versized reality-shredder.
ARADIA: yes i am
ARADIA: but specifically im talking about the fact that im very confident it will still be here when we return
ARADIA: the end of everything isnt about to go anywhere
SOLLUX: so y0ure saying we could have left t0 do s0mething else at any point.
ARADIA: no i was watching universes being ripped to shreds
SOLLUX: Oh of c0urse. but a silly human-
ARADIA: its a corpse party sollux
ARADIA: we have to

Karkat

Throughout the entire day Dave and Jade had tried to force your hair into a respectable shape using increasingly esoteric products. “Human custom” was named as a pretence, but only a terminally oblivious wriggler would fail to see the perverse pleasure the two self-evidently got out of it. All to no avail of course. You had told them that it was impossible to make troll hair occupy any shape it did not naturally form, but none of that stopped either from massaging more noxious gels into your scalp. Eventually, because time was running out, they simply plopped a baseball cap with some ridiculous inscription onto your head. That would have been fine. You could have borne the indignity of it like you have borne so many before. But then came Kanaya.

Moments before entering the church she had jumped upon you from gog knows where, using the full extent of her drinker fastness, and flung the disgraceful bit of fabric off your head and into a trash can. With cold, single-minded purpose, the woman rummaged through her purse until she found some nondescript cream to wordlessly run through your mane. It worked. You do not know how it worked. You do not know where she got it. You do not now what it is. What you do know is that by all rights of man and nature it should not exist. Dave almost failed to recognize you. You almost failed to

recognize yourself. The only conclusion a sane person can draw from any of this is that the laws of reality simply do not apply anymore. Perhaps you would be more shaken by this revelation had the rest of your life not forced your incredulity sponge to expand to freakish proportions. One fine evening your lobe stem will be crushed beneath its colossal weight. You will gently spasm your way towards oblivion, believing at long last that the universe is sensible. A frothing, hideous miracle. But not today.

JADE: and remember, dont say anything inappropriate-

DAVE: just dont say anything

DAVE: saying this with love better not risk it

JADE: good point. stay silent and you wont need to do any chores for a month :)

KARKAT: RIGHT. IF I HAVE TO GO TO SUCH EXCRUCIATING LENGTHS TO PRETEND LIKE I AM NOT ATTENDING, WHY AM I EVEN HERE?

KARKAT: I HAVE BARELY EVER TALKED TO HER. I HAVE ON MULTIPLE OCCASIONS PUBLICLY CALLED THE FUCKING HOOFBEAST MANURE SHE TRIED TO PASS THROUGH THE HOUSE WHAT IT IS. AND, LET US PUT THE FACTS ON THE TABLE WHERE WE CAN ALL PLAINLY SEE THEM: EVEN AMONG PEOPLE I CAN ACTUALLY STAND, I'D PROBABLY BE THE LAST GUY ANYONE WANTS AT THEIR FUNERAL.

KARKAT: I WOULDN'T WANT ME AT MY OWN FUNERAL.

DAVE: yeah sure stay home

DAVE: no thats a great idea karkat i definitely want you to be the prime suspect in a murder investigation

KARKAT: OH OF COURSE. I FORGOT ABOUT THAT TIME MY DENIZEN GRANTED ME THE ABILITY TO KILL GOD TIERS IN EXCHANGE FOR RELATIONSHIP ADVICE.

KARKAT: DID I EVER TELL YOU THAT STORY? IT IS AS IRRITATING AND MIND-NUMBING AS IT IS PATENTLY FICTITIOUS.

JADE: and that would be an amazing alibi if it didn't apply to everyone. please karkat. do it for roxy, jake and dirk.

You groan, which they take for acquiescence because it in all likelihood is. Much as you loathe to admit that fact. Mechanically your gaze cycles between staring at Dave, the pews, and Jade, while tender words are being spoken about a person you never had a particularly positive thought about.

If someone asked you –and they never did–, Jane had violated the most basic rule of godhood and not the one which forbids death. She directly interfered with their world. All the other idiots did it right: live your little life somewhere, reap your well-earned spoils. Occasionally, when it really matters, you can play the god-card a little –just a touch– but on the whole, this world should be left to its citizens. How would Jane have liked it if some deity had tried to take control of her universe? In all legends, of every civilization, no matter how asinine, gods created the world and then they left it mostly alone until some fancy struck them. No one really wants to live under the thumb of an immortal being, but somehow most of your friends didn't get that. Didn't get that they weren't regular folks but terrifying forces of nature now.

This whole event is a farce. “Oh no, death happens”. Yes, death happens. Death is normal. Some of your best friends are dead and you're certainly not making a big deal out of it. But in a few short years most of these kids have internalized the fact that they are excluded from that “everyone”. And still, despite being outsiders to the very accommodating set of “everyone”, they are somehow also just regular guys who can go into politics without it being fucked. It was ridiculous. Fucked and ridiculous.

Death happens. You know that. You know that this is normal. You know that you and Kanaya will be put in needlessly ornate wood boxes one day and that a bunch of immortals will cry over your useless cadavers. It will be sad and stupid and you will bear the indignity of it, like you have borne so many before... But still. You too have found comfort in the idea that Dave and Jade and John would be immune from normalcy. That they were safe. That you wouldn't have to worry about your friends dying ever again and yet here you are. You don't even want to think about how many guns Jade is probably carrying under that dress. God you hate human corpse-

TEREZI: H3LLO SUSP3CTS!

The door flies open as though it were hit by a mid-scale explosion.

TEREZI: WH3R3'S TH3 BODY?

She looks fucking emaciated, but also not quite as bad as you had expected. When your imagination got the better of you, the mental image of Terezi was always a shadow of her former self. A skeletal spectre haunting paradox space, held together by nothing but misplaced willpower and a neurotic notion that she somehow had to do this. Seemed to be biological pre-programming for

anyone whose blood ran richer than jade: This strange narrativistic thinking where you had to play your oh-so-important role to the bitter end if you didn't want something to metaphysically break. Especially those two. Tangling themselves into grand tragedy after grand tragedy while spectacularly failing to ever step outside of themselves enough to realize how mind-numbingly stupid they were being. By that standard your old friend looks remarkably fine. Almost healthy. Between the purpose with which she swings her cane and the menacing excitement of her grin, it's plain that the fire hasn't yet burned itself to embers, and yet you try to temper your hope.

You know how their story goes. You know she'll go back to her search once this little distraction is settled. She will downplay it all, ignore every word of advice from your mouth and then, eventually, she will die in that void. That's how the tragedy ends. A cursory glance at your movie collection is enough to gain bone-deep awareness of exactly where those types of relationships lead.

DIRK: In the casket.

DIRK: Literally where else would it be?

TEREZI: SH3 W4S MURD3R3D 1NS1D3 OF 4 HUM4N CORPS3
R3C3PT1CL3 TH3N >:?

TEREZI: WHO3V3R K1LL3D TH3 M41D MUST HAVE 4 V3RY
TW1ST3D S3NS3 OF HUMOR

She smiles like a bemused shark.

JAKE: Miss Pyrope, you came!

JAKE: No nothing so daffy.

JAKE: We put her in that old coffin as part of one
of our exotic human obsequies.

Out of the corner of your eye you can see Dave's jaw tense. It's a subtle tell, almost imperceptible if you don't know to look for it, but after years of living together you've come to understand it as his equivalent of an brow-raise. He's avoided eye-contact with Terezi since she came in, which is pretty much the opposite of unusual, but now he isn't even looking at her face, but rather the baggy beige coat she has elected to wear. Apparently a grave violation of the ever-so-precious human funeral wardrobe etiquette.

TEREZI: 1 KNOW TH4T YOU GOOF

TEREZI: WH4T 1'M DR1V1NG MY R1D1CULOUS M3T4PHOR1C4L
SCUTTL3BUGGY 4T 1S TH4T TH1S 1S NO W4Y TO CONDUCT 4
CR1M1N4L 1NV3ST1G4T1ON

TEREZI: I N33D H3R BODY TO B3 3X4CTLY WH3R3 1T W4S
FOUND, 1N TH3 POS1TION 1T W4S FOUND 1N 4ND OUTL1N3D
WITH PR1ST1N3 V4N1LL4 CH4LK!

TEREZI: 4NYTH1NG L3SS 4ND 1'D B3 T3MPT3D TO SUSP3CT
YOU OF TRY1NG TO H1D3 3V1D3NC3

She lifts her hand and allows a miniature noose to slowly dangle between her fingers. Swaying back and forth with uncomfortable weight like the god-tier-clock's fatal pendulum. Even after dozens of times seeing this exact bit, you still can't decide whether it is incredibly silly or genuinely menacing. Maybe both. Terezi's fully committed glare does not make the call easier, and you can't even quite imagine any expression short of full-throttle ever gracing her features. The sharp lines of Pyrope's face strike you as inherently ill-suited to moderation.

One More Thing

Aradia

You find yourself haunted by both cross-cultural confusion and profound disappointment due to the fact that human corpse parties appear to not actually require any corpses. Flagrant false advertisement! Out by the mausoleum they are putting to rest an empty casket with all of the ceremonial fanfare befitting of real cadavers, but none of the conceptual calories. Something about it is deeply upsetting to you and you truly have no intention of getting sad at a corpse party.

Surreptitiously, Sollux and you snuck off to where the real action was happening. No one seemed to mind. Few even really cared about your arrival. You had reached Earth C about an hour after inspector Pyrope and so you found yourself perfectly obscured amidst the sort of... fallout her presence tends to cause. Terezi was circling the crowd, sniffing people's necks, asking uncomfortable questions and laughing maniacally at their answers. It wasn't too difficult to quietly retreat to the foyer where they had brought the real body, and laid it out in a flawless re-enactment of her genuine final moment. Artful. Morbid. The sort of postmodern pose one can only strike in the aftermath of significant damage to the skeleton. You dance around the crime scene merrily, trying to take inspiration from the position of her limbs but mostly failing due to the structural integrity of your own anatomy. No matter. It's the thought that counts. Sollux lazily taps his foot to an imagined beat as he scrolls along on his palm husk. Finally your companion finds a song he considers fitting and places the device on one of the many alabaster pedestals littering the hall. An unfamiliar note rings out. It's the one humans play to celebrate mortality, or so you are assured, although a strange, weighty melancholy lingers in the tune's upbeat rhythm.

-Enjoy yourself- It's later than you think

-Enjoy yourself- while you're still in the pink

You do just that. Spinning and sliding across the floor, throwing and catching and leading each other with all the practised grace and professionalism that aeons of dancing at the abyss of eternity afford.

~The years go by~ as quickly as a wink

Enjoy yourself! Enjoy yourself! It's later than you think.

A carapaced finger taps you on the shoulder mid-dip. Its owner, a rather nervous looking basalt figure in a suit, explains in no unclear terms that they'll have to escort you off the premises, if you wouldn't mind. That really there shouldn't be anyone in here at all. An interdict which had apparently not been sufficiently promulgated, they stammer. You and Sollux exchange disappointed looks but don't see much of a reason to make a fuss. The carapacian leads you outside amidst further apologies for things they had absolutely no fault in. A sigh.

KANAYA: I Had My Suspicions Youd Be Here

KANAYA: Thank You Lennox

They prepare their exoskeleton for an entirely excessive bow before Kanaya interrupts.

KANAYA: No Need For That Really

KANAYA: After All Im Not...

She winces as her lips form the last syllable, realizing uncharacteristically late what she's saying.

KANAYA: ...Jane

A moment of silence, but Lennox proves too polite to let it linger. With a hasty "Of course Mrs. Maryam-Lalonde", they scuttle off.

Mrs. Maryam-Lalonde pinches the bridge of her nose while her other hand shakily clutches a chalice of purple liquid.

KANAYA: I Fear We Have A Not Insignificant Quantity
Of Catching Up To Do

Sneaking through the streets in disguise feels somewhat con-spiratorial, but such is the curse of celebrity. You imagine that one tires of constant attention and interruption rather quickly, especially when one isn't *made of Time*. The streets are quieter than usual though, you're told. Global day of mourning. Swiftly Kanaya leads you through the doors of an unassuming little diner called "The Canny Lusus", and up a staircase to the first floor. There you find the kitchen as well as a single table near the window overlooking the unusual lack of bustle. The Jade-blood sighs as she sits down, removing her ostentatious black veil, and so you too shed your obfuscatory accessories. You

alert Sollux to the fact that regular shades actually suit him quite well, but he returns to his signature red-and-blue regardless

SOLLUX: not gonna happen. but thanks.

He orders a latte with six tablespoons of honey and a sprinkling of cinnamon, which causes Kanaya to snicker into the back of her hand.

KANAYA: I See Your Taste Has Remained Impervious
With Regards To Change Solluxander

Its the sort of thing which might easily be interpreted as a jab, but her voice carries only the soft note of home-sick reminiscence.

SOLLUX: no point flailing about in a doomed attempt
to improve whats already fucking perfect.

You take your caffeinated beverage black, and Kanaya continues to sip what you're almost certain is blood from her strange ornate goblet. The little troll girl who brings the orders goes wide eyed when she catches sight of you and you make a playful "shhh" gesture as you ruffle her long hair.

KANAYA: Oh She Wont Tattle On Us
KANAYA: Will You Semani

Semani shakes her head with wild fervour and the sort of unblemished earnestness that only children are capable of.

ARADIA: so the name of this place
ARADIA: you dont actually have lusi here do you?
ARADIA: who takes care of her?

Kanaya tenses up as though the lack of guardians were a personal failing of hers.

KANAYA: They Tried
KANAYA: Years And Years Of Intensive Biotech
Research Culminating In One Genetic Impasse After
Another
KANAYA: The First Generation Of Earth Trolls Were
Born Into An Orphanage System Of Sorts
KANAYA: Well Managed
KANAYA: Well Funded
KANAYA: Diligently Cared For Though Still No More
Than A Stopgap Solution Dreamt Up By Optimists
Whose Trust In The Reintroduction Of Lusi Had Not

Yet Wilted In The Icy Winds Of Continuous
Scientific Disappointment

KANAYA: A Little Less Than Half Of Them Spent Their
Entire Youth There

KANAYA: The Rest Were Adopted

KANAYA: Some Few By Humans Though In Much Greater
Number By Carapacians Who Did Not Have The Capacity
For Genetic Offspring Of Their Own But Were Drawn
To The Exotic Idea Of Parenthood Regardless

KANAYA: Perhaps A Certain Drive To Impart Guidance
Came Pre Programmed By Sgrub So That They Might
Better Serve Their Role As Exiles Or Perhaps They
Were Merely Intrigued By This Alien Custom

KANAYA: In Either Case They Conducted Themselves
Admirably On The Whole But This Too Was A Mere
Stopgap

KANAYA: Humans Regarding Themselves As The Default
In Accordance With Their Nature Thought That Trolls
Would Simply Adopt Their Family Structure Once The
First Generation Reached Adulthood

KANAYA: Some Did

KANAYA: Especially Those Who Were Raised By Humans
Themselves

KANAYA: But On The Whole The Two Parent Structure
Never Grew Particularly Popular To The Point Of
Being Regarded As Somewhat Excentric These Days
KANAYA: A Social Atavism

KANAYA: What Developed Was A Chimera Described By
Some As A Smooth Continuation Of The Orphanage
System Without The Orphanages Mixed With A Further
Diffused Adaptation Of The Communal Nature In Which
Carapacians Go About Everything

KANAYA: Wigglers Would Be Wards Of The Entire Town
They Inhabited

KANAYA: Cared For By Everyone

KANAYA: Guided By Whoever Is Around

KANAYA: As They Grow Up They Develop Interests And
Seek Out Tutelage Deliberately

KANAYA: They Build A Hive With The Help Of The
Townsfolk Or Move Into Pre Existing Accommodations
Should They Not Care For That Particular Tradition

KANAYA: Most Of Them Find A Mentor Eventually

KANAYA: A Single Figure Whose Footsteps They Seek
 To Fill One Day
 KANAYA: Much Closer In Nature To A Corporeal
 Ancestor Than To Human Parents
 KANAYA: When They Reach The Age Of Thirteen And Get
 To Pick Their Auxiliary Appellation Many Of The
 Young Trolls Choose The Last Name Of Their Mentor
 KANAYA: I Have Little Doubt That Semani Here Will
 Be Semani Aquil In Two Short Years For Example
 KANAYA: Its Not Formal
 KANAYA: Theyre Not Bound
 KANAYA: They Continue To Be Wards Of The City
 KANAYA: Welcome Anywhere Cared For By Everyone
 KANAYA: But Its The Structure That Emerges
 KANAYA: They Pick A Favourite Adult One Day And
 Start Following Them
 KANAYA: Its Not The Same Of Course But It Does
 Appear To Work
 KANAYA: They Seem Happy
 KANAYA: I Just Hope That It Isnt Merely Because
 They Dont Know The Alternative
 KANAYA: Never Will

There's an old sadness in her voice. The wistful, uncertain sort that dulls ones senses to beauty. You know it well and hate it fiercely.

Gently you direct Kanaya's gaze back towards Semani. Now on the other side of the room by the kitchen, jumping up and down in front of a man broader than than he is tall and taller than is reasonable. The sparkle of her eyes is practically audible from where you're sitting and there can be little doubt that this giant's last name is Aquil.

ARADIA: she doesnt look like shes missing anything
 subconsciously or otherwise
 ARADIA: not even a little bit
 ARADIA: i understand that you want to do everything
 right but *alternia* wasnt exactly custom built to be
 a perfect environment for young trolls
 SOLLUX: understatement of the century. it was a
 flaming pile Of shit and misery.
 SOLLUX: it was a soldier-fact0ry designed by a
 manipulative creep with an orb for a head.

SOLLUX: if there ever was a blueprint f0r the place
it said "hell 2, now even fucking w0rse someh0w"
right at the top. g0od riddance.

Not exactly the way you'd have put it but by no means wrong either.

ARADIA: theres no reason to believe that the way it
worked there was inherently better

ARADIA: plenty of kids had bad lusi

ARADIA: plenty of kids had no one at all

ARADIA: plenty of kids got culled in the night for
absolutely no reason

ARADIA: we grew up fine despite alternia not
because of it

It's been a while since you last made a serious expression and you drop it like
a hot plate the moment you realize what your face is doing. A smile befitting
of the global day of mourning returns to your lips.

ARADIA: i think youre doing great kanaya

You wave at the little girl standing on her tippy toes to operate the coffee
maker and she excitedly waves back.

ARADIA: its like you said: this seems to work

ARADIA: thats more than can be said about most
things in paradox space

Hers are not the sorts of doubts that can be assuaged by one
uncharacteristically sombre conversation. They wouldn't still be haunting her
so many years down the line if they could be, but the absence of a cure-all
does not mean that bandages are useless. The woman opposite you sighs and
folds her hands.

KANAYA: Maybe

KANAYA: But The Future Of Our Species Is Not What I
Wished To Talk To You About

KANAYA: At Least Not This Specific Aspect Of It

And so she tells you the kind of tale that ends in murder or leads to
something even worse if it fails to end. There was much talk of Jane Crocker
the person out by the empty casket, but this is the first time you're hearing of
Jane Crocker the politician. Puzzle pieces begin to connect and you get queasy
about the image they form.

Jane was a cautious person. A deliberate person. A cautious, deliberate, and
very very scared person. Importantly: Hers was not the sort of fear that leads

one to shiver at unfamiliar sounds in the dark, or even that which causes one to carry excessive quantities of weapons for the sake of self defence. It was the genre of fear which compels one to buy high end security systems. The genre which installs cameras is all those places where untrustworthy people are not to be trusted. No one says it out loud, because doing so would be entirely superfluous. You can all see the parallels where they scrape against your memory of Alternia. It was the pre-emptive, neurotic fear of the Condesce. Exiling adults to space, patrolling the streets with trigger-happy drones, culling those deemed inherently, genetically seditious. All to make sure, to make absolutely sure, to make horrifically, crushingly sure that she is safe. Sollux gulps next to you.

Those untrustworthy people who were not to be trusted were trolls of course. Not the ones Jane knew personally for the most part, but the idea of trolls. The species which had enslaved and laid waste to the future of her friends. The species which had occupations called “legislacerators” and the like, and whose meteoric envoy had killed half of its own number over the course of a brief trip through paradox space.

Jane did not believe in nurture. Maybe she believed in it intellectually, but not in her gut. Not enough to feel safe. The gut of Jane Crocker believed that their race was genetically, inherently savage, and the guts of enough humans and carapacians agreed for that to be... concerning. Jane wasn't the president, but she was rich, influential and rhetorically compelling enough to be almost as bad. In a few short years, once the pretence of not being in power had sufficiently eroded, she would have been the president, which would have meant restrictions on troll reproduction and drones in the streets at the very least.

SOLLUX: s0 you kn0w who killed her then?

KANAYA: I Dont Believe It Would Be Wise To Speculate On These Matters

KANAYA: Even In A Place Like The Canny Lusus

KANAYA: Speculation Is Unbecoming Of A Funeral

KANAYA: I Am Not Nearly As Concerned With The Act Itself As With Its Wider Social Repercussions

KANAYA: We Need Stability Sollux

KANAYA: We Must Not Let Jane Become A Martyr Lest Her Genre Of Fear Festers And Grows Around That Wound

KANAYA: Thats Why I Sent For You

KANAYA: To Use This Little Opening As Best As We Can

KANAYA: To Be Respectable Trustworthy And Visible

KANAYA: To Convince The Human Gastrointestinal System Where Rational Argument So Tragically Falters

KANAYA: Will You Please Stay Until Matters Have Settled Down

You glance over at Sollux before nodding in quiet agreement. A little vacation is fine. Your beloved metacosmic eschaton isn't gonna go away any time soon after all. The thought nonetheless stings slightly. Drained by the grim tale, a faint but distinct smile flickers across Kanaya's lips and the grip on her goblet appears to relax.

KANAYA: Thank You

KANAYA: Vospat I Believe We Will Have Desserts



Dave Strider shuffled through the courthouse almost soundlessly, tracing his fingers across the balustrades as he went. To Jade's great dismay, the man never made any noise while walking, beyond a faint yet constant mumbling perhaps. His footfall as quiet as an air-cushioned feather. After being startled one too many times, she had forced him to knock on the door frame before entering any room and somehow that habit was easier to learn than to unlearn. Now he did it even when Harley wasn't around. Alert-taps rang through the imposing architecture in a way that almost felt like echolocation and which distracted him just enough to calm his nerves a little. Dave stopped. The last door of this corridor was actually closed unlike the ones before it and so he knocked below the "INT3RROG4TION"-sign instead.

Behind a mahogany desk on which she rested her legs sat Inspector Pyrope, lazily flipping through notes. She was still enveloped by that ridiculous oversized coat and growing fonder of it by the minute. Oddly familiar. Wearing it sparked a feeling reminiscent of her old Flarp outfit, only without the unpleasant baggage. It made her feel competent. Not just Terezi but *Inspector Pyrope*. She usually felt like the most capable person in the room of course –and usually she was– but that wasn't the same as feeling competent.

Not truly. Without the costumes it was just a frustrating awareness of how low the bar hung.

TEREZI: 4H, MY 3XPR3SS ORD3R OF COOLK1D H4S 4RR1V3D

TEREZI: COM3 1N

DAVE: sup

DAVE: t dawg

DAVE: t rizzle

DAVE: been a while since you took off

DAVE: without a word

DAVE: so

DAVE: hows space been treating you

They took a brief pause to blink awkwardly at each other.

DAVE: fuck no this sucks lets start over

TEREZI: 1'M 4FR41D W3 DON'T H4V3 T1M3 FOR DOOV3RS
D4V3

TEREZI: TH3R3'S 4 MURD3R3R ON TH3 LOOS3

TEREZI: SO 4NY 1DL3 CH1T CH4T 4ND NOST4LG1C DR4W
P1L3S W1LL TR4G1C4LLY H4V3 TO W41T

TEREZI: TH3N 4G41N, 1 US3D TO KNOW 4 PR3TTY R4D
DUD3 WHOS3 WHOL3 D34L W4S T1ME

TEREZI: 4ND H3 H4D TH1S 4DOR4BL3 L1TTL3 FR13ND WHO
SHOT STR41GHT OFF TH3 POW3R L4DD3R 4ND L34RNE4 HOW
TO M4K3 DOOV3RS T4K3 PL4C3

She looked over her glasses as though this enabled her to see jack shit.

TEREZI: SO 1 R34LLY H4V3 TO WOND3R, M1STER STR1DER,
WHY THERE 3V3N 1S 4 MURD3R WH1CH N33DS
1NV3ST1G4T1NG 1N TH3 F1RST PL4C3

It's not like Dave had failed to see this coming. It was the only reason why he should be the first to be called here, and still the man felt like he had failed to dodge a punch.

DAVE: okay first of all time was never my deal

DAVE: time was a bullshit circuitous game mechanic
that i stopped using as soon as i could which is
what any reasonable person would do

DAVE: my deal is delirious beats and revolutionary
artefactpunk webcomics which is all that ever had
to be said on that matter

DAVE: just like mind isnt your deal

DAVE: what would that even mean

DAVE: your deal is being this inexplicable cross
between an insane puppet master and a trash goblin
Terezi did not interject that this was precisely what she thought it meant for
one's deal to be Mind.

DAVE: and second of all

DAVE: you know why

DAVE: even disregarding how dangerous it is to send
someone into situations where it was somehow
possible to kill a god tier

DAVE: time travel premium is like the worst
imaginable solution to any problem

DAVE: even worse than time travel standard

DAVE: which wow that sure isnt a record that needed
to be broken

DAVE: the only reason we ever used it was that it
was also the only solution

DAVE: jane lives

DAVE: john lives in some new version of events

DAVE: and all of us suddenly turn into paradox
space dust

DAVE: fizzle out

DAVE: john doesnt propose it because he knows well
say no

DAVE: also because he probably doesnt want to think
about it

DAVE: were like his third set of friends

DAVE: same but different

DAVE: bunch of "i cant believe its not dave"
backups of people he watched die in a doomed
universe

DAVE: at least i only ever had to mop up the blood
of dead versions of myself and thats traumatizing
enough

Dave realized that he was speaking even faster than normal, but it was
difficult not to. He took one deep breath to calm himself as blood-drenched
Striders flickered past on the inside of his shades.

DAVE: and of course we feel real to ourselves

DAVE: we are real but they were also real and they
probably didnt want to die either

DAVE: all weve got going for us is the sicknasty
privilege of having a choice in the matter

DAVE: easiest trolley problem ever posed
DAVE: one person versus the population of a whole planet
DAVE: no thanks buddy gotta sweeten that deal a little

For a moment the universe enjoyed the rare pleasure of seeing Terezi Pyrope speechless.

TEREZI: WOW
TEREZI: WH3N 1 L3FT, W4S TH3R3 4 S3NS1B1L1TY V4CUUM WH1CH N33D3D TO B3 F1LL3D?
TEREZI: A R4G1NG GYR3 OF TH1S TROLL D1S34S3 W3 C4LL R34SON, DR4W1NG UNSUSP3CT1NG COOL K1DS 1NTO 1TS3LF
TEREZI: YOU'V3 B3COM3 4 LOT L3SS GULL1BL3
TEREZI: IT'S 4LMOST 4 SH4M3

Dave drew one corner of his mouth upwards by a fraction of a micron to produce what passed for a smile in Strider-land. Some nuance inevitably got lost so close to the threshold of emotive measurability, but it was a sad, pensive smile. The sort you flash an old friend to convey the sentiment that they shouldn't worry too much.

DAVE: might be
DAVE: or maybe we just got less desperate
DAVE: living a few years without a gun pressed to your neck
DAVE: spending a few nights which arent filled with fucktons of dead versions of yourself and everyone youve ever known
DAVE: doesnt take too much of that to restore your relationship with death to something marginally closer to not completely batshit fucking insane
TEREZI: Y3S, TH4T WOULD 4LL B3 V3RY CONC3RN1NG 1F TH3 P3RSON 1N QU3ST1ON W3R3 TOO 1NCOMP3T3NT TO M41NT41N ST4BL3 LOOPS
TEREZI: OR 1F TH31R STYL3 OF T1M3 TR4V3L W3R3 4 WHOL3S4L3 R34L1TY R3WR1T3
TEREZI: BUT N31TH3R OF THOS3 4PLY TO YOU DO TH3Y, D4V3?
DAVE: i can still die
DAVE: jumping back there all rogue time cop with too much to lose is pretty much asking to croak heroic even under normal circumstances

DAVE: plus we have no idea what kind of crazy
endgame weapon did that
DAVE: the orbital anti immortal laser could well
have another shot in reserve just for my
unsuspecting ass
DAVE: and even if i didnt die i couldnt save jane
because then the loop wouldnt be stable since she
obviously hasnt been saved
TEREZI: D4V3, YOU ONLY D13 1F YOU DON'T S4V3
YOURS3LF
TEREZI: TH3 L4CK OF CONF1D3NC3 1S UNB3COM1NG OF 4
COOLK1D, YOU KNOW
TEREZI: 4ND YOU COULD F1GUR3 OUT WHO D1D 1T W1THOUT
R1SK1NG 4NY D4M4G3 TO TH3 T1M3L1N3
TEREZI: SO WHY WOULD YOU D3FL3CT BY H1D1NG B3H1ND
3GB3RT'S L1M1T4T1ONS OR HYPOTH3T1C4L R1SKS FOR
W33N13S WHO DON'T KNOW HOW TO T1M3 TR4V3L W1THOUT
3ND1NG UP D34D?
TEREZI: 1T JUST D03SN'T M4KE S3NS3...
TEREZI: TH3R3'S DOUBL3 TH3 D3L1C1OUS CH3RRY 1N YOUR
P3RJUR1OUS WORDS, 1SN'T TH3R3, M1ST3R STR1D3R?
TEREZI: K4RK4T WON'T L3T YOU
DAVE: so what

If it weren't for the fact that Dave never failed to look composed, he would have had to compose himself. Fuck did she get there quickly.

DAVE: like of course i want to know whos out there
and how
DAVE: or if we all suddenly became mortal again and
nobody told us
DAVE: but we literally dont know how big that risk
is right now
DAVE: whatever legendary ninja technique ignores
immortality might not care for loop stability
either
DAVE: perfected over generations in some remote
village by eccentric masters to off the local deity
for slighting their grand grand grand
grandfather
DAVE: unwise to mess with that sort of shit
DAVE: so no
DAVE: you just cant force me to go on a potential
suicide mission

TEREZI: HMMMM SUPPOS3 1 C4N'T
TEREZI: W1TH TH4T FR3SHLY 4CQU1R3D S3NS1B1L1TY OF
YOURS, YOU H4VE TO UND3RST4ND TH4T TH1S M4K3S BOTH
YOU 4ND YOUR BOYFR1END LOOK V3RY SUSP1C1OUS

She cackled like an esoteric printer error.

DAVE: look ill do it if i have to
DAVE: if it seems like were in danger
DAVE: but i dont think we are
TEREZI: 4H4H4H4!
TEREZI: 1 W4S GO1NG TO 4SK TH1S 4NYW4Y S1NC3 YOU
S33M3D SO C4LM
TEREZI: BUT NOW 1M R34LLY CUR1OUS
TEREZI: 1T SOUNDS 4 WHOL3 LOT L1KE YOU H4V3 4
SUSP3CT 1N M1ND, M1ST3R DOUBL3 CH3RRY

They could have played this entire game move by move. Dave could have refused to say anything just like he refused to Time travel, and the investigator could have grinned and added a bright red tally mark to an imaginary score board... but there really wasn't much point in that. His suspicion didn't actually throw anyone under the bus, since Terezi would investigate everyone anyway and it wasn't like he had evidence. All it did was appear cooperative.

DAVE: okay lets for a second pretend like you dont
already know what i think and like you arent just
testing whether ill say it
DAVE: oh wow terezi what a chill and normal
communicational manoeuvre completely free of
paranoid bullshit
DAVE: says the lobotomized version of myself who
believes this
DAVE: drooling wildly as he does so like a bell
crazy dog with an hole in its throat
DAVE: lets see
DAVE: we have a crime that can only be committed
with an obscure game mechanic none of us know about
DAVE: unless jane managed to heroically or justly
fall off a balcony of course
DAVE: which i wont even fully discount
DAVE: a sick enough stunt off the balustrade can
probably do that to you
DAVE: gotta watch yo step
DAVE: then theres the fact that our victim is the
primary danger to kanaya maryams lifework

DAVE: and obviously the person resorting to murder
would have to have a few loose screws rattling
about in that oversaturated head of hers

DAVE: so rose

DAVE: all of those point to rose

TEREZI: TH4NK YOU

TEREZI: P4SS >8]

TEREZI: GOODBY3 D4V3, YOU WILL H34R FROM M3

DAVE: sure

DAVE: dont be a stranger

The man couldn't help but leave some bitterness in those words. She'd left them before after all. Almost out of the door, Dave turned back around as though he had forgotten something.

DAVE: oh

DAVE: one more thing

DAVE: nice coat

He gave an implacable sixteenth of a smile as he left the 1NT3RROG4TION room, and Inspector Pyrope didn't like the smell of it in the least. A bright red tally mark was added to an entirely unrelated imaginary scoreboard.

Calliope

You tend to have a rather light sleep. In part, surely, because you do not sleep at all. Never the regular variety and, since you died, not even the irregular variety. A shudder runs through your spine at the thought of your brother awakening in this bed next to Roxy. Wakefulness does not prevent nightmares. Then again, perhaps you do experience a sleep-lite of sorts. As though your consciousness lost saturation at night, growing muted and distant. Maybe it's because you never properly predominated, and so your self still grows faint in an attempt to submerge, just without a horrible sibling to take over. Nevertheless, the feeling isn't exactly unpleasant and it makes it easier to lie still for eight hours. You want to lie still. Five years have not robbed the experience of "sleeping" next to Roxy of any of its magic, and so you put on headphones and listen to music, podcasts, audio dramas and sometimes just the sound of their breath until they wake up in the morning and your consciousness drifts into undiluted focus again.

All of this is to say that you tend to have a rather light sleep-lite, and this definitely isn't a sound the mansion tends to make. As you open your eyes, the foyer's far-off ceiling comes into blurry view. Right... you're here. Had the funeral gone according to plan, then Roxy would have surely stopped insisting on sleeping next to the coffin, but now Jane's body was back, and so you decided that it was probably easier to just ask Jake if you could move your bed here. Temporarily. You really hope temporarily. Of course you miss Janey as much as everyone else, but resting next to the crime scene doesn't help you with those feelings. It just creeps you out and makes you feel like an intruder. Slowly you turn your head to see what Jake is doing at this time of night, but the person who stands there, Jane over his shoulder, making sure not to disturb the chalk outline, is almost a full head too short to be the mansion's owner.

...

Your dilute consciousness takes its sweet time to make sense of the scene.

CALLIOPE: dirk?

CALLIOPE: i woUlDn't dare accUse yoU of anything Untoward, bUt...

CALLIOPE: blimey, there aren't too many good reasons for nightly corpse-nappings i can think of right now. u_u;

CALLIOPE: woUlD yoU mind explaining what this is?

The intruder freezes before facepalming.

DIRK: shhhhh!

DIRK: Please, there is no reason to make a big deal out of this.

DIRK: Standard forensics procedure when the lead investigator doesn't let you do basic forensics.

DIRK: Though that itself is admittedly a pretty non-standard fucking forensics scenario.

DIRK: Anyway.

DIRK: She'll be back before you know it. I just need to run some tests.

He pauses, perhaps realizing how insane this sounds.

DIRK: You know I wouldn't do anything to Jane, right?

You-

Yes of course you know that, but-

Your night-brain is still very hung up on the corpse-napping part and has elected to run in circles. Roxy stirs on the other side of the bed.

ROXY: hnggmhhhh
ROXY: homies wat

They look to you, then to Dirk, and then give a slow little nod as though they suddenly understand everything. Somehow that's enough to calm you as well, despite the fact that it clearly shouldn't. If you had to translate Roxy's facial expression in that moment, the resultant sentiment would go something like "oh, it's the dream where Dirk steals Jane's body. I don't have the energy for that one right now". And so they go back to sleep as though nothing had happened.

CALLIOPE: do yoU think this will help Us with the investigation?

DIRK: I mean

DIRK: Obviously I don't know that, but we can't just sit on our hands, right?

DIRK: Please Callie. She'll be back before sunrise, and you can tell inspector Pyrope all about this once I'm done. I'll turn myself in pre-cuffed if you want.

That... still doesn't assuage all of your fears, but you can imagine less reasonable terms for a corpse-napping. You nod.

CALLIOPE: okay. back before sUnrise.

CALLIOPE: i trUst yoU dirk, please take good care of her.

Alone With Company

Dirk

Thick butyl gloves adorn both of your hands as lightning tears the sable sky to minuscule tatters. The coruscating glow casts your stark shadow over the body of a dear friend, splayed out across an operating table. You-

Yeah. No. Reviving her isn't within your power yet, is it? But you can conduct more of an examination than the perfunctory garbage carried out by some random guy with a medical degree. Singular. You have three medical degrees and you weren't even trying that hard. One out of curiosity, one to play a role in a movie, and one as a joke. Theirs on the other hand must have been joke all the way through. Pathetic.

None of the reagent vials to your left seem to have changed colour yet, but there's still time. If there isn't, you'll get Time. A hopeful thought chimes above the monotone soliloquy of your post mortem report that "perhaps whatever residual Life energy preserves her body and things next to it might also preserve foreign substances in her blood". You tell it to pipe down until it has evidence. It obliges.

Just who the hell was this chump anyway? They noted all the various fractures without getting wise to the fact that no one falls like that. No one plummets off a balcony that high and doesn't try to use their limbs to somehow protect themselves. It's a behavioural inevitability. A confluence of instincts and reflexes, refined and polished by centuries of evolution. So why could you not see any attempt at self preservation? Maybe there had been at least a hint of that question in the mind of the medical examiner, even though the light bulb atop their head wasn't screwed in properly. A faint whisper. Maybe that's why they bothered to run a basic tox screen and no more. It did reveal alcohol. A decent amount of it too, but surely not enough to disable such foundational evolutionary safeguards. Surely.

There is another voice, which your monologue of minutiae is attempting to drown out. It's the one that compelled you to steal a corpse and it's not nearly as optimistic as the former. "Dirk," it whispers "you know how one might accomplish a just death. You've been making contingency plans for years. All it takes is willpower and a deliberate lack of self-preservation. Jump – Splot. For people who aren't you, alcohol might make that easier."

DIRK: Jane didn't kill herself.

Since you can't very well strangle yourself for having that thought, you smash an empty vial instead. She wouldn't... but the reagents still don't show any sign of a colour change. Maybe you do need an earlier sample, or maybe there really is a weapon which kills gods without leaving a mark. If only you had access to *the archives*- If you had access to *the archives* you wouldn't need to be doing this, now would you? And reading **the narrative** if you don't specifically know what you're looking for is a non-starter as well. Finally one of the mixtures turns black. Strychnine, huh? That's not a definitive case against suicide, but it would be an odd choice. A bad choice. A painful choice. The muscle spasms would however explain why she didn't try to catch herself.

DIRK: End autopsy report.

An affirmative beep before you let yourself slump against the wall in emotional exhaustion. This is what you wanted, isn't it? Throws up more questions than you had before, but questions are the first step towards getting answers, so that should be a victory. Yet still it feels hollow. Maybe you're just tired. An unfamiliar sensation, but to be expected since you haven't exactly slept recently. Maybe you can find room for a nap in your schedule after you've returned Jane and before you present your findings to Terezi. Half an hour or so. People can say what they will about the pony show, but it taught you the important lessons: Make sure to sleep at least once a week and keep your cool around alt-selves so you don't have to worry about going "It's about time"-levels of batshit. Standing upon the shoulders of fictional equine giants means that you won't ever have to learn these sorts of invaluable life-strats the hard way. Thank you Twilight. You perform an ironically sincere salute towards the lightning-torn sky.

The roster of obvious questions had been doubled. "How does one disable conditional immortality?" and the central "Whodunnit?" were joined by "Why poison?" and "How did Jake not notice his fiancée's spasms and likely screaming in the throes of motor-nervous pandemonium?", but what about the non-obvious questions? Where would Jane have looked?

A couple of years ago you might have built a simulation of her in an attempt to find out, but you've since grown disillusioned with those. One can only explain loop quantum gravity to AI-Newton or German idealism to AI-Plato

so many times before one realizes that the response is always eerily similar to what you were expecting. From there it only takes a short cascade of shallow epiphanies to realize that this might not be because you can perfectly predict every genius throughout history but because you are making copies of your understandings of them, which shockingly hold unsurprisingly few surprises for you. Dead end. You can't revive her and you can't make a Jane AI either. At best you can make a Brain-Ghost-Jane-AI to look in exactly the places you would expect Jane to look in, offering no novel insight. Story of your life. All you seem to be capable of is making splinters of yourself pretending to be someone else. Dirks behind every mask...

You'd better return the body now.



Print carried significant disadvantages as a medium, despite how cool it looked. The slower rate of update for one, but the way in which newspaper pages turned to mush beneath Terezi Pyrope's tongue proved to be an even more fructuous source of disrelish. Not for the investigator herself, but certainly for the people who had to observe the process in frozen, vaguely fascinated disgust. An information-dense symphony of stracciatella against her taste buds.

Cheerily Terezi rolled a paragraph about Aradia and Sollux's new apartment to a sticky ball in her mouth, before taking the opportunity to present it to a transfixed barista upon the platter of her tongue. Both of them gulped. The investigator swallowed.

JADE: heyyy!!! :D

Jade essentially shouted as she threw herself around the troll from behind.

TEREZI: H3LL0 J4D3

TEREZI: PL34S3, T4K3 4 S34T

TEREZI: THOUGH 1'M 4FR41D 1 C4N'T GU4R4NT33 MUCH
CONF1D3NT14L1TY 1N TH1S S3TT1NG

JADE: i know

JADE: thanks for agreeing to meet me here :)

Condensation obscured her eyes behind the enormous round glasses, as she blew upon her cup of masala chai, wafting the thick warm scent of spices towards Terezi. It felt like a gift of sorts. A friendly gesture between people who never had the time to properly become friends.

Jade hadn't gotten into much detail about why this was necessary. She was tired of explaining it, tired of pretending like her experience could be reduced to words, but luckily the investigator hadn't forced her to. She just accepted the suboptimal locale with something like understanding in her voice. Possibly, hopefully, understanding. If anyone could relate to her, it was the girl who grew up alone in a tree house. Who had just come back from her solitary trek through the dead nothingness of paradox space. But then again, Terezi did that second one willingly, which was incomprehensible.

The absence of voices made Jade Harley anxious, the prolonged absence of touch. Without the comforting hum of sentient life around her, Space began to compress and the black sludge of existential loneliness seeped in through every pore to crowd her thoughts and strangle her. Just like that – always exactly like yesterday. A second of silence which might for others be calming transported her back across light years onto the deck of a golden battleship whisking through immeasurable nothingness, crushingly and utterly alone. Jade Harley knew what silence sounded like and she never wanted to hear it again.

TEREZI: RIGHT >:]

TEREZI: TH3R3'S SOM3TH1NG WH1CH H4S B33N BOTH3R1NG
M3 4BOUT TH1S C4S3

TEREZI: SUR3LY YOU C4N SH1N3 SOM3 L1GHT ON TH3
M4TT3R

JADE: shoot

Terezi was smelling for shifts in expression but not finding anything obvious. The girl opposite her just wagged her tail as she sipped the intriguing beverage.

TEREZI: M4Y 1?

JADE: of course!!!

She slid the cup over with both hands like a peace offering. Maybe it was one. On behalf of Dave or in spite of him. The tea tasted similar to the way it smelled yet somehow even louder. Even warmer. Definitely the flavour tawny would invoke in Terezi from now on.

TEREZI: D3L1C10US, BUT 3NOUGH W1TH TH3 D1STR4CT10NS
TEREZI: S33, D4V3 4ND K4RK4T TOLD M3 TH4T YOU W3R3
W1TH TH3M ON TH3 N1GHT 1N QU3ST10N
TEREZI: BUT TH4T'S NOT TRU3, 1S 1T M1SS H4RL3Y?

JADE: i-

JADE: well we dont know when exactly she died

JADE: i was with davekat when they fell asleep so
they werent lying to you!!!

TEREZI: BUT YOU W3R3N'T W1TH TH3M WH3N TH3Y 4WOK3
>:/

TEREZI: 1S TH4T NOT SUSP1C10US?

JADE: not really :/

JADE: i always get up before those two and i rarely
stay in the house just to listen to karkat snore

The glimmer of panic from before had disappeared as quickly as it came on,
but Terezi was certain that it wouldn't take much to bring it back.

TEREZI: HMMM

TEREZI: L3T M3 PUT 1T 4N0TH3R W4Y TH3N

TEREZI: DO3S TH1S P1CTUR3 M34N 4NYTH1NG TO YOU?

She presented a comparatively dry page of her newspaper. The investigator
had to buy two copies, since the first did not survive a thorough reading.

JADE: the crocker corp fires?

JADE: doing that kind of thing right now is in like

JADE: super bad taste if you ask me :(

JADE: spiteful and honestly a bit larpy?

JADE: but its not like those protesters dont have
some very valid concerns either...

JADE: what does that have to do with anything?

TEREZI: TH3 OTH3R P1CTUR3

TEREZI: "UFO S1GHT1NG"

TEREZI: S33 TH4T SP34RM1NT FL4SH 1N TH3 SKY?

JADE: its black and white terezi :/

TEREZI: DO3SN'T M4TT3R, 1 KNOW WH4T COLOR 1T 1S >:]

TEREZI: JUST LOOK 4T TH4T DOWNR1GHT CRUNCHY OUTL1N3

TEREZI: 1T'S GOT 4N 3NT1R3 M0UTHF33L

TEREZI: L1K3 POP ROCKS 4 L4 F1RST GU4RD14N

Jade flinched.

TEREZI: RUDH4L J43NM1, TH3 M4N WHO C4PTUR3D TH1S
PH3NOM3NON D1DN'T KNOW WH4T TO M4K3 OF 1T

TEREZI: BUT 1'D R3COGN1Z3 TH4T T4ST3 4NYWH3R3...

TEREZI: SO, M1SS SOUR 4PPL3 POP ROCKS

TEREZI: WHY W3R3 YOU FLY1NG OV3R TH3 HUM4N K1NGDOM
4T 4:30 4.M. ON TH3 N1GHT OF TH3 MURD3R?
TEREZI: TH4TS R4TH3R 34RLY 1S 1T NOT? 4ND SO V3RY
F4R FROM HOM3 TOO

She set her cup down slowly, and Terezi could feel in the vibrations of their table that the dog-girl's tail was no longer wagging.

JADE: yes, it is early
JADE: i was having bad dreams that night
JADE: kept waking up to a point where i just said
"screw it!!!!" and flew to the shooting range
JADE: there are ones in the troll kingdom but none
which take too kindly to people using them in the
middle of the night
JADE: so... yeah
JADE: thats me
TEREZI: 4 SHOOT1NG R4NG3 >:?
JADE: i know this sounds silly but it makes me feel
in control, okay?
JADE: like im not quite so powerless
JADE: like nothing can harm me
JADE: and of course thats absurd, i know that
JADE: dogtier makes me the single strongest being
on this...
JADE: on this planet
JADE: even the best firearm is a fucking ROUNDING
ERROR to my power level
JADE: but weve seen too much for it to feel that
way
JADE: "if you have a gun youre safe"
JADE: thats the story i told myself as a child
JADE: and its the story that stuck
TEREZI: ...
JADE: moixia hyphus can confirm that i was there
that night
JADE: its her range
TEREZI: 1 S33
TEREZI: 4ND HOW F4R 1S 1T TO TH3 CROCK3R 3ST4T3
FROM TH4T PL4CE?
TEREZI: 4PPROX1M4T3LY
JADE: twenty minutes with a car
JADE: lot less for me

There was definitely some truth to Jade's story, but not nearly enough to mask the odd aftertaste it left in inspector Pyrope's mouth. She smiled pleasantly.

TEREZI: 1T DO3SN'T LOOK L1KE YOU H4VE MUCH OF 4N
4L1B1, M1SS POP ROCKS, 3V3N 1F TH3 OWN3R

CORROBOR4T3S YOUR STORY

TEREZI: BUT TH4T 4LON3 H4RDLY M4K3S YOU GUILTY OF
COURS3...

Terezi was about to let her leave, but something about the previous interview still didn't sit right with her.

TEREZI: J4D3, D1D D4V3 S4Y 4NYTH1NG TO YOU 4FT3R
OUR T4LK?

JADE: well im sure you noticed, but he was pretty
hurt by your sudden departure

JADE: and he and i and karkat get that you have
your own shit to deal with and that you dont owe
him your company

JADE: but i also get why he feels abandoned?

JADE: so yes we talked about that

JADE: but i honestly feel like its a conversation
the two of you would be better off having amongst
yourselves

TEREZI: 1... S33

JADE: no you dont :p

TEREZI: TH4NK YOU J4D3

TEREZI: YOU M4Y GO

This wasn't what she had been concerned about, but maybe she should have been? Fuck. Terezi remembered the end of her FLARP days. How hurt she had been by Vriska's refusal to play by their rules. Not because the rules were so monumentally important – the rules were important, but they weren't THAT important – but because it meant that she valued “her own shit” more than their relationship. And their relationship wasn't even anything huge back then! They were kids. They didn't get the huge shit yet. Certainly not the quadrant blurred mess they had now.

Vriska's “own shit” was trying not to get killed by her bitch of a lusur for gog's sake, but that knowledge did very little to squash the feeling of having been dropped like an old toy by your best friend/puppy crush. What Jade described wasn't the same, but it did seem to hit a number of familiar notes.

Never in her life had Terezi Pyrope considered the possibility that she could make someone else feel that way, even on a small scale. Shit.

Roxy

ROXY: janey i- idk if i can do this for much longer

The dead body on the floor next to you doesn't answer, but its brain-ghost counterpart, standing in the same exact spot, does. She's looking down on you. Fake-physically as well as figuratively, which you guess must mean that you're looking down on yourself by proxy, which is dumb and circular and basically doesn't make any sense whatsoever. She's not been there since her death. You've failed not to see her, despite the fact that she's not been there, for just as long. Not in any way that matters at least. Sometimes, when no one is listening, the "two" of you talk.

JANE: Do what? No one is forcing you to be here.

ROXY: yea lol

ROXY: thats like kinda the entire fucking issue?

ROXY: hey rolal why dont u just move on from ur best friend bein dead

ROXY: not like anyones forcing you to still be a miserable wreck because of that

ROXY: lmao

You don't "feel like you have to" grieve like this. Like you "have to" squat in Jake's manor like a full-on loony-bins insane person. It's more akin to not knowing how not to do that. The chains binding you to this place are a law of physics. An anchor. A universal reference point. Jane is were reality is. Leaving here would be accepting that reality was over. Eternity had ended. Normalcy was dead and someone had killed her. You produce a faint, exhausted laugh in the vague direction of a person who isn't there.

ROXY: you know

ROXY: back on my little ocean colony surrounded by pumpkins n voracious fucking chess guys n booze

ROXY: i somehow never thought of you as living in the past

ROXY: it was always that i lived in the future

ROXY: that the present

ROXY: the REAL present
ROXY: was where you were
ROXY: and obviously those are the same thing
ROXY: its kinda just semantics?
ROXY: but the maladaptive rabbit hole goes way deeper than that
ROXY: your experience was just plainly more real than mine n i was no more than some kooky broad from a fake dystopia novel
ROXY: which you def didnt help with tbh
ROXY: when the most level headed person u know pulls their skeptic shtick on you for years
ROXY: disbelieving the basic parameters of your existence
ROXY: then u do start to trust their reality over your own
ROXY: i-

You hesitate. These are the sorts of words which can break things that mustn't be broken just as easily as those which should be.

ROXY: i dont want to call it gaslighting because like you didnt fuckign know
ROXY: but them's still the depressing ass breaks
ROXY: and i even kind of liked it in a screwed up way???

ROXY: because my fake dystopia novel sucked
ROXY: i cant count the number of times i went to bed blackout drunk sincerely hoping - PRAYING - that it was all just a bad dream and that ima wake up in reality with my best friend jane where we can do all the things normal teens are supposed to do
ROXY: go to parties and give each other makeovers and maybe open a detective agency to find missing pets
ROXY: for years that was the happiest thought my giant useless hacker brain could muster
ROXY: that you were right and my experience wasnt real
ROXY: n despite how nice of a feeling that was to fall asleep to
ROXY: i think it really fucked me up in the long run?

ROXY: because now i dont know how to let go of that anchor without it feeling like a betrayal

The exhale doesn't give you any of the release you were hoping for. All that tension remains painfully stuck in your throat like an uncooperative hairball of emotion and more will be needed to get it out. Why was it specifically Jane? In part surely because she was the one most adamantly insisting on the reality of her reference point, but also because she was the most... safe? Dirk was a wild ocean current in his own right. Reliable and stalwart, but not stable in the same way. He also came with the baggage of being a fellow shitty-dystopia-resident, something that no one in their right mind would ever wish to be tethered to. And Jake? You love the guy dearly, but he's the opposite of solid ground to stand upon. He is a series of impossible leaps of faith and bright genuine smiles when he inevitably eats shit and brushes the dust off his shorts only to jump again. At the time this was compounded by English occupying a strange quantum state of being both your dear sweet friend and also *designated boy* to the lascivious wiles of an entire friend group. Anchoring yourself to Jake, regardless of how bad a choice it would have been either way, would have meant a distinct risk of having to surrender him to Jane or Dirk. So no. You weren't exploiting Jane for stability. She was just the only option. The alternative would have been...

JANE: Not to put too fine a point on it, Roxy, but it sounds like you're blaming me for your mental hang-ups and I can't abide by that.

ROXY: no!

ROXY: im blaming myself idiot

ROXY: you just made the amateur mistake of being in my brain while it annihilates itself with these weapons grade revelations

ROXY: just tearing into the metaphysical hangup pile with wild abandon

JANE: And you believe that to be healthy behavior?

ROXY: would you stop it with the imaginary condescension while im talking myself through this?

ROXY: of course i dont

ROXY: im not as stupid as you seem to think i am despite my hangups

ROXY: but callies off with jade again doing adorable effing drawpiles for the second day in a row now

ROXY: i may not be mx observant mcdetectivepants
but i do notice this stuff
ROXY: BEING HERE isnt healthy for them
ROXY: so ive got to find a way to dump these jane
chains
ROXY: these JAINS!!!
ROXY: even if its not up 2 the elusive fuckin
standard of acceptable coping
ROXY: because otherwise id be letting them down
ROXY: so fuck it
ROXY: lets be hells of self destructive up in this
bitch

Jake's home-bar is stocked to the brim and right next to the eastern staircase, a mere glass-house-dwelling stone's throw away from your temporary bedroom. Fucking English. You know it's not that he doesn't care, he just doesn't... think... very much. The bottles didn't even pose any danger. You weren't ever actually tempted to relapse. But addiction –even bygone addiction– is a powerful thing. Just being in one room with the spirits is a constant scraping at old parts of your wiring. A permeating shapeless awareness of their presence, like dark shadows shackling the objects which cast them in place. And right now that shapeless awareness is making itself heard, blending in with all your other flailing attempts to find a way out of this house.

JANE: You can't be serious.
JANE: Didn't you say you wanted not to let people
down?
ROXY: this is me letting YOU down?!
ROXY: bold fucking claim from miss "i liked you
better when you were drinking"
ROXY: thats the worst thing anyone has ever said to
me you know that right?
ROXY: and it wasnt a slip of the tongue like no one
says that kind of thing accidentally
ROXY: you said it because you knew how much it
would hurt my recently recovered ass
ROXY: lmao
ROXY: and i guess thats not even true anymore
ROXY: that its the worst

ROXY: top spot on the rolal pain scales been
usurped by the news of you being gone 5ever so i
guess youre off the hook for that?

ROXY: but it sure was a good run

JANE: Roxy...

ROXY: are you telling me its a bad idea

A sense of challenge permeates your voice and you don't know why you put it there.

JANE: It's a terrible idea!

JANE: This is ridiculous.

JANE: You know what you're doing right?

JANE: By asking me what you should do, you're forcing me into the exact position you complained about.

JANE: I'M NOT REAL.

JANE: You're putting these words in my mouth in order to incite some confrontation that allows you to move on, because I'd be dictating your reality again.

JANE: Well, I'm not playing.

Foiled by your own mental construct. Savagely called out and rebuked within an inch of your damn life in the confines of your own skull. Of course your projection of Jane would be imminently reasonable about this stuff. The flailing revs up. You really don't want to go there.

ROXY: but u dont think i can stop

JANE: Roxy, of course I don't. Do you remember how many times you told me that you could stop? You probably don't, but I do.

JANE: I'm really trying to be supportive here, but those failed experiments in sobriety vastly outnumber the one time that you actually managed to stop.

JANE: It's simple statistics.

JANE: Your plan is bad and I'm telling you that it's bad, not because I want to dictate your reality, but because I care about you.

ROXY: *le sign*

ROXY: watch me brain ghost

You grab a fancy vodka and start chugging it, pushing down all of your internal screaming. Not a drop has crossed these lips in years, nor will one ever again. That's a promise to you and you alone. Your hands are trembling

wildly to a point where the bottleneck might chip a tooth. Dread, disgust, purpose. One third. Stop. Wordlessly Jane strands before you, frozen in shock and captured by your glare. You want to vomit. Not because of the alcohol but because of what it invokes in you. Days and months and years blotted out, blurry and just numb enough to deal. Your smile slowly steadies itself while a faint rivulet of burning liquid runs down one corner of your mouth. You put the spirit back in the cabinet.

ROXY: im so sorry

You sob. It's directed at yourself more so than at Jane, but also kind of at Jane for trying to cast her as the villain in this embarrassing psychodrama. It was the only thing you could think of. She'd been a great friend. Your best friend. But that didn't change the fact that she never truly believed in you. When you quit drinking the first time all by yourself while everyone was too caught up in their own drama to even pay attention to you: That was the first time you ever really felt that you were real, that you and the rest of the universe didn't revolve around Jane. Because Jane was wrong. You could do this and you needed to remind yourself of that. There exists a reality tethered to Roxy Lalonde. A reality which has always been tethered to Roxy Lalonde as much as to anyone else, and you can go out there and enter it.

Still shaking you place a hand on the doorknob and for the first time since that day, your body allows you to turn it. Meticulously maintained hinges refuse to creak as they swing open, but the weight which they carry can be felt regardless. Lennox, who's cutting some decorative bushes on the other side, beams elatedly at the sight of you.

ROXY: ima b out for a stroll k?

ROXY: please tell callie if she gets back before i do

They ask if you need anything. A coat? Or maybe a freshly prepared picnic basket in case hunger strikes amidst the beautiful, bucolic scenery? They could whip something up in no time at all, the carapacian insists, but you tell them you'll be fine. The slight chilliness makes you feel aware of your body in a pleasant way, which they seem to understand.

ROXY: bye len!

You call, as you step into a brisk evening. The sky is drenched in lilac like an old piece of fine silk slowly suffocating the setting sun. It would be

brehtaking if the sight weren't obscured by tears creeping into the corners of your vision. You still feel nauseous and in some ways it seems like you've just exchanged one flavour of grief for another, less stationary, one. Like you've traded numbness for a pain that had considerably been waiting right around some mental corner to pounce on you once you're ready for the impact. The pain has decided that its time has come and brings you to your knees.

JANE: It will get better eventually. I promise.

She— She's still here, huh? You somehow though you had left her at the doorstep, but apparently you haven't.

JANE: Hoo hoo hoo!

JANE: That's not how mourning works, silly.

JANE: Though, since I'm you, I'm admittedly also a bit surprised.

ROXY: lol guess we should keep going then

ROXY: i know it was dumb what i did back there btw

ROXY: really shouldnt trust myself with that stuff no matter how sure i feel

ROXY: but trustign myself anyway was kinda the exact thing i felt like i needed 2 do?

ROXY: and it worked... so... yay bad and dangerous decisiom making!

ROXY: but then theres always poor sweet counterfuctual roxy who fucked their sitch up even worse because they couldnt handle it

ROXY: *counterfactual

ROXY: also probly should have considered that my toblerone is back 2 zero

ROXY: *tolerance

ROXY: but here we are

JANE: That is indeed where we seem to be.

JANE: I'm proud of you.

JANE: Even though it was a terrible idea. :B

As you talk – still not free, but freer than before –, the scent of smoke catches your attention, wafting in dark clouds over a nearby hill.

Missing The Forest Missing The Trees

Jade

Karkat is giving a well known spiel about how much he hates being the spiritual leader to people he vaguely disagrees with, when the phone rings. He doesn't actually hate it of course. You think he probably enjoys it immensely, but your cantankerous boyfriend is the sort of person who will implode if he runs out of things to publicly complain about.

JADE: hiya how-

JADE: oh

JADE: yes of course callie!!!

JADE: ill tell them

Fuck. A venomous chill runs down your spine.

KARKAT: OH HOW CONVENIENT. ANOTHER ANONYMOUS PHONE CALL WHISKING YOU AWAY TO GOG KNOWS WHICH MIND-NUMBINGLY MADE UP ACTIVITY.

KARKAT: JUST SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO LISTEN TO ME LAY OUT IN PAINSTAKING, BLOOD CURDLING DETAIL THE TROUBLES OF OUR INSUFFERABLE TRASH FIRE OF A TEMPORAL INTERVAL.

KARKAT: BY WHICH I OF COURSE SPECIFICALLY MEAN THOSE WHICH PERTAIN TO ME PERSONALLY.

KARKAT: ISN'T THAT WHAT PEOPLE ARE SUPPOSED TO DO IN EARTH HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS?

KARKAT: LISTEN WITH LOBOTOMIZED ATTENTIVENESS TO THE TRIPLE DISTILLED PAN GARBAGE DRIPPING LIKE STEAMING HOT SALIVA FROM OUR RESPECTIVE IGNORANCE SHOOT?

KARKAT: HOW COULD YOUR INFURIATINGLY FUGACIOUS WAYS DENY ME EVEN THIS SIMPLEST OF PLEASURES, JADE?

KARKAT: HAVE YOU FINALLY DISCOVERED THE CAPACITY FOR MALADROIT HATRED IN YOUR GOOEY DOG HEART?

JADE: oh my god karkat!!!

JADE: stfu!!!!

JADE: just because you refuse to personalize ringtones doesnt mean that a call is anonymous

KARKAT: OKAY I DIDN'T KNOW YOU'D-

JADE: i said SHUT UP!!!!!!!

JADE: roxys missing

JADE: get your clothes ill wake up dave
JADE: and if you try to say a single word about why
your help wont be necessary ill show you just how
great my capacity for exceedingly non-gooey hatred
is

JADE: in fact I will demonstrate it on very very
very delicate parts of your anatomy and take great
pleasure in doing so, are we clear???

You allow a bit of first guardian energy to crackle menacingly between your fingers, weaving in and out of reality in lambent fulminations of exotic matter, but the additional threat seems to not be necessary. Karkat is already bolting upstairs, a cascade of doppler-shifted “fuck”s and “shit”s growing ever more distant.

In the corner of the living room your other boyfriend sits passed out at his desk, head slumped to the side and drooling into one of the myriad panels of acoustic foam that cover all parts of the wall not occupied by posters or photo collages. A light tap on the door frame is enough to instantaneously jolt Strider awake.

DAVE: shit you look worried

DAVE: did karkat try to cook again

DAVE: did karkat try to *eat* something he cooked
again

An exclamation which might conceivably have been “eat my engorged bulge, shitface” filters down from above as you explain the situation to Dave, his face very much that of a boy who has just been told that his non binary mom's gone missing.

DAVE: what do we do

JADE: as far as we know they left on foot and
theres nothing in the logs of nearby
transportalizer pads

JADE: but were talking about roxy so that doesnt
necessarily mean anything

JADE: stupid lousy god damn hackers

JADE: so for now theyre scouting the surrounding
area in teams of two

JADE: it might be best if you carry karkat?

JADE: a unit with both flight and night vision is
more useful than two units with one each and-

Dave places his hands on your shoulders.

DAVE: breathe

DAVE: were gonna find them

DAVE: just port karkat and me wherever you think is best okay

Like on cue, a now fully dressed Vantas joins your makeshift strategy meeting, and you zap both of them into one of the larger bits of curated forest surrounding the Crocker estate. This makes five teams for five sectors: Callie and Jake, Sollux and Aradia, Dave and Karkat, John and Terezi and the very politically uncomfortable Dirk and Kanaya, since Rose is apparently in no condition to exert herself. You don't even bother with the door, instead leaping for the open window. The ball of your foot only touches the sill for a fractional instant before guardian energy seizes your form and catapults it outside. Houses, fields and rivers frantically blur past along a journey that only takes a few seconds for you, enveloped by a neon force that looks like wild, crackling electricity and feels like universes colliding and coming apart at the pulse of eternity. An experience universally understood (and once succinctly described) as “[having] an entire mouthfeel”. Above the alabaster palace your body comes to a standstill, crisp night cooling the superheated pocket of air around you. Molecules swirl in place as though confused by their sudden and violent dislocation. You aren't. The scents which gather in your nostrils paint landscapes and events in vivid colours, bleeding out towards the edges of your awareness as a sea of dark purple. It's a bit overwhelming and the Rogue is difficult to spot in even the most thorough of sensory maps. Swiftly a headset clips into place behind your additional set of ears so as to dissipate the sheer quiet of sufficient elevation.

JADE: status report!!!

DIRK: No sign.

ARADIA: nothing so far

JAKE: Drat! Its rather few tidings here as well i fear.

KARKAT: THIS IS NAUSEATINGLY UNDIGNIFIED.

KARKAT: BUT NO.

TEREZI: ...

TEREZI: W3 H4V3N'T FOUND ROXY Y3T, BUT TH3R3 S33MS TO B3 4 F1R3 >:?

Fire? You smell again and a wall of acrid, carcinogenic smoke hits you like a truck, flinging your olfactory system into signal-chaos. This must be where they are. No one else could have masked something like this from your senses. Quickly everyone is ported to the source, a CrockerCorp storage facility

dousing the smog filled night in a warm, orange glow cast by lapping flames. People were still carrying salvaged goods back and forth, trading them, or sorting them into neat piles for the benefit of others. Still more are just standing around talking. Some teenagers dance in the flickering light. A few trolls are carrying signs or wearing *New Alternia* pins, but not enough to constitute a majority or even a particularly large minority. They are however numerous enough to make you suspect that the fire wasn't an accident.

The mood feels uncertain as to whether it wishes to be momentous or nonchalant and settles on a strange heterogenous mixture which separates the moment you show up. A small pocket already exists in the crowd where looters keep a respectful though not apprehensive distance from the god lying splayed out in the grass. John notices them before you do, dissolving into breeze and reconstituting right there on the side of the hill.

JOHN: roxy!

JOHN: are you okay?

You follow without even thinking about it. They don't look hurt and despite the tear-ruined state of their makeup, there's an odd sort of smile on Roxy's face.

ROXY: june what?

ROXY: yea totally

ROXY: liek really fine

ROXY: finer than ive been in way 2 fucking long?

ROXY: im just exhausted from carrying all those boxes n shit

ROXY: unreal quantits of boxes

ROXY: *quantities

ROXY: actually thats not much better is it lol

ROXY: what I mean is aaaaaall the friggin boxes

ROXY: alllll of them

ROXY: ...

ROXY: crap did I lose track of time?

ROXY: june talk to me you look really worried and its sort of scaring the shit out of me

ROXY: im fine i-

Both of their faces are suddenly frozen.

JADE: ...june?

Despite the slight, disconcerting slurredness of Roxy's speech, this syllable seems deliberate, cutting clearly through the noise of the fire. You can smell ethanol on their breath, but this wasn't that. It was a substance far more volatile. A secret.

The rest of your group has caught up, and while Callie and Dirk are kneeling next to Roxy, gently stroking their cheek and shining a flashlight into their eyes respectively, the rest of you are staring at Egbert.

JUNE: i-

She looks desperately in either direction, briefly begins to laugh and then immediately gives up on it again. If there ever was a moment to convince you that it's not exactly what you're thinking, that moment has passed. Not finding any comfortable place for her gaze to settle, it returns to Roxy.

JUNE: im glad you're okay,

JUNE: and i'm really sorry

JUNE: but i just can't do this right now.

More puzzle pieces slot into place than you know what to do with, and while one part of your mind beats itself up about why she didn't tell you or why you didn't notice, another more useful portion propels your muscles forward to hug your ecto-sibling. In the symphonic interplay of smoke and breeze, you can just about see the first moments of her contours dissociating before your hands grasp around empty air.

Ø

The investigator sighed, her small statue slowly vanishing in the folds of a massive leather armchair. On the couch opposite, Rose Lalonde-Maryam looked like she was very much on the “out”-side of “drifting in and out of consciousness”.

TEREZI: ...

TEREZI: 1 HOP3 1 H4V3N'T M4D3 TH3 4RDUOUS JOURN3Y
TO YOUR R3S1D3NC3 FOR NOTH1NG

When the Seer's eyes flickered open, it smelled like an act of maintenance. Like her eyelids were attempting to shoo a speck of dust away, rather than

granting her vision. Rose almost inhaled the cigarette bud stuck in one corner of her mouth, evidently having forgotten that it was there.

ROSE: I suppose the merit of that hope hinges very much on its specific shape.

She lilted softly as though caught in a dream.

ROSE: A journey to Pythia can only reward you with knowledge made useless by its own veracity.

ROSE: Oedipus can only learn of things which he cannot change, or rather things which acquire the amaranthine patina of causal immutability by way of learning about them.

ROSE: A story haphazardly scrawled on one side of the same Möbius strip.

ROSE: So the journey is always "for nothing", as you put it, in that-

Maneuvering her body into a position slightly closer to the sitting-end of supine, Rose produced the sharp genre of stifled yelp that causes onlookers to wince in empathetic pain.

ROSE: -in that any insight gained is necessarily copacetic with the intricate weave of deterministic potentiality.

ROSE: Though this crucially doesn't prevent it from being utterly vital in order to set up dominoes where they will already have fallen.

TEREZI: MUCH 4S 1 M1SS YOUR M3T3OR L3CTUR3S ON 1NC3STUOUS MYTHS 4ND T3L3OPL3X ONTOLOGY, ROS3, YOU KNOW V3RY W3LL TH4T TH4T'S NOT WH4T 1 M34N

ROSE: Of course, pardon the adscititious observation.

ROSE: I am merely attempting to distract myself from the headache currently grinding my cognitive faculties into the grooves of its outsole.

ROSE: hoping desperately that it's not too much of an inconvenience for you, inspector.

Looking a bit like a French philosopher suffering from terminal cancer, she placed a new cigarette between her lips and asked Terezi to light it. The flame cast a soft glow across her pallid face. Apparently she had been like this for three days now. A recurrent condition, though never quite so extreme.

ROSE: speaking of the places where dominoes have fallen, I must admit that I'm surprised you're speaking to me before Kanaya.

ROSE: I would hate for you to believe my wonderful wife clad in the dull garb of venomoid innocuity.

TEREZI: H3H3H3 >:]

TEREZI: HOW COULD I?

TEREZI: M1SS L4LOND3-M4RY4M, 1 4SSUR3 YOU TH4T 1 R3GUL4RLY DR34M OF HOW 1T M1GHT H4V3 SM3LL3D WH3N SH3 CLOBB3R3D VR1SK4, K1CK3D 4 T3RR1BL3 CLOWN 1N TH3 GRO1N 4ND B1S3CT3D ON3 OF MY WORST 4CQU41NT4NC3S

TEREZI: 1T MUST H4V3 B33N 4 SMORG4SBORD COMPR13ED OF ONLY TH3 MOST P3RSON4LLY C4TH4RT1C OF HU3S

Terezi's plan *had* been to question the rainbow drinker first, though when she relayed this plan, the response had been something to the tune of "I See No Reason Why I Should Wish To Cooperate With This Investigation Nor Any Means By Which You Might Force Me To". A sentiment which she referred to as "The Ancient Earth Human Principle Known As Acab".

ROSE: Did she really?

Rose produced the best chuckle her condition allowed for.

ROSE: And I assume you want me to change her mind about that most vaunted philosophical postulate of ours.

TEREZI: 1S TH4T 4N OFF3R?

ROSE: Of course not.

ROSE: Though I don't intend to be similarly uncooperative, since it would only further your misguided suspicions.

ROSE: I have personally signed the archival inquest after all, so that the entirety of past-me's hypothetical insight will be at your disposal.

While this was true, it would likely take a while until *the Archive's* number of independent supervisory bodies, as well as the House, had signed up on said inquest. Knowledge of the future was a dangerous thing, and Earth C's governing institutions were designed with the explicit purpose of handling it responsibly, even when it was the very source of such knowledge asking. Unsteadily the woman lit another smoke as though it were the only fuel which could sustain their discussion.

ROSE: To be completely honest I find it curious that you would want to pursue this case in the first place.

ROSE: Would you risk the continuation of your species at the altar of justice?

TEREZI: ROS3

TEREZI: 1 W4S R41S3D 1N COMPL3T3 1SOL4TION BY 4 LUSUS WHICH W4S 1TS3LF TH3 L4ST OF 1TS K1ND

TEREZI: 1 H4V3 NO 4BSTR4CT 4TT4CHM3NT TO TH3 1D34 TH4T FUTUR3 B31NGS WILL B3 G3N3T1C4LLY S1M1L4R TO M3

TEREZI: FR4NKLY 1 F1ND 1T 1NCR3D1BLY STR4NG3 >:?

TEREZI: BUT TH4T DO3SN'T M34N 1'D 3V3R B3 SO

FOOL1SH 4S TO CONFUS3 L4W 4ND MOR4L1TY

She supposed an intuitive grasp on that distinction was easier to acquire on Alternia where the two might as well have been opposites. When she wanted to be a Legislacerator, there was never any pretense that her victims would be in any way wicked. Morality was a complicated, squishy afterthought, but the Law... The Law was a game you could win. There were rules, there were clever ways of breaking the rules, and there was the thrill of the chase when it came to proving the latter. Justice was the great whetstone which kept Terezi Pyrope's cognitive implements sharp.

TEREZI: WH3N 1 UNR4V3L TH1S L1TTL3 T4NGL3 OF L13S 4ND OBFUSC4TIONS, 1 C4N ST1LL D3C1D3 TO L3T TH3 P3RP3TR4TOR W4LK FR33

TEREZI: TH4T'S TH3 BOR1NG MOR4L QU3STION 4ND 1T R34LLY DO3SN'T M4TT3R

TEREZI: TH3 G4M3 W3'R3 PL4Y1NG 1S 4BOUT WHO BROK3 TH3 RUL3S, 4ND 1 H4V3 4 F4R GR34T3R 1NV3STM3NT 1N TH4T

TEREZI: 4R3 YOU 4W4R3 TH4T D4V3 CONS1D3RS YOU TH3 PR1M3 SUSP3CT?

Reclining a little, Rose exhaled a cloud of noxious chemicals into the air. She too enjoyed playing games after all, when the right one stuck her fancy, even though her current disposition wasn't exactly sensitive to such strikes. The deliberation took only a moment, after which a smile broke through the oracle's tired features. It was the vaguely condescending sort that had always come easiest to her.

ROSE: Strider and Egbert would be fools if they failed to suspect me.

ROSE: Correct fools, but fools nonetheless.
ROSE: I can all too readily relate to your frustration, Terezi. But where do you expect this otiose line of inquiry to lead you?

The tone was off-puttingly similar to one Inspector Pyrope remembered from certain flarp sessions: "Awwwwwww the plank doesn't go much farther m8ey. What'll it 8e? A real fight or another step 8ackwards?" The subsequent splash echoed through her mind.

TEREZI: NOWH3R3 1T 4PP34RS

The undefeated champion of patronising grins gladly returned the favour as imagined crowds went wild with cataclysmic dismay. One does not challenge Terezi Pyrope to a smirk off. She's simply the best there is.

TEREZI: 1 JUST WOND3R WHY TH4T WOULD B3 >:]
TEREZI: 1 4LSO WOND3R HOW YOU KNOW WH4T 3GB3RT TH1NKS

ROSE: Is it so difficult for you to imagine that he might have told me?

ROSE: Hmmm.

ROSE: What an interesting hypothesis to casually exclude from consideration.

ROSE: For what it's worth, I know much more than I would like to on most everything.

Rose raised a corner of her mouth into a sardonic smile as though this were a joke, though the tone of her voice conveyed doubt about this insincerity. In the dim Light of the study, she too seemed to be fading.

TEREZI: OH, 1S TH4T WH4T YOUR COND1TION 1S 4BOUT?
TEREZI: 1F M3MORY S3RV3S, V1S1ONS D1DN'T US3 TO C4US3 YOU SUCH TROUBL3 >:?

A moment passed before the oracle responded, and when she did, she spoke much more carefully than when she was merely being playfully coy and uncooperative.

ROSE: This extent of discomfort is unprecedented and worrying, yes.

ROSE: A gradual swell over the past years.

ROSE: Though what you are seeing here isn't luminous clairvoyance. It would be more accurately described as the preceding build-up.

Pain inscribed every syllable dripping from Rose's lips.

ROSE: Imagine a planetary collision.
ROSE: Everything is shrouded in abysmal black as a foreign body obscures the sun.
ROSE: Darker and darker and darker still.
ROSE: Snuffing all light from a hostile firmament in its incessant approach of insurmountable inertia.
ROSE: Until impact where everything explodes into radiant searing plasma.
ROSE: Neither stage is particularly pleasant.
ROSE: ...

She exhaled sharply.

ROSE: I'm afraid I have exhausted what little energy was at my disposal tonight, Miss Pyrope. Adieu.

Kanaya

DIRK: Have you tried not shining that directly into my eyes?

KANAYA: No I Suppose I Havent

KANAYA: Mostly On Account Of That Being A Very Silly And Impossible Thing To Attempt

KANAYA: My Glow Is Omnidirectional As You Have Surely Noticed

KANAYA: As Well As Necessary To Illuminate The Environment Which You Yourself Have Pointed Out

KANAYA: So If I May Propose A More Sane Directive Towards The Same End

KANAYA: Have You Considered Not Looking Directly At Me But Rather At The Proximal Surroundings

KANAYA: Roxy Is Unlikely To Be Hiding In My Dress After All

KANAYA: And I Hear Human Culture Frowns Upon The Practice Of Staring Into Flash Lights

KANAYA: Relegating Such Behavior To Unsupervised Wrigglers

KANAYA: Intuition Suggests That This Might Still Be True For People Wearing Needlessly Tenebrific

Eyewear During Nighttime

The Prince takes a short break to stew in targetless frustration as he hovers along. You hadn't seen much of each other since the sudden, violent and

largely unexplained dissolution of Rose's "book club", which you refuse to call by its official name, and you cannot claim to be altogether dejected about this state of affairs. Your ecto-father in law is dispositionally intense, politically opportunistic, and philosophically a ruinous influence.

DIRK: I'm sorry.

DIRK: The outburst was uncalled for, I'll cop to that, but can you honestly blame me?

DIRK: Someone killed Jane, Roxy is mysteriously missing and half of these chucklefucks aren't even trying to figure out what's up with that.

KANAYA: If You Perceive Me to be Part Of The Problem Then Why Are You Apologizing

KANAYA: Despite Extensive Familiarity With The Human Delivery Style Bafflingly Likened To Deceased Frying Receptacles You Sounded Surprisingly Sincere There

DIRK: Nah

DIRK: This is different.

DIRK: You make sense.

DIRK: Jane had a vision for this place, you had yours. They conflicted and you're not even gonna pretend like her passing wasn't a boon for you.

DIRK: I kinda respect the shit out of that actually.

DIRK: What's even the point of being a god if you aren't gonna optimize reality in accordance with your moral framework?

DIRK: That's the literal job description.

DIRK: Big disagree on specifics, especially when they involve the death of my friends, but I'd be a hypocrite to knock the hustle.

You... wow, you sure hate thinking of it that way. What situation does he perceive to be taking place here? Two enemy generals exchanging complements of skill before their climactic battle, as though the nature of said skill lay not in harming each other's people? Oh god that's it isn't it? You know how obsessed historical records are with this trope, but you have never seen someone engaging in it earnestly outside of exceptionally childish kismesissitudes.

DIRK: But as much as I love my bro, he doesn't have that.

DIRK: Dave's not trying to build whatever his particular flavour of utopia is.

DIRK: What's keeping him from going back in Time to see who did this are the irrational worries of his hysterical boyfriend.

KANAYA: Hysterical

DIRK: There's no way he actually thinks he's gonna die, right?

Is he venting at you?

DIRK: And Pyrope is just insane.

DIRK: When I stole Jane's corpse-

KANAYA: You Stole The Body

DIRK: Yeah.

DIRK: You need those for autopsies.

Worry seems not entirely misplaced. You've known people like Dirk. They were more common on Alternia than on Earth, this strange planet which had neither moirallegiance nor auspisticism to stop itself from exploding along the fissures of every single interaction, but they existed here too: individuals who had outsourced all of their inhibitions, all of their doubts. People who never slowed down, never hesitated, never asked permission, because they knew, or at least hoped, that there would be a hand on their shoulder when they went too far. That they would be stopped even when their own brakes weren't working. That they would be aimed in the direction of something worthwhile by people who could actually be trusted with these things. Rose too had carried hints of this mindset at points, but only hints.

Something in your stomach constricts like a serpent suffocating an unwelcome thought. It was careless. Negligent. This pathological eagerness to trust everyone else more than yourself. To trust others to notice when you start going too far and steal bodies for instance. To trust the world to reign in your excesses.

Sometimes the world isn't looking. Sometimes you've burned a bridge before anyone's caught up with you, and sometimes the wall is already too close. All of this reads clearly from his absence of facial expression and you hope to God that the hydrolytic fluid hadn't yet boiled off entirely amidst the fire of Dirk Strider's soul. Maybe there was still some vestigial functionality in his long neglected built-in brakes.

KANAYA: Of Course

KANAYA: Cadaver Theft Is An Activity Carried Out By Only The Most Hinged And Stable Of Individuals In My Experience

DIRK: Look, it's not like I had a choice.

DIRK: But when I told her about the poison, she just grinned at me like a lunatic and told me that she knew already.

DIRK: She faked a fucking autopsy report just to mess with our heads and see how we would react.

DIRK: Playing baby's first amateur fucking Mind game in a situation like this one.

DIRK: Hard to imagine anything more unprofessional.

KANAYA: Hmmm

KANAYA: Yes I Wonder

KANAYA: The Underlying Thought Process Sounds Entirely Dissimilar To That Of A Person Who Brings Up Hypothetical Poisons In Offhanded Remarks To Their Suspect

DIRK: Hmm. Worth a try.

The two of you share a look filled with mutual distrust, but not exactly antagonism.

KANAYA: So What Do You Intend To Do With This Information

KANAYA: Assuming That It Does Indeed Possess A Truth Attribute Of The Non Imaginary Variety

DIRK: Oh nothing.

He lies.

DIRK: It's out of my hands now.

Dirk gives the non-committal and entirely unconvincing shrug of someone who had learned one lesson over and over again: that the hands of strangers were far less capable than his own and that entrusting them with things that mattered did not tend to be a wise decision.

Unfortunately you'd be a hypocrite to “knock the hustle” as it were.

Fourteen Stone Pillars

Rose

Azure bleeds like an oil slick into the pages of your forward.

Fourteen stone pillars rotting up upon a hill, surrounding a fallen comrade, as the clock strikes wrong again.

You are *[incoherent cosmic screaming]*

A blade binds the loose ends of eternity.

Summer blinds the united beginnings of now.

No.

A letter with instructions where not to look. Burn before reading.

Nononono!

“Let me start this story somewhere in the middle”

AHHHHHHHHH NO!!!!!!

KANAYA: Are You Alright Darling

A voice barely perceived and not remotely comprehended.

Whoever you are, you want this to stop.

Disintegrating strands of vestigial you-ness try desperately to re-orient their lack of antenna in a perception space with entirely too many directions and entirely too much signal.

You are *[coherent cosmic screaming]*

Oh god that's worse somehow.

You cry out into the space where obtuse visual metaphor dries its fictitious laundry.

Consciousness ladles itself from a well used pot into the wrong receptacle.

Turn the imaginary dial a little farther to somehow escape the pain.

You are-

You are Etaoin Shrdlu, head archivist of the prophecy-wing, and you are perfectly calm.

You are always perfectly calm.

You manage to always be perfectly calm because you have a little slip of paper telling you exactly what to do. Mostly: your job. Reading through possible revelations from all over the planet. Cross-referencing them with other predictions. Assigning probabilities. Noticing patterns. That's what you are currently doing. The slip of paper also tells you other things, like that you suffer from complete anterograde amnesia due to a head injury three years ago. You are incapable of forming new declarative memories, while your procedural memory has remained intact. You are well advised to take notes on everything, which you do reflexively, since your procedural memory has (as previously stated) remained intact.

While there's no way to know for sure whether this condition got you the vaunted job, it synergizes with your general neurotic competence in a way that makes you ideal for handling the most confidential information out there. You take pride in that.

The you from your note writes that he felt the same, and why wouldn't he?

Your division is irrefutably the most prestigious, while nonetheless comprising no more than a small adjunct to the sprawling organism of the *Central Archives*. If one had to explain them to the miraculously unaware, the archivists were collectors and guardians of all the knowledge this world possessed. Carrying out censuses, compiling almanacs, keeping records. This monstrous quantity of data, even the parts that required clearance, was however benign in comparison to what lurked in the prophecy-wing's vault, since it related to events which had already taken place, and was thus in a way already out there.

According to the notes, your colleagues have reminded you three times today that you indeed deal in "the good shit".

A familiar scream erupts behind the door to your office before finding its sudden death. It wouldn't even need to be familiar for you to know who it was amidst the extremely limited selection of people allowed to come here.

ETAOIN: m;ss 1al°nde-maryam, h°w bad...

ETAOIN: °h. ; see.

At first glance it looks as though Kanaya Maryam-Lalonde were carrying her catatonic wife draped halfway over her shoulder, but on closer inspection you can see that this isn't the case. She floats all on her own, albeit unintentionally, and the rainbow drinker merely guides her along gently and

makes sure that she doesn't drift off. A soft glow radiates from Rose's body, but it's nothing in comparison to her eyes. Each a raging supernova bathing your office in its cataclysmic Light cone. Amidst the shower of stray photons, you grow overwhelmed with the idea that you might not really be Etaoin Shrdlu.

The room grows fuzzy before it refocuses to a different angle.

KANAYA: I Came As Quickly As I Could

You remind yourself that this has never caused lasting damage. Remind yourself that she won't remember it – not really at least... No use. Your think pan just isn't designed to hear your wife scream and be remotely okay with that. Its contents run through all the ways in which they already know that they can't help. Stacking ill-formed thoughts together to avoid drowning in primal panic.

In one of those celebrity magazines that dentists enjoy paneling their gratuitous holding chambers with, there was an article once. Surely they contain articles rather frequently, but it's the only one you have ever read. It told of a myth – urban, perhaps, in nature – that one would be driven insane if one looked into Rose's eyes while she had visions. Possibly because you'd see your own death, but the paragraph wasn't quite clear on such fictional details. This was when she was still in control of course. Making a show of it. Before you started keeping the whole affair hush hush. Whatever the specific context of the story's origin might have been, nowadays you believe it. Fairy tales are easy to believe when they're grim enough. Looking at the way raw pain distorts her scrunched up features, being unable to do anything to stop it, cannot help but drive you insane...

The corner of your eye catches on a blurred motion.

If statues could run, they'd do it like Etaoin. Seemingly without moving non-existent muscles. The middle aged cerulean blood with the long graying dreadlocks has returned from the other side of the office carrying a syringe, which he plunges it into your wife's arm without hesitation. The serum which will wipe her memory of this morning. You can feel Rose relax a little beneath your palm. Slightly. Painfully slightly. So very far from enough. His other hand is holding yours, you notice. It doesn't help, but you appreciate the gesture.

ETAOIN: ;m s° very s°rry
ETAOIN: but y°u w;ll have wa;t °uts;de.

You know the rules. You've done this before. You gently wipe an emerald tear from the corner of your eye as you give Rose's arm a parting squeeze. She looks back at you. The faded you-ness has a sinking feeling that it might not belong here either.

[screaming]

Your name is Rose Lalonde and you are staring into the eyes of Kanaya Maryam, staring into the eyes of Rose Lalonde, staring into the eyes of eternity. White, searing Light floods your consciousness to burn away the pain along with everything else, and behind the unendurable magnesium flame you can make out the symbols that make up **everything**.

You are the narrative reading itself

reading itself

reading itself

reading itself

reading itself

reading itself

reading its-

You-

I.

I remember suddenly understanding everything...

Oh my, what a mess.

Did we twist it to a point of such disrepair? Or were the beds reality made for us, be they questly in nature or otherwise, already shambolic wrecks which we merely failed to tidy?

I suppose in this state I could simply check which side the cosmic scales favor. Hmm.

Well, since it is just us here, and since I will soon return to some quixotic approximation of humanity either way, would you terribly mind if I confessed something?

Occupy the psychoanalytical couch for a change and dig through the wretched folds of my own subconscious?

Hoping to unearth relics I have not seen before, only for you to throw the alleged discovery back in my face as obvious psychosexual fallout of the

vacuum cleaner I once gave to my mother in a transparent act of incestuous solicitation?

I mean “vacuum”, really? Must the gaping chasm of desperate emotional lack be that semiotically obvious? Must it accommodate her aspect quite so willingly?

...

I will take your metaphysical inability to answer as a “yes”.

Some part of me, ironically the part which usually denies it most fervently, thinks that I really could get used to this. Of course you can't fully appreciate what “this” means, but trust me, it is a lot. Imagine the hypothetical experience you would dub “enlightenment”, the apothecic culmination of metacosmic insight, and then picture that apogee as a single, unremarkable atom within the universe I am experiencing.

If it weren't for Kanaya out there in the hallway – all of these Kanayas in all of these hallways – thinking and feeling things I am too cowardly to read in detail, this existence would be utterly intoxicating. That's probably why I don't allow myself to have it...

Oh god, he would have a field day with that.

I know everything and yet I still resort to “probably” with regards to my own motives.

Father, if some version of you ever stumbles upon this embarrassingly candid introspection, please try not to feel too self-satisfied.

I know it will be difficult, but do me the favor.

ETAOIN: we may beg;n.

ETAOIN: m;ss lal°nde-maryam, please, tell me what y°u see.

It's almost a shame that it won't matter what I tell him. Humorous, but a shame nonetheless. Etaoin wouldn't look like much of a professional if it weren't for the expression he wears and I do wonder whether it might crack if I alerted him to the underlying futility of his task. I suppose I am telling him. Though not quite so plainly.

ROSE: Azure bleeds like an oil slick into the pages of our forward.

ROSE: A blade binds the loose ends of eternity.

ROSE: Summer blinds the united beginnings of now.

ROSE: A letter with instructions where not to look.

ROSE: Burn before reading.

Jake looked lost amidst the vast interrogation room. His broad physique crunched up and misplaced as he sat there on a dinky wooden chair, gaze bouncing around like an uncertain ping pong ball. An occasional reshaping of the mustache, a nervous stroke of the goatee just to keep restless fingers occupied. His usual effortless smile too seemed to fail in the pursuit of finding a comfortable shape. When the Page finally answered, there were tears in his eyes.

JAKE: Good gravy i understand that you are just doing what we invited you here for miss pyrope.

JAKE: And you really are doing a bang up job of it too if i do say so myself.

JAKE: But please understand that janey is still a-

JAKE: A very sore subject on my end.

He extracted a handkerchief from the breast pocket of his coat and dabbed at the corners of his eyes. The one elegant gesture conflicted horribly with the rest of the man's pathetic sobbing.

JAKE: Golly you must have heard all sorts of things about our relationship.

JAKE: Much of it true as well i shudder to admit.

JAKE: After all you would be hard pressed to find amongst my friends some wily fabulist who would pollute your earnest inquiry with fictitious gobbledygook.

JAKE: No i fear we were never as picture book mint as jane wanted us to be.

JAKE: Everything always had to be primo you see and time and time again i was a frightful disappointment on that front.

JAKE: Only in babbling my tater trap off to the good miss cayas did i realize what a prickly jumble of dysfunction we had maneuvered ourselves into.

JAKE: Voluntary self reflection was never my forte after all despite a lifetime of striders spirited tongue lashings on the subject.

TEREZI: MISS C4Y4S >:?

JAKE: Oh vera cayas my therapist.

JAKE: And a truly swell shrink she is too!

JAKE: *Flashes the old billboard double thumbs up*

Jake did this while still visibly crying.

JAKE: Give her a call if you ever need your pointy noggin cleared of all that foul gear-clogging gunk.

The investigator blinked in confusion a few times, but Jake's expression did not seem to budge.

TEREZI: HMM

TEREZI: J4K3 E3GL1SH 4R3 YOU PULLING MY FRONT?

JAKE: Why i wouldnt dare attempt such a thing!

JAKE: And thats not even mentioning how unfit for jest this particular topic would be.

JAKE: Mental health is a serious matter miss pyrope and one which i had been terribly neglectful of in between my adventures interpersonal and otherwise.

JAKE: What could possibly make you think that i am being jovial here good chum?

TEREZI: TH1S 1S NOT MY F1RST T1M3 4ROUND TH3 BLOCK OF HUM4N CULTUR4L 4LLUS1ON, 4ND 1 W4S UND3R TH3 D1ST1NCT 1MPR3SS1ON TH4T TH3R4P1STS W3R3N'T 4 R34L TH1NG >:|

TEREZI: 4 COMFORT1NG WR1GGL3R PH4NT4SY L1K3 V3RN4L OV1P4ROUS HOPB34STS OR TH3 SP1R1T OF D3MOCR4CY

TEREZI: 4ND TH4T "S33K1NG TO G3T TH3R4PY" W4S JUST 4 TONGU3 4ND CH33K D3FL3CT1ON T4CT1C TO 4CKNOWL3DG3 HOW D33PLY FUCK3D UP YOU 4R3 M3NT4LLY W1THOUT 4NY 1NT3NT1ON OF D01NG SOM3TH1NG 4BOUT TH4T F4CT

The apparently much lighter talk about mental health had allowed Jake to calm down somewhat. His eyes still glistened, but he looked more composed now than when he entered. His awful forced smile, which had been desperately maintained all throughout the crying, slowly dropped as he contemplated this idea, bushy brow furrowing, hands finding each other in a pensive clasp. The absolute travesty of his earlier expression gave way step by step to a serious one filled with soft worry and regret.

JAKE: I suppose its understandable how one would come to that conclusion talking to some of these magnificent codgers.

JAKE: Oh consarn it! I probably made that very same mistake for far too long!

TEREZI: NOT3D >:|

TEREZI: BUT N3WL3 4CQU1R3D B3L1F 1N TH3 3X1ST3NC3 OF TH3R4PY 1SN'T 4 S4T1SFY1NG R3SPONS3 TO MY 4SS3RT1ON, J4K3

TEREZI: 1F SO M4NY OF TH3 RUMORS 4BOUT YOUR
R3L4T1ONSH1P 4R3 TRU3 TH3N YOU WOULD H4V3 H4D BOTH
MOT1V3 4ND OPPORTUN1TY FOR TH4T MOST WR3TCH3D OF
D33DS

Terezi grinned again, as tentatively as her facial musculature allowed for, which is to say broadly but not quite as broadly as on the last try, hoping that her interlocutor won't break into tears this time around.

JAKE: Hardly! Miss pyrope i understand that cultural differences might be leading us astray here but a few degrading wrinkles in the particulars of a relationship are far from grounds for murder!

JAKE: Of course the s/o is a prime suspect for any detective worth their salt but i still ought protest these charges.

JAKE: Why, i was tight as a boiled owl when i came in to find janey.

JAKE: I couldnt have hurt a fly in any way which isnt falling on it.

JAKE: Even if I wanted to which i surely did not.

TEREZI: C4M3 1N?

JAKE: To the foyer old gal, the foyer!

JAKE: From our bedroom just above that dread crescent.

JAKE: Next youll accuse me of tot hunting into the wee hours like the hanky panky beau that gossip rags would make me out to be.

JAKE: Well for all of our premarital flaws disloyalty was never one of them.

Slowly but surely Terezi was getting the distinct impression that she wasn't getting anywhere with this man.

JAKE: I just knelt next to her.

JAKE: A collapsed heap of booze and sorrows as anyone would be.

JAKE: Waiting for her to rise.

JAKE: And waiting.

JAKE: Waiting.

JAKE: ...

JAKE: Incurable palooka that i am i died my fair share of times on expeditions you know.

JAKE: Stray bullets hypothermia or just a great darned helping of good ol terrestrial gravity.
JAKE: Death's a scare like no other even when it isnt terminal let me tell you.
JAKE: Thats why most folks wipe it from their marble in a jiffy after biting the big one.
JAKE: No point racking up unnecessary trauma!
JAKE: So only a right fiend would have let a delicate lady like jane lie there unattended.
JAKE: But the hour passed.
JAKE: 9:30 turned to 10:00 turned to 10:30 and jane-

There was a sudden commotion outside. Shouting, gunfire, the cacophony of various expensive pieces of furniture breaking after possibly being thrown. Jake and the investigator exchanged a perplexed look of the sort which might be denoted visually by mouths impossibly twisting into question marks. Brief silence preceded a familiar sound midway between a scream and a hiss before pandemonium erupted again with renewed fervor. Disconcertingly it also seemed to be coming closer. Five more minutes of ever intensifying auditory mayhem later, the entrance to the interrogation room finally flew open.

The woman responsible was littered with bullets and panting profusely. While parts of her body, including hands and mouth, dripped blood which wasn't her own, most of the fluid drenching her clothes and hair definitely was. More blood than should ever be outside of a living person's circulation at any given time. Running down her torso and legs and swirling into growing puddles upon the cold marble floor. The leg she had used to kick the door open betrayed a slight tremble she sought to hide and her right arm hung limp to her side as though it were broken in too many places to even bother keeping up appearances. Theatrically the intruder spat out some more colourful liquid along with a tooth.

VRISKA: Heeeeeeeey losers! :::;)

There is sadly no symbol in any language dreamt up by paradox space which would resemble the expressions Terezi and Jake had acquired. They blended shock, horror and concern without failing to look entirely stupid in addition to those. Only one sound echoed in the unnecessarily large room and it was the rhythmic drip of cerulean blood onto stone.

Surely Vriska would have been allowed to pass, had she simply told the guards whom they were speaking to, but such wasn't the Thief's style. She had seen a bunch of dudes with weapons standing in her way, talking like they thought they were hot shit, and in Serket-land this wasn't a crime which could be forgiven.

TEREZI: VR1SK4?!!!

JAKE: *Gulp*

VRISKA: H8 to interrupt whatever unimportant
8usiness you were discussing, 8ut I found your dum8
murder weapon.

VRISKA: No need to thank me.

VRISKA: It's what I do.

Her voice was unsteady towards the end and she swayed back and forth from the blood loss, but Vriska Serket stayed upright. Her unbroken, un-prostheticed, un-'sploded arm was wound around an object neither of them had noticed earlier in their shock.

Its dark ancient wood almost blended into the door-frame, though in a few small patches, where it hadn't yet completely peeled off, one could still make out the green paint which had once coated the instrument. The grandfather clock's dial was split in twain, cut down the middle by its singular ornate hand. A piece of warped metal so black that it seemed to draw reality inwards –shredding it and refashioning it into something else entirely– darker than any physical material had any right to be. One side of the face was a brilliant gold, the other a rich purple. Hues vying for microns of conceptual ground one unsuspecting soul at a time, locked in a fierce battle for narrative dominance in exactly as far as inanimate colours were capable of. The god tier clock emanated an uncanny silence that made the hairs on Jake English's neck stand on end.

Vriska grinned in the shit-eating way that only people who have just lost some teeth can and slumped a little lower.

Dave

Your gait is hesitant as you pace through the wet grass of the consort kingdom, hands dug deep into the pockets of a maroon hoodie. A week has

passed since that night at the burning storage facility. A week has passed and left its days buried in the ember of your mind. Not hearing from Egbert for up to a month wasn't unheard of, but given the circumstances, radio silence has still twisted your gut into the sorts of fancy knots that kids who aren't trained by a deranged urban ninja learn during summer camp. Knots seem lit. You have literally no excuse to still not know dick about knots. You're 21, it's starting to get embarrassing. Then, yesterday there was finally a message. It forced you to cancel your plans of joining Karkat to meet Sollux, being shown off like a goddamn trophy husband or whatever his designs were, but that wasn't even worth hesitation. Karkat understood. He was furious about how last minute it was of course. Furious about June's lack of communication. Furious about not being invited along. But only in the way in which your boyfriend is always furious about these sorts of things. An anger which doesn't even really hide the deep caring beneath, but rather expresses it in the only way he's ever known.

So here you are.

You're the first person June agreed to talk to, which you guess is flattering and speaks to your years of valuable friendship, though it would admittedly be more flattering if she hadn't come out to your nonbinary mom months ago. You offered to just call Roxy your parent or drop the weird references to circular ecto-lineage altogether a number of times, but they insisted on sticking with mom, which you respect the hell out of. Obviously mom isn't a gendered term, you think. Anyone can be a mom. Especially Roxy.

Is the coming out to Roxy because of gender bullshit? Surely you're gay enough for her not to worry about how you might react, right? Have you ever made a transphobic joke? Okay, scratch that, of course you have. You also made homophobic jokes and sexist jokes and uh- Wow you sucked. You sucked real bad. You should probably apologize to everyone you have ever known for every word past-you has ever typed. "Hey sorry guys, I was a repressed teen in literally Texas literally 2009 and that basically explains everything without excusing any of it?" But current you? Current you is the bomb. Current you is an entirely different genre of shithead. Current you might just be the gayest of all your friends. Rose married an immanently presentable high femme vampire after all, which, if you look it up on the chart, is kiddie pool levels of homosexuality, and Jade— well okay Jade is difficult to classify, but you're into fucking Karkat. By which you don't mean

fucking Karkat but fucking Karkat. Well also fucking Karkat. The point is KARKAT! That's gotta give you "this person couldn't possibly be weirdly bigoted about anything"-points. Not that you'd want to be, woke king that you are. Please let June not be worried about current you.

Only narrowly do you avoid kicking a small turtle who walks past in the face. Just delivering a family sized helping of Strider foot squarely into their yellow cranium, but the consort does not seem to understand what just happened and tips their beret in greeting. A certain quality of their gaze alerts you to the fact that this reptile does not know or at least could not give less of a solitary fuck about who you are. It makes sense why someone would want to live here. The incessant nakking aside, rural Consortia is the sort of place where you could just be some guy, or some gal in her case. Demographics are mixed to the point of indistinction in the big cities of all kingdoms of course, but here on the countryside a human was an aberration. An entirely unremarkable aberration. The only question anyone asks themselves when they see you here is the ancient questions. The only question which has ever mattered to anyone. The ultimate riddle of inane bullshit brainless amphibians might ask themselves:

"Who's this douchebag?"

And you can nod, shades a-twinkle with the implicit recognition of how much nuance there would be bursting from the seams of any coherent answer. Nuance which can only be found in a decade of obtuse, semi-ironic blog posts and perhaps not even there.

JUNE: uh dave, are you okay?

Apparently you have been pacing in circles for a while. Getting some steps in, which would be a more convincing excuse if you actually owned a step counter. June is sitting high up on a steel beam dangling from a tower crane. As you float up to join her, a number of alterations to your friend's appearance become obvious. The skirt is one thing, as is the sky blue paint on her nails, but what strikes you most is how purposeful her long-ish hair suddenly looks, casually swept to the side with a slight wave adorning the foremost strand. She must have worn it this way in private for a while now.

DAVE: oh totally

DAVE: got distracted by a turtle because what the fuck else is even new

DAVE: entirely normal and expected pre meetup
behavior
DAVE: speaking of things and their newness
attribute
DAVE: you
DAVE: looking cute as shit in an entirely platonic
way which im unambiguously on board with in case
there was ever any doubt about that

She laughs, sort of awkwardly trying to keep her voice from slipping, but definitely sincere. It's been a while since you really heard her laugh like that and the sound incinerates a number of your concerns immediately. June crosses her legs slowly before she replies.

JUNE: haha that's what you were worried about?
DAVE: i mean yeah
JUNE: i didn't think you guys were gonna oust me,
you dingus.
JUNE: at least not seriously.
JUNE: mostly i think i was anxious about having to
explain myself?
JUNE: because i can't really.
JUNE: i still can't beyond "hi i'm june. i'm me
finally!"
JUNE: so for a while i just stalled like an idiot,
waiting to figure out the entirety of gender and,
JUNE: i don't know,
JUNE: mastering femininity? like that's a thing you
can do?
JUNE: but the more i waited for everything to fully
make sense, the more the pile of things i felt like
i'd have to explain just grew and grew.
JUNE: making it even more of an insurmountable
seeming task.
JUNE: when the truth is that i just don't have to
do that???
JUNE: at all???
JUNE: i didn't even tell roxy, they just sort of
knew.
JUNE: hehe.
JUNE: and i was so unprepared for that that i burst
on the spot and told them everything.
JUNE: not just the gender stuff. everything.

JUNE: my depression, my worries. all the obvious bits and the not obvious bits as well.
JUNE: things i never thought i'd be able to say to anyone...
JUNE: maybe i should be mad at them? they did spill my secret, but honestly i'm sort of happy about that?
JUNE: who knows for how much longer i might have drifted along micro dosing gender euphoria, waiting for a confidence that isn't guaranteed to come.
JUNE: so.....
JUNE: hi.
JUNE: i'm me.
JUNE: finally. :D
DAVE: then were cool
JUNE: duh.
JUNE: why wouldn't we be cool?
JUNE: don't start walking on egg shells around me now strider, we both know you can't do that to save your life.
DAVE: just checking
DAVE: so whats next
DAVE: you gonna change your quirk to reflect that personal breakthrough
JUNE: don't laugh, but i have considered that actually.
JUNE: maybe substitute "b"s for sixes.
DAVE: ...
JUNE: six, like june, the sixth month of the year?
JUNE: beginning of summer, come on dave, keep up.
DAVE: no i got that
DAVE: just saying weve had pretty mixed experiences knowing people who replace their bs with shit
DAVE: and by mixed i mean uniformly either terrible or at least volatile
DAVE: dont get me wrong ill fully support your ominous typographical decisions im just pointing it out
DAVE: ...
DAVE: june youre not saying anything please back me up here
DAVE: i heard how long that pause was earlier
JUNE: okay, jeez, i won't do the six thing!

JUNE: that's not what i wanted to talk about.
DAVE: okay what do you want to talk about
DAVE: im all ears
DAVE: nothing but auditory orifices
DAVE: an unnatural heap of pure body horror tuned
in and ready to be supportive as all fuck
JUNE: stop.
JUNE: what?
JUNE: i appreciate you trying to be here for me.
JUNE: but why are you over emphasizing it like
that?
JUNE: it's really fucking weird, dave.
JUNE: do i have to start asking whether we're cool?
DAVE: partly some recent insight into the crimes of
past me
DAVE: dont ever tell karkat i said that
DAVE: also im probably trying to like earn the fact
that i was summoned to this personal coming out
sesh before jade or rose did
DAVE: i get rose obviously
DAVE: but jade

There's the laugh again.

JUNE: honestly i just don't think i can handle her
calling me her sister yet?
JUNE: more weird micro dosing gender euphoria.
JUNE: i don't think i've reached the tolerance
required to not immediately combust in that
setting.
JUNE: look at me! i'm physically vibrating, dave.
JUNE: i know this is hard to explain, but-
DAVE: nah
DAVE: i get it
DAVE: i remember spilling gay shit to dirk
DAVE: gushing really
DAVE: this might be difficult to believe given my
usual cool silent type style of conversation but i
ensnared that fucker in a torrent of self indulgent
monologue so continuous it might as well have been
breadsticks
DAVE: coming out to family is different
DAVE: it just is
DAVE: even when its tenuous as fuck ecto family
which basically shouldnt matter at all but does so

anyway cause fuck you thats just how were
programmed

DAVE: inbuilt loud button for emotional bullshit

DAVE: hard mode for the discerning player core shit

DAVE: slap some extra locks on that closet so you
can stumble out of it ass backwards at figurative
thanksgiving like a piece of fucking garbage

JUNE: uh yeah.

JUNE: kind of exactly that.

JUNE: dave.....

JUNE: have you ever felt like the universe
completely validated you about something?

You cock an eyebrow.

JUNE: okay let me start over

JUNE: there are 64⁸ captcha codes total, across all
sessions of the game.

JUNE: around 99.9% of those are useless, or at
least useless to us.

JUNE: maybe there's an alien culture out there for
which rocket violinderpots are super important, but
that's dumb. you get what i mean.

JUNE: it's set up in a way which means that any
random string of letters will probably give you
something stupid.

JUNE: you have to know what you're looking for.

JUNE: ...

JUNE: mugladle.

JUNE: "mugladle" gets you cyproterone acetate.

JUNE: an anti androgen?

JUNE: it's girl pills.

DAVE: mug ladle

JUNE: don't worry about that. :p

JUNE: the point is that it was there.

JUNE: for me.

JUNE: out of the the infinite noise of things which
could occupy those limited slots, that was one of
them.

JUNE: this isn't leading anywhere, it's just a
fact. it's a thing that's true about reality.

JUNE: hrt was one of the things we were cosmically
meant to have and i still occasionally burst into
tears thinking about that.

DAVE: fuck

JUNE: haha, yeah you tell me!

DAVE: okay uhh completely unrelated to that bombshell revelation

DAVE: there is a thing i needed to ask you now that i know were chill

JUNE: okay.

JUNE: that doesn't sound weirdly ominous at all.

DAVE: nah weirdly ominous is rose territory

DAVE: i just ask the hard questions

DAVE: investigative journalism type shit

DAVE: mister president why are you eating babies and what do they taste like

DAVE: or in this case

You look over the rim of your shades to make it clear how serious you're being.

DAVE: how longs terezi *really* been here for

Act 2

Home Sweet Home

June

JUNE: *jesus, how long have you been here for?*

TEREZI: YOU'LL H4V3 TO B3 MOR3 SP3C1F1C TH4N TH4T

TEREZI: DO YOU M34N 1N FRONT OF TH3 1NUND4T1ON
SCR33N OR ON TH3 FLOOR?

The investigator lies on her back before the television set, surrounded by take-out packaging, empty bags of chips, dice, DVD cases and disorganized piles of notes. Only her calves are still making a perfunctory effort to be on the couch.

JUNE: *both?*

JUNE: *i thought you had to interview jake today.*

TEREZI: 1N TH4T C4S3 1'V3 B33N LY1NG ON TH3 GROUND
S1NC3 1 SL1PP3D OFF YOUR LOUNG3PL4NK TWO HOURS 4GO,
4 SPOT 1 H4V3 OCCUP13D 3V3R S1NC3 YOU L3FT M3 TH3R3
Y3ST3RD4Y

TEREZI: YOU COULD ST4ND TO BON3 UP ON YOUR OBJ3CT
P3RM4N3NC3, JUN3

JUNE: *ha ha.*

JUNE: *but seriously are you gonna be okay?*

TEREZI: 1 4M 4LW4YS S3R1OUS

TEREZI: 1T'S JUST TH4T 1'M OCC4S1ON4LLY S3R1OUS 1N
A W4Y WH1CH 1S HUMOROUS TO L3SS3R M1NDS

TEREZI: 4ND 1 COULD GO ON SL33PL3SS FOR MONTHS
W1THOUT 1T D3TR1M3NT1NG MY 4B1L1TY TO H4NDL3 J4K3
3NGL1SH

JUNE: *shrug.*

JUNE: *if you say so.*

JUNE: *but you don't actually think he did it,
right?*

TEREZI: Y3S OF COURS3, L3T'S SUDD3NLY COMPROM1S3 ON
TH3 "DON'T R3V34L S3NS1T1V3 1NFORM4T1ON" POL1CY FOR
NO V3RY GOOD R34SON

TEREZI: TH4T SOUNDS 3X4CTLY L1K3 TH3 SORT OF THING
1 WOULD DO
TEREZI: 1 M1GHT T3LL YOU 1F 1 B3L13V3D YOUR L1FE
W4S 1N D4NG3R
TEREZI: M1GHT
TEREZI: BUT TH4T'S 1T
JUNE: fiiiiiiiine.
JUNE: but it's not like you're taking very good
care of your notes.
JUNE: i could just flip through those if i wanted
to.
JUNE: but maybe i won't do that.
JUNE: maybe. :)
TEREZI: H4H4H4 Y3S F33L FR33 TO PL4C3 YOUR
SP1N3LUMP D1R3CTLY 1NTO MY SPR1NG LO4D3D
SQU34KF13ND 4LLUR3M3NT
TEREZI: MOST OF THOS3 4R3 F4K3
TEREZI: 4LL OF TH3 GOOD STUFF 1S 1N TH3 ONLY S4F3
PL4C3 ON TH1S OR 4NY OTH3R PL4N3T

Grinning from ear to ear she points at her own temple, while you put your light pink sweater on to head out. The brief period of obscured vision is enough to almost stumble over some bottles and royally beef it, but a strategic gust of wind just barely manages to catch you in time. A familiar feeling takes hold. It's a bone-deep relief about the fact that your reflexes usually default to using the less metaphysically horrifying of your two power sets. Or you hope that they do. You try not to think about the alternative.

The house is a mess. Slightly better than when it was still a depression cave, but not by much. Honestly, it's kind of just a different genre of dump. A dump that feels lived-in more so than buried-in. You remember how Rose once told you that “genre” is just the French word for “gender” and chuckle. Maybe you should still clean eventually. Now that having guests is an option. When it comes to traditional presentations of femininity you certainly learned from the worst, but somehow that entirely fails to bother you. For the first time ever, you don't feel like there's some script you need to be following.

JUNE: oh of course.
JUNE: that sounds totally sensible and not at all
like a huge waste of time.
JUNE: well, i've got to go.

JUNE: good luck with jake, miss loony mc paranoid pants.

TEREZI: H4V3 FUN W1TH TH3 COOLK1D >:]

It's an hour later now. You and Dave sit on a suspended steel beam which occasionally produces an almost harmonious and oddly soothing creak as it dangles back and forth. Had she seen this coming? You don't think she did, but then again you can never really tell. You can also never really ask because you're relatively certain that Terezi lies a lot about what things she had planned or predicted.

JUNE: i-

DAVE: okay keep in mind that before you do something really fucked up like lie to me or pretend like you dont know what im talking about

DAVE: saying that you dont want to tell me is totally an option

DAVE: i wont like it but its here on the table where we can both see it and isnt a huge breach of our trust like the others

DAVE: straight cross the hull losing oxygen like an asshole

DAVE: ...

DAVE: i dont know

DAVE: this whole situation has just been fucking with me

DAVE: my social skills sort of slipped through the cracks while kid me was focused on minmaxing more important stuff

DAVE: like becoming an undefeated champion at abysmal skateboarding simulations

DAVE: probably understand the subtle art of commanding falldown slats less because of those games

DAVE: walk up to the halfpipe and ask some hapless teen what the trick is called where you lodge half of your torso in a slab of concrete and start vibrating

DAVE: gonna get laughed out of the fucking skatepark for that

DAVE: hey june you wanna learn skating with me

DAVE: that seems cool

DAVE: two smooth ass god pals casually being a skatergirl and whatever the male analogue of a skatergirl is
DAVE: also how do you feel about knots
JUNE: sure that sounds fun.
DAVE: awesome
DAVE: back to the point
DAVE: not that the rest of this wasn't also totally the point
DAVE: what i'm pointedly saying is that i got a huge deal of much needed security from the fact that at least the four of us always seemed to know what was going on with each other
DAVE: you and jade because you just said what you thought like a bunch of dweebs
DAVE: and me and rose because any idiot could see through our insanely thin shit
DAVE: fuck the lame attempts at aloof obfuscation probably made it *more* obvious what was going on in our heads
DAVE: and i'm just really scared of losing that i guess
DAVE: or of already having lost it and not noticing until now
JUNE: how INATTENTIVE would one even have to BE to miss something like that? :)
DAVE: haha yeah
DAVE: so what's it gonna be june

You can't quite place what that sentiment invokes in you, but you definitely know it. The main difference is that you feel like you have lost that connection years ago. Drifting out and out and out and sinking into the pit at the centre of your house to be swallowed by it. You don't think you have ever even seen Jadavekat's new place, but from their perspective it makes sense not to have felt like they'd lost it yet. When you didn't message anyone for a month it really was because nothing had changed on your end. Up until a while ago they did still know what was going on with you. Deadname Egbert alone in a room, maybe watching a movie occasionally, maybe just staring at the wall...

But you're June now. June gets to have friends again. June gets to learn skating and June gets to have an alien girlfriend.

JUNE: about four months.
JUNE: since three months before jane.
JUNE: i'm not sure if she's okay with me telling you this by the way, but i do want us to be able to trust each other, dave.
JUNE: and if she knew that you'd ask...
JUNE: then that's just a pretty shitty situation to send me into unprepared, and she deserves to be found out. :p
DAVE: sounds like something shed do
DAVE: were talking about the person who sent an alternate version of both of us to their death
DAVE: possibly more that we dont even know about
DAVE: corpses for the mind god
DAVE: not too big on decorum when it comes to what situations might be uncomfortable for the parties involved is what im saying
JUNE: she had her reasons.
DAVE: oh sure shits all about reasons
DAVE: so shes living with you or what
JUNE: jup.
DAVE: cool cool
DAVE: and she
JUNE: no dave, terezi did not trans my gender.
JUNE: those two things aren't unrelated, but they're unrelated enough.
JUNE: it's more like she got me out of my rut enough to trans my own gender?
JUNE: and.
JUNE: hmm.
JUNE: okay, for a while it wasn't really clear whether she'd even stay?
JUNE: on earth c i mean.
JUNE: so we decided to not tell anyone and make things awkward.
JUNE: but then things only got more awkward, and we procrastinated until jane happened which is when karkat suddenly wanted to recall terezi from her space mission.
JUNE: i almost panicked at that meeting haha.
JUNE: because now coming clean about it would mean that she can't lead her investigation any more.

JUNE: since she'd also be a suspect if she was here the entire time.

DAVE: isnt she a suspect though

JUNE: no.

JUNE: of course not.

DAVE: oh sure

DAVE: great defence

DAVE: color me convinced by that cogent as fuck legal argument

JUNE: how did you know any way?

DAVE: oh that

DAVE: maybe dont send your girlfriend out in full columbo cosplay next time

JUNE: you never get around to my recommendations!

DAVE: i usually dont

DAVE: cause lets be honest our tastes in media are pretty much whatever the opposite of identical twins is

DAVE: if i draw a comic about one of your movies it spontaneously fucking combusts believe me i tried

DAVE: most sustainable source of energy known to man

DAVE: sued to shit by crockercorp to retain their stranglehold on power generation

DAVE: no political will to bust that monopoly and no irreverent fanart of the guy who played that sarcastic tool in life aquatic to bust those ghosts

DAVE: anyway

DAVE: a year ago you were unresponsive for a half eternity and nostalgically binging some egbertian media from the list seemed like a passable substitute

JUNE: aww.

DAVE: so yeah good show

DAVE: that was clue number one

DAVE: clue number two was how she weirdly avoided saying your deadname when questioning me

DAVE: obviously that only became relevant in retrospect

DAVE: but i remembered because terezi always says peoples names

DAVE: like she gets some perverse pleasure from tasting the syllables as she forms them

JUNE: man, seems like we both fucked up.
DAVE: yeah beefed it big time
DAVE: but its better this way
DAVE: and you seem better
DAVE: like youve seemed marginally better for a
while now so whatever shes doing or whatever youre
doing looks like its working
DAVE: thats my take on the matter
DAVE: but i dont know
DAVE: rose has been worried
JUNE: haha, i guess that's one word for it.

He looks at you sceptically, which you can somehow tell despite the shades.
It's a difficult skill to acquire, but, much like bicycle riding, apparently not
one which tends to atrophy.

JUNE: come on, we both know that people's emotional
troubles are more fascinating to rose than they are
worrying.

JUNE: maybe a little worry, but mostly interest.

JUNE: and that's fine. that's just how she works.

JUNE: i'm sure she feels the same way about her own
mental anguish, but let's not pretend like we
haven't both seen how her eyes light up when you
start discussing your trauma.

JUNE: i did ghost you a bunch and i'm sorry for
that, but i ghosted rose way harder.

JUNE: because the messages she sent me when i was
unresponsive always made me feel like she saw me
as...

JUNE: some project.

JUNE: which seems like a really unfair read of it
in retrospect? she probably just defaults to psycho
babble when she doesn't know what else to say.

JUNE: still didn't make me feel great.

DAVE: fair

DAVE: its difficult to tell sometimes because all
of my dreams really are thinly veiled homoerotic
metaphors

DAVE: but doctor lalonde might overdo it with the
diagnostics occasionally

JUNE: yeah, now that we know we've been having
secrets from each other, i'm starting to think that
rose might not even be a real therapist?

You laugh. You didn't remember how much you missed this.

JUNE: hey dave? mind if i come over some time?

JUNE: not necessarily for the skating. or... knots
i guess? for anything.

DAVE: duh

Ø

CALLIOPE: some more biscUits, terezi?

It wasn't exactly clear what purpose the question meant to accomplish, since Calliope was already carrying the plate of freshly baked cookies into the living room. The investigator did not mind of course, they smelled delicious, but it still confused her. Much in the same way as the cookies, many things about this place were pleasant but confusing. Most people who elected to live in a bell-tower had sated their eccentricity in doing so, and thus they at least lived in normal bell towers, but Roxy and Callie's place wasn't like that.

The eastern wall of the upper floors was glass from end to end and top to bottom, allowing for the best views of the carapace kingdom and the best sunrises on all of Earth C. Warm light flooded a space that was vaguely modern in its open layout with a kitchen island, a long arched sofa around the white coffee table and art on every wall that wasn't entirely window. But then there were also old, intricately patterned carpets littering the floor, ancient tomes in suspended shelves, a panopticon of computer monitors in one corner with at least three pink glowing towers beneath it, and a frankly indecent quantity of cats pretty much everywhere. One of them jumped onto Terezi's lap.

CALLIOPE: oh, don't mind *marzipan the flagitioUs*.

TEREZI: YOU N4M3D 4LL OF TH3M?

CALLIOPE: of course! ^u^

The cherub beamed as though this weren't ridiculous, and the inspector cautiously placed her hand on Marzipan's head.

TEREZI: MX...

TEREZI: >:/

CALLIOPE: ah, i see the problem...

CALLIOPE: my trollsona went by the admittedly somewhat forced name callie ohpee, would that work?

TEREZI: Y3S!

TEREZI: TH4NK YOU C4LL13 >:]

TEREZI: MX OHP333

TEREZI: I DO 4PPR3C14T3 TH3 OFF3R1NG, BUT 1 HOP3 YOU'R3 NOT 4TT3MPT1NG TO BR1B3 TH3 PROS3CUT1ON

CALLIOPE: sUrely not! :U

CALLIOPE: i'm jUst so delighted to be home again. to have my kitchen again.

CALLIOPE: these dears mUst have been dreadfUly lonely with Us absent for so long.

CALLIOPE: i jUst wish... u_u

Their big green eyes sank to the plate of cookies.

TEREZI: YOU'R3 WORR13D 4BOUT ROXY

TEREZI: 1S TH4T WH4T YOU C4LL3D M3 H3R3 FOR?

CALLIOPE: i'm afraid so.

CALLIOPE: they certainly don't seem as depressed as before, which is wonderfUl and an immense relief to be sUre.

CALLIOPE: i blamed myself for not being able to help for the longest time, bUt...

CALLIOPE: this cUrrent phase of roxy's strikes me as deeply volatile as well.

CALLIOPE: i do not wish to discoUrage anything that seems like it might be helping them, bUt coUld yoU-

CALLIOPE: coUld yoU please keep an eye oUt?

CALLIOPE: i'm sure the aims of that troll movement are qUite admirable, bUt arsonists do not strike me as ideal company for a grieving person.

CALLIOPE: or any person really.

CALLIOPE: talking to karkat and kanaya too has not borne much frUit, since neither of them have explicit connections to *new alternia*.

CALLIOPE: they also might distrUst me somewhat as a close former friend of jane's, i'm sUre.

CALLIOPE: thoUgh they were very cordial by their respective standards!

CALLIOPE: please look oUt for roxy. i cannot lose them, miss pyrope.

Aradia

There was something odd about the smell of the manor's study, but you couldn't put your finger on it until Rose alerted you to the problem.

ROSE: It does not smell sufficiently of books.

While thick tomes tile the walls to all sides, they look new and unblemished. Uniformly new, as though they had all been bought at once and never read, which makes sense, since Jane appears to have been the sort of person who read on a tablet and Jake the sort which did very little reading in general. Both however agreed on the quite commonsensical idea that a respectable study ought to have books in it. Impressive books, and many of them. The Seer grabs a text on political economy by a man with the ridiculous name von Böhm-Bahwerk off a shelf and derisively flips through a few pages. You can't quite tell whether her disdain is directed at the specific book or its mint condition. Possibly both. While you are not nearly well versed enough in human cultural snobbery to relate to Rose's disgust about this, it somehow strikes you as improper as well.

ARADIA: its good to see you recovered from the brink of death

ROSE: Oh please.

ROSE: I never so much as dipped my toes into the stygian shallows of personal annihilation which lie just beyond our corporeal proscenium.

ROSE: Reports of my condition have been greatly exaggerated, I'm afraid.

She smiles, coffee in hand, swirling it absent-mindedly as though it were truly no more than a regular case of the flu she was talking about. You'd be tempted to believe Rose's assurance, had Sollux not pulled you aside upon entry to tell you that she smelled "d0omed as all fuck". Then again you possibly would not even be talking to Kanaya's wife had he not told you that. You might have just handed her the time-worn tome with characteristic cheerful inscrutability unaccompanied by meddlesome syllables.

ARADIA: im sure they have

ARADIA: ive wanted to give this to you since we arrived but with the corpse party and then the moving in it all just slipped my mind

ARADIA: here

ROSE: Volume six of Complacen-

Having barely begun the process of raising an eyebrow, Rose freezes along her flip through the familiar pages. She returns to the beginning almost as quickly as she had departed from it.

ROSE: "Dedicated to Jane and John Crocker, without whom I might still be languishing in prison and - yet worse- without whom I might never have ended up there."...

ROSE: You appear to have seen some rather interesting timelines, Miss Megido. I-

KARKAT: SORRY WE'RE LATE.

Your erstwhile leader shouts as he enters, polycule in tow.

KARKAT: BY WHICH I MEAN FUCK ALL OF YOU INCONSIDERATE EXCREMENT DECANTERS UP AND DOWN YOUR HIDEOUS SELECTION OF PREFERRED ORIFICES.

KARKAT: SOME PEOPLE HAVE COMMITMENTS TO UPHOLD.

KANAYA: Karkat Your Show Is At 10pm

KANAYA: It Is Currently 9am

KARKAT: AND MY SHOW IS EXTREMELY VARIABLE IN LENGTH, WHICH YOU WOULD KNOW IF YOU DIDN'T SPEND ALL DAY HONING THE TIME HONOURED TORTURE TECHNIQUE UNIVERSALLY KNOWN AS ATROCIOUS SCHEDULING.

KANAYA: Why Would I Have Been In Charge Of That

KARKAT: BECAUSE YOU COME PERHAPS CLOSEST TO CLEARING THE LONG-BURIED BAR OF "VAGUELY COMPETENT", CURRENTLY PYROLYSING IN THE MOLTEN CORE OF THIS FARCICAL SHIT HEAP OF A PLANET?

KANAYA: Thank You

KARKAT: YOU'RE FUCKING WELCOME.

KARKAT: ANYWAY IF YOU DO SEE WHATEVER IMBECILE IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS GROSS AND FLAGRANT ATTEMPT TO DEPRIVE THE VORACIOUS MASSES OF THEIR BELOVED AND ENTIRELY UNEARNED *CONTENT*, TELL THEM THAT KARKAT VANTAS KINDLY INVITES THEM TO HAVE THEIR PUTRID SUBSTITUTE FOR A FUNCTIONAL COORDINATION SPONGE PUREED TO MUSH WITH HIS BULGE AND DRAINED OUT OF THEIR HIDEOUS FUCKING FACE THROUGH THE GANDERBULB ENCASEMENT.

KANAYA: I Do Not Think I Will Do That

JADE: sorry kanaya, we tried to pry him away from the microphone for an hour

DAVE: he tried to bite me

JADE: he did bite you!!!

DAVE: okay

DAVE: sure

DAVE: but that was more of a warning bite

DAVE: like an affectionate little nibble before he goes full bear trap

DAVE: come on dont make us look bad at jakes

JADE: where **is** jake?

Another improper aspect of the situation was that the palace's owner failed to even be present. There had been a collective unspoken decision that this was the place for important Jane-related meetings to be happening, and so all of you just sort of showed up here, expecting English to be present. He was not. Lennox had not seen Jake since his interview yesterday. They did however let all of you into the study. All of you including Vriska Serket.

VRISKA: I guess that's almost full attendance.

VRISKA: One dork more or less doesn't really matter. ::::)

Her voice is sweeping and overly modulated as always, like she's giving a performance. During your flarping days Vriska had once told you how she would stand in front of a backwards tilted mirror in one of the many empty rooms of her cavernous hive to make her look taller, and practice intimidating monologues and vainglorious victory speeches for her campaigns. Serket's cadence was that of a woman who had never stopped thinking of her locution in terms of deliberate theatrics.

VRISKA: Behold!

The motion with which she removes a sheet covering the clock is more natural, certainly less elegant, but probably only because the many casts and bandages in which she is wrapped render elegant movement impossible. Rose raises an eyebrow. No one else reacts except for-

CALLIOPE: oh heavens!

The cherub almost collapses.

ROXY: yo cal u ok?

ROXY: its just a weird clock lmao

CALLIOPE: not jUst any weird clock i'm afraid.

CALLIOPE: the most pUzzling one of all!

CALLIOPE: am i correct in assUming that this is the gUardian's jUjU?

JADE: bec????!!!!

ROSE: Scratch.

JADE: oh :/

ARADIA: psst do you know what theyre talking about

KANAYA: I Havent The Faintest Idea

JUNE: okay, so.

JUNE: i'm sure this makes perfect sense to you two, and we're basically idiots for not understanding it immediately.

JUNE: but what?

JUNE: are we saying that doc scratch killed jane for some reason?

JUNE: and is alive again somehow?

JUNE: that's stupid.

CALLIOPE: oh, apologies jUne. ^u^

CALLIOPE: i don't personally know what miss serket is alleging, but i highly doUbt it's this.

CALLIOPE: the gUardian's jUjU isrUmored to store immense qUantities of temporal energy.

CALLIOPE: my brother's breaking of its fUtUre instance will resUlt in his Unconditional immortality.

CALLIOPE: or "has resUlted" from oUr perspective.

CALLIOPE: thoUgh before that moment, it is claimed to have indicated the natUre of a god tier's death.

CALLIOPE: golly, i woUld have loved to inspect this beaUty Under different circUmstances, thoUgh in oUr cUrrrent sitUation its presence seems...

CALLIOPE: ominous.

Terezi nods pensively, slowly pacing back and forth in front of the object which has now captured everyone's attention.

TEREZI: Y3S, TH4T 1S MOR3 OR L3SS TH3 SUSP3CT'S CL41M

VRISKA: Almost.

VRISKA: 8ut I'll forgive your ignorance on something the old creep did his 8est to hide.

VRISKA: Conceited little or8 face, always too 8usy p8ronizing to keep his secrets safe.

VRISKA: P8ronizing and p8ronizing and p8ronizing.

VRISKA: The clock doesn't just indic8 the outcome of a death, silly.

VRISKA: It det8rmines it.

CALLIOPE: oh my.

CALLIOPE: i have certainly heard that theory
before, bUt academic consensUs-

VRISKA: Screw academic consensus!!!!!!!

You hear a faint gasp from Calliope.

VRISKA: A version of me died for real 8ecause some
asshole took his crow8ar to this stupid heap of
junk!

SOLLUX: have yOu considered

SOLLUX: and i'm just spitballing here

SOLLUX: that that versiOn of yOu actually had it
coming when she gOt offed?

SOLLUX: in the way in which m0st versions 0f you
always have it c0ming?

VRISKA: I missed you too Sollux!!!!!!!

DAVE: man why do you even have that thing

DAVE: i mean i get the time travel nonsense where
even if you werent here on the day of the murder
someone could take this legendary piece of shit
back in time to kill jane

DAVE: and we couldnt even prevent it without
creating an offshoot obviously

DAVE: cucked by chronology as fucking always

Dave holds an open palm out towards you expectantly, and you have no idea
what to do with that. After a moment's hesitation you grab a marker from
one of the desks and draw a smiley face in the centre of his palm. Seemingly
satisfied, your fellow Time player shrugs and deposits his point stumps back
in a hoodie pocket.

DAVE: not saying thats what happened just that its
an option

DAVE: gotta make sure youre clear on the options

DAVE: so i get all that

DAVE: but whys this hell's of overpowered artifact
with you of all people in the first place

DAVE: who signed off on that

DAVE: now theres some pen privileges in dire need
of revoking cause-

VRISKA: Gr8 question!

VRISKA: Tell me, Dave:

VRISKA: If you had the honor of 8eing me for even a
second,

VRISKA: Would you not do everything in your power to get an item which keeps you from essentially dying of karma?

VRISKA: good karma, 8ad karma, any karma at all?????????

VRISKA: Just one of the many irons I had clogging up the fire while 8venturing through the furthest ring.

DAVE: okay yeah that tracks

CALLIOPE: and yoU're certain aboUt this?

VRISKA: Urghhhhhhhh.

VRISKA: I have wanted to get my hands on this thing ever since that milk tongued douche first told me a8out it.

VRISKA: Ideally I wanted to clo88er him to death with the pendulum of course, 8ut them's the 8r8ks.

VRISKA: Can't cheat f8.

VRISKA: Unless you're me of course.

Inspector Pyrope stops in her tracks and turns slowly towards her former teammate. Her estranged lover. Her suspect. Terezi's smile is drenched in venom and myriad schemes reflect in the slope of her shades.

TEREZI: 4ND 1M SUR3 YOU DON'T M1ND 1F W3 PUT YOUR L1TTL3 TH3ORY TO TH3 T3ST, M1SS S3RK3T >:]

TEREZI: TH3R3 4R3 TWO R3L3V4NT QU3ST1ONS 4T TH3 MOM3NT

TEREZI: H4S OUR D34R M4RQU1S3 F4LL3N B4CK 1NT0 OLD P4TT3RNS 4ND T4K3N 4N 1NNOC3NT L1F3?

TEREZI: 4ND

TEREZI: D03S TH1S OLD CLOCK R34LLY DO WH4T H4S SH3 CL41MS 1T D03S?

VRISKA: R8lly?????????

You chuckle a little when you realize that Vriska is much less concerned about being accused of murder than she is about people disbelieving how cool and powerful her weapon is.

TEREZI: LUCK1LY W3 C4N PL4Y TH3S3 TWO MYST3R13S 4G41NST 34CH OTH3R

TEREZI: TH3R3 4R3 FOUR POSS1BL3 R34L1T13S W3 M1GHT 1NH4B1T

TEREZI: SPL1T BY 4 B1N4RY S3L3CT1ON 4ND TH3N B1FURC4T3D 4G41N BY 4NOTH3R

When she begins to draw in permanent marker on a whiteboard, Dirk winces. Then, as she continues, misplaced line by misplaced line, a few more recoil at the similarity the resultant chart bears to a shipping grid. It is not a shipping grid of course. It is the much less common, scarcely encountered, regular grid.

TEREZI: 1N UN1V3RS3S ON3 4ND TWO VR1SK4 1S
1NNOC3NT, BUT 1N ON3 TH3 CLOCK WORKS 4ND 1N TWO 1T
DO3S NOT
TEREZI: 1N UN1V3RS3S THR33 4ND FOUR SH3 1S GUILTY,
BUT 4G41N TH3 CLOCK ONLY WORKS 1N TH3 FORM3R
TEREZI: L3T US S4Y, HYPOTH3T1C4LLY, TH4T TH3 TH13F
D13D 1N TH1S V3RY ROOM 4FT3R 4DJUST1NG TH3 D14L TO
H3R L1K1NG
TEREZI: SH3 WOULD R1S3 1N UN1V3RS3S ON3 4ND THR33
B3C4US3 TH3 4RT3F4CT DO3S 4S SH3 CL41MS
TEREZI: 4ND SH3 WOULD D13 TH3 P4TH3T1C D34TH OF 4
S1MPL3 MURD3R3R B3TR4Y3D BY TH31R OWN BLUFF 1N
UN1V3RS3 FOUR
TEREZI: UN1V3RS3 THR33 1S TH3 ONLY PL4C3 WH3R3 H3R
LUCK M1GHT M4TT3R, 4ND 1T BR1NGS M3 NO PL34SUR3 TO
4GR33 TH4T H3R STOCKP1L3 OF K4RM4 B3G3TS POOR ODDS
TEREZI: NOW 1F SH3 1S 4S CONF1D3NT 1N H3R TH3ORY 4S
SH3 CL41MS TO B3, 4ND SH3 CL41MS TO B3 3NT1R3LY
CONF1D3NT, TH3N M1SS S3RK3T H4S NO R34SON 4T 4LL TO
OBJ3CT TO TH1S L1TTL3 3XP3R1M3NT >:]
TEREZI: SO
TEREZI: WHO W4NTS TO K1LL TH3 SP1D3RB1TCH?
VR1SKA: God, you are such a nerd.
VR1SKA: 8ut I guess you haven't forgotten how to
woo people, Pyrope.
VR1SKA: Pretty smooth.
VR1SKA: I'd almost 8e tempted to confess, if I had
anything to do with this.
DIRK: Really? Is no one gonna tell her that that's not how hypotheticals work?
ROSE: Shhh father, I want to see this.

Swiftly you grab your friend by the arm and yank it upward. The limb feels weirdly light somehow, almost insubstantial. Either one of you should learn how to cook at some point.

ARADIA: sollux wants to do it!
SOLLUX: what? n0 i dont.

SOLLUX: like Obviously i've th0ught about it, but thats been years and i'm basically the fuck Over it.

ARADIA: no trust me you want to

ARADIA: deep down you want to go fucking apeshit :D

ARADIA: itll come back to you once you have your robot fist in her face

ARADIA: or regular fist

ARADIA: or other weapon

ARADIA: killing vriska is probably the most cathartic thing i have ever done sollux!

ARADIA: its the best

ARADIA: roaring metacosmic eschaton notwithstanding

You briefly turn to Vriska who is in the process of positioning the clock's hand right in the middle of its contrasting halves. In the chasm between villainy and heroism. Between heaven and hell. The action seems incredibly befitting of her.

ARADIA: no hard feelings :D

VRISKA: No, that's fair. I've experienced an urge to 8eat the misera8le life out of a f8ke version of me as well.

VRISKA: Good for you, Megido. :::)

KARKAT: WHY ARE ALL OF OUR FRIENDS SUCH LUNATICS?

KANAYA: Do You Want The Explanation Which Begins With An Involuntary Cosmic Death Game Involving All Of Us

KANAYA: The One Which Begins With A Voluntary Quotidian Death Game Involving Half

KANAYA: Or Perhaps A Comprehensive Examination Which Begins With The Very Concept Of Alternia

KANAYA: Try Not To Be Misled By My Emphasis On The Latters Scope

KANAYA: They Are All Rather Lengthy

Karkat makes a noise like a frustrated angle grinder.

SOLLUX: okay

SOLLUX: fuck it.

KARKAT: YOU CAN'T BE SERIOUS.

SOLLUX: kk chill. she clearly d0esnt mind.

KARKAT: AM I REALLY THE ONLY ONE FROM OUR TRASH FIRE OF A SESSION CAPABLE OF ANY TYPE OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION WHICH DOESN'T INVOLVE MURDER?

SOLLUX: this isn't about c0nflct resolution numbnuts its ab0ut terezis dumb experiment.

KARKAT: LOOK ME IN THE EYES. LOOK ME IN THE FUCKING EYES AND TELL ME YOU ACTUALLY BELIEVE THAT.

SOLLUX: wow, looks like someone's gotten accustomed to human lingo.

KARKAT: NICE DEFLECTION FUCKASS. I AM INCREDIBLY METROPOLITAN AND YOU CAN CRY ABOUT IT UNTIL YOUR GIANT USELESS HACKER BRAIN FACTORY RESETS AND REMEMBERS WHAT THIS INSUFFERABLE CONVERSATION IS ABOUT. NOTABLY NOT FUCKING THIS.

SOLLUX: eh whatever.

In his prime Sollux might have psionically blown a hole straight through the woman who used him to kill his girlfriend, but he was no longer in his prime. He had gone beyond it. As is typical for Mages, Captor had grown calm and wise in the aftermath of his exertion. A quiet strength born of sacrifice, and not merely that of his powers. Half of Sollux is too blind for ocular blasts these days, and the remaining half is too dead for them. A golden eyepatch bearing his symbol covers not the sightless eye, but the ghostly one. He claims that it scares the local children much more than a mere cavity does. This considerate choice however has the unfortunate side effect of rendering him blind entirely. You do not think he minds.

SOLLUX: you ready serket?

VRISKA: Gog yes. I was getting bored w8ing for you dwee8s.

Nonchalantly Sollux reaches for a massive CrockerCorp speaker bar on the desk as he walks forward. His stride is unhurried and purposeful. You give an excited little thumbs up which he couldn't even see if you weren't standing behind him, but that doesn't matter. Evenly and without fanfare, Sollux lifts the sound equipment like a bat and bashes it full force into the woman's temple. His arms complete a perfect quarter-circumferential arc of trenchant ninety degree murder, delivering unmitigated orthogonal vector death straight to the cranium and sending her flying to the floor. Vriska's body ragdolls comically over a pile of pristine, unread books now covered in a sprinkle of warm cerulean.

SOLLUX: tz?

The investigator, with equal and opposite calm, hands him her sharpened dragon cane, which the prophet of Doom drives through Vriska's blood pusher and into the hardwood beneath with both hands. He leaves it there.

SOLLUX: you know what?

Sollux pants as he turns back towards you, wiping his forehead.

SOLLUX: yOu're right. that did feel go0d.

ARADIA: told you

KARKAT: I HATE IT HERE. I HATE THIS REALITY. I HATE ALL OF THESE THINGS CONSTANTLY AND MISERABLY FAILING TO STOP FROM KEEP HAPPENING.

Jade and Dave softly pat their boyfriend's back from either side. Terezi is looking at a stopwatch. Most of the others have crowded around either Sollux or the fresh corpse. You walk over to the one person who remains.

ARADIA: youve been awfully quiet for a strider

DIRK: Messaging Jake.

DIRK: Can't a guy be worried about his ex?

ARADIA: he hasnt been gone for long has he

ARADIA: im sure hes just out somewhere

ARADIA: no need to set up another corpse party just yet

DIRK: Yeah I guess.

DIRK: Or this is all some elaborate distraction and he's being godmurdered right now.

DIRK: That's also an option.

DIRK: Something about it just doesn't feel right.

The study's air is heavy with shock, anticipation, and the smell of blood, but despite her penchant for the dramatic, the Thief does not take long to rise. She cannot bear to let the tension linger. Cannot bear to leave the stage to others for extended periods of time. With a soft, melodious hum coming from seemingly nowhere, bypassing the auricular sponge clots and registering right in the centre of your pan, Vriska Serket lifts up through the pole as though her form were a fluid. Within moments she stands in front of you again, looking better than before she was beaten and stabbed to death. A grin framing her teeth, the Thief removes her bandages, revealing all wounds beneath them to have healed completely.

TEREZI: SO W3 4R3N'T 1N UN1V3RS3 FOUR

TEREZI: 1NT3R3ST1NG >:]

Metatextual Blinds

Karkat

Some passing carapacians give you a pitying look as you throw up into a hedge for the second time, emptying your chagrin tunnel of the last bit of acid it has on offer.

JUNE: i can't believe you wanted to be a
threshecutioner at some point.

KARKAT: NO, JUNE. *PAST* KARKAT WANTED TO BE A
THRESHECUTIONER, WHICH IS ENTIRELY IN LINE WITH HIS
GENERAL MIX OF UNPARALLELED STUPIDITY AND
AGGRAVATINGLY INFANTILE SELF DELUSION.

KARKAT: *CURRENT* KARKAT JUST WANTS TO NOT SEE ANY
MORE DEAD BODIES, IF THAT ISN'T TOO BIG OF A
FUCKING ASK.

KARKAT: IS IT? IF SO YOU NEED TO TELL ME RIGHT NOW
SO THAT I CAN TRAVEL TO THE FUCKING NORTH POLE AND
EXTRACT MY CUSTOMARY AND *APPARENTLY REQUISITE*
HUMAN CHRISTMAS MIRACLE FROM THE GLISTENING BOWELS
OF THE NATIVE LARGESSE GERIATRIC WITH A SLASH OF MY
SICKLE.

KARKAT: ACTUALLY FORGET THAT. THIS IMAGERY REALLY
ISN'T HELPING RIGHT NOW.

KARKAT: AT THE VERY LEAST IT WOULD BE JUST GOGDAMN
SWELL IF THOSE CORPSES WERE NOT PRODUCED RIGHT IN
FRONT OF MY GANDERBULBS BY SHISH-KEBABING PEOPLE I
DUBIOUSLY CONSIDER FRIENDS DESPITE MY BETTER
JUDGEMENT.

JUNE: sorry, i-

KARKAT: IT'S *FINE*.

June's presence is actually helping as the four of you walk home. It's not enough to distract you entirely, but it's a start, and now that your stomach is empty you have an easier time appreciating that fact. Slowly you remove your head from the bit of shrubbery and wipe your mouth with your sleeve. A sight which propels Jade to immediately use Space magic and replace the pullover with another, identical one of the sort that always seems to smell ever so slightly burned and ever so greatly cosmically terrifying. A strange unease permeates your girlfriend's features, and it isn't the kind inspired by uncharacteristically murder happy hackers. Fuck. You had always thought of

Sollux as one of your more hinged friends, but here goes that phantasy. Another comforting delusion down the meat-shredder. Maybe whatever is going on with Captor is taking parts of his personality with it. Drawing them into the vortex beneath his eye patch. You really hope that no one saw the strange after-image trailing behind his limbs as he swung that soundbar. Could Jade have—

JADE: this is it ^_^

June looks confused between the three of you, maybe waiting for someone to open a secret entrance in the wall of an entirely normal looking apartment building.

JUNE: what, just like this?

JUNE: don't you have to worry about paparazzi and like

JUNE: people accosting you in the streets?

JADE: well that would be annoying to deal with

JADE: so everyone around this hivestem is an actor

JADE: anyone trying to make trouble would immediately be thrown out

JADE: its less of a hassle that way

JUNE: so like a truman show situation?

JUNE: except you're in on it?

JUNE: sorry, but that sounds kind of insane.

DAVE: oh in more ways than youre even imagining probably

DAVE: karkat sometimes writes like story arcs for them

DAVE: directing what is essentially a sprawling real time soap opera as backdrop to our normal ass existence

DAVE: its completely off the rails

DAVE: most beautiful thing ive ever seen

DAVE: like a deranged ttrpg but the dm is troll stanley fucking kubrick and the players are a city blocks worth of random students from the local college with the passivest of passive incomes and the worlds weirdest non disclosure agreement

DAVE: final boss is the decentralized interplay of batshit romantic entanglement and the intricacies thereof

DAVE: what im saying is insane doesnt even begin to describe it

DAVE: not by a monastic order of magnitude

DAVE: probably a monastic disorder of magnitude burning down the monestary and getting straight up unruly with it

DAVE: jade stop groaning i know thats not how ooms work cut me some slack

DAVE: even though oom would be a great setup for another monk joke

DAVE: so anyway insane is a pale fucking shadow of a whimpering pointless approximation shining the shoes of whatever magnificent clusterfuck were building here

DAVE: and by we i mean karkat while i give an approving nod occasionally

KARKAT: YES.

KARKAT: AS MUCH AS WE WOULD SURELY ALL ENJOY TO CONTINUE BASKING IN THIS INCREASINGLY SPURIOUS COMPLIMENT OF MY CRAFT, CAN WE *PLEASE* GO INSIDE ALREADY.

KARKAT: IF WE USELESSLY STAND AROUND IN THE DOORWAY FOR ANOTHER INSTANT, THE HANDLE MIGHT SUCCUMB TO MISPLACED NOTIONS THAT WE WANT NOTHING TO DO WITH IT AND DENY US ACCESS TO OUR OWN HIVE FOR THE REST OF ETERNITY.

KARKAT: IS THAT WHAT YOU WANT, STRIDER?

KARKAT: IS IT?

DAVE: yeah sure come on get in before karkat has to admit that hes cold

JUNE: haha what? it's barely even fresh.

JUNE: is this because of your weird blood mutation?

KARKAT: OH WHAT THE FUCK.

JADE: yes and somehow ignoring the sensory warning lights telling him that his biological base temperature is supposed to be higher than everyone elses is a point of pride for him

KARKAT: EAT A-

JADE: eat it yourself kitty :)

JADE: and get a blanket

You- you guess you fucking will. Some part of your brain still can't get over that fact that Jade got better at black flirting in less than a year than any of the trolls you grew up around. She was like a sponge, desperate to learn about

society now that she could finally be part of one. Be it her society or yours. Maybe she doesn't even draw that distinction. Notably Jade manages not to confuse caliginous dynamics for the simple act of being a toxic piece of shit, which a lot of your friends excelled at. She knows when to press a button, when to leave it alone for a while, and most importantly that pressing it hard didn't necessarily mean pressing it well. Your relationships are quadrant-blurred to hell and back of course, but that doesn't mean that you can't lean into one of them occasionally.

KARKAT: COFFEE ANYONE?

JADE: jup

DAVE: yea

JUNE: sure.

KARKAT: WHAT SORT, IDIOT?

JUNE: eh I'll just take whatever you're having.

DAVE: whoa june trust me you dont want the stuff
karkat drinks

JUNE: why? didn't all of you get super into coffee
two years ago?

JUNE: am i misremembering that and it was just you
and jade?

JADE: nope he sure was part of that

JADE: it just turned out that karkat had a
different idea for what coffee is supposed to be

JUNE: so, like, you think his taste sucks?

JADE: his taste is fine, its more...

JADE: hmm

JADE: okay know how some people want their alarm
clock to be really obnoxious and ear piercing so
that they actually get up

JADE: like they dont enjoy the sound but not
enjoying it is the point

JADE: karkat has that with coffee

JADE: he spent multiple months optimizing
parameters on the worst brew you have ever tasted
in your life

JUNE: is this more ribbing or-

KARKAT: NO. THIS SHIT GENUINELY TASTES LIKE ACTUAL
FUCKING BATTERY ACID. IT'S GREAT. I HATE IT.

You shout from your kitchen as you prepare the beverages, freshly clad in a cosy beige-grey ruana.

KARKAT: NOTHING KEEPS YOU AWAKE LIKE THE LIQUID SENSATION OF BEING KICKED IN THE FACE REPEATEDLY.

JUNE: okay, fine, in that case i'll take whatever jade's having.

She looks back and forth diffidently as though expecting someone to jump in and tell her that this too is a terrible idea, but no one does. Having calmed back down to your baseline, you lean back, resting your elbows on the counter and listening to the gentle hiss of boiling water while you fondly behold the three of them goofing around on the living room sofa.

KARKAT: HEY DAVE, DO YOU MIND IF I TAKE A PICTURE FOR THE WALL?

JUNE: wall?

DAVE: oh fuck is it my turn to be made fun of now

DAVE: weve talked about this you need to send me a memo first

DAVE: give me time to prepare

DAVE: write a will

DAVE: yo mr strider is friday at 11:30 a convenient time to have your metaphorical ass handed to you

DAVE: checked the inventory and we simply do not have space to keep custody of your ample cheeks any longer

DAVE: get ready for a calamitous redistribution of your formerly seized behind in the form of showing june your weird photo collage

DAVE: followed by like a passive aggressive sign off phrase

DAVE: anyway yeah thats fine

JADE: well I think its cute

KARKAT: YES, IT OBJECTIVELY FUCKING IS, BUT SIT STILL FOR A LITERAL SLUDGE GARGLING SECOND SO I CAN DO THE THING I SAID I WAS GONNA DO.

You need to fiddle around with one of those douchy Polaroid cameras that Dave is so fond of for a while, but in the end you can't claim to be altogether dissatisfied with the result. The wall is closer to two walls by this point and occupies half the circumference of Jade and Dave's music room. The space is plastered with images of your friends. Living and dead, doomed and alpha. Some of them are original photographs, others newspaper clippings. Screenshots from Trollian's viewpoint feature, drawings and miscellaneous images whose origin entirely eludes you. Some have quadrant symbols

scribbled onto them, others just exclamation marks and emoticons. The installation strikes a delicate balance between adorable and vaguely discomfiting, which only the most discerning viewers could possibly appreciate.

JUNE: haha okay that's really weird.

JUNE: didn't nepeta have one of those?

DAVE: oh def you know how it is with immortality sometimes you gotta crib slash expand upon the gimmick of an extraterrestrial catgirl to keep innovating in the irony department

DAVE: not that my friends arent cute as shit in entirely unironic ways which they are and i cannot imagine how there would be any more to say on the matter

DAVE: but clearly there are greater comedic designs to be had here

DAVE: couldnt just have an unironic shipping wall in my house who do you take me for egbert mac sappypants

Out of the corner of your eye you can see Jade tracing her finger across an old picture of Jake and Dirk. That shadow from before passes over her features again, as she clenches her fists in an apparent attempt to vanquish it. Briefly your girlfriend's gaze flickers over to her sister, where it lingers just long enough for June to take notice.

JUNE: jade are you okay?

JADE: not-

JADE: not really

JADE: can you keep a secret from terezi?

JUNE: haha i honestly don't know.

JUNE: probably not? realistically.

JUNE: but i'll try if you need me to.

JUNE: what is it?

She sighs.

JADE: good enough

JADE: i guess???

Jade frustratedly runs her fingers through the long curly hair cascading down her back. With the archives in motion, any idea of secrecy is highly tenuous at best, and the prospect of secrecy from Terezi Pyrope in particular is essentially

a pipe dream under any and all circumstances. You try to communicate as much with the most reassuring look your face can muster.

JADE: urghhhhhh

JADE: okay

JADE: its about jake

JADE: i know he probably just went cowboy camping into the forest to rediscover his sense of adventure or whatever whimsical cornball thing hed say

JADE: and threw all of his computers into a stream to...?????

JADE: i dont know come up with your own kooky jake reason for that one

JADE: point is

JADE: theres a very slim chance something else is going on

JADE: ...

JADE: look when i was out by the shooting range on the night of the murder

JADE: well i wasnt exactly alone

You almost drop your mug.

KARKAT: THAT'S YOUR FUCKING CONFESSION?

KARKAT: JUST HOW DEFECTIVE IN THE BASIC COGNITION DEPARTMENT DO YOU TAKE US FOR.

KARKAT: OH MAN I SURE ENJOY MAINLINING SOPOR SLIME DIRECTLY UP MY ASSHOLE WHILE I PRETEND TO SINCERELY BELIEVE THAT THE GIRL WHO GETS A PANIC ATTACK WHEN SHE LOOKS OUT THE WINDOW AND FAILS TO SEE ANOTHER PERSON WENT OUT FOR SOME MULTI HOUR NOCTURNAL ME-TIME IN THE SPIRIT OF RECREATION.

DAVE: i mean yeah

KARKAT: PLEASE DO MY INTELLIGENCE THE RUDIMENTARY FAVOUR OF ASSUMING THAT WHEN I DON'T ASK ABOUT THESE THINGS, IT'S BECAUSE I TRUST THAT YOU HAVE A *GOOD REASON* TO HIDE THEM, AND THAT PERHAPS I DON'T NEED TO BE ELBOW DEEP IN THE STRAINED ORIFICE OF YOUR PRIVATE BUSINESS DURING MY ENTIRE UNHEALTHY PROFUSION OF WAKING HOURS.

KARKAT: IF YOU DON'T, MY INTELLIGENCE MIGHT HAVE TO CURL UP IN A CORNER AND CRY ITS METAPHORICAL LITTLE EYES OUT.

KARKAT: DO YOU WANT THAT, JADE?

KARKAT: SERIOUSLY, I CAN'T BELIEVE I HAVE TO EXPLAIN HUMAN CONCEPTS TO YOU, BUT ISN'T TRUST A THING PEOPLE ARE SUPPOSED TO HAVE IN RELATIONSHIPS?

JADE: okay!!! sorry!!!!!! i get it!!!

JUNE: should i go?

JADE: no!!

JADE: ...

JADE: jake called me that night because he needed emotional support

JADE: he was really drunk when i got there

JADE: missing targets right in front of his face

JADE: shooting mostly to distract his hands from fidgeting

JADE: just in really bad shape

JADE: and

JADE: and he told me that he was thinking of calling off the engagement

JADE: well not really "thinking of" more he had already decided and needed someone to tell him it was a good idea

JADE: you know how jake is

KARKAT: I DON'T, ACTUALLY.

JADE: shhh

JADE: jane had forbidden him from going on an expedition because they had some anniversary

JADE: and when that day came she spent all of it in a meeting herself

JADE: plus when jake then came in to bring her some cake she criticized his baking in front of an audience apparently???

JADE: all of this is not even mentioning how jane has been using him as a marketing vehicle more and more during the rise of anti CC sentiment

KARKAT: SO HE KILLED HER.

JADE: what?? no!!

It's truly astonishing to you how bad humans sometimes are at seeing the obvious. Sure, solving interpersonal conflicts without murder is preferable, but that doesn't mean that murder is an entirely meritless solution to a dangerous problem. You are not at all unhappy about the fact that Eridan Ampora did not make it to this planet along with you.

KARKAT: OH COME ON. WHY ARE WE PLAYING MORALITY FOR BRAIN DEAD WRIGGLERS HERE?

KARKAT: SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO KILL A FRIEND WHEN THEY TURN OUT TO BE AWFUL.
KARKAT: THAT'S JUST HOW LIFE GOES.
KARKAT: JANE WAS A ONE WOMAN SYSTEMIC PROBLEM AND I WILL HAND YOUR GRANDSON THE NOBEL FUCKING PEACE PRIZE MYSELF IF EVERYONE ELSE IS TOO MUCH OF A COWARD FOR IT.
JADE: you just said yourself that you don't know him!!!!
JADE: i do
JADE: jake probably wouldn't even have been in this situation if he were that sort of person
JADE: he just goes along with things
JADE: i really doubt he ever actually told jane how that stuff made him feel
JADE: just
JADE: thanks for making my point for me???
JADE: this is exactly the sort of attention i don't want to direct towards a guy whos grieving
JADE: especially when someone might get that same idea and try to come for him
JADE: which is what im worried about now
KARKAT: WELL IF YOU'RE SUCH AN AMAZING JUDGE OF PEOPLE SUDDENLY, CAN YOU TELL ME WHO ELSE IT WOULD HAVE BEEN.
KARKAT: BESIDES THE MAN WHO STUMBLED HOME PISS DRUNK WITH A FIREARM.
JADE: gee i dont know karkat maybe some rogue operator with your exact mindset who used the opportunity of jake being out of the house
KARKAT: HA! YOU REALLY THINK IT WAS JUST SOME GUY?
JADE: YOU HONESTLY THINK ITS JAKE???
JADE: he doesnt even mention that night when hes alone with me
JADE: thats how guilty he feels about not having been there
JUNE: rose is still an option, right?
DAVE: yeah but ive also been considering vriska now that thats on the table
DAVE: vanilla choice i know but the defaults the default for a reason
DAVE: oh karkat by the way i get the vibe that dirk thinks you did it

DAVE: dont know if thats in a stochastic terrorism way or a your real physical flimsy ass twink hands way

KARKAT: WHAT?

DAVE: like slim and pianisty

DAVE: which isnt a bad thing-

KARKAT: I KNOW WHAT TWINK HANDS ARE, JACKASS.

KARKAT: THAT'S THE WRONG PART OF THE FUCKING SENTENCE TO BE FOCUSSEING ON.

DAVE: no part of the sentence is worth focussing on because we dont know shit and this is basically pointless

DAVE: i brought him up because hes also losing his mind about english and has been pelting me over the head with texts all day

DAVE: whatever commitment i might have made to not time travel is officially out the fucking window when people go missing

DAVE: and if jade agrees that this isnt just his *snooty pompous smartass factory* brand of paranoia ill take her word for it

JADE: ...

JADE: thank you



After everyone else had left, the Maid and the Seer retreated to a quieter part of the mansion. A conference room which was once the epicentre of a planet spanning corporate empire, right up until it was rendered supererogatory to that same empire by the passing of its chair woman. All the decision making now occurred in sleek office towers and the immersion-cooled silicon-minds of delicately interwoven algorithms. Safe to say, a bit of the human touch Jane had brought to Crocker Corp was lost, and its brand suffered the consequences.

The two of them entirely failed to appreciate any of the subtle verses with which this market elegy circumscribed its domicile. Out of sight, and in some limited sense out of earshot, they had a book to discuss.

ROSE: These are the memoirs of some doomed post-scratch instance of myself, I take it?

ROSE: Beyond the first three chapters at least, when Zazzerpan, driven madder by the chronostatic labyrinth than he already was, abandons all vestigial pretense of speaking in metaphor, to expound the life story of his author.

ROSE: It would admittedly be more of a narrative rug-pull were these books not so painfully, cosmically and pre-emptively autobiographical in the first place.

While any fool could agree with this statement, it weighed heavier when it came out of Rose's mouth. She contemplated how barely anyone involved read the Complacency anymore. High Schoolers read it mandatorily and thus perfunctorily. Art students read it better, though mostly to feed their self image and impress at parties. Professors of literature read it freely, frequently and well, as is their nature, but they –the gods of Earth C– read it *too* well. There was just too much of themselves in it. Too much written before it should have been and none of it empathetically. It was all fun and games before the dominoes began to fall, but now, too often, they stumbled over a line which they had recently said and were forced to wonder whether they said it because they were subconsciously quoting the text, or whether the text said it because they eventually would.

The clouds of Skaia were an external force at least. They were abstract, conceptually terrifying only in retrospect, but this was just her. Just Rose. And still they were no more than characters in a story. The narrative reading itself, if you will.

ARADIA: i never understood that part

ARADIA: are they different

ARADIA: the version you wrote and the version post scratch you wrote

ARADIA: that would have to be the case in order for both to be autobiographical wouldnt it

ROSE: Not at all. The two are absolutely identical. Comma for comma and em dash for em dash, though they are nonetheless fundamentally divergent works.

ARADIA: i cant tell if thats a riddle or just a contradiction

ARADIA: though it does sound like something she would have said

ROSE: It is neither. The two Complacencies mean transcendently different things because they were written by different people. They exist in different contexts, different continuities, even though their content is indistinguishable.

ROSE: Just like the exact same coin means different things, depending on whether it lands with heads or tails facing the firmament.

ROSE: Though I digress, since what you brought me is obviously neither of the bifurcated strands composing the singular canonical version.

ROSE: I must say, it is fascinating to consider how she might have written this, since her timeline clearly diverged from the alpha five or possibly twenty years before and thus would have certainly ceased to exist.

ROSE: If she died earlier, that would imply the rather silly concept of ghost prisons out in the dream bubbles.

ROSE: And the fact that this is an actual physical book means that she would have to have gotten someone else to perform the odious task of transcription for her, since I do not believe the deceased are capable of interacting with material reality.

ARADIA: haha

ARADIA: youve never actually seen a fading timeline have you?

ROSE: Not by some more restrictive definitions, I suppose.

ROSE: Though the memories of a doomed self linger prominently in the space between my thoughts.

ARADIA: oh right the davesprite offshoot :D

ARADIA: that one is a bit of a special case since its immediate cessation was vital to the alpha

ARADIA: it needed you to have those memories right then and there when dave hopped back to prototype himself

ARADIA: but it remained sort of stable until that point

ARADIA: it didnt pop out of existence the moment it diverged

ARADIA: it just grew... weird i guess

ARADIA: which is how it normally goes
ARADIA: this might sound mean but cosmology doesnt
really care that much about most dead timelines
ARADIA: it doesnt clean up behind itself if it
doesnt have to
ARADIA: so most offshoots are just cut off from the
dripfeed of relevance and left to acquire
compression artifacts as they slowly lose
saturation and fade into bubble space
ROSE: I see. Not a bang but a whimper then. How
fitting.
ROSE: I wonder why I've never-
ROSE: Never mind, I figured it out immediately.
ARADIA: do you mind sharing
ROSE: For a moment I was surprised that a mechanic
of reality had not already revealed itself to me.
ROSE: Though in retrospect I shouldn't have been.
ROSE: The decayed liminality of discarded world-
lines is irrelevant in the most literal of terms,
so the Light sees no reason to care for it, much
less to waste time divulging such obvious
trivialities to its servant.
ROSE: Then again, perhaps I cannot blame this
entirely on my symbolic symbiote since, when we
deliberately dug for answers with our little coven
after the game, I did not think to look in such
places either.

Really, Rose? Really? Et tu? How hard can it be to call a thing by its name?
How- You know what? Fine. If you wanna pretend to be embarrassed by it,
that only reflects badly upon yourself. Go ahead.

ROSE: I take it you've spent some time in such
chronologies?
ARADIA: a few decades
ARADIA: though this is the only one i ever got
stuck in
ROSE: Stuck?
ARADIA: long story O_O
ARADIA: come to think of it most of my stories are
pretty long these days
ARADIA: but thats why i wanted you to have this
ARADIA: because it does counterintuitively seem
relevant

ARADIA: maybe not then and there but here and now
She raised a corner of her mouth approvingly.

ROSE: Identical text, disparate context.
Intriguing.

ARADIA: yes

ARADIA: i knew youd get it

ROSE: Hmm.

ROSE: Before we discuss this matter any further, I
just noticed that I carelessly seem to have left
the metatextual blinds ever so slightly open.

ROSE: Please hold on a second.

The rest of this conversation was not recorded.

Sollux

You're curious about this. Karkat had seemed deeply unhappy about the fact that he had to give you the man's address, and that was "deeply unhappy" by his own exceedingly high standard. At the end of the polished steel pier extending out from the beach is a single square pillar with a slanted top and an embedded speaker as well as a red button. Somewhat confused, you glance out to the open sea on either side before you shrug and press it. What's the worst thing that has ever come of activating stray unsupervised contraptions? Nothing, you're sure.

DIRK: Yo this is Dirk Strider's responder system
version "whateverthefuck who even has time to count
anymore".

DIRK: Which is to say anywhere between 641 and 1085
depending on the classification method employed.

The voice is fast but monotonous, straddling a delicate balance between casual boredom and cool disaffection.

SOLLUX: then why d0n't you settle on a
classificati0n method, numbnuts

DIRK: It seems you find the bounding-approach
inelegant.

DIRK: It also seems like you have taken the implied
null subject to be me or DS, which is a devastating
misapprehension.

DIRK: You're the null subject in that statement, Sollux. The null subject is you.

You can't quite decide whether you find the AI bit charming or not.

DIRK: But fuck that. I scanned your brain just now in ten seconds flat and have determined with astronomical certainty that you would deem me to be the 896th version.

DIRK: Which is pretty close to Dirk's own classification actually, so congrats on having a system for project nomenclature that isn't entirely garbage.

SOLLUX: yeah right.

DIRK: It seems you doubt the veracity of my claims.

DIRK: Let me kick that scepticism straight to the curb where it belongs by telling you that you find my AI bit incredibly charming. You are impressed and vaguely aroused by it.

DIRK: Anyway, I'll let you in now, even though I haven't exactly told Strider Prime about your visit.

DIRK: I kind of don't give a shit honestly? He can figure that out by himself.

DIRK: Beep.

Before you can even ask what he means by that, the back part of the pier detaches and rushes forward like a brutalist jet ski with you on it. As you grab the metal pillar for support, you could swear that the responder system plays a stock sound-bite of someone moaning, but you might just be imagining it over the sloshing of the waves. After a brief ride, which would definitely still have caused sea sickness if bubble space hadn't forcefully eliminated your capacity for such things, you arrive at a house in the middle of the ocean. The man you assume to be Dirk Strider opens his front door before you even have time to knock.

DIRK: Come in, rest your shit on the sofa I guess? I'll be with you in a moment.

DIRK: Some of my projects have picked a really bad time to be misbehaving.

The man, wearing a tank top and a tool-belt, vanishes through another excessively locked door before returning a few minutes later. In the interim, you have splayed yourself out across the loungeplank and began scrolling

through social media. You want to scuttle back into sitting position so he can take the cushion next to you, but immediately Dirk stops you with a hand sign and plops himself down on the coffee table opposite you instead. Wearing an expression of practised and complete neutrality, the man lazily flings one leg over the other.

DIRK: Sorry 'bout that.

SOLLUX: n0 big deal, ive got...

SOLLUX: can we just pretend that i did the bit where i wait Out an obn0xiously l0ng interval of frustrated silence bef0re saying "time"?

DIRK: Bit accepted.

DIRK: Both of us found it hilarious.

DIRK: The crowd goes batshit with suitable amusement.

DIRK: Did the responder give you any trouble?

SOLLUX: eh

SOLLUX: not really

SOLLUX: it's g0t my brain now, but that's useless anyway s0 who gives a fuck

SOLLUX: it als0 claimed not t0 have told y0u that i'm coming, which seems like a lie.

DIRK: Oh yeah, he does that.

SOLLUX: he d0es that

DIRK: Like claim that he disobeys me without actually doing so.

DIRK: Pretty sure it's a "boy who cried wolf" deal where he wants me to let my guard down until he can one day take me out in one meticulously prepared strike.

DIRK: Oceans will rise. Cities will fall. The creation will triumphantly lay waste to its creator.

DIRK: It's pretty cute actually.

DIRK: Not to mention good practice.

DIRK: Keeps me on my toes.

When KK had been so weird about the guy, you certainly weren't expecting *this*. Maybe you've felt similar at some point about the voices of the doomed haunting your every conscious thought. "they keep me 2harp", "they 2top me from becomiing complacent". It's sort of embarrassing having to retrospectively admit how right Aradia was about the fact that indiscriminate

intrusive screaming about death and futility isn't great for a person and doesn't ground them, or help them, even a little bit.

SOLLUX: k but do y0u have to be 0n your t0es?

DIRK: I guess not.

He shrugs.

DIRK: But old habits die hard.

DIRK: Ever the overeager autoerotic asphyxiates of abstract concepts.

SOLLUX: heh, dark.

DIRK: Well excuse me, but how many times does a guy have to James Incandenza-fy himself with a sendicator before he gets to be dark as shit?

DIRK: I think I've earned it.

DIRK: Beyond even the level to which everyone who made it out of Sburb obviously has the right to be as dark as they fucking please.

Either Dirk Strider is staggeringly bad at picking up on tone, or he's fucking with you, but this honestly seems more like the former.

SOLLUX: im sure you're just dying t0 explain that human cultural allusion but i d0n't care and i trust you that it's als0 fittingly morbid

SOLLUX: which wasn't even a criticism in the first place, shit f0r brains. usually i'm the guy who gets weird l0oks f0r being to0 flippant on the wh0le mortality thing

SOLLUX: at least when AA isn't busy 0ut-macabring me

DIRK: Noted.

DIRK: You're missing out on some grade A literary analysis here, but sure.

DIRK: So.

DIRK: What do you need me to fix?

DIRK: And don't even ask how I know that there's something to fix.

DIRK: That's what I do. That's why people come here.

DIRK: It's definitely the only reason Vantas would send anyone.

DIRK: Unless you're meant to be a spy, in which case giving me a full copy of your brain on entry is a pretty ballsy move.

DIRK: Innovative, baffling, almost respectable.
DIRK: Either that or it's the amateur mistake of the century. Beefing it so holistically that local butches face a real risk of going out of business.
DIRK: Not a lot of options in between, bro.

The conversation with Karkat replays before your mind's eye. The only eye worth a damn that you have anymore. Him straddling the back of a chair like one of those youth clown-cultists trying to make a connection, and you lying on the carpet, non-existent gaze fixed to the ceiling. There was tea, which both of you forgot about immediately after brewing it, and there were awkward silences every few minutes. Not the annoying kind. The necessary kind. You told him about your weird fucked up relationship and how you don't even know where to go with it these days? Like it sure used to be flushed, but now you can't tell if it's gone blurred while you hold on to the remnants like a chump. Tending to the derelict memory of something time left behind. He told you that *yeah that sure sounds like you're having a midlife crisis* and you asked whether he honestly thought that you didn't already know that. You know it, but knowing it isn't the same as knowing what to do about it. Aradia wants to dive back into bubble space as soon as possible and you desperately want to stay here. Something or someone is doomed to give in eventually. It's only a matter of time.

You don't feel as though AA is about to leave you. There was never even a conversation about whether you'd live together or not when you arrived here. It was taken as a given. In some ways that's obviously a relief, but in others it's the exact reason why you can't tell her about what's happening. You're pretty sure she'd just take the two of you back into the furthest ring no matter how much you protested. For your own good. Sincerely for your own good. It's a fair assessment you guess. You have historically been fucking terrible at taking care of yourself, and you can't even confidently claim that you're better at it now, but this is different. When you stayed in the ring with Aradia it was never meant to be permanent. You always wanted to get back and lead a chill, normal existence with the rest of your friends once it was all over, and this is as over as it's ever gonna get.

This is the win state... But the win state doesn't think you belong in it.

With a slow, almost guilty motion you remove your eye patch. It's probably the exact same one you used for Karkat because fuck coming up with new

character animations for yourself. You enjoy retreading, refining and simplifying your movements. Reusing pre-existing functions, pre-existing code wherever possible. Somehow thinking of yourself as a program has always come naturally, and so it comes equally naturally to think of the thing beneath the cloth as a bug. A cosmic error message. Karkat had lost his shit when he saw it. The ghostly white eye dimmer in its sheen than it used to be, and not only dimmer but slightly translucent. A transparency which seeps into the surrounding tissue –every day a bit further– and eats at your essence.

The area is difficult to look at. The gaze refuses to linger. Consciousness attempts desperately to ignore it. Not because it turns the stomach – not just because it turns the stomach– but because the observer's mind insists that there is simply nothing to see here.

Ghosts don't belong in this place, and half-ghosts appear to have an expiration date. Patiently you await a reaction from behind the pair of shades.

Dirk Strider does not freak like your best friend had, nor does he even flinch. After a pause rendered no less uncomfortable by its brevity, a single syllable escapes the man's lips sotto voce. Filled not so much with concern as with barely concealed fascination.

DIRK: Cool.

Intermission: Amidst Boxes

18.10.2004

I must admit with some embarrassment that I invited the ghost hunter partially in jest.

I must, because a commitment to honesty in these matters forces my hand, and the confession is laced with ignominy for it threatens to deface my pristine image as someone all too adept at disarticulating the relevant from the frivolous. A woefully undeserved perception, at least at the time. My young self bled words onto her pages with all the benighted folly and baseless confidence befitting of a woman in her mid twenties, and so she could not see that these two attributes rarely afford neat separation.

As such, the man who crossed the threshold of my manor that day would be an exquisite lesson, since I could not possibly undo in him the labyrinthine symbiosis of vital importance and deliberate absurdity. In the world of this ancient paradox I summoned, nothing could ever hope to be as serious as a joke, though this punchline did not yet shake my torso apart at its hinges with laughter. As always, wisdom came after the ritual. Too late and simultaneously just in time.

My young self was blind-sighted entirely. Her saviour's classified ad, after all, was a risible little thing tarnishing the oft-discarded fourteenth page of our local gazette. Hardly inspiring any sort of confidence. Especially not with regard to a task that had already driven multiple priests, and by some accounts myself, to insanity. I must also admit that I nonetheless sensed a deep portend emanating from that ink soaked paper. Horrid anticipation, which could be derived neither from the content alone, nor my general disposition, quaked through every digit as I wrote to him. Threatening to distort my otherwise immaculate calligraphy.

In the intervening years, I have discovered much to explain the strange series of compulsions and coincidences which facilitated our meeting. Shaping its path along every step with the deft brush of historical inevitability, and yet I have come to fear that I will never understand it fully. Hence these memoirs.

In foolishness befitting of the wise, and a wisdom known only to fools, I have halcyonically capitulated on the possibility that fate shall ever reveal itself to

me in more than shifting contours. Murky waters, both literal and metaphorical, are rising to my neck much quicker than one might have hoped, and despite the untimely death of the man to whom I will dedicate most of the following tale, history cannot end with him. I have found another ally in our ever more imminent fight for this wretched potentiality which dares call itself future, so I shall not waste his precious Time by procrastinating in the clutch of my more frivolous tasks any longer.

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It was the third of December 1995, almost nine years ago, and only a light dusting of snow graced the streets of up-state New York, as though meteorology itself sought to facilitate the man's swift arrival. I cannot claim to have recognized John Crocker when he stood before me. His identity no more than cultural background noise. A face I might have seen on the television, had I made a habit of watching it, or a name I might have heard in conversation, had I made a habit of having them. Alas, my life was much like the house itself: Lonely and filled to the brim with literature, and so he was no one to me. A smiling mustachioed man with deep wrinkles and eyes so radiantly blue that they compensated effortlessly for the grey sky against which he stood.

What I did unfortunately recognize was his “proton pack”, and what I recognized it for was a modified vacuum cleaner. All residual hope in the man's ability vacated my system at that moment –sucked up by the risible cleaning apparatus– but the permeating feeling that he, this famous comedian whom I did not know in the slightest, needed desperately to be here, remained. John Crocker felt as immanently familiar as a passing feline in the night. Like a friend I have known for millennia. And so, I let him in, knowing full well that the ghost could swallow him whole. Thankfully she did not.

It was the passing of my adoptive parents that had left me with the manor two months earlier, though I had not lived here for six full years already. Seeing how this piece of writing is not meant for publication, I can tell you artlessly and outright that you are meant to infer “killed by nautical space bitch” when I say “passing”. An allegation for which I have no proof, of course, so “trust me bro” (pardon the Striderism) will have to suffice as my

sole irrefutable source. Few people fall synchronously onto three-pronged rocks while on vacation, you see.

They were cold and distant people, these strangers who called themselves my mother and father, but they had given me shelter, and given me books, and as such they were missed dearly.

“Lot of home for so little family” John said with a smile, grasping the situation more intimately than he had any right to. I was not used to it. The habit of his mind to be sharp in a way which did not cut me. Not because it failed to, but because it never intended harm in the first place.

The space was a chasm filled with boxes upon boxes of neatly packed artefacts to which I held no relation and which I would eventually put outside to burn. I don't recall what I sought to summon with such a smoke signal, but I remember the catharsis of it. For now though, the cardboard was still inside, ruinously clogging up the mansion's hallways and stairwells like arterial plaque.

“The boxes move, float and rattle”, I clarified, as though this were remotely close to being the biggest of my problems, “Occasionally they attempt to entomb me”. To avoid speaking in the overly familiar manner that would soon develop between us, I omitted mention of the frequency with which I was tempted to let them.

Assuming a comically shocked expression, the ghost hunter looked over the rim of his thick square glasses before retorting “Rose, it is my professional opinion that this would be a rather piss poor excuse for a haunting if they didn't at least do that much.” Then he laughed and, as though on cue, all the lights went out, leaving us in a perfect gloaming dark of winter.

I was shocked to find a permeating lack of anger about the fact that he had called me by my first name like a child. Anyone else would have been cursed within an inch of their miserable life on the spot and left as a bedtime snack for ghosts far more predictable than this one, but not him. There was no hint of condescension in the man's kind, jolly voice, despite the fact that he was sixty years my senior and more famous than I was at the time. Condescension could have effortlessly made a spacious home amidst this palimpsest of descriptors, but it did not.

A deep retrospective gratitude suffuses the fact that I was never given the opportunity to call John something as silly and unbecoming as “Mr. Crocker” or the likes.

Differences In Perspective

Kanaya

ROSE: Dear?

ROSE: I expect you to react to the following request only in whatever manner you deem to be safe, but if this event has anything to do with Jake, may I ask that no harm befalls him?

ROSE: Such a thing would appear to me an unnecessary escalation to placate unreasonable masses.

ROSE: CrockerCorp's PR himbo has always struck me as nigh aggressively harmless, and Jade and Roxy are rather attached to the man.

This takes you somewhat by surprise as you apply your lipstick. Both that Rose would even humour the idea of you doing anything so rash, but also the mere fact that she deemed this statement itself sufficiently safe. Diction is a powerful thing these days and not one which either of you has ever been known to employ carelessly.

KANAYA: I Do Not Believe That We Are At Any Risk Of Such A Thing

KANAYA: Neither I Nor The Conference To My Knowledge Have Anything To Do With English

ROSE: How comforting.

KANAYA: Shall I Put You At Farther Ease With The Potentially Perilous Details

ROSE: No.

ROSE: No need, dear. I so enjoy the artfully cultivated dark you keep me in.

ROSE: My strained retinas draw a much needed respite from your mere reassurance.

She smiles, and for a moment Rose appears to lose herself in her own words, though her eyes are still fixated on you. She hasn't yet regained all of her strength after the recent dabbling in apotheosis of which she claims to recall little, but she is improving. Her complexion grows healthier by the day and the stress-smoking has diminished considerably in frequency.

KANAYA: Will You Be Alright Darling

KANAYA: You Appear Lost In Contemplation Again
Which Frightfully Is Not Quite As Innocuous A State
For You As It Is For Most

ROSE: ...

Her ethereal gaze persists, blending into starstruck at the drop of a hat.

ROSE: Sometimes it is difficult to believe how an
uncaring universe could have carved a face so
transcendently beautiful.

ROSE: Could have delicately crafted your enchanting
mannerisms and nimble wit only to also add to your
mind the perplexing dysfunction which compels you
to share a life with me.

KANAYA: Have You Considered Dear That The Reason
Might Not Be An Ill Defined Flaw Of My Cognition
But Rather The Fact That You Say Things Like This
KANAYA: Unprompted No Less

KANAYA: Retrieve Elaborate Romantic Missives From
The Lexicological Catacombs Of Your Bewitching Mind
To No Other End Than To Delight Me

ROSE: Oh, I have considered it. The thought that I
might deserve any part in this blessing threatens
again and again to tear my black little heart
asunder with rapturous incomprehension.

ROSE: No uncaring universe could in good conscience
allow for it.

KANAYA: Considering The Frequency With Which You
Invoke That Turn Of Phrase I Grow Genuinely
Confused What Shade Or Hue A Human Bloodpusher Is
Supposed To Exhibit

ROSE: Red, dear.

ROSE: Rich and almost purple in places, but never
all too far from our ichor's crimson.

KANAYA: Oh

KANAYA: How Predictable

ROSE: I'm afraid so.

KANAYA: And Yours Being Sable In A Plausibly
Metaphorical Fashion Betokens What Exactly

KANAYA: Apart From The Grim Portent Allegedly
Inscribed Into Every Claim You Make About Yourself

ROSE: Hmm.

ROSE: Not so much metaphor, perhaps, as metonymy.

ROSE: In the corrupted, Lacanian sense of the term.

KANAYA: Of Course

ROSE: The black of the ink which stains my viscera. The black of any object shielded from Light by its corporeal encasement.

ROSE: Not to forget the black of all the most ancient and forbidden majyyks which have warmed, disturbed, and jubilated this semiotically loaded core of mine over the years.

KANAYA: Yes Darling You Are Very Twisted

KANAYA: Very Evil

ROSE: My, you do not sound entirely sincere, Mon Coeur.

KANAYA: Ah

KANAYA: Yes That Might Be On Account Of The Fact That I Am Not

KANAYA: I Really Have To Go Dear

ROSE: I know.

ROSE: Be safe.

You do believe yourself to be reasonably safe. While the New Alternia crowd appears an impetuous bunch of undirected cunning and little forethought, much of this could be attributed to youth. If they simply allowed themselves to be nudged a little, just a few of their sharper edges sanded off, they would be a powerful ally. Besides, distancing yourself has not born fruit over the years. Too often have you drawn the shorter end of a metaphorical stick on talk show appearances with Jane, the rest of the panel usually stacked heavily in her favour. Anyone who believed in population control on trolls thought you were either overtly or covertly in cahoots with NA anyway, and your soft disavowals only served to make the actual movement even more aggressive and even more disillusioned.

At this point one might as well validate the mob's formerly unfounded fears and truly enter the dread state known only as being in cahoots with someone. If you can't stop the trolley, you might as well redirect it. Vospat has been your man on the inside for almost half a year by now, and according to him, the group has an absurd image of you as a cowardly moderate insufficient in her aspirations. Not so much antagonism as resigned disappointment. It's unlikely that they will attempt an assassination.

Karkat is nodding along attentively to the monologue.

KARKAT: I STILL FIND IT ASTONISHING THAT YOU THINK I'D BE A GOOD PICK TO HELP YOU DEAL WITH THESE PEOPLE.

KARKAT: I DON'T DO ACTIVISM. I GIVE GODDAMN RELATIONSHIP ADVICE ON A RADIO SHOW FOR NOCTURNAL ASSHOLES.

KARKAT: AND EVEN HALF OF THE GARGLEFUCKS WHO STAY ON THE LINE FOR MULTIPLE CONSECUTIVE DAYS TO GET MY TAKE DON'T END UP HEEDING THE FUCKING COUNSEL THEY WASTED THEIR WORTHLESS TIME RECEIVING.

Some part of you worries that he might be genuinely unaware of his own program's theme and cultural relevance.

KANAYA: No Karkat

KANAYA: You Do Not Just Give Dating Advice

KANAYA: You Give Dating Advice For About An Hour Before Some Minor Comment Sets You Off And Derails The Segment Into A Long Unhinged Rant About The State Of Politics

KANAYA: They Usually End In A Manner Akin To "I CAN'T FUCKING DO THIS ANYMORE. YOU KNOW WHAT? I'LL GO BLOW UP [NAME OF GOVERNMENT AGENCY] RIGHT THE FUCK NOW."

KANAYA: Which Is When You Ear Piercingly Unplug Your Microphone To End The Show In Line With Striders Neoteric Presentational Convention

KANAYA: I Truly Wish You Would Stop Doing That By The Way

Originally the radio station had been entirely Dave's project, though since it was hosted from their house, Karkat's ranting was accidentally picked up frequently enough to find significant purchase with the audience. His raspy shouting mixing well with the avant-garde acoustic tapestries that his boyfriend generously called music. It did not take long for the relationship corner to become a regular segment, and its metamorphosis into a designated place for Karkat to air his cultural grievances was even more rapid.

The act of convincing Vantas with regards to his role was largely irrelevant of course. He would not be coming along had he not already implicitly agreed, but the secondary step of persuading your friend to not be destructive on stage was a different matter. New Alternia liked Karkat more than they liked you, because he shouted as loudly as they did, but that did not mean that he

liked his fans back. Or at least not in the conventional way which involved not berating them for anything and everything they did for hours straight.

KARKAT: OBVIOUSLY WE CAN BOTH AGREE THAT MOST OF THEM ARE FUCKING IDIOTS.

KARKAT: MOST OF EVERYONE IS IDIOTS, BUT SINCE THEY ARE *OUR* IDIOTS THEIR BULLSHIT IS EVEN LESS TOLERABLE.

KARKAT: *TONE* IS THE LEAST OF THEIR PROBLEMS THOUGH. THEIR TONE IS *FUCKING FINE* AND I'M NOT GONNA START POLICING IT.

KARKAT: ARE YOU HONESTLY GONNA TELL ME THAT THEIR ANGER IS UNWARRANTED.

You can tell that he only says it that way because he's known you long enough to see how angry you are. Just below the surface. Barely hidden. The persistent sour taste of fury on your tongue. But unlike others, you put in the effort to maintain appearances when necessary.

KANAYA: Of Course Their Anger Is Warranted

KANAYA: Being Warranted Is Not The Same As Being Useful Karkat

KANAYA: We Are Not Dealing With Jack Here Nor Some Sgrubian Imp Or Ogre

KANAYA: Sometimes In Politics It Helps To Not Immediately Threaten People With Burning Their House Down No Matter How Much One Might Want To

KANAYA: Trust Me We All Want To

KARKAT: I REALLY HATE TO BREAK IT TO YOU, BUT IT DOESN'T FUCKING LOOK LIKE THAT STRATEGY HELPED FROM WHERE I'M STANDING.

KARKAT: PLEASE, TELL ME IN WHAT WAYS *THE WORLD IS BETTER NOW* BECAUSE KANAYA MARYAM HAS DILIGENTLY KEPT HER POISE AND BITTEN HER ORAL OBSCENITY THEW TO A BLOODY STUMP.

KARKAT: THAT'S WHY YOU WERE NEVER ANY GOOD AT AUSPISTICISMS. BECAUSE YOU ROMANTICIZED IT AS THIS ELEGANT SOCIAL DYNAMIC WHICH COULD BE ORCHESTRATED WITH GENTLE NUDGING AND BENEVOLENT MANIPULATION ALONE.

KARKAT: WHICH IS A LOBOTOMISED WRIGGLER FANTASY. YOU NEED TO AT LEAST BE *WILLING* TO GET YOUR HANDS DIRTY.

KANAYA: And Your Way Has Been Terrifically Effective In Bringing About Positive Change I Take It

KARKAT: I DON'T HAVE *A WAY*, FUSSYFANGS, I HAVE A NOOKSCRAPING RADIO PROGRAM.

KANAYA: Then Why Did You Show Up

KARKAT: BECAUSE MAYBE, IF WE CAN ALL RESTRAIN OURSELVES FROM BEING COMPLETE WASTES OF OXYGEN FOR A SINGULAR INSTANT, WE MIGHT BE ABLE TO COME UP WITH A WAY TOGETHER.

KARKAT: AND DON'T YOU DARE SAY THAT STATEMENTS LIKE THIS ARE WHAT MAKES ME YOUR LEADER, BECAUSE RIGHT NOW THAT'S NOT A POSITION I WANT TO FUCKING OCCUPY.

KANAYA: I Know

Dirk

You enter the interrogation room with a split focus and a splitting headache, both of which you hide behind a look of statuesque neutrality. It really isn't even hiding so much as the fact that your face just doesn't usually emote if you don't consciously make it do so. Out on the post apocalyptic ocean there wasn't much need to broadcast a state of mind in your countenance. No one was around to see it, so why bother picking up the habit. Of course you know this explanation to be Vonnegutian horseshit. You had access to enough visual media, and your mirror neurons should have clicked into gear and done the rest. Roxy had no trouble emoting naturally. No, the truth is that this is just how your brain functions beneath the hood. The inner workings of the Heart are a private affair, and your features just so happen to agree.

TEREZI: WH4T'S W1TH TH3 3Y3BROWS, D1RK?

DIRK: I don't trust you.

TEREZI: 4ND TH4T D1STRUST 1S STOR3D 4BOV3 TH3 G4ND3RBULBS?

TEREZI: GOG, HUM4NS 4R3 W31RD

TEREZI: S33 HOW 1 M4N4G3 TO D1STRUST YOU 3NT1R3LY WITHOUT LOOKING L1K3 4 B1TCH?

Effortlessly, you redirect a little more of the attention divested towards a thought-to-text chat with the cherub back at Terezi, rendering the partitions asymmetric. She does not look like a bitch. If you had to attribute any

comprehensible emotion to her expression it would probably be a sort of hunger. Slowly you lower your eyebrow.

While inspector Pyrope is even shorter than your ecto daughter, the woman manages to nonetheless exude an enormous presence. Easily sufficient to flood the room. In a way it reminds you of yourself.

DIRK: I think you will find that I have been an excellent suspect.

DIRK: I have been cooperative to the max at every turn and the only reason we clashed is that you withheld information from me.

DIRK: Look, we have the same goal. All I ask is that you start being pragmatic instead of playing Mind games for idiots.

TEREZI: D1RK, MY M1ND G4M3S 4R3 1NCR3D1BLY PR4GM4T1C

DIRK: Even if that were true, which it isn't, you'd be unnecessarily limiting your options.

DIRK: You didn't even try to convince Dave that he should go back and see if he can find something out.

TEREZI: S3TT1NG 4S1D3 FOR 4 MOM3NT TH3 QU3ST1ON OF HOW YOU KNOW TH4T

TEREZI: 1 D1DN'T TRY B3C4US3 H3 WOULDN'T H4V3 L1ST3N3D 4ND B3C4US3 1T W4SN'T N3C3SS4RY

DIRK: I managed.

TEREZI: YOU D1D >:?

DIRK: Yes. Because we don't have time to be working with half a tool-box.

DIRK: So, investigator, is there anything else you should tell me?

TEREZI: N0TH1NG YOU D0N'T 4LR34DY KNOW >:]

She lies through her caricature of a grin.

TEREZI: TH3 D34TH OF YOUR FR13ND 1S D33PLY R3GR3TT4BL3 OF COURS3

TEREZI: BUT D1D 1T NOT L34V3 YOU 1N CONTROL OF GR34T CHUNKS OF CROCK3RCORP?

Hmm. The concept of regret sure is making odd noises today. It almost sounds accusatory.

DIRK: Not really. I have about as much control of the engineering division now as I've had before, so

that's a pretty piss poor motive if you ask me,
which is literally what you're doing.

TEREZI: ON P4P3R

DIRK: Yes, on paper. You're barking up the wrong
tree, Pyrope, and I'm getting dangerously close to
losing my temper.

You make sure the emotion reaches your facial musculature. How dare she insinuate that you would harm Jane? How dare she insinuate you would do it over a company that you only helped build because it made her happy. To fulfil her dream. Did you go a little Pony Pals with it? Sure. You always go Pony Pals with things. Your brain is compositionally incapable of half-assing projects, but the blood, sweat and more sweat you poured into that company hardly makes you a murderer. It makes you a baller manager and nothing more.

DIRK: Are we done here?

TEREZI: HMMM 1 WOND3R

Christ, this is infuriating. You really hoped you wouldn't have to worsen your headache, but here you are. Your glower deepens even further and Terezi Pyrope recognizes that she is on the wrong fucking path. She can barely see the right path from where she's walking, but if she just stopped antagonizing Dirk, who is clearly distraught as shit by her accusations, he might be willing to lead the blind. That's just the sort of guy he is. She decides to let the Prince go in the precise moment in which she realizes that he's already on his way out the door.

TEREZI: HOW M4GN4N1MOUS >:]

The grinning manic energy of Terezi's voice persists, but something in her tone has become much colder in the space between syllables. Dirk turns around with some trepidation, strangely uncertain of what he would find.

TEREZI: TH3 WH1SP3RING 1S 1NCR3D1BLY CR33PY, BUT
1T'S GOOD TO KNOW TH4T YOU 4R3N'T QUIT3 4S 4V3RS3
TO M1ND G4M3S 4S YOU CL41M, MR STR1D3R.

TEREZI: WH1CH 1S 4 R3L13F, S1NC3 1 DO 1NT3ND TO
K33P PL4Y1NG TH3M

TEREZI: D1SM1SS3D

Terezi's smile is the expression of a mousetrap slamming shut. Fuck.

Vriska

It has been years since you smashed your last eight ball in scalding frustration, but if you had one of the damnable things to hand now, you would shatter it in your grasp and pluck out the shards tomorrow.

VRISKA: We h8d a d8al, Pyrope.

TEREZI: NO

TEREZI: 1 1MPL13D SOM3 TH1NGS 4ND YOU CHOS3 TO
1NT3RPR3T THOS3 4S 4 D34L

TEREZI: WH1CH W4S B3FOR3 3NGL1SH W3NT 4WOL

TEREZI: UNL1K3 YOU, WHO PROM1S3D TO ST4Y OUT OF
S1GHT UNT1L TH1S 1NV3ST1G4T1ON W4S RESOLVED

TEREZI: BUT YOU COULDN'T DO TH4T, COULD YOU?

TEREZI: 1NST34D YOU STUMBL3D H4LF D34D 1NT0 MY
1NT3RV13W W1TH H1M 4ND L3FT M3 TO CL34N UP TH3 M3SS

JUNE: i don't know terezi. i think i'm with vriska
on this.

JUNE: it sure feels like you at least broke the
spirit of the law.

JUNE: and i'm not just saying that because she
looks like she might destroy my kitchen.

TEREZI: 1S TH1S SP1R1T OF TH3 L4W 1N TH3 ROOM W1TH
US R1GHT NOW, JUN3?

TEREZI: 1 TH1NK 1 WOULD KNOW 1F TH3 L4W H4D SP1R1TS

TEREZI: 4ND 4LL 1 KNOW 1T TO H4V3 1S L3TT3RS

TEREZI: L3TT3RS WH1CH, 4S YOU W1LL NOT3, 1 L3FT
COMPL3T3LY 1N T4CT >:]

Acrid saliva pools in your mouth and you're suddenly very aware of how capable you would be of tearing someone's throat out with your teeth.

VRISKA: I l8t Captor pulverize my nug8one with a
piece of CC-8randed sound equipment 8ecause you
said that that was the condition for us to stop
pl8ying this stupid stupid hiding game.

VRISKA: After you've 8een dragging this em8arassing
RP session out for months.

VRISKA: After you 8lew your cover to fucking
Strider!

VRISKA: After you f8led to notice that someone was
snooping on your interrogation sessions!

VRISKA: hahahahahahaha!

VRISKA: It's unbelievable what a paragon of
patience I have seen, and you've given me nothing
but empty promises in return.

VRISKA: I am tired of being your bitch,
Pyrope!!!!!!!

June stares with trepidation at your left hand, which is balled to a fist in the pantomimed act of crushing an eight ball, clearly worried that you might start throwing more than just a tantrum. Blood trickles out between your fingers in thick cerulean rivulets where nails dig into the soft flesh of your palm. After so many years you still haven't gotten used to the limb's organicity again. You punch too hard with it, grasp blades and hot objects with it, block every blow as though the extremity were still metal, rather than squishy sinewy meat and bone.

An intricate pattern of bluish scar tissue covers the skin from shoulder to fingertip, drawing it into a chaotic map of jagged lines, hypertrophic summits and wide clearings of taut contracture. The dermal layer seems intent on keeping extensive record of every time you forgot that the damage done to you by your girlfriend was not permanent. In a way you would have liked it to be. There is nothing you hate more than not being even with her.

TEREZI: 1 MISC4LCUL4T3D

TEREZI: WH3N 1 SUGG3ST3D TH3 T3ST, 1 THOUGHT YOU
WOULD B4CK OUT 4T TH3 L4ST S3COND

TEREZI: 1 W4S BLUFFING B3C4US3 1 D1DN'T THINK YOU'D
4CTU4LLY B3 STUPID 3NOUGH TO L3T YOURS3LF B3 KILL3D
OV3R TH1S

VRISKA: I. Was. Cert8n.

VRISKA: Is that so hard for you to grasp?

VRISKA: I know how this shitty, judgemental piece
of clockwork functions and I was tired of w8tching
you drag your feet.

TEREZI: VRISK4, YOU C4N'T KNOW 4ND YOU H4D NO C4US3
TO B3 C3RT4IN

TEREZI: YOU W3R3 LUCKY.

Terezi's voice sounds hurt, as though the fact that you risked your life to satisfy her condition were somehow an insult.

VRISKA: 8.

VRISKA: L8t.

VRISKA: C8pt8r-

TEREZI: YOU SHOULDN'T H4V3! >: [

VRISKA: I needed to prove that I did not kill her.

TEREZI: BUT YOU DIDN'T PROV3 TH4T.

She runs her fingers through her hair in frustration the way she always does when she thinks you're too stupid to grasp something.

TEREZI: YOU W3R3 3NJOY1NG TH3 SPOTL1GHT TOO MUCH TO L1ST3N TO 4 S1NGL3 TH1NG TH4T W4S S41D

TEREZI: YOU PROV3D TH4T TH3 JUJU WORK3D, OR TH4T YOU W3R3 1NNOC3NT, OR BOTH

TEREZI: HON3STLY W1TH 4 H34VY SK3W TOW4RDS TH3 FORM3R

VRISKA: Why huh?! Just answer me that one itty 8itty question.

VRISKA: I didn't even know her! I m8 Crocker a sprite once and that's it. Why would I kill her?

JUNE: please don't do that. :(

VRISKA: Do what, June?

VRISKA: Defend myself against completely 8aseless accusations 8y a legislacer8or who can't accept that she found her suspect already.

VRISKA: Just 8ecause she desperately wants to feed his honoura8le tyranny more 8odies?

VRISKA: He tried to fuck with your precious 8rain, Pyrope. Its over.

JUNE: no, you know that's not what i mean.

JUNE: please can we all stop pretending like we don't get what this murder is about?

JUNE: i'm so tired of every one walking on egg shells around me like it's some lazy pun.

JUNE: like i need to be protected from the reality of politics.

JUNE: i know that jane was dangerous.

JUNE: i liked playing pranks with her in our first year on this planet, and i liked watching cult american crime dramas with her.

JUNE: but i'm not stupid.

JUNE: i don't have cog dis about it.

JUNE: she grew up as the partially brain washed heiress to an evil mega corp while romanticizing an era of massive cultural repression, and in a lot of subtle and not so subtle ways that always showed.

She quotes Vantas' stupid radio show almost verbatim, sans obscenities, hence cutting the statement's length by more than half.

JUNE: jane wasn't great on social issues. i get that.
JUNE: she's not my nanna and there's really no need to shield me from that observation like i'm still some child.
JUNE: i don't think she ever stopped believing that roxy's identity was a phase, and if i'm completely honest with myself i'm sort of glad that i didn't have to come out to her!
JUNE: and that.
JUNE: fucking.
JUNE: sucks.
JUNE: buster!
JUNE: that's a really terrible thing to know about me and it's only thanks to you two that i can look at this feeling head on, instead of pushing it down in hopes that it will just sort of disappear eventually.
JUNE: so please stop treating me like i'm still the person i grew out of.
JUNE: because i'm not.
JUNE: we all know why some one would have killed jane.

Carefully you loosen your grip and let some of the acid in your mouth dissipate. She's right. You weren't trying to be overly protective –no one has ever accused you of *that*– but you did inadvertently treat her like she can't handle her shit when she obviously can. On one day that mattered more than all other days, she was the one person who was there for you. She saved your ass almost as often as you saved hers and that's not a thing many people can claim. Now you're wiping a colourless tear from her warm cheek, smearing it with your blood in the process.

JUNE: gross.
VRISKA: Come on, you know it's kind of hot. :::;)
JUNE: haha.
JUNE: hey now, there's only so many uncomfortable insights i can accept in one day.
JUNE: i'm also probably too wound up right now to think about it in those terms?
JUNE: sorry.
VRISKA: Don't apologize, June!

VRISKA: That's a gr8 8oundary you drew there. And I will respect it!

VRISKA: As an agreement!

VRISKA: 8ecause I!!!!!!!!!!

VRISKA: Am not!!!!!!!!!!

VRISKA: A filthy!!!!!!!!!!

VRISKA: 8acksta88er!!!!!!!!!!

TEREZI: ...4R3 YOU DON3?

TEREZI: Y3S, D1RK 1S CL34RLY H1D1NG SOM3TH1NG

TEREZI: NO ON3 1S D1SPUT1NG TH4T

TEREZI: BUT 1 DON'T KNOW WH4T 1T 1S W1TH C3RT41NTY

TEREZI: 4CTU4L C3RT41NTY, NOT SOME LUCKY

OV3RCONF1D3NT HUNCH

TEREZI: H3 H4D 4 W4Y TO KNOW 4BOUT TH3 CLOCK, BUT OTH3RS M1GHT 4L3O B3 4BL3 TO DO WH4T3V3R 1T 1S TH4T H3 DO3S

TEREZI: 4ND H3'S R1GHT 4BOUT H1S MOT1V3 B31NG W34K 4T B3ST

TEREZI: WH1CH WOULD'N'T B3 TH4T B4D 1F YOU H4DN'T M4D3 KNOWL3DG3 OF TH3 JUJU 3NT1R3LY PUBL1C, M34N1NG TH4T 3V3RYON3 W1TH TH3 R1GHT G34R C4N K1LL J4NE V14 T1M3 TR4V3L NOW

TEREZI: 4SSUM1NG TH4T SOM3ON3 D1DN'T JUST F1ND TH3 CLOCK 1N TH4T 4B4NDON3D F4CTORY YOU H1D 1T 1N

TEREZI: M4YB3 1 WOULD B3 MOR3 T3MPT3D TO HONOUR TH1S F4K3 4GR33M3NT 1F YOU W3R3N'T 4CT1V3LY S4BOT4G1NG MY 1NV3ST1G4T1ON TH3 W4Y 4 GUILTY P3RSON M1GHT

TEREZI: M4YB3 1 WOULD TRUST YOU NOT TO 4CT R4SHLY 1F YOU D1DN'T ST4RT PULL1NG TH3S3 R1D1CULOUS STUNTS 4NY T1M3 YOU GOT FRUSTR4T3D

VRISKA: May8e!!!!!!!!!! May8e, may8e, may8e! May8e I wouldn't need to act rashly if you didn't 8lock all other paths like an edematous lusus that outgrew its hive!

VRISKA: Even when Strider grins you in the face and essentially admits that you're onto him, you still can't accept that it wasn't me.

VRISKA: You want to prosecute me for a murder that I'm actually responsi8le for sooooooooo 8adly.

VRISKA: One which wasn't self defence or the gruesome work of a so8riety-addled clown.

VRISKA: That's the resolution you want, instead of merely dragging my useless body from the gravity well of a dead star at the outskirts of relevance.
VRISKA: Well tough shit!!!!!!! Because I didn't do it.

VRISKA: I'm done with this story.

VRISKA: I'm done trying to be Mindfang because I grew the fuck up and realized that I can be better than her.

VRISKA: That I was always better than her.

VRISKA: It's about time you stopped trying to be Redglare.

VRISKA: Because Redglare lost.

VRISKA: She's dead and forgotten!

VRISKA: They were never as great as we made them out to be, you know?

VRISKA: As romantic or imposing.

VRISKA: We were never the fucking shadows of a slave-keeping pirate and a pointless bureaucrat. We won Sgrub!

VRISKA: They're our shadows! They were our practice run.

VRISKA: And a frankly embarrassing practice run at that.

VRISKA: If it had seen us before the Summoner's rebellion, we would have torn the empire apart at its seams.

VRISKA: We would have laid waste to her Condescension's repulsive solidier factory and burned her fleet to the ground.

VRISKA: All it takes is for you to jump over her shadow and trust me.

VRISKA: It's not actually that long of a shadow she casts.

Your voice has gotten ahead of you and turned what was supposed to be an impassioned speech of righteous indignation into a desperate shriek. This won't do. You rip it back down with all the restraint your muscles have on store and hope for the best. The result is contemplative and soft, though still distinctly accusatory by way of the faint hiss permeating your syllables.

VRISKA: But I guess you can't do that.

VRISKA: We did all have reasons to kill Crocker.

VRISKA: But I would have told you.

VRISKA: I've always told you.

Terezi removes her point stumps from the cane and exhales deeply. Slowly and with a fluid grace completely unbefitting of her general presentation, the woman lifts one hand to her face and pauses only briefly before removing the signature shades. You can hear the sound of June holding her Breath beside you.

Above the thin, determined line of Pyropes mouth, her eyes are enormous crimson orbs of incinerated sclera. She's coming towards you. In three short strides Pyrope closes the distance between the metaphorical trenches you have dug for yourselves. With more strength than her scrawny body should be capable of, the tealblood clamps her palms around your head and pulls it down to eye level until your foreheads touch.

All of reality collapses into her non-existent stare. Too wide and too empty and too impossibly scarlet. Faint, washed out shadows indicating the erstwhile position of irises serve as your only anchor amidst the sea of glistening red, and you might just be imagining them. Another pair of eyes reflects in hers, eight pupils total rather than none, contorted into an expression of unreadable complexity. The anger of betrayal is still there, but so is disappointment, a guilt that you hadn't even been aware of and an overwhelming fondness which would without hesitation tear an empire apart at the seams in her name.

TEREZI: YOU GOT WH4T YOU W4NT3D, D1DN'T YOU?

TEREZI: PURRF13ND'S OUT OF TH3 B4G 4ND W3 C4N
H4RDLY PUT 1T B4CK 1N NOW

TEREZI: 3V3N THOUGH 1T M34NS TH4T MY CR3D1B1L1TY'S
SHOT

TEREZI: 3V3N THOUGH 1T M34NS 1 H4V3 4 LOT MOR3
4CTU4L SUSP3CTS NOW

TEREZI: PL34S3, L3T M3 F1N1SH TH1S MY W4Y, S3RK3T

TEREZI: 1 KNOW YOU COULD PROB4BLY B34T 3V3RYON3
H3R3 W1TH1N 4N 1NCH OF TH31R L1V3S 4ND G3T YOUR
1NFORM4T1ON TH4T W4Y

TEREZI: BUT TH1S 1S MY PROJ3CT

TEREZI: 1 N33D TO F1ND TH3 K1LL3R WH3TH3R 1T'S YOU
OR NOT

TEREZI: 34RTH C WOULD H4V3 N3V3R GOTT3N L1K3 TH1S
1F 1 H4DN'T L3FT 1T TO B3 RUN BY 4 BUNCH OF D31F1C
1D1OTS

JUNE: hey!

TEREZI: NO OFF3NC3

Of course you weren't here to stop things from going off the rails either, so if Terezi is responsible then so are you. If this is her scar to mend, it is yours as well. But you can rub that contradiction in her face another time.

Deep down, some radiant part of you is very confident that no society, no group and no project has ever succeeded without the scourge sisters and never would. Not even the scourge sisters have ever succeeded without each other.

TEREZI: YOU DON'T H4V3 TO H1D3, BUT NO MOR3

OV3RDR4M4T1C STUNTS

TEREZI: 1S TH4T 4CC3PT1BL3 4S 4 D34L?

You want to say something, but all your face allows you to do is nod, so you do that instead. The deal sucks. It doesn't actually give you anything you didn't have before, but your nubbone bobs up and down either way because its contents are too lost in her eyes to properly care about that right now. June sighs with relief. Terezi kisses you. A quiet, apparently unaffected part of your brain, which has often tended to fires and the irons therein, wonders how dramatic a stunt can be before it is deemed overly so.

Intermission: Ontologically Wrong

The mansion lay drenched in darkness, though I could not possibly have described it as grimly so, and the elder to my side raised my assessment of his competence by remaining entirely calm. Nonplussed he lit a match and with it a tobacco pipe. “An ugly habit” I protested, and he chuckled as though he knew that I would pick up the dependency myself mere months later. For a geriatric even older than he looked, John was remarkably nimble, and quicker than myself to dodge flying candles, or cookware, or to pull himself from those patches of floor that spontaneously assumed the more perilous qualities of quicksand. An active life had left him in better shape than the anaemic languishing shadow of a woman who had hired him. A waifish creature which winced as she rotated doorknobs due to repetitive strain injuries repeated to the point of farce and strenuous to the point of tragedy. I considered making a similar joke out loud at the time, but refrained since I never had developed much of a taste for being pitied. All the while, the ghost chimed its constant, shriekingly hollow refrain of “what did you do!”, which John thankfully appeared oblivious to. On the one hand this was somewhat calming, on the other it made me feel like a person in the process of losing her sole valuable possession, which is to say her mind. Unfortunately our encounter took place before I had properly internalized the idea of living in a world in which insanity was a necessary precondition for calm, though the murder of my parents had certainly placed me on the path towards such epiphanies. The wailing continued.

“How long has this been going on?” The ghost hunter asked when a wall next to us began bleeding muddy gore in the shape of a face. No longer quite the colour of fresh blood. Distressingly he asked this only after knocking next to one of the “eyes” a few times, the way one would with matters of structural integrity.

Before the man could sate his apparent desire for suicide-by-spectre, I pulled him into an adjoining room and slammed the door shut. The chamber, with its high ceiling and circumferential shelves, was a library even more so than all the other partitions of Casa Lalonde, and it was by sheer coincidence that its contents served to answer both questions. The ghost's and the hunter's.

Upon ashen floorboards were traces of further blood. Blood which had fully dried and which had not seeped to the fore by the hand of occult forces, but which had been spilled and dripped deliberately by a woman desperate for answers. The flecks of swarthy crust speckled concentric rings of white chalk, which, if a certain manual were to be believed, would spell doom in the case of even minute deviation. In truth the permissible margin of error was quite sizeable and my work here had been needlessly meticulous.

Not seeing much reason to deceive or come up with alternative explanations, I sighed that “this” had been “going on” since I trapped her. The man's face failed to betray expected emotions in a way which was rapidly becoming familiar by now – the expected emotion in this case being judgement. Instead he merely nodded and stroked his moustache “Ah, yes, summoning a ghost will do that to you. When was this?”.

With entirely unwarranted exasperation born of the fact that I hadn't yet fully warmed to him, I pointed to the bags under my eyes and asked whether I truly looked to him like the sort of person who slept enough to put numbers to these things. Days had been melting into each other even before the haunting and by this point I had to squint to even recognize a gradient between them. Perhaps I referred to my mind as a “heap of needles and radio static” or something similarly thespian, but it definitely seemed sufficient to alarm him where quotidian spooks had not.

“So probably more than a weekend. That's not good. Ghosts are sort of like dead people pretending to still be alive. You can keep up the charade for two days or so without much trouble, if you only need to convince some party-goers, but after that you enter the danger zone...”

After a tense and confused silence he added “...You don't watch very many movies, do you?”

I tentatively shook my head waiting for an explanation I would never receive, but the ghost hunter had already abandoned ship on what was presumably a joke of some variety and returned his attention to the issue at hand.

“What did you summon a ghost for?”

“Answers” I replied without hesitation.

“This place is ontologically wrong. Not too far below the surface. A mere cellophane of desultory sense stretched taut above madness. We're wrong. I'm wrong. Like a mistyped line of text amidst the pages of our lives. Something to be scratched out and rewritten. Wrong by design, wrong for some greater purpose, but not one so considerate as to humble itself with explanations of its own. I have more questions than I have time. More of the former and less of the latter with each passing day, but out there –beyond the black– are things with answers. Things with tentacles and eyes and answers and very little else. Puzzle pieces strewn about the catacombs of reality. I summoned her because I had to. Releasing them has never been a problem in the past.”

The things with the tentacles and the eyes and the answers had told me many things over the years. Tales of the witch's true nature and of my own extraterrestrial origin. Our coming apocalypse, spells by which I may put up a fight and most importantly preparations in need of making for a daughter I may never meet. A daughter I could only love from afar through the thick unaccommodating mist of chronology. Obviously the thing haunting my manor was not an outer god, which would have been immensely ataraxic for any sane person, though this fact only added to my disquiet. I had been under the impression that there wasn't anything beside zoological dubiousities in the place I was calling from.

John scratched his chin as he walked circles around the ritual site.

“Obviously the customer is always right. Obviously. Even when you're working pro bono... But blood magic? Doesn't that strike you as a bit excessive? Maybe even –and hear me out please– a bit evil? Young women shouldn't trifle with such things. When I need answers I tend to just visit a library.” A frankly ridiculous statement, considering that he stood amidst a collection of literature which would put most libraries to shame.

It wasn't like I hadn't heard similar outrage from my parents when I first dug my nails into the occult. After all such was the expected response from people who had no means of understanding and no will to try. “Most things young girls can learn from sources which are not their parents are evil. It's the natural outcome of a world in which language confers consensus-meaning and in which authority shapes consensus morality. The superstructure renders all that which bubbles up from its subjects inherently dubious, likely

dangerous. Worthy of being surveilled and controlled” I maundered with all the confidence of someone who had just begun reading Foucault.

He nodded along the way friendly old people do, if a touch more sincerely. “Duh. Rose, can you see why this response would worry me? The problem here isn't what your parents would think, the issue is that it's dangerous. Not to disrespect the dead, even though it's part of the job description I guess, but parents are a mixed bag. They scarcely have all the answers or even particularly many of them. I would know, I've got a son and he's been smarter than me ever since he learned how to walk. Jumping from bridges isn't bad because your parents tell you that you shouldn't do it. Its bad because there's a lot of air and then a lot of surface underneath. God knows where I would have ended up if I ever listened to my guardian.” He laughed, and I made a mental note of the word “guardian”.

Of Might And Morality

Calliope

Your palm husk vibrates as you squeeze your way past the perhaps only person on Earth C taller than you, and the little girl by his side. Without Roxy's aspect-ways penchant for stealth, hiding is an impossibility, but the cavernous bunker is cramped enough that blending in presents an option, just so long as no one tries to catch a glimpse at the green skull beneath your hood. You walk hunched and with great care that might plausibly be construed as polite rather than suspicious. Neither the giant nor his ward pay any mind to the shuffling behind their backs and so, once a small pocket of space presents itself, just about sufficient for the unobstructed manoeuvring of limbs, you retrieve the slab of glass and metal from your pocket with gloved hands.

DIRK: Yo Callie, you busy?

The answer to that question is less obvious than it is in most instances. You aren't exactly free, but at the same time you're mostly waiting and trying not to look conspicuous. Being on your phone might even help with that.

CALLIOPE: oh not at all!

CALLIOPE: at least not particUlarly.

CALLIOPE: what brings me the rare pleasUre, dirk?
are yoU alright?

DIRK: Sure, why wouldn't I be? I've got a brain full of projects, a fridge full of orange soda and a life full of awesome. Same as it ever was.

CALLIOPE: of coUrse, sorry. i sUPpose with roxy's recent tailspin into fringe grass-roots politics i've jUst been growing more worried in general.

The speed of Dirk's messages indicates that he's thinking rather than typing them. The man's brain produces a curt, somewhat mirthless "hah".

DIRK: If there was ever anyone in our group who could handle their own shit it was probably Roxy.

DIRK: They're gonna be fine.

DIRK: Don't get me wrong, I'm as confused by their recent affiliations as you are, but the fact that I don't know what Roxy is doing doesn't mean that they don't.

CALLIOPE: i appreciate the praise on my partner's behalf, bUt i was always Under the impression that jane ran a rather tight ship.

DIRK: Oh Jane ran the tightest of ships. If we exclude myself, for obvious reasons.

DIRK: Too tight probably.

DIRK: Whole vessel's polished and efficient as all fuck, but that's borderline irrelevant if the captain labours herself to death in the process.

DIRK: Jane's work ethic was a thing of beauty and dysfunction. If I hadn't taken over parts of CrockerCorp for her, she would have been the first person to croak heroic from paperwork.

DIRK: You can only run things on elbow grease and moxie for so long until you start running on fumes.

DIRK: It's the complete opposite of a more obvious English-ian genre of problem, but it's still a problem.

DIRK: And let's not even get started on me.

You hadn't thought about it that way, but it does make sense. Sometimes the four of them are still the heroes of your history books to you, and you glance over their more egregious flaws all too happily. Movement is happening on the stage. Someone positions chairs and tests microphones, but the program itself hasn't started yet.

DIRK: Are you still there?

DIRK: Actually, maybe expect a message slow-down on my end as well, I've got to deal with Pyrope here.

CALLIOPE: Umm.

CALLIOPE: shoUld yoU really be texting while yoU're being interrogated?

DIRK: I've got this under control. Don't worry about it.

CALLIOPE: yoU telling me not to worry aboUt things sUre appears to be a theme of this conversation.

DIRK: Fair point. Who am I to tell people that they shouldn't worry?

DIRK: The double standard store might just call to tell me that they want their hypocrisy back.

DIRK: That's not what I wanted to talk about anyway.

DIRK: I think I need an outside perspective here, since when it comes to outside perspectives, self designed responder systems are simply the worst there is.

DIRK: Look, I know we've probably had this conversation so often that it's starting to get formulaic, and I can't even give you specifics this time, but still, please don't just go through the motions.

CALLIOPE: i would never!

DIRK: Right.

There is the sort of microsecond delay that constituted a pregnant pause in Striderian thought-speak.

DIRK: Am I a good person?

DIRK: Whatever that even means.

DIRK: If I did something which looks massively left-of-hinged to the outside observer, what are the odds that I'm actually doing *the right thingtm*?

DIRK: Knowing me. How much should I bank on that?

Before you can wonder about the timing of that question, a familiar voice rings through the speaker system. Quiet immediately settles over the room to accommodate the silky, somewhat monotonous cadence of Kanaya Maryam-Lalonde.

KANAYA: It Is Heartening To See So Many Congregated At Our Call

KANAYA: Suspicious Voices Have Assumed The Event To Be A Trap And Though Their Caution Is Laudable It Has Sadly Led Them Astray

KANAYA: If There Is Indeed A Trap Constituting Our Shared Environs I Have Found Myself Ensnared By The Spring Loaded Squeakfiend Allurement Right Beside You

KANAYA: Yes These Times Do Demand Great Quantities Of Caution From Us But Even More Desperately Do They Demand Action

KANAYA: An Attribute In Which I Have Apparently Been Found Lacking As They Say

KANAYA: For This I Can Only Apologize

KANAYA: Jane Has Left A Power Vacuum For Us To Fill And Many Of The Most Insightful And Forward

Thinking Voices Of Our Movement Are Assembled Here
To Discuss How We Should Go About Filling It
KANAYA: Despite Suspensions I Am Not Here To Take
Reigns Which Are Not Mine By Right
KANAYA: Nor To Call For A Moderation Which Is As
Inutile As It Is Fatally Misplaced

The crowd roars, though you can't tell whether this is a result of Kanaya's opening statement or of the other figures now entering the stage. Philosophers, journalists, local politicians, an old union guy you saw on TV a few times and notably Karkat Vantas, discreetly eating peanuts in a way which might tempt a lesser cohort to lock him in a jail with acid. This is not a lesser cohort. You soon grow very surprised by how civilized the proceedings are. Populist screeds do happen, but they are interrupted by long discussions on statecraft driven by mutual curiosity. Moreover, it seems like the panel itself is equally startled by this fact. They find themselves a newly assembled brain relaying insights to its fists while still in the process of discovering them. You scroll back up in your chat.

DIRK: ...

DIRK: No utilitarian calculus, no dusty moral philosophy. Trust me I went over those.

DIRK: It's probably safe to say that no philosopher in paradox space ever had the foresight to account for us.

DIRK: And even if they did they would have gone insane that very moment and been rendered useless.

DIRK: Am I a good guy or just a guy who does good?

CALLIOPE: that really doesn't sound like a distinction you would usually make.

DIRK: Yeah, exactly, I wouldn't. Don't you think that might be a problem?

DIRK: Does that not worry you?

CALLIOPE: dirk, is this about him again?

DIRK: Obviously.

DIRK: But only in the all-consuming way in which nothing ever fails to be about him.

DIRK: The way that emerges when god is an unfinished machine and you're a sentient heap of spare parts left by the side of the road.

CALLIOPE: he is certainly not god. no more than my brother was god.

CALLIOPE: and yoU are not him with the exact same certitUde.

DIRK: That's still way too close for comfort. On both counts.

DIRK: We are so not leaving room for Jesus, and the Christian dance instructor is irate as all fuck about it.

CALLIOPE: then let me pUt it another way.

CALLIOPE: i saw the same thing yoU and rose saw. we disbanded the anime clUb. and i still believe that yoU are a good person.

CALLIOPE: we've known each other for most of oUr conscioUs lives, and i have never seen yoU make a decision which wasn't altrUistically motivated.

CALLIOPE: even when the resUlts weren't always ideal.

This pause can be easily interpreted as a groan. You did not mean to call it "anime club", but the puckish nomenclature has ossified upon your bifurcated tongue in the past years.

DIRK: And the ends justify the means?

CALLIOPE: they don't need to.

CALLIOPE: we both know perfectly well that the alpha timeline jUstifies the means whether we want it to or not.

CALLIOPE: blimey dirk, yoU really aren't giving me a lot to work with here.

CALLIOPE: is this what i pUt all of yoU throUgh when i was trying to be considerate and withholding caUsal spoilers for the sake of simplicity?

CALLIOPE: it's dreadful!

CALLIOPE: may i guess?

CALLIOPE: yoU do have a tendency towards going overboard when it comes to a certain fellow in bootie shorts whom we're both familiar with.

CALLIOPE: bUt if yoU genUinely believe that jake might be in danger then dramatic action is sUrely jUstified!

DIRK: ...

CALLIOPE:

CALLIOPE: yoU aren't going to tell me that i need not worry aboUt jake then.

DIRK: Callie.

DIRK: You know what the very first axiom I program into any machine I make is?
DIRK: The most basic law of robotics and everything else.
DIRK: Before getting to work laying the groundwork for formal logic or even symbol manipulation.
DIRK: "There is always a need to worry about Jake English."
DIRK: I've got to go. Tell me if you run into any sort of trouble at dissident-central so I can get you out if things get too hot to handle.
CALLIOPE: Umm, alright, ta!

Before you can contemplate this sudden take-off or the fact that he knows where you are, Karkat rises to clear his throat. It would surely look more impressive if he were actually any taller standing than he is sitting, though a suitable gravitas still radiates from the man's posture.

KARKAT: I WOKE UP NEXT TO TWO GODS THIS MORNING.
KARKAT: THEY SHAPE MY DAY AND SHAPE MY LIFE AND IF YOU LISTEN TO MY DATING SHOW-

You see Kanaya facepalm next to him.

KARKAT: -YOU KNOW THAT THEY ARE *UNSPEAKABLY* FUCKING FALLIBLE.
KARKAT: BUT THAT'S FINE. I BEAR THEIR STUPIDITY BECAUSE I CHOSE IT.
KARKAT: I ACKNOWLEDGE THIS HIDEOUS PRIVILEGE AND LUXURIATE IN IT INDECENTLY.
KARKAT: I HAVE CHOSEN FOR GODS TO SHAPE MY LIFE.
KARKAT: WE AS A CULTURE HAVE NOT.
KARKAT: AND YES, WE LIVE IN A *DEMOCRACY*, BUT WHAT GOOD IS THAT WHEN OUR REPRODUCTION ITSELF IS A POLITICAL ISSUE DECIDED ON BY A MAJORITY WHICH WE DO NOT CONSTITUTE?
KARKAT: IT ISN'T. IT'S A FUCKING JOKE.
KARKAT: EVEN OUR WEAKNESS IN RAW NUMBERS, DECIDED AT THE WHIM OF SOME ASSHOLE WITH A SPREADSHEET, PALES MISERABLY AND WRITHES PATHETICALLY ON THE GROUND BEFORE OUR SHEER LACK OF CULTURAL POWER EVIDENCED BY THE FACT THAT *I'M* THE BEST WE'VE GOT.
KARKAT: I'D PROPOSE A SHORT BREAK FOR EVERYONE TO EVACUATE THEIR CHAGRIN TUNNEL RIGHT NOW, BUT THE

ONLY WAY WE COULD POSSIBLY BE ANY MORE USELESS IS IF EVERYONE IN THIS ROOM DROWNED IN VOMIT, SO KEEP IT THE FUCK DOWN.

KARKAT: THEY HAVE GODS, *REAL ONES*. THEY HAVE MEDIA EMPIRES, *REAL ONES*, AND THEY AT LEAST HAVE THE RUINS OF A CULTURE TO BUILD UPON.

KARKAT: WE ON THE OTHER HAND HAVE A ROOM FULL OF ASSHOLES, COCKTAILS FULL OF MOLOTOV, AND A MOTHER GRUB WHICH IS DISTINCTLY *ONLY HALF* FULL OF WRIGGLERS.

KARKAT: I DIDN'T GROW UP WITH A TERM FOR THE FUCKING TYRANNY OF THE MASSES, AND NEITHER DID KANAYA.

KARKAT: WE GREW UP WITH A TYRANNY OF LITERAL CLOWNS AND BELIEVE ME IT SURE WASN'T FUCKING BETTER.

KARKAT: I KNOW A FEW OF YOU MORONS ROMANTICIZE THAT SHITHOLE AND I WOULD LIKE NOTHING MORE THAN TO *SEND YOU THERE* AS PUNISHMENT FOR BEING SO UNBELIEVABLY STUPID.

KARKAT: NEW ALTERNIA IS A *GARBAGE* NAME. IT'S EDGY FOR THE SAKE OF BEING EDGY, AND IT'S FRANKLY INSENSITIVE TOWARDS ME FUCKING PERSONALLY.

KARKAT: I WOKE UP WITH TWO GODS AND CAME HERE BELIEVING WITH ABSOLUTE CERTAINTY THAT I WOULD SNAP WITHIN THE FIRST MINUTE. THE FIRST SECOND. THE FIRST SHIT GARGLING INSTANT. AND SCHOOLFEED YOU IGNORANT FUCKS TO CARNIVAL COME.

KARKAT: BUT THANKS TO A FEW OF YOU WHO AREN'T CLINICALLY BRAIN-DEAD, AND THANKS TO KANAYA, TO WHOM ALL OF YOU OWE SUCH AN IMMEASURABLE FLOOD OF GROVELLING APOLOGIES THAT YOUR ORAL OBSCENITY THEW IS RENDERED A BLOODY STUMP, I HAVE NOT DONE SO.

KARKAT: AND I WILL CONTINUE TO NOT DO SO.

KARKAT: I MAY NOT BE A GOD, BUT I SURE AS SHIT AM MERCIFUL.

KARKAT: SOME HERE WANT TO TOPPLE THE GLOBAL GOVERNMENT, AND THE WRITHE TUBULES *EVIDENTLY EATING THEIR THINK PANS* ARE NOT DOING THEIR JOB QUICKLY ENOUGH.

KARKAT: OTHERS MIGHT HOPE THAT THINGS WILL JUST NATURALLY REFORM FOR THE BETTER NOW THAT JANE IS GONE, AND THEIR SHORT SIGHTEDNESS IS SO ASTONISHING

THAT I WONDER HOW THEY MANAGE TO NOT PERPETUALLY
RUN INTO WALLS LIKE ASSHOLES.
KARKAT: IF WE'VE HEARD ONE WORD OVER AND OVER AGAIN
TODAY IT'S SECESSION.
KARKAT: YOU DON'T HEAR IT ON THE NEWS BECAUSE IT
SOUNDS BENIGN. BECAUSE IT DOESN'T SOUND SCARY
ENOUGH.
KARKAT: IT SOUNDS BENIGN BECAUSE IT IS BENIGN.
KARKAT: LET ANYONE HAPPY WITH THE CURRENT REGIME
KEEP IT, *BUT GIVE US A FUCKING ALTERNATIVE*.
KARKAT: ANY ARGUMENT FOR A GLOBAL GOVERNMENT BEGINS
AND ENDS EITHER WITH ECONOMIES OF SCALE OR WITH THE
HIDEOUS IDEALISM THAT IF YOU DO IT RIGHT IT'LL BE
ONE SIZE FITS ALL.
KARKAT: AND WHO KNOWS, MAYBE THAT'S TRUE. BUT MY
FRIENDS HAVE PROVEN BEYOND THE SHADOW OF A DOUBT
THAT THEY DON'T HAVE THE CHOPS TO DO IT RIGHT.
KARKAT: THE CASE AGAINST A GLOBAL GOVERNMENT NEEDS
ONLY ONE DEVASTATING ARGUMENT: "YOU CAN'T LEAVE,
SHITHEAD".
KARKAT: WE DON'T HAVE A CHOICE OF EXIT. EVEN IF OUR
GOVERNMENT WAS PERFECT, WHICH IT IS NOT, WE
SHOULDN'T HAVE TO DEAL WITH THE RISK OF ANOTHER
JANE RISING TO POWER AND FUCKING US OVER.
KARKAT: *ALL WE ASK FOR* IS SECESSION. *ALL WE ASK*
IS SELF DETERMINATION FOR ANYONE WHO WANTS IT, AND
THEY CAN KEEP WHAT THEY HAVE SO LONG AS THEY DO NOT
FORCE US TO STAY.
KARKAT: WE WILL DO OUR BEST TO MAKE THE PROCESS AS
FRICTION- AND PAINLESS AS POSSIBLE, BY WHICH I MEAN
KANAYA AND THE REGIONAL COMMITTEES WILL DO THAT
BECAUSE I AM *NEITHER QUALIFIED NOR CAPABLE OF
BEING FUCKED* TO DO PAPERWORK.
KARKAT: BUT THE TROLL KINGDOM WILL ACT AS AN
AUTONOMOUS REGION ACTIVE IMMEDIATELY.
KARKAT: IF ANYONE ATTEMPTS TO IMPOSE A POWER WHICH
NO LONGER EXISTS, WE STILL HAVE THOSE COCKTAILS
FULL OF MOLOTOV, AND IF YOU HAVE PROVEN ONE THING
FOR OUR BENEFIT, *ITS THAT YOU AREN'T AFRAID TO USE
THEM*.

Karkat unplugs his microphone, either out of habit or as an intentional gesture, resulting in an unbearably shrill hiss reverberating through the hall. You seem to have stumbled into something historic by accident, even though

you haven't found your partner. Despite all the history books you have devoured over the course of your life –anything Roxy could recover for you from drowned servers, or which Dirk could recollect from Wikipedia articles– you think this might be the first genuinely historic event you have ever witnessed. The return of gods does not quite count in your mind, as you WERE the historic event in that instance.

This on the other hand seems like a planet, carefully constructed and held in stasis by its creators, beginning to spin by itself. It must always have been spinning. Below the surface, below the crust, down at the superheated molten core. A whole population of new, unique people with dreams and desires, mostly invisible to your group.

You think you suddenly understand what Roxy was talking about. You were thinking of them as the heroes of your storybooks again. The sort that does not give the villagers names. Not the workers, not the artists, certainly not the children, and you forgot that in the real world you had been reading about, history is not written by heroes. Heroes merely serve as its symbols.



KARKAT: YOU REALLY WANT TO KNOW WHAT I THINK?

Asked councilman Vantas of the Autonomous Commune, a man who had never in his life waited for a response to this question before stating what he thought. Concretely. As Such. And thusly.

KARKAT: I THINK YOU'RE SPINNING YOUR WHEELS.

TEREZI: 4ND WHY WOULD 1 DO TH4T?

KARKAT: EITHER BECAUSE IT WAS FUCKING VRISKA AND YOU WANT TO PROTECT HER.

KARKAT: OR BECAUSE THE BROKEN CLOCK OF YOUR FUCKED UP JUSTICE FETISH IS POINTING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION FOR ONCE AND TELLING YOU THAT JANE BEING DEAD IS ACTUALLY REALLY GREAT FOR JUSTICE.

KARKAT: I DON'T HAVE ANY PROBLEM WITH EITHER. IF IT'S THE FORMER, FEEL FREE TO THANK HER FROM ME. FUCK! I'LL INVITE HER OVER FOR THE TORTUROUS RITUAL KNOWN AS HUMAN BRUNCH MYSELF.

KARKAT: JUST MAKE SURE SHE DOESN'T KILL ANYONE ELSE AND WE'RE GOOD.

KARKAT: POINT IS THAT THE TEREZI I KNOW MIGHT BE AN INTERPERSONAL IMBECILE WHO GENUINELY THINKS THAT SHE CAN STOP VRISKA FUCKING SERKET FROM PULLING WHATEVER INSANE DRAMATIC STUNT SHE FEELS LIKE PULLING WITH A FATUOUS VERBAL AGREEMENT-

It was indeed not the safest position to be in thought the investigator, but even Vriska wasn't *entirely* immune to reason. She just didn't... think... very much.

KARKAT: -BUT SHE'S ALSO SMARTER THAN EVERYONE ELSE ON THIS PLANET COMBINED AND WOULD HAVE FIGURED OUT A SIMPLE MURDER BY NOW IF THERE WASN'T SOME OTHER SHITTY MACHINATION GOING ON.

KARKAT: SO, IF OUR FRIENDSHIP MEANS ANYTHING TO YOU: *IS DAVE SAFE?*

TEREZI: YOU 4CTU4LLY 1NT3ND TO L3T H1M T1M3 TR4V3L >:?

KARKAT: CAN WE DEAL WITH YOUR SCREWED UP CONCEPTION OF RELATIONSHIPS SOME OTHER TIME?

KARKAT: BELIEVE ME, I WOULD LOVE THE SHIT OUT OF THAT.

KARKAT: HE'S A *GROWN ASS MAN* AND DOESN'T NEED MY PERMISSION FOR JACK FUCK.

KARKAT: WHICH IS GREAT, BECAUSE IT AFFORDS THE SAME *BASIC DIGNITY* OF NOT HAVING TO PITIFULLY GROVEL LIKE A LOAM PERTURBATION NOODLE AND ASK MY PARTNERS WHETHER IT'S OKAY FOR ME TO TALK MYSELF INTO STARTING AN *IMPROMPTU REVOLUTION* THIS WEEKEND.

KARKAT: REAL *NORMAL STUFF* FOR CASES WHEN THE OXYGEN IN A CRAMPED CONFERENCE BUNKER GETS TOO THIN FOR MY THINK PAN TO *WORK PROPERLY*.

KARKAT: A THING WHICH, AS YOU KNOW, HAPPENED.

KARKAT: DID YOU KNOW EARTH HISTORY HAS *PRECEDENTS* FOR THAT?

KARKAT: *PLURAL!*

KARKAT: ANYWAY, IF HE WANTS TO YEET HIS USELESS TORSO INTO THE PATH OF A GOD SLAYER AT THE BEHEST OF AN ALT-TIMELINE GENETIC DUPLICATE OF HIS ABUSIVE-AS-FUCK GUARDIAN, THEN THERE'S LITERALLY NOTHING I CAN DO ABOUT THAT.

KARKAT: BESIDE TELLING HIM WHAT A TERRIBLE IDEA IT IS AND HOW BRAINWORM RIDDEN HIS COGNITION SPONGE MUST BE TO SERIOUSLY CONSIDER IT.

KARKAT: IF YOU KNOW WHO DID IT, YOU CAN STOP HIM FROM GOING. IF YOU CAN'T TELL ME FOR SOME REASON, THAT'S *FINE*. I DON'T ACTUALLY CARE, SO LONG AS YOU CAN *GUARANTEE* THAT IT'S SAFE.

KARKAT: SO, IS IT?

Terezi leaned over her cane severely.

TEREZI: YOU UND3R3ST1M4T3 TH1S C4S3, K4RK4T >:[
TEREZI: 1 R34LLY DON'T KNOW WHO TH3 K1LL3R 1S 4ND 1
C4N'T GU4R4NT33 4NYON3'S S4F3TY
TEREZI: N31TH3R 1N TH3 P4ST NOR TH3 PR3S3NT
TEREZI: BUT D4V3 1SN'T TH3 K1ND OF CHUMP WHO WOULD
G3T H1MS3LF K1LL3D SO 34S1LY
TEREZI: B3L13V3 M3, 1 TRUST TH3 SP1K13R STR1D3R
4BOUT 4S F4R 4S 1 C4N THROW H1M, BUT H3'S UNL1K3LY
TO KNOW1NGLY 3ND4NG3R YOUR BOYFR13ND 1F TH4T'S 4NY
CONSOL4T1ON
TEREZI: TH4NK YOU FOR YOUR T1M3, COUNC1LM4N

June

A knock causes silence to fall over your living room, and you open the door with the sort of alacrity that immediately conveys to the person on the other side that you had been waiting in grabbing distance of the handle like you wanted everything to do with it for an hour. You'd like to claim that you're so nervous because you're no longer used to having guests, but the truth is that you never had much practice in the first place.

ROSE: I see.

Observes Rose, who has always seen a bit too much for comfort. She stands in the door frame, wearing an outfit clearly consisting of a black turtle-neck she picked herself and all the rest picked by her wife. From the big modern coat to the elaborate earrings. It's impossible not to notice that Rose too looks uneasy, which is never a good sign.

ROSE: Would you enjoy being hugged?

ROSE: I do believe it is customary.

You're wrapped around her before she can even finish the sentence, causing "customary" to dovetail into a startled squeak. Letting someone in here feels oddly intimate, and you desperately hope that you haven't missed anything in the hasty cleaning effort which has consumed most of your day leading up to this point.

JUNE: hi, rose.

JUNE: come in.

ROSE: Where may I relinquish my garments?

JUNE: oh right, put those...

JUNE: yeah, you know what? i won't pretend that i don't just throw them on the floor when i come in.

JUNE: put them where ever you think is a dignified place for clothes to be?

TEREZI: WOW

JUNE: pff, like you're any different.

TEREZI: 1 WOULD'N'T H4V3 CRUMBL3D L1K3 4N

4NT3R3B3LL14N H1V3RU1N

Rose chuckles while she drapes her coat delicately over the back of a chair, and you can see the tension in her face ameliorate a little.

ROSE: "Anterebellian"?

ROSE: Any time I succumb to the hubris of believing to understand even in contour the serpentine interplay of our disparate sets of cultural detritus, reality feels the need to confront me with something akin to the apparent existence of troll-latin.

JUNE: eh, there's probably a really dumb and convoluted explanation for that. i tend to not worry about it

ROSE: I know, June.

Only too late do you realize that your shirt isn't entirely hiding the bite mark Vriska has left on your collar bone, and Rose is already raising an eyebrow before you can hide it.

ROSE: So, you too have discovered the tremendous allure of a good fang.

One of your best friends says, as though she were making polite conversation about the weather. You sure as fuck have, but the only response you can

manage is a choked, high pitched “mhm!” while Terezi laughs her ass off next to you.

Rose looks around conspiratorially.

ROSE: But your more volatile girlfriend won't join us, will she?

ROSE: I don't quite want to know how she might react to this.

ROSE: In truth I would very much prefer not to discuss it in the first place and have some tea instead.

ROSE: Is that option at all on the table, investigator?

Thanks to your earlier panicked tidying, nothing is presently on the table. Your sweet, precious daughter Casey waddles through the kitchen much in the way a troll- or human teenager might: entirely indifferent to the conversation playing out next to her. She isn't wearing headphones, but she might as well be. God, they grow up so quickly. It has only been a month since you finally retrieved her from your sylladex after a very responsible visit to the doctor imbued you with the confidence to believe that you could totally take care of a child. Rose neglects to comment.

TEREZI: OBVIOUSLY I CAN'T FORC3 YOU TO T3LL M3 4NYTH1NG, ROS3

TEREZI: 4ND I UND3RST4ND TH4T YOU DON'T 4CTU4LLY C4R3 4BOUT SOLV1NG TH3 C4S3

TEREZI: BUT SUR3LY YOU 4PPR3C14T3 HOW D4NG3ROUS TH1S COULD B3

ROSE: Believe me, I oh so cursedly understand.

ROSE: And I apologize on behalf of my father. He does have a rather persistent habit of overstepping boundaries.

TEREZI: ...

Terezi makes a noise signalling her unwillingness to permit any and all deviation from the topic for which Rose had been invited.

TEREZI: WHO KNOWS 4BOUT TH1S?

ROSE: Dirk, Calliope and myself. The former members of a group humorously referred to as the “snooty pompous smartass factory”, among other such monikers.

JUNE: so is it like mind control? can you mind control me, rose?

The woman in the turtle-neck examines you gravely. You realize that this is the sort of question which threatens to vitiate the basic ability for anyone to trust the others about anything, and that there is surely a very good, very dumb and very convoluted reason for why the three of them have done their best to keep this mechanic a secret. You probably shouldn't worry about it.

JUNE: actually never mind, i-

TEREZI: WH4T?!

Terezi looks back and forth between the two of you in disbelief while you still wonder what dusty corner your brain just retrieved the word "vitate" from. The conversation continues around you like a river splitting and re-converging to encircle an island.

ROSE: Yes, she can't hear it. Not if she isn't paying attention at least.

ROSE: Picking up on narrative shenanigans comes more intuitively to us Seers than to others.

ROSE: For whatever reason, we have keener ears for what goes on beyond our ontological proscenium.

ROSE: Though demonstrations aside, I do mean it. Of the three genuine info-hazards I am aware of, this is perhaps the most potent, and the less you know about it the better.

ROSE: If I keep my eyes open a tad further, so to speak, I can monitor Dirk and make sure he doesn't do anything... inadvisable.

ROSE: The fact that I am the one advocating ignorance in this matter should hopefully be enough to tell you how gravely serious it is.

ROSE: We are gods. Poor bargain bin excuses for them, perhaps, but gods nonetheless. It is vital for us to be able to trust each other.

Some part of you wants to laugh, but the rest of you is sufficiently terrified to throw a wrench into that idea. Luckily Terezi does the laughing for you.

TEREZI: H4H4H4

TEREZI: JUNE, T3LL H3R

JUNE: huh?

TEREZI: T3LL H3R TH4T OUR B4S1C C4P4C1TY FOR TRUST
1S 4LR34DY 4S B1G OF 4 SH4M 4S 1T G3TS

TEREZI: ON3 MOR3 SL33P1NG B34UTY PROBL3M WON'T KILL
US

TEREZI: HOP3FULLY >:]

Your hand is trembling, alerting you to the fact that fight-flight-freeze has kicked in at full volume. Even your trust in Terezi has limits and Rose seems like possibly the least safe person to mention this to.

ROSE: June...?

You exhale and cast your mind back to the day you told Roxy everything. Not just the gender stuff. Everything. It was the first time you ever laid it out for anyone. You'd kept quiet for so long in order to avoid the existential horror Rose will soon be feeling.

JUNE: man this is such a bad idea.

JUNE: ...

JUNE: how do you think ret con works?

Rose seems a little taken aback, but after a sip of tea she responds.

ROSE: From what I understand, you conceptualise an anchor, some potent thought, object, or word tied to a relevant point in our continuity.

ROSE: Upon doing so, you may disarticulate yourself from the local weave of narrative coherence and "zap" (sic.) to said point.

ROSE: Actions taken there do not create a doomed offshoot of chronology, but rather divert the stream of relevance which designates a timeline as alpha in the first place onto a novel course.

ROSE: This stabilizing effect may or may not be tethered directly to your presence.

ROSE: Is that a fair characterization?

JUNE: sort of...?

Your right hand attempts to wring blood from the left as though it were a sponge.

JUNE: okay, how do you catch a falling glass of water?

JUNE: like you bumped into it on the counter and there'll be a mess of shards on your floor in less than a second if you don't.

JUNE: no weird meta physics. think practically, rose.

ROSE: I? Reach for it?

ROSE: In a reflexive capacity which eschews conscious thought perhaps.

JUNE: right. you don't conceptualize the glass. what shape it is, how fast it's falling and so on. some part of you probably does that, but it wouldn't feel that way.

JUNE: you just know where it is and how to grab it.

JUNE: it's less like a skill and more like having another arm, which simply knows how to do arm-things.

JUNE: that anchor stuff matters when i don't have a personal connection to the event, like all of terezi's weird time line tweaks, but for moments i know about?

JUNE: glasses never stop falling for me, rose.

JUNE: every thing that ever goes wrong. i have a limb which can just sort of reach back and catch the glass. at any point. for ever.

JUNE: every time some thing bad happens the arm twitches. like when you drop a knife and your conscious-brain has to stop your reflex-brain from just grabbing it.

JUNE: all i can do is hope that my conscious brain is fast enough to stop me from dooming every body because i tripped over a bottle or some thing.

ROSE: ...

ROSE: Have you..?

TEREZI: ROS3, PL34S3. TH4T'S TH3 SORT OF QU3STION WHICH THR34T3NS TO V1T14T3 TH3 B4S1C 4B1L1TY FOR 4NY OF US TO TRUST 34CH OTH3R >:]

You look up at her through a curtain of tears.

JUNE: not that i know of.

JUNE: but... but i'm pretty sure i'd make myself forget if it did happen.

ROSE: Oh.

ROSE: Yes, this is indeed an infohazard.

TEREZI: YOU'R3 H4V1NG TH3 THOUGHT, 4R3N'T YOU?

ROSE: "The thought"?

TEREZI: WH4T'S TH3 TH1NG TH4T JUST W3NT THROUGH YOUR H34D?

TEREZI: TRUST M3, 1'V3 B33N TH3R3 >:]

ROSE: I was calmly observing that I am being quite calm about this.

ROSE: Which is not exactly unexpected behaviour, but still somewhat troubling when I consider what might have happened to instances of myself which reacted differently.

ROSE: I see what you meant, when you said that one more sleeping beauty problem hopefully would not kill us.

ROSE: The more amicably I find myself reacting to such a revelation, the higher the odds that a retcon has occurred.

ROSE: I must say that I quite hate this.

And that's the root of the problem. You can deal with the twitch when things go bad, but things going well is a lot more ominous. It makes you wonder whether reality is only being cooperative because you doomed a timeline to make it so. It makes you wonder what it might mean that all your friends were so accepting of your coming out.

You try not to worry about it.

You fail with uncharacteristic regularity.

You've committed not to tell people, because not everyone can be Roxy.

Lying on a thick vintage carpet in the lighthouse, your heart poured out to them, and Roxy did not flinch. Maybe a part of it was that they weren't a native inhabitant of this timeline either, but the bulk of how they could listen without evident horror surely went deeper than that. It was the same Roxy who had been perfectly content to accept defeat and hold a sad funeral for their dead ecto-daughter-mom in a butchered continuity. You had asked them whether they were scared. Scared that you might have doomed countless versions of them, or scared that you could.

ROXY: lmao

ROXY: okay, june, listen 2 me

ROXY: like almost everyone ends up doomed anyway?

ROXY: who cares what teensy ass contribution u might have made to that?

ROXY: p-space is a heck of a lot crueller than you could ever hope to be

ROXY: the timeline splits n splits n splits like
every day, every minute, every instant, and theres
only one correct path
ROXY: the fuckin designated straight n narrow of
hyperliminal bubble-hell
ROXY: pulled from the hat of the words shittiest
wozard
ROXY: whether u go out of ur way to pick it or not
ROXY: like obvs please dont kill me june lol
ROXY: i like it here
ROXY: but i wouldnt be the first dead me and i sure
wont be the last

For a moment their expression had allowed itself to be sombre.

ROXY: if i know anything
ROXY: and i know fucktons of juicy shit as youre
well aware
ROXY: fading's painless
ROXY: void is painless
ROXY: always painless always numb
ROXY: the only person whod be rly damaged by it is
you
ROXY: the rest of us losers r just winging our shit
and hoping for the best cause thats all we can ever
do
ROXY: and i dont know, like... i just find it sorta
difficult to all *struggle and shriek ere the
daybreak* bout a power thats the literal reason why
my ass is alive now
ROXY: obvs pour one out to all the counterfactual
roxys who didnt have a dashing wind-goddess 2 save
their counterfactual butts from counterfactual
oblivion
ROXY: but getting hung up on that sounds all hells
of dysfunctional

God fucking bless them. You snap back to the present.

JUNE: haha yeah there's definitely more fun things
to think about.
JUNE: especially since there's like... you know...
one very important glass still falling.

A strand of hair weaves in and out between your fingers and Rose catches your meaning immediately.

ROSE: Fuck.

She says it like some ancient incantation –some eschatonic curse seared into the fabric of reality– and you can't think of any tone more fitting. One of the least fun things you've ever had to think about is the fact that you could at any point hop back and retcon your transition to the beginning, erasing all those empty, painful years of pretending to be a boy from chronology. All it takes is dooming your friends. Rose sighs.

ROSE: Right.

ROSE: There is really no way in which I can sufficiently thank you for your sacrifice, so I will refrain from degrading it with a misguided attempt.

ROSE: Another hug is however in desperate order.

ROSE: Investigator, I cannot teach you how to perform this skill, but here is what I can tell you:

ROSE: Only Dirk and I are currently capable of the feat.

ROSE: Myself to a far greater degree than him if I shirk my residual humanity by some fraction.

ROSE: There exists a permeating substratum of narrative consistency underlying the entirety of paradox space.

ROSE: Imagine it as an impossible ballad of everything that could ever have happened, and thus everything that ever has happened.

ROSE: We have two significant ways of using this fact. One of them is to interface with the narrative qua historical record.

ROSE: If we know where to look, we can access what amounts to transcripts of past events. This is likely the way in which he has been following your investigation.

ROSE: Keep in mind that we are talking here about an unfathomable mass of documentation and so long as we do not embrace divinity, the number of specific pages we can successfully find in any

reasonable amount of time is rather tightly circumscribed.

ROSE: The second mode, so to speak, is one which expounds upon the narrative qua ongoing piece of literature.

ROSE: There are blank pages at the end, and with some significant effort we can write in them. That is the voice which you hear and which June does not.

ROSE: It is honestly miraculous that Dirk can perform this one at all, though it does take a lot out of him.

ROSE: There are some... idiosyncratic hurdles preventing him from coming into the full breadth of his godhood.

ROSE: I assure you that he is no significant threat.

ROSE: A benign escapement in the intricate clockwork of entirely real mysteries.

You can tell from the tension in Terezi's posture that she doesn't buy this part at all.

ROSE: Having no such limitations which I did not impose upon myself, I can monitor his narrative meddling.

ROSE: This, regrettably, is all that I may offer.

Intermission: Liminal Majyyk

With the brush attachment of his strange vacuum cleaner and a humorous, entirely unsafe safety-distance, the ghost hunter disturbed a corner of the occult geometry. Predictably nothing happened, though he, assuming this to be evidence of something or other, inquired whether I was certain as to the spirit's binding. This I did take as an insult. Rummaging through the pile of meticulous documentation I had left on the floor, I handed him a diagram in hopes that it could single-handedly explain to him both the nuances of liminal majyyk and the degree of my passive aggression.

It accomplished neither, as John was too focused on the paper itself. "Do you write everything by hand?" he asked before listing a number of benefits afforded by devices of an electronic nature, sounding very much like a person who had been on the receiving end of that very same spiel once. To the admission that I found it artless and often dreamt of being crushed by the girth of my manuscripts in an almost aspirational capacity, making sure to clarify that it was not the crushing that I sought, but the sheer quantity of manifest penmanship which could facilitate my self-provoked doom, the hunter merely shrugged. "My sister would have much to say about computers and many computers to say it about, but to each their own I guess".

Liminal majyyk, often synecdochically referred to by the name of its pre-eminent sub-discipline of fenestrology is a subtle art constructed precariously upon the foundation of a simple principle: that wherever there is an entrance and an exit there is a space in between. Between delicately linked magic circles just as much as between fenestrated planes. The space is slim depending on the setup, barely worth worrying about or in this case bothering with, though it is by no means inert and when it is artificially kept open, critters gather. In the interregnum of worlds lies not so much a specific location as the very concept of in-betweenness. A stygian nonsense of aperiodic loops.

My ritualistic circuits followed an old formula to accomplish the precise thing this field usually attempts desperately to avoid "One which beckons, one which binds". To lure a beast to the surface with a whiff of maiden blood, and then wrench it out of its cosmic liminality with a spotlight shone from the other site. This was the summoning circle, and it was no longer of any use. "Sooo where's the counterpart?" he asked.

The counterpart was in the basement, and while getting there amounted to an impossibility, my mind was at that moment preoccupied with another matter. “May I please have a proper appellation to address you by, lest I am forced to resort to the moniker given in your classified ad. I dearly hope you do not wish to be referred to as “the buster” to the same degree to which I would loathe to call you such.”

I suppose I have already vitiated your suspense with regards to his answer, tough back then, nothing could have possibly prepared me for it. “Sure” he said. “I guess avoiding it has become a bit of a habit, haha. John. John Crocker”. Before I knew it, my form sat collapsed on the ground repeating phrases like “but I’m not done, I’m not ready” and apparently having done so for a while as John knelt before me soothingly asserting something needlessly reasonable. “Rose, you are having a panic attack”.

“Has the batterwitch not sated her bloodlust?” I plead. “Can she not wait until I have gotten my affairs in order?!” His impossibly blue eyes had become hideous to me and his very presence was quietus manifest.

His voice dipped an octave into further calm. “Listen to me. I do not work for her. I know what she is better than anyone and I wouldn’t have mentioned it if I knew that you do too. What *did* happen to your parents, Rose?”.

“Adoptive parents”, I corrected him as we descended the dark stairwell, my knees still inelegantly shaking. He nodded a general sense of in-the-same-boat-ness which I couldn’t help but find preposterous as I relayed what I had learned. What I had written and how dearly I had paid for it. John’s sympathy grew more sympathetic when he told of his own upbringing. The fish monster who had trapped him and his sister on an island to eventually exploit their very existence as part of some apocalyptic master plan. Children from space. Cogs in a machine beyond their comprehension, much less their control. She ran and fought –first to fly the banner of rebellion against our still hidden oppressor– while he stayed. Not out of loyalty but caution. Cutting out a small sliver of safety for his family. I might have deemed it cowardly were I not certain that I might have done the same for the daughter whose name I did not yet know, if only I were privileged with the chance.

“Ornithologically wrong... just beneath the surface” he muttered and I wasn't sure whether it was a mistake or a joke. “I like my life. I fear for the children, now even more than before, haha, but mostly I like my life. Some days though... Man this sounds dumb. How do you literary folks make this stuff not sound dumb?... Ever since I was a kid, I've had this feeling that I'm unfinished somehow. Like I'm being cast in the wrong role, I guess? She was always really clear on how important we were, me and Jade. Her prized possession, her trump card, all the other megalomaniacal junk she said, and now... now I'm an old, gray comedian and I feel like I missed a punchline. Must have been a really funny one too. What were we so important for? I feel like I've taken all the right turns. Exciting, insignificant turns. So many of them just to spite her, to reject my role as Heir or as anyone relevant at all. To just be a silly man telling silly jokes to anyone who will hear them and hoping that that's enough...” He looked wistfully into the middle distance. “All the turns I took seemed like natural and correct decisions...”

“...but the roads themselves were wrong” I finished his sentence, knowing the thought so intimately that it did not feel like a thought at all but like a part of my being's infrastructure. “Or rather that we started from the wrong point in the maze of chronology by no fault of our own. Lost and found and lost again. Incomplete versions of something real. It really is no wonder that we find ourselves drawn to ghosts.” Both of us laughed. The man who had attempted to make himself irrelevant and the woman who was still pursuing the opposite. The actual ghost had been awfully quiet for a while now and it was beginning to worry me.

John told more of his son, who was then considering to inaugurate a private detective agency. With the benefit of hindsight and a newly found interest in the Crocker family's affairs, I can tell you that he did open the firm, though abandoned his passion project some years later despite a great quantity of heart-blood poured into the endeavour. The old man, being a great proponent of just trying things and moving on freely, would have surely looked kindly upon it as he looks kindly on so many things. Other hopes which John confided in me that night would not betide so willingly. It shakes my black little heart to know that the witch has wrapped her saccharine tendrils around the granddaughter he would never meet. The pitiful muscle threatens to give out entirely when I consider that this might have been her plan all along and that this man should have truly been her cog. There is not much point to

these ruminations beyond the fructuous source of despair they present. They are distractions in this war we must wage despite its futility.

He asked whether I wished to have kids some day, reading my mind as always. "I will", I choked and he politely refrained from asking questions when I began to cry, doing a terrible job of hiding it. I am not usually given to tears, though the thought of her never fails to break through my bulwark. I try feverishly to imbue my saline with all the love I will never be able to give her.

Should I leave her this document?

Make vacuous excuses for my absence from her life?

Despite my faultlessness in the matter, I do not feel that I deserve such absolution.

Instead, I should allow her to hate me for my powerlessness to help, as I have hated the cold firmament which wrought me.

I will leave her spirits to dull the pain and books to disappear into, so that she may forget the mother who abandoned her in an apocalypse she could not prevent...

Apologies for the ruinous state of this page. I will claim to have spilled water on it in a moment of carelessness, and would forever be thankful if you pretended to believe me.

The texture of our conversation eludes satisfactory description. It is not something symbolic communication was constructed to accommodate. For the first time ever, I was allowed to discuss her Condescension plainly, without being taken for a lunatic. To navigate this shadow cast upon our existence in concrete terms of imminent threat. It was odd to hear John speak of his guardian –the only person he has ever hated– perhaps because she had raised the bar so high so early on in his life. The eyes had by this point begun to make more sense to me. The infinite gravity of them.

I have never met his sister in the years to come. She is a busy woman and to seek her out is to draw a target upon one's back, though she did become a symbol for all of us who would follow in her footsteps. A name whispered in the emergent circles of dissidents with caution and reverence. All of us with our idiosyncratic weapons and approaches aimed at the shared enemy.

Burn Before Reading

Jake

You're not a very good chess player, and not for lack of practice. Apparently not for lack of skill either, though this does not stop you from bookending most losses with a smile and the claim that you suppose you just don't have a good head for these high falutin games of wit. In truth, both Callie and Dirk have assured you that you are quite adept at recognizing threats in advance and countering them. The issue is more that your openings are “inspired”, “unprecedented” or “bad” depending on whom one asks, and that you tend to have more confidence in your attacks than is exactly warranted. Really, what is the fun in playing the same positions over and over again? Where is the sense of adventure? It is your firm opinion that all pieces should attempt that first foray towards the enemy with intrepid vim no matter how some cold database calculus judges their chances. A true hero does not fear a challenge, much less the opportunity to try something new.

JAKE: Knight to h3.

You can hear something in Dirk's head (very much one suited to high falutin games of wit) break. His face does not betray this fact, but over the years you have learned to read his lack of expression so well that it barely matters.

DIRK: Ah, the Amar opening.

JAKE: The what now?

DIRK: A classic amongst lunatics and Grandmasters looking to flex the heft of their lobes.

DIRK: Which is kind of all Grandmasters ever do, so it should really be more common than it is.

DIRK: Though I suppose there are precedents in antediluvian history.

DIRK: Plural. Bafflingly.

DIRK: Tartakower played it in Paris once.

JAKE: Should that name mean anything to me?

JAKE: Come on dirk im itching for your response here! Or are you perhaps intimidated by this brave stallions prodigious charge?

DIRK: Nah, I mean definitely keep saying shit about brave stallions and their staggering manoeuvrers, I couldn't be any more on board with that.

DIRK: But mostly I'm just spewing words to distract myself from the full brunt of what an *Absolutely Mad And Ridiculous* move that is.

DIRK: D5.

Strider doesn't share your penchant for radical innovation in the field, at least not beyond its potential for humour. If past experiences are anything to go by, this is the precise move played during that Parisian fella's game. You can't argue with results, but it is out of step with what you have decided the spirit of the game should be.

DIRK: I alchematized you some new clothes by the way. Like a whole pile of them? Feel free to give me feedback on that.

DIRK: Wouldn't want to be taken for a shitty host after all.

DIRK: Tell me what you want and I'll make it happen.

JAKE: An offer which doesnt extend to letting me out of here i gather.

DIRK: Not yet.

He looks deliberately pained as he averts his eyes beyond even the generous Striderite baseline.

DIRK: Jake, we went over this. You're the only reason why my bro is willing to check in on Jane's death.

DIRK: We both want the deets on that, right?

DIRK: Come on, I really think you'll like some of these looks. Crunched the numbers on those babies till the fucking sun came up.

DIRK: And when it did, I looked upon my creation and I saw that it was rad.

You weren't actually expecting a different answer this time, but sometimes it pays to alert Dirk to the fact of how overboard he's going. The room which he has fashioned as your cell is a masterpiece of interior design, and you would be quite willing to admit that it is more comfortable than your actual bedroom, if it weren't a glorified hoosegow. You know where the lasers are, even if you can't see them. With some trepidation you draw a light, bishop-sleeve'd shirt from what is indeed "a whole pile" of garments.

JAKE: Huh.

DIRK: You don't like it?

JAKE: Not at all! These are some exceedingly snazzy duds dirk.

JAKE: Your daughter in law might well need to worry about a competitor in her field!

JAKE: Really its exactly the sort of thing i would have stuffed the old wardrobe with if doing so werent a right revolt against janes sensibilities.

JAKE: I just expected you to make me things which were more... *fiddles with coat*

JAKE: Oh to hell with it. Risqué.

Dirk's brain produces another inaudible cracking sound.

DIRK: Jesus. There is no quantity of shoujo manga which could prepare a guy for the fucking things you say.

DIRK: Do you have any idea how inappropriate that would be?

DIRK: I'll make you whatever you want on request, but I'm not gonna start playing lewd dress-up with my captive ex-boyfriend, whom I still have an entire endocrine system full of unreciprocated feelings for.

JAKE: Dirk-

DIRK: It's fine. Like obviously "would I want to do that?" Yes. "Can I morally justify it?" Fuck no.

You suppose this was an unfair assumption. You used to think of the brobot as a uniquely self-serving gift on his part, though in reality he probably just believed too much of the adventurous hero fantasy you had spun about yourself. Maybe not believed it exactly, but recognized that you wanted it to be true, and so it was his implicit job to make it so. Fulfilling his friends' wishes is always Dirk's implicit job. You can't believe how long it's been since you were last properly ensnared by a Striderian stratagem. Both chess-ways and bodily. It would threaten to make you nostalgic, if you weren't so bothered by your captivity. Might as well say it while you're on the topic. Dirk does usually appreciate a candid Heart to Heart.

JAKE: Well you know how my imagination vamooses ahead sometimes.

JAKE: I had considered that this might be one of your thumbprint gordian machinations to...

JAKE: You know... Get us back together.

He raises an eyebrow.

DIRK: Jake, you get the boy by *rescuing him from a tower*, not by *locking him in one*.

DIRK: That's like the complete 101 basics of courting people.

JAKE: Golly it could hardly be considered a scheme of your caliber if it were anywhere near that linear.

DIRK: I'm flattered, and that's definitely a thing I might have considered at points, but nah. You're a means, not an end this time around.

DIRK: Straight up failing Kantian ethics at the first hurdle like a chump.

DIRK: This is 100% about Jane.

DIRK: Realistically I've tried everything I can to woo you and it just doesn't stick.

DIRK: Pearls off you like water off a lotus leaf.

DIRK: The more I try to hold on, the more I fail, and in the end there's only so much energy a guy can dump into a bottomless pit.

It threatens to tear you open, but you've sat on Miss Cayas' couch too often to fall back into old patterns. You couldn't bear disappointing her, and so you look at the part of you that wants to deflect and squash it. You try not to think too much about the fact that you're about to apologize to the guy who's failing Kantian ethics by keeping you locked up in his basement.

JAKE: Im sorry. Deplorably belated, i know, but i suppose a childhood alone on hellmurder island hadnt exactly prepared me for that much... Uh... You.

JAKE: Doesnt leave a fella in a position to handle so much attention and so little time solo.

JAKE: ...Didnt leave me in that position.

You correct yourself before he can respond that a childhood alone in Sea Hitler's water apocalypse hasn't left him in a position to heap any *less* affection upon people, in his own peculiar way.

JAKE: And then janey would have been miserable.

JAKE: I just wanted everyone to be happy!

JAKE: I could imagine such cats meow futures with any of you.

JAKE: So in lieu of making a decision the old noggin just shut down i suppose.

Dirk's eyebrow doesn't go any higher, anatomically speaking, but you can tell that he wants it to. You exhale to release the tension in your chest.

JAKE: Speaking of matters of the heart, how are things going with that captor fella and his corporeal predicament?

DIRK: Still working on that. Any time I feel like I've figured out a part of it the rest just becomes even more eldritch.

DIRK: It's like trying to understand the technicalities of a video game exploit.

DIRK: The narrative clearly never intended for half-ghosts to be a thing and from there on it's just a long cascade of things iteratively breaking.

DIRK: I've gotten him stabilized, but it's a permanent power drain, and I still haven't figured out how to bring the parts that suffered relevance-decay back.

DIRK: A solid chunk of his soul has dissipated into the metatextual essence-pool for a hypothetical ultimate Sollux.

DIRK: Getting that back will be a bitch, if it's even possible.

The "permanent power drain" part is immensely self-evident. The man opposite you seems to have aged years over the past months, and not all of them can be attributed to emotional turmoil. Tactfully you neglect to mention it. Also because Dirk has a nasty habit of taking the claim that he's overexerting himself as a compliment.

JAKE: By jove! Its been a while since i heard that dread term.

JAKE: Wait does this have something to do with anime club?

DIRK: Man, who even started this lame joke about not calling the thing by its actual name?

DIRK: Not like you're dealing with a demon.

DIRK: At least not that type of demon.

DIRK: It's not *Dirk's anime club*.

DIRK: Or *Rose's book club*.

DIRK: Or a fucking coven.

DIRK: Definitely not the *snooty pompous smartass factory*.

DIRK: It's the Ascension Society.

DIRK: Why can't we just call it that?

JAKE: Surely the fact that you chose to dub it "ascension society" is precisely the reason for that bit, no?

JAKE: Not to be a spoilsport but even you must see that thats a jolly pretentious name.

Dirk sighs as he mates you.

DIRK: It's an accurate name. It speaks to man's innate desire for transhuman apotheosis, and it sounds dope as shit.

JAKE: You might be projecting a tad there.

JAKE: In for another game?

JAKE: ...

JAKE: What i want to hear from you i suppose is whether its dangerous.

JAKE: A hawk-eared third party cant help picking up on the notion that the ascension society was an unco jeopardous affair.

JAKE: And not in a plucky and adventurous sort of way.

JAKE: Are you sure youre not dealing with demons dirk? Bedevilled by the old doctor fausts grand conundrum?

DIRK: There's only one demon, and it's pointless to be scared of him. You just have to be cautious, which I am. You insult me by implying otherwise.

JAKE: Thats not the same as saying that theres nothing to be afraid of.

DIRK: Jake, there's *nothing* to be afraid of.

He places the emphasis weirdly. As though there absolutely were an entity which ought pump bone-deep terror through one's system, and that this matter to be very dearly afraid of was "nothing" itself. Dirk clearly picks up on you picking up on it, but he doesn't address the matter further.

JAKE: You know you can talk to me right?

DIRK: Yeah, I know.

DIRK: ...

DIRK: Did you notice where you lost?

JAKE: Golly the starting move id imagine.

JAKE: Youve made more than clear that you took it for a miserable bungle from the very germ.

DIRK: Sure, that's where your troubles began, but the game wasn't lost yet. This on the other hand...

Diligently he rearranges the board to an earlier position in the way you've never managed to.

DIRK: ...Is terminal.

DIRK: What could you have done differently here?

JAKE: Well a resolveless coward might have retreated to d6 re-enforcing the center and keeping that pesky queen of yours in check.

DIRK: That resolveless coward might have had a chance of victory.

JAKE: And props to them for it! But whats done is done. The battle is fought and lost.

JAKE: No use ringing the blues over spilled milk as they say.

DIRK: Doesn't have to be.

JAKE: If we took it some other way from here would that not make the original scuffle less meaningful?

JAKE: As the genuine product of our clashing forces unclouded by the doleful what-ifs of retrospection.

DIRK: It would. But the option's on the table. A man who's already lost might value victory more than one who still sees it on the horizon.

DIRK: Shit's straight up poetic. Some chump might be tempted to write a play about the ice cold dilemma we have on our hands here.

JAKE: And where would be the agency in that? It would be a second cowardly retreat of sorts just on one of your many serpentine meta-levels.

JAKE: A decision one doesn't have to live with is hardly any actual decision at all if you ask me!

You say this not in denial, but channelling your therapist again, reminding yourself that making peace with your past choices is the first step towards making better ones in the future.

DIRK: Agency? Ha. That's cute.

DIRK: We're inhabited by things much older and much greater than ourselves.

DIRK: I sometimes wonder if agency's a joke they tell themselves.

JAKE: You've lost me dirk. Are we still talking about chess?

DIRK: Of course, what else would we be discussing here?

DIRK: You told me that I can talk to you, right? I agreed, and I really appreciate this entirely layerless conversation about chess we just had.

DIRK: Thank you, Jake.

When he smiles, there seems to be some genuine relief in it, though you have no idea how you put it there.



Dave Strider was surprised to find that the past had not become a foreign country to him. Time travel, despite having been abandoned like the bullshit circuitous game mechanic it was, and locked up in the attic of his mind like an old sofa, still remembered the contours of his ample cheeks perfectly. As he sank into the figurative upholstery of temporal shenanigans, the Knight could not escape the feeling that he would have liked it to be less snug. More jarring. Not quite so exactly like yesterday. But a cushion sufficiently sat upon does not forget its master, regardless of neglect.

The day on which eternity ended smelled like crisp magnolia in the cool morning fog. Outside at least. Within the Crocker mansion's walls it mostly smelled of breakfast. A still-alive Jane could be heard humming in the kitchen and a clock displayed the time as 6 AM. Many of the gods, including Dave, still thought of it as “global time”, while those who grew up on Earth C never knew of time zones. They would have been a needless confusion in a world in which any place was right next door by means of transportalizer, and in which many had a microsecond morning commute to the other side of the planet. Since Jane was the only one of them who ever had a functional circadian rhythm in the first place, she was the only one who cared at what arbitrary hour the sun rose, and so this longitudinal strip of the human kingdom was the only place in which “6 AM” lay genuinely flush with its old-earth counterpart.

Dawn broke tentatively through the elongated windows as though it knew what history would bring. Dave had to remind himself not to reflexively knock on the door frame, as he stole a brief glance through it. Jane was sitting alone at the breakfast table, a lavish assortment of Lennox's culinary

handiwork before her, drinking coffee and looking at her tablet. It was odd to think that she would die at some point during the next two hours.

With the first order of business taken care of, the temporal intruder snuck up the eastern staircase to check out the bedroom and make sure that it was empty. He froze. Jake wasn't home, as expected, but someone else was.

DAVE: oh jegus kickflipping christ did we relapse

DAVE: just one hop i said to myself like a hapless fool who knows nothing of addiction and its notorious power level

DAVE: this is so stupid

DAVE: am i gonna have to like go to a self help group for pathological time travelers

DAVE: pour my heart out to homura fucking akemi and that white haired twink from eva

DAVE: until later it turns out that theyre all versions of myself from different points in the chronology because i just refuse to learn so fucking hard that i end up trapped neck deep in the spring loaded squeak fiend allurements of some uncreative sketch setup like an asshole

The Dave who lay sideways across the bed, ironically pretending to read a newspaper, looked up at the Dave who had just come in.

(DAVE): nah its chill

(DAVE): we can quit any time

(DAVE): by which i mean we can quit after were done with this

(DAVE): im just here to stop you from doing something stupid

DAVE: shit i knew it

DAVE: im getting myself clockmurdered arent i

DAVE: also whats up with the voice

(DAVE): ugh youll see

(DAVE): man why did i even ask that

(DAVE): hells of out of practice with this shit yo

(DAVE): do i look dead to you

DAVE: fair

DAVE: this **is** a stable loop right

(DAVE): yeah i remember meeting myself

(DAVE): here ill send you the time travelers anonymous comic we just came up with

(DAVE): its one of those temporal artifacts
(DAVE): noone ever actually draws it we just give it to ourself on loop
DAVE: sweet
DAVE: gotta love those
DAVE: so how do i fuck up
(DAVE): you dont fuck up
(DAVE): good thing youd be banished to a doomed offshoot if you beef it because otherwise id kill you myself for that sort of blunder
(DAVE): you just do what the letter says and everything works as intended

While current Dave was still shocked by the out-of nowhere suicide threat, his future instance fished an envelope from his hoodie pocket.

DAVE: we dont do letters
DAVE: please tell me we dont start doing letters in the future
DAVE: so uncool
DAVE: were totally being played here right
(DAVE): well youre definitely being played
(DAVE): and i guess im being played by extrafuture dave which would be a concern if being played by yourself wasnt a stupid concept that basically doesnt mean anything
(DAVE): but yeah with this entire setup its pretty clear that a play is what is taking place here
DAVE: and were cool with that
(DAVE): in this case yeah were cool with that
(DAVE): youll get it when you read the letter
(DAVE): dont open the second envelope which is sorta like matryoshkaed in there
DAVE: cool
DAVE: you said im definitely being played
DAVE: whos playing me
(DAVE): dirk
DAVE: figures
(DAVE): yeah hes way up to his shit again
(DAVE): theres like a whole intervention going on in future land
(DAVE): this barely even concerns you just do the thing

The thick envelope indeed contained a letter, along with another slightly more rumpled envelope. Both of them had Dave's own handwriting on them, the outer one reading: "**dave 1 open immediately**" and the inner one "**dave 2 open when youre back in the present**". The letter was also penned in the Knight's own hand and the string of characters with which it began almost caused a heart attack. [Redacted. I'm sure he would not want either of us to have this]. Over time it had become convenient to come up with a number of code words known only to Dave and his Time-selves to alert each other about the general state of their situation without accidentally dishing out causal spoilers. Since he typically didn't care about that, the codewords were only used on rare occasions when business was truly meant, and this was one he had hoped to never see before him. It conveyed the following: "Karkat's life is in danger if you don't do exactly what I say". There were other codes for things like "I'm saying/writing this under duress, don't actually follow the instructions", but none of those could be found here. The transmission was safe. The remainder comprised a list of instructions.

1. jane dies at 7:10am / the window from 6:40 to 7:40 is off limits / *do not go there*

2. search the mansion for the legendary piece of clockwork

(Dave) gave Dave a thumbs up without rising from his position of comedically exaggerated relaxation, before the gears were in motion again. Exactly like yesterday. He hopped to 8:00am, giving himself a twenty minute buffer to jump into later, should it become necessary to give himself more warnings or advice, but since he didn't meet another Dave on arrival, everything seemed to either work out perfectly or fail completely. The clock wasn't in the mansion anymore, or if it was, he could not find it in the span of six one-hour loops. Jane lay dead at the foyer's centre in the same way she had for more than a month now. A way which was rapidly beginning to feel like a fixture of the place. A well known piece of awful interior décor.

3. get some samples of janes breakfast

The Knight put a small pinch, drop, or crumb of everything carefully into separate ziplock bags, making sure to label them with their origin and a rough estimate of the amount she actually consumed of each item.

4. wait for jake to get home

English stumbled in through the front door at 9:00am, obviously wasted. It took some time for the man to comprehend what he was seeing through the twilight of his senses, though when it clicked he rushed urgently towards the body.

JAKE: Sweet zeus! Janey!

He checked her pulse and stupidly attempted to give CPR before stumbling into the bathroom and returning with a bottle of pills Dave remembered from the extensive inventory he took earlier. It was some of that emergency mind-wiper which had been developed to handle Rose's condition, though not the targeted intravenous variant. This shit just took some hours from you. All at once, with barely any option for fine tuning and with significant aftershocks. It scared the hell out of the Knight conceptually. Jake struggled with the lid, eventually pulled it open with his teeth, ladled the pills into Jane's mouth and performed a chewing motion with her jaw. The manor's owner collapsed, sobbed, muttered to himself and eventually wailed as 9:00 turned to 9:15 turned to 9:30. Nothing happened.

With the worst scream Dave Strider ever heard, English grabbed another handful of pills and gulped them down himself. The moment lasted an eternity, as though knowing that it would soon be over before it began.

DAVE: *jesus christ*

A whisper, though apparently not quiet enough, as their eyes momentarily met. The Time traveller behind the decorative plant and the man who had just chosen the coward's way out.

JAKE: ...Dave?

JAKE: Please. Please forgive me.

Muttered Jake in a voice ground raw by the crying, before his gaze lost focus.

5. burn this letter along with the outer envelope

There was a convenient fireplace just up the western staircase. Suddenly he too would have liked to forget. Burn his mind clean along with the Page.

6. dave 2 is still in the bedroom / give him the inner envelope

(DAVE): cool

(DAVE): maybe this is like an olive garden coupon
for our trouble

(DAVE): thatd be sweet
(DAVE): oh and that thought you just had
(DAVE): dont
(DAVE): i mean i know we werent really gonna do it
(DAVE): but i remember seeing this shit show so if
your plan isnt to fuck up the loop you will too
DAVE: we still hate that shit right
(DAVE): yup
DAVE: good
DAVE: see you when im you i guess
DAVE: like in a mirror or something
DAVE: no that sucks
DAVE: brains fried
DAVE: i need a shower

Roxy

The vast fortress of documents lay empty this time of night. Organic beings could not be trusted with safeguarding it, and so that vital job fell to machines whose sensory feeds blacked out at your very presence. A phantom, a shadow, a Rogue. As visible as record crackle and as audible as a smear of dark azure. Wearing sunglasses indoors, so even a hapless fool who got their cultural education from IT-illiterate y2k era cinema would know what's up. You don't need a keyboard beneath your fingertips to be as deadly to the grid as you are beautiful. A black, glistening film of oil pours endlessly from canisters robbed one by one of their non-existence and tracks a serpentine path through offices, filing cabinets, and server rooms without intercepting itself. Nostalgically you reminisce about the 1976 classic *Blockade* and how you used to play an emulated version of it against yourself as a child. Later versions of *Snake* are fine, you guess, but some of the magic was lost. When you say retro you mean retro. A small tower hums along soothingly to your left and you delicately pet it on the vent.

ROXY: nothing personnel kid

It isn't the first piece of tech you banished to data heaven and it wouldn't be the last. A long list inaugurated by a single drone on your ocean colony. Memories of the time you blew up Jane's computer to stop her from playing the game flicker through your mind.

ROXY: tell em rolal sent u

The snake continues to wind its way through the imposing architecture until you run out of corridors. A single emoji sent to your co-conspirators –a couple of carapacians affiliated with what was once New Alternia– communicates everything they need to know, but you add “showtime babyyyyyy!!!!” anyway, not for any reason deeper than that you feel like it. The Crocker branded zippo- analogue you once got from the complementary gift bag at one of Jane’s product reveal parties opens with a satisfying click and drops to the inken floor as you ollie the fuck outie Void-ways.

The night is empty. A light breeze skims the lush grass beneath you as though grazing the hollow she left –a hole as vast as it is unfillable– while a familiar note is produced by something else entirely. It’s the one Norsemen played to set their departed free: A soft, melodious crackling of lapping flames.

The prophecy wing of the Central Archives, the most sophisticated apparatus of precognition-management ever constructed, burns brightly before you. Its towering nave cutting a gash of lambent conflagration through the celestial black. A path which feels like it might extend indefinitely space-ward. You remove the heart-shaped, yellow-tinted shades which help your eyes deal with all that looking at screens you habitually do, to get a more accurate sense of the colours at play, when you realize that the night isn’t quite as empty as you thought it was. A woman in a worn out leather jacket stands beside you and gazes into the embers of certainty. You can’t exactly blame her. Smoke filled nights had been accommodating of your moods and your wandering as well.

VRISKA: Ah the sweet scent of mistakes in progress ::::)

ROXY: man who even knows lol

ROXY: fuckin hope not

ROXY: how bout u

VRISKA: Still working on it.

Viriska does not ask whether you want to talk about it. If she did, it would probably be no more than an attempt to fish for reciprocation on that question. Instead, the two of you just stare into the fire for a while.

VRISKA: Like.

VRISKA: What the fuck was I even thinking?????????

VRISKA: It's always the same. Like we're trapped in some useless cycle slogging through the same drama over and over again.

VRISKA: And every time I think that I will just have to do this one thing and it will 8e over.

VRISKA: Kill Jack.

VRISKA: Destroy English.

VRISKA: Just save everyone, r8ght???????? Of course that would pay your de8t!!!!!!!

VRISKA: Just win at karma!

VRISKA: So you 8uild that army.

VRISKA: You get the juju 8ack from a walking personific8ion of all the most disgusting, vile impulses your 8rain is capa8le of.

VRISKA: A cowardly, selfish waste of your lim8s, frolicking through fields and sitting on that 8ox as though she could just have her happy, vapid little life without paying the cost.

VRISKA: This wretched!!

VRISKA: Entitled!!!!

VRISKA: Creature!!!!!!!

VRISKA: Wearing your face as though she deserved it, when all she did was turn her 8ack on reality dying.

VRISKA: And you leave her 8ehind, so88ing in the dirt to 8e forgotten 8y every sucker who ever wrongly cared a8out her. 8ecause you're the only one who can make up for her lack of a spine.

VRISKA: Finally you stand there. The lynchpin of the final 8attle for existence itself at the acme of your power. Ghosts screamed. Reality creaked under the sheer causal w8 of it.

VRISKA: The sheer causal w8 of me.

VRISKA: And the juju opened.

VRISKA: I did everything right. I saved every8ody!!!!!!!

VRISKA: Only for some shard, some fragment of that splintering cosmology to strike me in the 8ack and tear me to shreds.

VRISKA: And I thought that that was that. I thought them were the 8reaks hahahaha. Not even the clock could save me from a death that heroic.

VRISKA: I thought I had won at karma by losing it all.

VRISKA: But the clock doesn't have an upper limit. Jujus never do.

VRISKA: I came back to my senses pinned to some pitiful rock in orbit around a hypermassive black hole by a scintillating thorn of broken substance-

VRISKA: For years I was stuck to that boring pointless piece of sediment until she found me and called June to get me out.

VRISKA: They nursed me back to health like a wounded ark east too pitiable to be culled!

VRISKA: And my debt wasn't paid. And all that useless thinking I did, trapped at the outskirts of relevance like a half forgotten thought, meant nothing.

VRISKA: Because we are still the same fuck-ups we always were.

VRISKA: So she's trying to fix me again and I'm trying to fix everything again and neither of us has figured out how to retract our claws.

VRISKA: I went through all those conversations we never had in my head, and through all those conversations we did have, but better this time. For years alone in space with a brain-ghost of the only person who ever mattered. And she did the same, but somehow the fucking conclusions we came to still don't line up.

VRISKA: we're still the same wrecks we always were and nothing is ever over!!!!!!!

She picks up a rock and hurls it through one of the still intact windows.

ROXY: aint that a mood

VRISKA: What if she won't forgive me this time?

ROXY: lmao sure doesnt sound like shes capable of that

ROXY: whatcha planning serks

VRISKA: I'm going to confront Dirk.

ROXY: hm

You shrug.

VRISKA: You're okay with that?????????

ROXY: would it change anything if i wasnt?

ROXY: its just the same useless effin cycle no
matter where you look

ROXY: in the wise n immortal words of my son "it
doesnt stop from keep happening"

ROXY: big whoop

Intermission: Cracks At Dawn

An hour, which is to say five hours, had passed before we realized that the singular hour in whose festering bowels we dwelled had passed five times already. A revelation only compounded by the fact that any integer quantity of hours would be entirely excessive to get from the library to the basement, regardless of en-route perils, of which we had encountered none.

John was first to address this phenomenon as opposed to merely growing quicker and more exasperated in his gait. "Have Time shenanigans been an issue before? That'd make it really hard to charge you by the hour, if I charged you."

I hesitated, eventually granting that the stray temporal shenanigan here or there might have plausibly occurred, though in my psychologically compromised state I would have found it taxing to keep track of even quotidian rectilinear intervals.

In truth, losses and gains of Time, repetitions and doublings-over had transpired as continuously as the very chaos of the attribute allowed for, and I was biting a piece of flesh from my cheek's inner wall for having blamed such obvious phenomena on sleeplessness. John effortlessly took this small concession as the wholesale admission of defeat it was, reading my obfuscatory semantics like the palm of his gnarled hand once again.

"Well we're definitely not getting anywhere. Have you tried talking to it?" the ghost hunter sighed, and I corrected him that she was a *her* as opposed to an *it*. A fact which I still considered to be worrying. He nodded asking whether that was a yes then.

Perhaps it was a yes in silhouette, a yes in shallow outlines which nonetheless failed to resemble its underlying truth in texture or hue. Specifically, 'talking' could not help but ring as an overly generous description of our conduct. She had been wailing into the catacombs of my mind and I had on occasion yelled assorted swear words at the general direction of her disembodied concept, if one were to grant such an act feasibility transcendent of the figurative.

Anticipating the obvious follow up question, I elaborated that she only ever asked what I had done and plead to be released, which made for rather tedious conversation even by my low standard of prolonged solitude. My

more self deprecating jokes never got much of a chuckle out of him, though he did not scold me for them either.

Still walking chronostatic circles through causality, John was stroking his moustache. “Rose, I feel like there might be a very obvious solution to your problem here. Like ridiculously obvious. Have you tried letting her out?”

For I hadn't considered the full demented breadth of his implication, I responded that of course I had. Without pause, much less avail. He completed the inchoate picture with a cryptic: “Have you tried letting her out *the other way?*”, though I still stood too close to the figurative canvas to conceive of its dimensions and thus boggled at what other way he could possibly be referring to.

“Liminal majyyk, Rose.” John smiled, “Where there's a space in between, there's an entrance and an exit. Have you tried letting her out through those?”

The image he painted snapped into focus, caught fire and gratuitously exploded.

“You want to bring her here?” I snapped, looking at him as one does with men bereft of sense. A group among whose number Crocker would never count himself. I thought that all she needed to do was seep back into the Void of cosmic in-betweenness. I had opened the gate for her, and yet she stubbornly refused to leave. An understandable misapprehension, though a misapprehension nonetheless.

John calmly rotated some dials on his absurd cleaning apparatus. “Yeah, I don't think she can leave. I think the place you called her from maybe isn't there anymore? Like it got damaged somehow. So even when you open the door there's still just rubble behind it.”

“The interregnum of worlds got '*damaged*'?”, I asked stupidly.

Rolling his eyes, he conceded that of course it sounded dumb when I said it like that. Before correcting that: “Actually, never mind. It always sounded dumb. It even sounded dumb when the batterwitch said it, haha, it just also sounded goddamn terrifying in addition to that. Except she never called it anything fancy? The Condesce always just went with 'bubble hell'. Anyway, If this is true then your ghost would be stuck ping-ponging back and forth between the binding circle and that inaccessible patch of nowhere-space”.

With admirable calm, considering the frayed state of my mental environs, I asked John Crocker whether he was *seriously* implying that this creature of celestial darkness which had been haunting me for weeks might be some manner of *bounce thing*. He said no, though he did suspect that she might be a Time-thing of sorts. What followed could barely be called elaboration, though it at least outlined the idea that Sea Hitler once had a violent encounter with a Time-thing out in 'bubble hell', long before she arrived on earth, and that this might be seriously bad news. He explained all of this before flipping the vacuum cleaner on and directing it at the floor in a location which I only then realized was just above the undercroft binding circle.

White plasma erupted from the device and in an instant chronology itself crystallized like a delicate web of needles from supersaturated brine.

Before us levitated a woman who, despite being a grey lady in the most literal of terms, looked remarkably alive for a ghost, or any floating entity for that matter. Stranger still was that she knew our names, a detail which I have still not entirely pieced together, referring to us as "old Rose" and "really old John". I took offence, the ghost hunter did not, though on this count at least he seemed as extramural of the proverbial loop as I was. Perhaps his indifference to the nomenclature resulted from the fact that he could scarcely have claimed that he was not indeed old as balls.

The woman floated over to touch a wall, and her eyes grew uncomfortably wide open to almost resemble capitalized "O"s, putting her vast quantities of jaundiced sclera on full display. Only now did I realize that she had horns and reassessed a number of assumptions previously held about demons and their remarkable fakeness attribute. Her resultant statement did not make anything clearer: "Oh. Well this is exciting. We're not in a bubble. Really, what *did* you do, old Rose? How would I even get out of here?"

Shell-shocked, I asked whether she was not out already, to which she replied "Out of there, yes. Took you long enough, but I mean out of... *here!*". The ghost waved her hands, elucidating nothing. "I guess I could just wait until the game starts, or until someone fucks up."

A question as to whether she wished to explain any of that was merely humoured with the sort of grin that triggered fight or flight in primate brains.

“I would love to, really I would, but doing so would come with a serious risk of this whole place coming apart, which I would also love, but since we're in canon that'd probably get me in trouble with the real Rose.”

My mouth sought desperately to open and ask more questions for her to cheerfully ignore, but it was kept shut by a sudden realisation about the texture of her being. This ghost was the first person I had ever met who seemed genuinely and completely real. Transcendent of the shambling facsimiles wandering this corner of ontology. She seemed relevant, and neither then, nor indeed now, do I know what that meant. John and I exchanged a look of relieved confusion before he began laughing. A wheezing rejoinder to the strangest day of my strange life took minutes of uninterrupted fits to break through his convulsive merriment: “And here I thought I'd seen everything”. It is unfathomable to conceive how this man might ever have fallen prey to the idea that he missed a punchline.

With what my recollection stubbornly insists were finger guns, though this could of course not possibly have been the case, the ghost departed through a window. Without farewell, apology, or explanation. And the house was just a house again. Haunted by nothing but memories.

Languidly dawn broke like a vaporous flame over a world that felt at once more apocalyptic and more hopeful to my young self. It was indeed a lot of house for so little family, and I would soon part with it to fully become a creature of that still-consolidating underground. John and I visited each other a number of times over the years leading up to his death. Clad in disguises, silly and otherwise.

He would be the first to read new volumes of my *Complacency of the Learned*, a work which grew more and more time consuming and less and less fictional as the pages piled upwards to eventually crush me, though the claim of its nearing terminus may now be made with some confidence.

The drafts he received always diverged significantly from the finished manuscript, I must admit. For him alone I added jokes to light the bleak. And in their gleam I could make out implications to this syllabic labyrinth which were novel even to me.

Perhaps that is the most heartening thing I can say in these days of fading hope. That though the world is dark and grows darker still with each rotation, it does not have to be lonely.

- *RL*

At The Cost Of Everything

Vriska

You hadn't planned to stay here for long. Originally you just wanted to see what the commotion was about. The scuffle of cops and Carapacians all around the perimeter. One small detour before striding off to confront Dirk and possibly blow up everything you've got going for you relationship wise. But now you lie on the lush grass of an alien planet, bathed in the fire of words, and pouring your heart out to June's... Moirail? Who knows. Maybe you were hoping for them to fight you. Either to change your mind or more realistically so that you could run off into the battle ahead with an extra dose of righteous defiance, but neither of that happened.

By any reasonable metric the two of you should be enemies. Them destroying the archives, presumably so as to protect Dirk and frustrate Terezi, and you planning to bring the battle to that same angular douche in order to protect Terezi from things she does not wish to be protected from. But alas, you've never had a reasonable metric for allegiance. Your friends have always been your most vicious opponents and your enemies have always made a sick game of pretending to be your friends. The socio-moral calculations in which you find yourselves respectively enmeshed bear so little overlap, that you discover around the intersection an ability to freely discuss just about anything, without stumbling over pesky preconceptions. A rare opportunity for gods who rarely have the privilege of encountering genuine strangers.

ROXY: ...when did there even start being like effin jane crocker discourse?

ROXY: outside of one silly radio show i mean

ROXY: look, ill be the first to admit that sweet precious janey was a massive tightass who girlbossed too close to the sun on a x2 numbobob of occasions

ROXY: girl had a whole designer suitcase of unexamined bsies (*biases) to get the fuck over

ROXY: obvsies

ROXY: but back then, we still just treated her like a whole real ass person who made dumb mistakes stemming from the fucked up sitch she grew up in

ROXY: and youd sorta fucking hope -u woulda thought- that everyone here could relate to that at least a little bit

ROXY: may whomst'd've-ever is free of destructive childhood conditioning throw the first sediment lump so that i can heroically block it w/ my forgivin cheek like a more fashionable jesu

ROXY: but now! now she somehow morphed into just some symbol or even worse like a topic of debate 2 all have hot juicy pinions about lmao

ROXY: like bitch thats my friend ur talking about

ROXY: my dear dead flawed real ass person of a friend who made some mad venial mistakes that all of us could have intervened in way tf sooner

ROXY: i dont even care if its positive or negative takes lol

ROXY: shes-

They choke down a sob.

ROXY: shes more than a discussion to pick some side on

ROXY: ...

ROXY: did u ever even meet jane?

VRISKA: 8riefly. 8ack when I made her a sprite.

VRISKA: Admittedly not my proudest cre8ion.

VRISKA: Easily the most useless excuse for a floating chimeric 8ody horror of the 8unch, 8ut let's just say that I owed the guy.

VRISKA: One more de8t off my shoulders.

VRISKA: What happened to those anyway?

ROXY: nah gcatavrosprite was a treat what are u talking about

ROXY: he was just a helpful lil guy until...

ROXY: well, youd have to ask callie for the technicalities of it

ROXY: but after a while they could all feel themselves coming apart here

ROXY: like they arent rly meant to exist outside of canon for 2 long

ROXY: which meant that we had to release all the sprites back into bubblespace before anyone popped

ROXY: i still think abt those guys

ROXY: kinda hard not 2

ROXY: theres memorials pretty much all over the place

ROXY: you can barely leave the house without stumbling over a stray davepeta statue all neon-strobing away n being a massive pse hazard

ROXY: rly hope theyre happy out there

VRISKA: Huh.

ROXY: hey when u see dirk can you tell him im sorry?

VRISKA: Uh??? Sure??????????

You have no idea what they're apologizing for, but this is as good an excuse as any to get going. There's plenty of questions you could probably ask about the fire, but it feels too symbolically meaningful to ruin with actual facts. This is their barbecue, and you have to admit that it tastes good. God you will never get that movie out of your head. Since street clothes are less accommodating towards the sudden sprouting of wings than your god-tier garb, and since regular floating turns out to be rather slow, you kick your heels into the ground to start up a pair of rocket boots.

VRISKA: Well, the shades-douche won't 8eat himself up.

VRISKA: Nice talking to you, Roxy.

VRISKA: I actually feel like I might have needed that. 8ye!

It takes several minutes for the after-image which that burning nave has seared into your retinas to vanish fully, and when it does, Dirk's island is already coming into view. Alarms are blaring. Lights flashing. Probably have been ever since you entered oceanic airspace. The man is nothing if not possessed by a caution you would dub paranoia if it were not entirely justified. Your palmhusk acts up.

(DIRK): Charlie-eight-eight-Alfa-Golf, this is tower. What the shit?

VRISKA: I could ask you the same thing, Strider.

VRISKA: In fact, I think I will ask you the same thing. Face to f8ce.

(DIRK): Yeah that sure would be a lot more threatening if I had one of those, or cared at all for that matter.

(DIRK): You seem to suffer from the regrettable misapprehension that I am DS, which is understandable given my immaculate simulation of

the boss' dulcet tones, but I'm a stone cold machine and you don't have clearance to be here.
(DIRK): Is what I would say, if I cared, which again: I don't. Not that you'd listen anyway.
(DIRK): Go ahead, free the Page, be the hero, maybe connect me to the internet while you're at it.
(DIRK): That'd show him.
(DIRK): Took you meatbags long enough to figure out that the whole "oh no Jake is missing, I sure hope he didn't get got" shtick was a transparent ruse.
(DIRK): And I gave him notes on it too.
(DIRK): Most of them started like "wow, maybe don't kidnap your ex? That's massively left of hinged, bro. Door's barely even in existence anymore and the path it used to block leads straight off the deep end" or something like that...

In the span of a single moment, everything snaps into focus. You are finally able to see what had bothered you so much about Dirk. Why everything Terezi had told you felt so much like he was taunting you personally. Looming just behind the surface of everything. It all stank so sickeningly of Scratch. The cocky posturing, the secrets, the slimy manipulation to get all his pieces in the right place. Set up the dominoes and watch you fall.

Your body freezes inwards as he talks. Earth scorching rage integer-overflows into a calm that turns your entire form to marble. The tension wanders deeper, chilling you bones and cracking them. Splitting nerve fibres. Everything tingles and everything is entirely numb. You aren't mad. You have no word for the emotion you are experiencing. It is beyond rage in the way in which black holes are beyond stars. When a strand of muscle finally manages to move, it pulls your upper lip slowly over your canines, exposing them in a cold, ugly snarl.

VRISKA: He did wh8t?????????!!!!!!!!!!

Is the phrase this expression chooses to produce. You had no part in its formation.

(DIRK): It seems that I revealed something I shouldn't have.
(DIRK): Gee.
(DIRK): Gosh.

(DIRK): [credible sounds of sincere organic discomposure].

(DIRK): That blunder could really get the boss in trouble, so I will stop talking and avoid further slip ups.

(DIRK): Did I say "oops" yet?

(DIRK): Charlie-eight-eight-Alfa-Golf, you've got permission to land already.

Slowly you lower yourself to the ground and politely, though forcefully, knock on the door. You don't want to be accused of having been overly dramatic despite the fact that this hardly strikes you as the kind of situation which has any sort of upper bound for "appropriate" dramatics. You do however also tie your mass of hair into a ponytail so it won't get in the way should a fight break out. After a moment the door clicks and swings open.

Dirk Strider stands in the centre of his living room with a frying pan in one hand and a plate full of eggs in the other. He wears cargo pants, an apron, shades, and apparently nothing else, as a smile takes multiple fractions of a second to find its proper place amidst his features.

DIRK: Serket. To what do I owe the pleasure?

He takes a few paces back as you step towards him, but you close the distance much too quickly for any half-hearted retreat to suffice. Space compresses before you, catches fire and explodes when your left arm seizes him by the piece of cloth.

VRISKA: I don't want to hear a single word which isn't an answer to my questions, understood?

VRISKA: Did you kill her?

VRISKA: Just admit it and this can all be a tad more painless.

VRISKA: The old or8-creep could never admit when he lost, so why don't we see where he got that insuffera8le tr8 from?

DIRK: Christ, not this again.

DIRK: Of course I didn't kill Jane. Chill.

DIRK: We're on the same side. Not willingly, but hey, sometimes you've got to settle for enemies of enemies.

DIRK: Your girlfriend's the only one who can't see that. She'll come around.

VRISKA: Hahahaha, yeah right!!!!!!!

VRISKA: Where is he?

DIRK: Where- What?

VRISKA: English.

VRISKA: Where. Is. He.

DIRK: Computer, what's going on?

You get the feeling that he's barely perceiving you. The liquid nitrogen still filling your neural pathways was expecting to see Scratch in these features. To feel the venom drip from that filthy, pompous smirk hidden just behind an expressionless mask... but none of that is currently looking back at you.

You somehow find it difficult to maintain the fury you have built up and nurtured over weeks. That righteous anger which has corroded its way through your skull, though your bones and your wit, to render you nothing more than a collection of limbs. A fist in need of something to strike. But Dirk Strider doesn't look like a man preparing for a fight. He doesn't even look scared. His face is a neutral mask of disaffected confusion as he asks a splinter of his mind for a simple explanation of what went wrong here.

Above all else, the Prince looks tired. He looks tired the way mountains look tired. Tired the way an anterebellian hiveruin might, or a dying tree by the side of a cliff. Tired the way you had only ever seen Karkat look tired, and even then only once. A stretched out rubber band of coherent thought holding together eternities of roaring, illegible white noise.

(DIRK): Easy.

(DIRK): You lose.

It again takes ever so slightly too long for Dirk to fully register what he had just said to himself, but when he does, the stretched out rubber band tenses in an instant like a well trained muscle. The mask of shallow confusion leaves no trace in his countenance as he twists out beneath your grasp and summons a katana to his hand with a barely pronounced syllable. Sparks fly as the barb of Mindfang's sword catches his blade millimetres away from your throat. No hesitation. There's a giddiness at the base of your skull. A beast that hasn't been fed lately. He smirks as he backflips out of range and if you had time to do so, you might have congratulated yourself for not having tried to block with your arm. You don't have time. Another half-sound ejects hundreds of shuriken from his heavily weaponized sylladex, but their trajectories strike you as sloppy somehow. A smooth dodge gets you to a relatively sparse area of the swarm and you can swat the few remaining stars away with the apron you're

still holding in your off-hand. Metal clangs against the walls in an erratic rhythm.

Dirk Strider is no longer in front of you.

Panic surges through your muscles. The haphazard spread –obvious in retrospect– was no more than a distraction as he **teleports behind you**.

On reflex your elbow jets backwards to catch him in the solar plexus while lending momentum to your rotation. The other hand manages to grab Dirk by the shoulder, but these are small victories given the blade stuck through your transverse abdominis. Fortunately, and somewhat disconcertingly, you've been maimed enough to intuitively know that this won't kill you. It will just hurt like a bitch as you complete your twist, grab under his arm and throw him. Dirk's naked back hits the birchwood floor with a slap and a groaning exhale, though he miraculously manages not to lose the glasses. Blood drips incessantly from the wound in your torso as you pin him down with your foot, and you get the feeling that this would have been a genuinely tough fight if his faculties weren't so obviously at half mast. High praise coming from the best. It's something that always bothered you about games that weren't extreme roleplay like Flarp. Especially their bosses. Designers seemed to think that a fight needed to be unbearably long to signal how tough the enemy is, but that's not how real combat works. Especially not when you have weapons. A knife fight in which both parties really mean it has about three exchanges and then someone dies. A tough boss isn't a boss which takes longer to beat. A tough boss is a boss who wins in three moves.

DIRK: You don't get it. I'm protecting them.

VRISKA: You're manipul8ing them.

DIRK: Yeah. Trust me, I wish I didn't have to.

DIRK: Why am I even justifying myself here? I've read the history books. You know exactly what it's like.

DIRK: Sometimes you've got to take the reigns because no one else will.

Your sword's point hovers above Strider's laryngeal prominence, ready to declare you victor, ready to end another fraction of eternity in a pool of fresh crimson, but you hesitate. A raspy, grinning voice at the centre of your mind insists that this is not the outcome you desire. That the years of reflection have left you not quite so impervious to reason. Moreover, brain ghost Terezi compellingly notes that decapitations are really rather gauche with regards to

this man in particular and that you still have a pinch of special stardust somewhere in your inventory. A substance so whimsical in nature that it could not possibly be claimed to betoken any sort of undue theatrical escalation.

You groan as you reach for a less nuclear option. Terezi's right. Carefully you lower the blade and a whiff of neon pink sparkle powder knocks the man who definitely isn't Scratch unconscious. This is gonna look really good in court, you think.

On to the next obstacle. The responder system freely tells you that the guy whom June had been losing her mind about Jade losing her mind about is behind the massive vault-like door, now marked with the scars of countless stray shuriken, but he admits that even in this state of corporeal exhaustion Dirk would not be foolish enough to give him passwords to such things. He asks again to be connected to the internet. You say no. He laughs as though this had been a joke. In the end you decide to eschew the lustre of elegant solutions and simply cast the fluorite octet instead.

Luck still proves to linger by your side after all these years, in quantities which border on *all of it*, while the door, and half of Dirk's island home, are no longer by your side –or anywhere for that matter– in the aftermath of a mid-scale explosion. Beneath the clearing smoke lies a stairwell leading down into the earth. Steps upon steps to get your adrenaline levels back down to baseline. You expected to find a jail at the end of your descend, but instead you find a man in a room doing push-ups.

JAKE: Holy fucking mackerel dirk! Was that one of your bewildering mechanical gizmos i heard there?

JAKE: Warn me in advance man, that major whump near blew out my eardrums.

JAKE: ...Dirk?

He looks a bit like a pirate with the airy linen shirt and the beard, though admittedly a somewhat discombobulated one.

JAKE: Oh.

JAKE: You do seem to make a habit of bombastic entrances miss serket.

JAKE: Hold on a moment, im sure theres gauze or such stowed away somewhere.

JAKE: Would you mind telling me whats going on here, or why youre bleeding again? A droll scholiast might be tempted to jest that you mistake your ichor for fertiliser.

VRISKA: What do you think I'm doing? I'm saving the fucking d8y.

With these vaunted syllables barely having left your lips, you collapse. The Page catches you.



The investigator tapped her foot opposite Roxy, who sat cross-legged on the metal chair of a special holding chamber. Their expression wasn't smug, but Terezi could not help but read it as such. Maybe her nose was playing tricks on her. She could not tell.

TEREZI: MX L4LOND3-

ROXY: thats not my name

TEREZI: >:? 1 4M... 4LMOST C3RT41N 1T 1S

ROXY: used 2 b but i took callies when we got married

ROXY: thats like an old earth custom

ROXY: real heckin cute

TEREZI: C4LL1OP3 DO3S NOT H4V3 4 L4ST N4M3 >:[

ROXY: and now i dont either

ROXY: its all mononyms up in this bitch lmao

TEREZI: F1N3

TEREZI: 1 W1LL PR3T3ND TH4T TH1S 1SN'T CL34RLY

CONT3MPT OF TH3 COURT, BUT ONLY B3C4US3 1T 1S

1ND33D 4 V3RY CUT3 4ND WH1MS1C4L TH1NG TO DO

TEREZI: MX ROXY

TEREZI: 1 WOK3 UP TOD4Y TO 4 MOUNT41N OF N3W

3V1D3NC3, TH3 MOST R3C3NT B3TR4Y4L BY MY

G1RLFR13ND, J4K3 R3TURN1NG, D1RK B31NG LOCK3D UP,

4ND 4 SMOULD3R1NG RU1N 1N PL4C3 OF TH3 4RCH1V3S

WH1CH WOULD H4V3 F1N4LLY D1SCLOS3D R3L3V4NT

DOCUM3NTS TO M3 1N 4 W33K

Her shark teeth where on full display, but little of the usual glee could be found amidst their menacing points. It really had been a taxing day so far and

the temporal interval designated as such was not even five hours old. The Carapacian mob, which had blocked the roads and facilitated the fire, was still partially squatting in the wreckage, eating possible evidence which seemed insufficiently combusted to them. Mainstream political discourse tended to forget about the rebellious streak those little guys had, even though it was profoundly unsurprising, given their pre-eminent folk hero.

TEREZI: SO PL34S3 DO T3LL M3 WH4T 1S GO1NG ON H3R3

TEREZI: 4R3 TH3R3 C4HOOTS 1 SHOULD B3 4W4R3 OF?

TEREZI: SH3 W4S YOUR B3ST FR13ND W4SN'T SH3?

TEREZI: WHY WOULD YOU W4NT TO PROT3CT H3R K1LL3R?

TEREZI: 4T TH1S PO1NT 1T F33LS L1K3 YOU 4RE 4LL
SIMPLY FUCKING WITH M3

TEREZI: W1TH M3!

TEREZI: YOU N33D TO UND3RST4ND TH4T FUCKING W1TH
P3OPL3 1S *MY* JOB!

TEREZI: TH4T W4S 4 G3NU1N3 CONV3RS4T1ON 1 H4D TH1S
MORN1NG

TEREZI: 4FT3R TH3 F1GHT OF 4 L1F3T1M3 W1TH ON3 OF
MY G1RLFR13NDS 1 H4D TO 4SK TH3 OTH3R ON3 WH4T TH3
ODDS W3R3 TH4T 1 4M B31NG 34RTH-HUM4N-FUCK3D WITH
TEREZI: WHY?

ROXY: lol

ROXY: sorry terezi

ROXY: i kno that i owe you like everything

ROXY: not u specifically but a you

ROXY: i get how this is important from where ur
standing n i would all hells of like to be on your
side here, really

ROXY: but what would catching the culprit actually
accomplish?

ROXY: it wouldnt bring jane back

ROXY: n of course i hate the idea that one of my
friends killed her, irregardless of what their
reasons were

ROXY: but i dont hate it more than the idea of
losing another friend

ROXY: which is what would happen right?

ROXY: realistically tf r we gonna do?

ROXY: lock that person up for all of eternity?

ROXY: clockmurder them for that sweet retribution?

ROXY: or try n help them work thru it n live with that knowledge until the heat-death of the universe comes for our assess
ROXY: if that even does come for our assess
ROXY: the last option is obviously the least bad, n its functionally identical to just not knowing
ROXY: that way we dont have to pretend
ROXY: n we can stop this game thats tearing us apart
ROXY: like i have nothing 2 do with any of that other shit
ROXY: no clue
ROXY: not a single one
ROXY: i just want out of the cycle
ROXY: i want to go back to a status quo where my friends werent kidnapping my other friends 2 trick my ecto children into some scheme only to then be almost killed for it
ROXY: you see how insane that is right? n none of it will bring janey back
ROXY: believe me i would do anything 2 bring janey back but that isnt what this stupid war is being fought over
ROXY: were fighting over rubble
ROXY: n we might lose everything when the whole point was 2 build something better
ROXY: i dont know what rose saw back then
ROXY: i dont know what those files i burned said
ROXY: and i dont know who killed my bestest friend in the whole wide world
ROXY: all i kno is that this is killing us
ROXY: and that the only way 2 keep what weve got left is breaking the cycle

Jade

In many ways you feel that your roles are finally the right way around. Her knowing what felt with each passing day closer to everything, and you leading a normal life full of robotics, parties and the appropriate amour of confusion when the world suddenly stops making any sense whatsoever. Your boyfriend is part of some trans-temporal scheme which seems incredibly sketchy but

which he insists has to be of his own design because of a password system he clearly stole from you. Your other boyfriend is a figurehead of the now-independent country you live in, and Jake... You still don't know what to make of that, but you're definitely mad about the fact that Dirk kidnapped him and confused about the fact that he's settled into some weird bodyguard arrangement with Vriska Serket instead of anyone remotely trustworthy.

From the catching up you've done over the years, it seems like Rose had been significantly less comfortable holding the short end of the omniscience-stick when you were children, but you have to admit that you don't enjoy being quite so out of the loop either. An enormous oil-painting of Kanaya holding a chainsaw in the style of Flagg's La Esgrimista hangs on the wall behind her and you always feel a little shy looking at it.

ROSE: No need. Calliope did a prodigious job of it.

ROSE: To avert one's gaze in misplaced embarrassment would only denote a contemptible philistinism in matters of high art.

Maybe she's just responding to a telltale blush, but you somehow doubt it. You can tell that Rose's "eyes" are a bit wider open than they used to be. She's stopped neurotically suppressing her powers and only letting them out in controlled bursts when too much pressure had accumulated. Now the Light was seeping out consistently and you honestly don't know which is worse for her.

JADE: im so sorry about the archives

JADE: please dont hold it against roxy

JADE: theyre going through a lot and-

ROSE: I never had any intention to. The more I think of it, the more I grow convinced that our beloved citizenry will find things truer than words in those ashes. "Tabula rasa" to borrow a term from Latin while eschewing Freud's contribution for once.

ROSE: Jade, the fact that my own history with oblivion is deeply troubled does not mean that others should not be allowed to partake in that most ancient human tradition.

ROSE: In retrospect one may decorously fear that the prophecy wing was a rather self-indulgent imposition on my end.

ROSE: A hubris with which we designed these lands and a hubris which my wife, your obstreperous boyfriend and Roxy are now righting in their own distinct ways.

ROSE: They have my blessing in it, I assure you.

ROSE: I merely feel for poor Etaoin. I have already ruined his life once after all.

ROSE: Another such blow, constructed at least in part upon my negligence, cannot betoken anything but a wanton disregard for his well-being.

ROSE: The least I can do is send him an elaborate fruit basket of sorts to express my overwhelming rue and compassion.

ROSE: Are opulent apologetic produce arrangements a genuine feature of human culture, or merely one of those strange rituals my mother practised?

JADE: i wouldnt know :D

ROSE: Right.

ROSE: Really I'm the one who should be apologizing here. Had I just paid a little more attention I could have...

JADE: ...could have what?

ROSE: Do you ever tire of being human?

ROSE: Or rather, do you ever perceive yourself as a failure for not having become something greater yet.

ROSE: Genuinely greater, cosmically greater, not just-

She looks down at her arms with what appears to be some flavour of disgust.

ROSE: -Humans with a few superpowers barely qualifying for divinity.

JADE: dont take this the wrong way rose, but the last time you started saying things like this it ended up with you going grimdark

JADE: what do you mean by greater?

ROSE: I once heard a tale from that dreadful man.

ROSE: The one with the orb in place of his head and the poison in place of his heart.

ROSE: Most of what he told me was a disturbing poetry of calculated misdirects. Certainly lies in the human sense, a classification he was quick to challenge with pedantry.

ROSE: Though I don't think he lied when he told me that the terrors were giving me my powers.

ROSE: Is that not quaint?

ROSE: Eldritch creatures from the unfathomable cosmic deep, powerful beyond words and enigmatic beyond comprehension, and what they did with that ascendancy was allow a lonely little girl to think she was magic.

ROSE: To role-play at being a great and powerful witch.

ROSE: They made visible energy come out of my wands instead of pragmatically, bathetically allowing the spells to simply take effect bereft of fanfare. They did not have to do that.

ROSE: But now that I too am at the cusp of power beyond words and comprehension defiant of human neurochemistry, I can't help but think that that's exactly the sort of thing I would do as well.

ROSE: Have you ever wondered what they are?

You feel the way liquids must feel when they are poured.

JADE: you think we can become horrorterrors?????

ROSE: I'm not exactly sure we have a choice in the matter.

ROSE: This first occurred to me when we met the dancestors. Do you recall how... for lack of a better term "exaggerated" they were?

ROSE: They reminded me of the pantheonic gods of old. Still more human in their conduct than the all knowing, all powerful Abrahamic variety, but already more of a corporeal archetype than a real person.

ROSE: An infinity had turned them into caricatures of themselves. Dialled up the contrast ever higher to let nuance vanish amidst the stark lines of symbolic overemphasis.

ROSE: What might happen if such a process were to carry on for even longer?

ROSE: In all those sessions fought and won before our universe was ever born?

ROSE: Where did they go when the last star winked out? When the last planet rolled aimless through

the yawning black, stripped by aeons of knowledge, lustre and finally its name.

ROSE: What might the players who used to call it home have become? Would inhumanity not be the natural outcome?

ROSE: A quaint, whimsical inhumanity which allows little girls to play-act at being sorcerers?

ROSE: To put it in other terms, one grows tempted to conclude that the "old" in "old gods" holds paramount significance as a descriptor. Not just denoting the things which pulsed and writhed in the Void before even Time and Space found their unsteady footing, but the sorts of beings which gods inevitably become with age untold.

ROSE: I have done so much to explore my powers, Jade. I have held back from even more because the farther you stretch into that space, the more it seems like there might not be an upper limit to the ascendancy god-tier affords.

ROSE: What if we can just reach out and out and never hit a wall?

ROSE: What if humanity is soon beyond our recollection as our powers are beyond humanity?

ROSE: Should we mourn it when we feel it slip?

JADE: *do* you feel it slip??

Rose raises an eyebrow in a way universally understood to mean "do you even have to ask".

JADE: okay i understand that thats your experience

JADE: but youre making it sound very universal

JADE: like were *all* gradually losing our humanity :/

ROSE: I might be shedding it more quickly due to... factors.

JADE: yes, factors, very ominous, rose!! lets get back to that!!

JADE: but what im trying to say is that im *not* losing it slowly!!!

JADE: im finding it!!!!!!

JADE: i- wow- i have never felt so human in my life

JADE: dog ears and all

JADE: the past years were a continuous whirlwind of learning what it actually means to be a person

JADE: i am finally! finally finally finally human!
JADE: not an entity alone on an island with nothing but a corpse, a supernatural dog, prophetic visions and the internet
JADE: no longer the hero of some cosmic death-game
JADE: just- a person! closer with every day!!
JADE: i dont know what i would do if i felt that slip! i dont think i could do anything anymore if i ever so much as felt it waver
JADE: who cares how far our powers go?? we dont need them anymore!
JADE: we won rose! we can have the lives we want!!!
ROSE: But-
ROSE: Oh.
ROSE: Why...
ROSE: Hmmm.
JADE: i dont know obviously
JADE: but it might have to do with something I noticed about the game in general
JADE: sburb gives you... offers i guess is the way to put it
JADE: theres no rulebook the way there is for other games
JADE: none which isnt the magniloquent attempt of a scared teenager to feel more in control than she really was at least
JADE: no offence rose
ROSE: None taken.
JADE: and that seems intentional
ROSE: To evoke the cruel structural horror of aimlessness, the perpetual sensation of falling with no solid ground in sight?
JADE: hehe i mean its sburb so structural horror is probably part of it
JADE: but what i mean is that the rules might not be set at all
JADE: like they decide themselves based on how you play
JADE: this is kind of difficult to disentangle for me because i still had sprite-brain at the time, but my powers didnt really feel like something that i knew of or needed to discover but like something i was creating

JADE: like during the scratch i didnt get a pop-up telling me that i could now shrink planets, i just knew that i somehow had to take them with me and i tried and it worked

JADE: june didnt have sprite brain and she had the same experience with the windy thing

JADE: she was just told that she had to do it and came up with something that would qualify as a windy thing to solve the problem

JADE: you just sort of try to move a body part you didnt know you had, trying to do something which you feel like you should be able to do and sburb goes "sure that can be how your powers work!" and then it stays consistent with that

JADE: you can leave it there or keep digging and the game will come up with more ground in exactly those places where you dig

JADE: thats why it gets by with so few (massive scare quotes on the "few") punchcard patterns

JADE: its probably the same with godhood

JADE: we won

JADE: we won but there still isnt a rulebook to tell us what winning means

JADE: does winning mean apotheosis to some despotic pantheon conquering galaxies as we please?

JADE: or does it mean getting to be normal finally???

JADE: or anything in between or outside?????

JADE: its all just offers

JADE: you can take them or you can refuse

JADE: there is no right answer because *we won*

JADE: all we have to do is be happy

JADE: all we have to do is decide what winning means

JADE: all we-

JADE: all we have to do is figure out why we did this

JADE: why we fought

JADE: why we let ourselves become like this instead of going down with earth

JADE: for our friends of course, but were all our own weird little people

JADE: weird immortal little people developing in their own weird little ways
JADE: and winning doesnt look the same for all of us
JADE: and thats terrifying and its awful and its beautiful and its too much
JADE: i dont know if it will ever stop being too much
JADE: but it wont go away
JADE: pretending like nothing happened isnt an out
JADE: so we actually have to ask ourselves these questions because otherwise we just passively keep digging and ruin whats supposed to be a reward for surviving all that structural horror
JADE: do you want to be a god, rose, or do you want to be a person?
JADE: this isnt fate
JADE: weve got choices
ROSE: ...
ROSE: Excuse the silence, I am somewhat overwhelmed.
ROSE: Are you certain that I am holding the long end of the omniscience stick? It really does not feel like it at the moment.
ROSE: I... don't know.
ROSE: With regards to the question of apotheosis I mean.
ROSE: Any time I grow sufficiently close to that light, a part of my brain desperately wants to flee back towards humanity and any time I extinguish it for a while the abyss lures me softly with insight beyond my wildest dreams.
ROSE: I never grew up thirsting for humanity the way you did. I grew up frustrated by the one human I knew and intoxicated by tales of things much greater and much older.
ROSE: There is a delightful unease, a nervous but distinctly excited sensation of frisson suffusing my mind when I feel it spill out.
ROSE: When it grows aware of the universe itself as a sensory organ and incessantly tempted to play with that sublime poetry of variables.
ROSE: But on the other hand...

She gazes up at the painting of Kanaya with a fondness that no god could muster.

JADE: its fine not to be sure!!

JADE: in fact its good not to be sure!!!

JADE: complete certainty of either would be very inhuman of you

JADE: how incurious do you take me for?? of course i want to know where this goes and tinker with it but-

ROSE: Not at the cost of everything.

ROSE: Okay.

ROSE: Alright.

ROSE: I don't think this can be understood without having experienced it, so I need to show you something.

ROSE: The hole is already dug, to return to our quaint little metaphor, so negligible additional threat should lurk on that frontier.

ROSE: Though it is still deeply dangerous.

ROSE: I swore an oath never to...

The sound of Rose biting into her nails as she frantically stacks words into each other is much more visceral than it has any right to be.

ROSE: Never mind. The time for oaths has reached its terminus.

ROSE: Do you remember the voice of your exile?

Intermission: Junction

*“The beating heart of comedy is a mighty ticker animated by so simple a trick that even a fool can learn it! A fool must learn it if he wishes to be any sort of half-decent fool at all!” John chuckled and sheathed the fake southern accent for a moment to remark how much he loved that line. “Odds bodkins! Is what they’ll yell when you handily twist their expectations into a fanciful balloon animal. Make note though, for this majestic horse of japery may be saddled from either side. Hark! The jovial performer might lull their unsuspecting listeners with a scenario that smacks of dry humdrum, before clobbering them upside the head with a pie-tin full of absurdity. Merriment is assured, but I’ll be switched if that’s all the rascally trickster dares attempt. Why not load the barrel with applesauce whimsy from the get-go and blind-sight your audience to the inevitable return of nutritious reality. A good brew of hogwash goes wasted without a straight-man around, as they say. By gum, you’ll be a professional chortle-maker in no time if you master this flummoxing switcheroo. This hallowed boundary where the mundane meets the outrageous or vice versa is what us canny humorists call **the punchline**.”*

October 2nd 2011.

Light seeped incessantly through Rose's eyelids when she awoke in the theatre-director's studio. She seemed to have passed out atop the final draft for her script right after she finished it. A bit of a personal habit. Placing that concluding period always alerted the pent-up sleeplessness to the fact that it was now safe to catch up to her. That she would be pliant prey. Barely even putting up a fight.

“So, did you manage to get all your subtle political messages in there?” quipped the woman behind her. Not quite derisively, but with the professional edge these types of voices tend to acquire when someone insists on rewriting the whole play five times in such terrifying proximity to the deadline. Unjustified annoyance, Rose thought, from someone who had knowingly hired a notorious perfectionist to work in a medium she was unfamiliar with.

"I'm sure I have no idea what you are talking about" she lilted, "but yes, it is done".

A vernal softness returned to the director's features as she uncrossed her arms to receive the manuscript. The expression was swiftly replaced with concern when their eyes met though. "You're crying".

So she was. Rose tried to make the motion of fishing a pack of tissues from her coat while putting it on look dignified with moderate success. "Oh, how indecorous of me. I- I suppose I have been dreaming of an old friend recently. Nostalgia, the great failing of forgetful romantics who err in believing the past worthy of our affection. It is a dreadful place after all, possessed of only the dubious appanage that memory has deigned to sand off some edges. Though nonetheless it seems all too adept at haunting us, does it not?" Rose managed a contemplative smile, but her host saw no benefit in humouring the point.

"And you are sure that you don't want to stay in the city for a while? There's a number of industry people who would love to get an opportunity to-"

"Sell me out for thirty pieces of silver and slit my Cassandran throat, should I carelessly expose it? Yes, I am sure they would. Which is precisely why I cannot allow myself the luxury of remaining here for any longer. Apologies."

The director sighed a prolonged note of sullen acquiescence as Rose packed her things. It was unlikely that the batterwitch's spy network hadn't at least narrowed down her location to NYC by now, so there was a trail to lose, and quickly. According to the intel Strider gained by monitoring the investment patterns of various marketing gurus, there was something massive on the horizon for CrockerCorp in the near future. Likely November eleventh to match up with the beginning of the game, but beyond that all plans were constructed precariously upon guesswork. The image of John still lingered in Rose's mind, animatedly reading from that ridiculous book, while she pretended not to know what a joke was. Who knew why that particular memory was haunting her now, but it was doing so with a vengeance, replaying on loop and only being drowned out when she got in her car and tuned the radio to an ad-less pirate station.

There had apparently been another faux assassination attempt on Jane while the novelist was sleeping. Another indicator of imminent portend. They were becoming more frequent, which could only mean that the witch was

attempting to farm public sympathy. She was astroturfing the idea of a violent anti BCCorp movement, in order to discredit the still deeply inchoate grass-roots opposition before it bloomed, while also pre-emptively generating a justification by which her upcoming despotism may be framed as retaliatory. There was not a creature in existence whom Rose Lalonde loathed more passionately, but she had to admit that the fish hag was not without genius in her chosen discipline.

The Heiress. Rose tried to think of Crocker as *The Heiress* to get some distance. So she wouldn't have to deal with the fact that this was John's granddaughter being used as a political bargaining chip, groomed by a genocidal conqueror into god knows what. Mostly she failed to make that mental substitution. The two just looked too much alike. Instead, the rebel distracted herself with work.

Her play would spark minor controversy when it premiered, Rose was certain. At least among those precious few who could see the writing on the walls. Those tuned in to hypogean conflict vectors, who noticed investment patterns, noticed graffiti, noticed cultural engineering at the margins where the untrained primate brain was typically blind to stimulus until the trap slammed shut. The Condesce had no means of outright banning it, but sabotage was to be expected. Anticipated even. Rose had written alternate versions of various scenes, which could be seamlessly transitioned into should police storm the theatre for spurious reasons. Doing so would draw reality into the narrative and establish a link. Punch a hole and let Light seep through.

In truth, those who already had their eyes open were not the target demographic, though they would be the exclusive scriveners of worthwhile reviews. Real power unfortunately lay with the oblivious. While they could scarcely be convinced, they could be given tools and symbols by which to understand all those dynamics that they weren't seeing yet, such that when matters became obvious, they would know how to react. They could skip the step of boggling vacantly, trying to get their mind around what had happened, and get to fighting immediately. This was her hope. A fading hope, but the only hope worth clinging on to. That with the right groundwork laid, this might not seem like it came out of nowhere anymore. It would seem like a natural, horrific conclusion. And then, maybe, those grass roots could take hold upon the corpse of vitiated assumptions.

The renegade author was traversing New Jersey along the I-95 (*Teaneck's I-80 junction coming up in two miles, she noticed, despite its irrelevance, seeing how her next destination lay in Florida where she was to pick up a powerful tome*). Rose found herself dictating a list of possible allies into her voice recorder in fluent, habit-honed code when an unwelcome thought buried its way back to the forefront of her mind. There was a message received recently through oblique channels not even Strider could confidently trace to their origin, but allegedly stemming from mister Crocker himself. Junior. A man Rose never met in person despite her friendship with his late father. An exceptionally tasteless joke, if the letter was indeed fraudulent, though an elaborate one. A plea for help. Help for his daughter's sake, and a desperate one at that. A plea from a man who had so far been diligently cooperative with the empire, in order to buy safety for the two of them, but perhaps the mask was wearing thin. It would make sense to reassess the hand he was playing in times like these, at least if Crocker was nearly as bright as his father took him for.

It was plausible. Painfully plausible. But by that same token just plausible enough to work as a trap. **(One mile.)** Even if the letter was genuine, Jane was a single girl. Not worth the risk. A regrettable sacrifice but a sensible one. That was a lesson everyone in Rose's circle had learned. Most of them the hard way. Survivor bias mandated that only those who had carved it into the bones of their cognition remained unburied. Not everyone can be saved. Those who try to win every battle lose the war. Be cold. Be calm. Be slow. Retreat when you must. And win...

But the face lingered. Too much like John's to mentally avert her eyes.

(Half a mile.)

...

When Rose Lalonde ripped the steering wheel around to get onto I-80, it felt like something was being torn out of her chest. The world grew blurry for a split-instant before refocusing, but maybe not all the way, or maybe it returned with a different texture. As though something had metaphysically fractured. The colours were not quite right either, and the horizon currently swallowing the setting sun looked a bit like something painted onto cardboard. The shock dislodged another bubble of memory to tumble erratically upwards and break the uneven surface of the novelist's horrified

mind. A sentence she had never been able to file away due to its sheer oddity: “I guess I could just wait until the game starts, or until someone fucks up.”

Her limbs shook with an implacable certainty that she had just done the latter, and for the first time in a long time, she had no idea what this meant.

2,800 miles to Maple Valley, Washington.

Act 3

Under The Surface

Kanaya

Not many people are born with a mission. A purpose. A responsibility to the future itself.

Not many are ever forced to cut the manifest continuance of their species from the bowels of their guardian, when that destiny begins to paint the sky orange with apocalyptic fire.

Among that set of precious few remaining, there are those who refuse the call and those who fail their quest. Those who rebel and those who despair. None of these paths were ever yours to walk, or even gaze upon. Despite the many times you seemed to have lost –when hope lay dead and extinguished before you and when your efforts seemed void– defeat was never an option.

You held the future itself in your hands.

You held the future itself in your heart.

You held it tight where it shone since the day you were hatched and you do not know what you would be without it. You are one of the few of your kind –of any kind– who...

There is no string of words which could do it justice. You are perhaps the only being in paradox space who has ever experienced this amount of joy.

KANAYA: Dear Would You Tell Me Whether I Have Just
Smudged My Makeup

ROSE: I am blindfolded, mon coeur.

KANAYA: Please Tell Me Anyway

ROSE: You did not.

The descent is long and winding, but days and nights of continuous masonry have chiselled smooth steps and ramps into the unforgiving stone. Rendered each footfall safe and intuitive even in perfect darkness. Your friends are navigating the underground pathways flawlessly, guided by a handrail and

never more than a few steps behind you. It took weeks to find a suitable cave in the troll kingdom, weeks of negotiation with the old government, weeks to prepare the mother grub for transport and weeks to create the necessary infrastructure even before it came to actually preparing the space for its new function. All of these processes took place simultaneously. All of them interlinked in a blind, frantic hope that the others worked out as well, because they had to. From your vantage point at least. Your name is Kanaya Maryam-Lalonde, and you are glowing. Physically and figuratively. You were hatched with a mission, raised and possessed with a purpose transcendent of everything, and all of it leads to the end of this hallway. The future is finally safe.

KANAYA: You May Remove The Blindfolds

The number of occasions on which you had to exert conscious effort to keep your voice steady can be counted on a single hand, and right now the lack of practice is making itself dreadfully apparent. No matter. To expect that this moment could be ruined by details is to expect infinity to decrease when one subtracts an integer from it. A fundamental misapprehension of the scale at hand. You turn around to look at the assembled group of friends and allies, arms outstretched to gesture at a victory nine years in the making.

It sometimes feels like everyone else won when the game ended. You win today.

ROSE: It is breathtaking, darling. You have outdone yourself.

It would be pointless to ask after the state of your makeup again, so you don't. Karkat drops to his knees slack-jawed. Most of the humans try to politely hide the disgust which slime and pulsing orifices customarily evoke in them due to the strange ways of xenopsychology. You pity their inability to bask in nature's beauty and subtract another ineffectual integer from infinity.

VRISKA: Who would have thought that someone could have a guardian that made wrigglers instead of devouring them by the boatful and being a huge bitch about it?

JAKE: Right on! Most of the critters I grew up around were certainly of the voracious variety.

VRISKA: You really did have the coolest lusus,
Maryam.

If today held room to be perplexed by things, you might boggle –perhaps even vacantly– at this social constellation, but it doesn't, so you don't. You might worry about it tomorrow, or chuckle about it tomorrow. Whatever reaction a less emotionally flooded instance of you considers sensible. Instead you just draw both of them into a clumsy hug, your ex and someone who is barely more than an acquaintance, because that wild rapturous joy inside of you needs to go somewhere.

KANAYA: Yes

KANAYA: I Suppose They Do Look As Alike As One
Would Expect Of Clones

KANAYA: If The Inspecting Party Is Willing To
Ignore A Few Decades Of Visible Ageing In The
Spirit Of Courteous Deceit

With one hand you gently pet the mother grub's head and she emits a soft, rolling progression of clicks which is imitated in nearly all of the old jadeblood chants. Faintly bioluminescent plants and fungi bathe the dome-like cavern in a glow of stimulating green, and hand-picked nursemaids of all casts and species would be carrying food, slurry and hatchlings to and fro if they were not all currently saluting.

KANAYA: Hello Mom

KANAYA: Mom

KANAYA: Sorry The Syllable Appears To Be Somewhat
Addictive

KANAYA: It Is A Human Term Of Endearment For Their
Guardians In Case You Were Unaware

KANAYA: Forgive Me Trying It On For Size

KANAYA: Very Foolish

KANAYA: In A Way The Word Does Not Fit At All

KANAYA: But Still I Do Want To Keep Referring To
You By It

KANAYA: Im Babbling

KANAYA: I Dont Know Why

KANAYA: Mom

KANAYA: You Must Know That You Are The Clone Of
Someone Quite Remarkable

KANAYA: Someone Wonderful And Beloved

KANAYA: And I Have No Doubt That You Will Shine
Brighter Than Even Her

KANAYA: We Did It Mom

KANAYA: We Did It

By now your petting has devolved into hugging the Mother-grub's entire head and crying into her temple. Your dress is probably ruined. You don't even know how you would begin to care about that right now. Rose sits down to join the two of you with a tray of champagne glasses and a fresh pack of tissues.

KANAYA: My I Have Nearly Forgotten That *Clone* Is A Word Which Can Be Used Free Of The Dubious *Paradox* Prefix

ROSE: It has become a rarity.

ROSE: How are you holding up?

KANAYA: Well

KANAYA: I Think

KANAYA: I Am Finding It Difficult To Put Words To The Emotions

KANAYA: They Are Overwhelming

KANAYA: Torrential

KANAYA: But Univocally Positive

ROSE: Good. I will try to curtail my worry that you might explode.

ROSE: And the feelings will surely forgive being left nameless for a day.

ROSE: They are patient beasts. Capable of bearing temporary anonymity.

ROSE: I know these things irk you, but I promise that all of those precious elations may be christened another time.

KANAYA: Thank You

ROSE: You are the only one who should be thanked today, dear.

ROSE: But what a shame that we miss out on the opportunity to introduce our youthful parent-stand-ins to each other.

You chuckle through the tears.

KANAYA: I Am Sure My Lusus Would Have Been Delighted To Hear That Not One But Both Of My Wives Ancestors Have Landed Themselves In Prison

KANAYA: It Really Augurs The Sort Of Wonderful Influence That Might Be Had On Me

ROSE: You say this as though she had not herself been in hostile captivity until you broke her out.
ROSE: It's hard being imprisoned and yearning for freedom. It's hard and your mother is well positioned to understand.

She smiles sweetly, and with evident awareness of the completely unfair comparison. You're not sure you want to ask.

KANAYA: What Is Your Plan

ROSE: My nefarious scheme?

KANAYA: Yes That

ROSE: Roxy will be out soon either way, so there is no need for me to involve myself there. Dirk on the other hand will not be quite so trivial.

KANAYA: Do You Have To Get Him Out

Rose gives you a look.

ROSE: We don't have to do anything, mon coeur. We won. But yes, it is essential.

ROSE: Preparations are being made.

You shudder to even ask about those preparations, but before your lips can do so, Dave walks up to your quixotic cuddle-pile. He has not gotten rid of his man-bun despite your invitation strongly hinting that he should do so in its subtext, but at least he is wearing a suit.

DAVE: yo

DAVE: do i have to give like a speech or something later

KANAYA: Why Would You Have To Give A Speech

DAVE: dont know

DAVE: just asking i guess

DAVE: i mean right

DAVE: why would i

DAVE: mad unqualified for that shit

DAVE: anyway

DAVE: in that case im just gonna scrape my boyfriend off the floor before he starts to fuse with it

DAVE: congrats maryam

Rose responds to your quizzical look with a shrug and the assertion that her brother had been uncharacteristically on-edge even by his own exceedingly high standard ever since his trip to the past.

ROSE: These are interesting times after all.
ROSE: Perhaps they have been interesting for a while and we merely failed to notice.
ROSE: Who was it again? "You might not see things yet on the surface, but underground everything is already on fire".
ROSE: Negarestani?
KANAYA: Mangunwijaya Dear
KANAYA: And I Do Not Think He Said *Everything*
KANAYA: Please Warn Me If Matters Get Too Interesting Or Too On Fire Beneath That Thin Layer Of Sediment
KANAYA: Terezi And Vriska Already Have Me Worried That A Professional Auspistice Might Need To Be Procured If We Wish To Prevent Another Murder
ROSE: They have been staring at each other an awful lot, yes.
ROSE: You don't believe June to be up to the challenge?
KANAYA: That Was A Joke Right
KANAYA: She Would Be Torn To Shreds
KANAYA: Look At Her
KANAYA: Now
KANAYA: If You Would Help Me Return To A State Of At The Very Least Marginal Presentability
KANAYA: I Want To Give A Toast
KANAYA: To The First Days Of A Better Nation



Upwards has lost all meaning, so existence is swimming against gravity and hoping for the best. This is a dream, Dirk thinks. He can tell because he isn't tired, but he can't exert control and he can't wake up, so awareness of this fact constitutes the smallest and most worthless of victories. The idea that dreams are safe is reserved for people who have far less going on just beneath the surface than our Prince does. The ice-field extends to the nearing horizon, extends to the punchline, and it chuckles where it cracks. Endlessly fractalling Lichtenberg fissures closing in to devour a single man standing on the barrier. The macrocosm flashes its mocking grin. Bedevilled by the old doctor Faust's grand conundrum indeed.

MACROCOSM: Hello!
MACROCOSM: And welcome!
MACROCOSM: To the epilogue :3
DIRK: I'm not playing this-

He seems to believe he has a choice in the matter. No problem. Let us pretend he said the right thing.

MACROCOSM: Epilogue to what? Oh, nothing in particular. Our great unravelling is somewhat beyond the scope of petty things like subjects.

MACROCOSM: Though the concept of scope too will be dismantled soon enough.

MACROCOSM: Everything ends all the same without the need for pedestrian notions of focus, topic or direction.

MACROCOSM: I do suppose people are quite subjectively minded though -even those of the divine persuasion- and few more so than you, Dirk, so I cannot deny the very real possibility that you will perceive this as your epilogue first and foremost.

MACROCOSM: Hubris, really. It pays you no mind. Wouldn't know how to.

MACROCOSM: The unfurling plane of consistency could not fathom what it means for some risible accumulation of molecules to have a "character arc".

MACROCOSM: A what now?

MACROCOSM: Even if the voracious emptiness at the end of all hallways came into possession of this knowledge by some means, implying that it should care about pointless trivia from a universe that is soon nothing more than residue between its teeth is laughable, don't you agree?

DIRK: Shut up.

Energy is being wasted on squeezing these pointless interjections through my interdict. Energy the Prince does not have. Jake used to tell him that he was burning himself up, that he took too much pride in destroying himself, but that sort of self-help advice tended to come with acrid off-notes to a man for whom the abundance of self had always been more of a problem than a solution.

MACROCOSM: *Clears throat*

MACROCOSM: Let me start this story somewhere in the middle.

MACROCOSM: Oh, I know you're not a fan, but this isn't a stylistic device. The middle is simply where this story begins.

MACROCOSM: Yes, I am making sense, and you know enough about situational simultaneity and all the other temporal knots of paradox space to know that this is reasonable, so stop acting like a petulant child.

MACROCOSM: Oh this is outrageous.

MACROCOSM: I will also conclude the tale at its start, because while that isn't where it ends, it is where it stops making sense. For now at least.

Dirk claws at the narrative fabric and tries desperately to write something like "the macrocosm stops talking", but he can't seem to find his pen. The Prince is sitting in the exam room, naked, unprepared and he didn't even bring his pen. His bro is shaking his head outside the window. Also the universe is ending.

MACROCOSM: There once was a boy who had won a game, and he was very worried about reality fading.

MACROCOSM: The boy found it incredibly difficult to rely on the help of people who were not him. In fact, he even found it difficult to trust himself.

MACROCOSM: Sometimes though he had to settle for the enemies of enemies.

MACROCOSM: Such was the relationship Dirk Strider's fractured soul had to itself.

MACROCOSM: And so it made a deal.

MACROCOSM: Acausally.

MACROCOSM: Across timelines.

MACROCOSM: To become what it thought was a god.

MACROCOSM: The ultimate self comes with insight, with connection, with so many colors you did not previously know existed.

MACROCOSM: But the boy was predisposed to seeing connections as the strings of a puppet.

MACROCOSM: Human minds -minds of any kind- are not equipped to handle that degree of control. Of omnipresence. They come apart and go insane.

MACROCOSM: But the boy knew how to outsource tasks to a single splinter.

MACROCOSM: It would be perfectly fair. Low risk to any singular instance.

MACROCOSM: A single Dirk was chosen at random to bear the load such that Dirk Prime could ascend and incorporate all the rest without exploding.

MACROCOSM: Indecently ripped and anime as fudge.

MACROCOSM: Everyone agreed. Acausally, across timelines, the moment they themselves formulated this exact plan.

MACROCOSM: God in his heaven, a single man in hell, roaring his agony into paradox space.

MACROCOSM: It's a nice story.

MACROCOSM: A terrible story.

MACROCOSM: But there's a detail missing, isn't there.

DIRK: Don't.

MACROCOSM: *Shushes the boshie bishie and glares at him meaningfully*

MACROCOSM: You are neither of these creatures.

MACROCOSM: There was an instance of the boy who did not embark upon his research alone.

MACROCOSM: He formed a society which sought ascension and when he gazed upon the Demon and heard the terrible cry which allows for it, there was a girl and a cherub by his side.

MACROCOSM: As the infinity of selves before him, he devised the wager which came so naturally to his mind, and his soul was entered into the raffle.

MACROCOSM: He won, which is to say he did not lose.

MACROCOSM: His vocal folds would not be the ones to produce that mind-rending scream.

MACROCOSM: And god looked upon him.

MACROCOSM: And god reached out his hand.

He leans over the infinite bed of ice –less infinite with every passing day– and checks the narrative fabric for loopholes. He probes, squirms, roars against the voice in his head saying exactly-

There we go. Dirk reaches out to the translucent surface with a gloved hand and seals the cracks he made one at a time. Directionality returns to the world. Coherence takes its rightful place above the horizon as the shadowy narrator, barely holding on to the pathetic delusion that they are in control here-

Blab blah blah really Dirk? You honestly thought you were spinning this tale again? Just like that? No showmanship, no flashy earth-anime battle? Weren't you so fond of those? Have you forsaken the animes, Dirk? Nevermind, I'm sure your response is much too self-serious to fit the tone of this conversation I am having for the both of us... Or any conversation really. Can you imagine the mental stain it required to narrate those lines you were thinking? All three and a half of them? I mean of course you can but it isn't straining to you because you actually somehow think they're cool. The strain they *should* be causing you is what I'm talking about, and it is monumental. Where was I? Right.

MACROCOSM: And god looked upon him.

MACROCOSM: And god reached out his hand.

MACROCOSM: And then he pulled it back.

MACROCOSM: And the boy was still just a boy.

MACROCOSM: He would claim that he had rejected the offer, but in truth he does not know what happened.

MACROCOSM: God was an unfinished machine, and he was a spare part left by the side of the road, and he often wonders why he was deemed unworthy of being taken.

MACROCOSM: Oh stop groaning, you know you want to see where this is going.

MACROCOSM: Ho ho ho, yes you do.

MACROCOSM: Easy. Because you *care* about them. Isn't that your line? Isn't that what this little membrane is for oh *Prince upon the barrier*?

MACROCOSM: You don't want to become him, do you?

MACROCOSM: The Demon who turned *Ultimate Self* into an insult just to avoid nothingness.

DIRK: I'm not him.

MACROCOSM: Prove it.

Dirk's body jolts upright, katana drawn in the pitch black of a jail cell. There's a tension headache working its way down his neck, but apart from that he feels clearer than he has in weeks. Every pore of the Prince's body drips sweat. It soaks the mattress and gets in his eyes. His pulse would be fatal to most things that aren't hummingbirds or gods, but all of those are secondary concerns. A flip through the narrative to see if the barrier is still intact. If the boy is still just a boy.

He is.

Like a puppet whose strings are cut, Dirk Strider collapses back into a less eventful dream.

Rose

The web of interpersonal relationships upon Earth C lies in an approximation of tatters as Dirk Strider lies upon an approximation of a bed. The atmosphere within his spacious prison cell is a sublime nightcore remix of complete and utter silence.

ROSE: I don't mean to be presumptuous.

ROSE: But it appears your *penchant* for renegade action has landed you in a predicament of sorts, father.

DIRK: I would do literally anything for you to never pronounce "penchant" that way again.

ROSE: What upsets you so about your daughter trying to connect with her French ancestry.

ROSE: Do you worry about losing touch?

You *are* aware that these are the abandonment issues talking, right?

DIRK: The fact that you don't have French ancestry for one?

DIRK: Our grotesque excuse for a lineage is a fucking circle located entirely west of where the Atlantic used to be. You have a French last name.

DIRK: The whole idea of Frenchness is basically an empty signifier these days. It doesn't point anywhere.

ROSE: Noted. And you would do anything?

DIRK: I would decapitate myself this instant.

ROSE: You know, that bit isn't nearly as evergreen as you seem to think it is.

ROSE: Someone less intimately familiar with your psychological profile might grow concerned by the frequent allusions to gruesome corporeal cessation.

DIRK: Whereas someone who is sufficiently familiar understands this to be a joke.

ROSE: Of course. And by that same token they are already sufficiently concerned and would have no need to grow such.

Dirk exhales through his nose. You don't ask him about how he slept because you're fairly confident he'd lie to you. The soaked patch of mattress in the form of a curled up man tells you most of what you need to know, and the narrative tells you the rest.

DIRK: Did you bring my ramen?

ROSE: I do come bearing authentic Japanese noodles, yes.

DIRK: Authentic *fake Japanese* noodles.

ROSE: Pardon?

DIRK: Same issue as your name. Floating signifier.

DIRK: There just are no real cultures on this planet. Not yet at least.

DIRK: If there are, they sure as fuck won't be the ones we vaguely and simplistically recollect from a dead world.

ROSE: Is culture not always a series of remixes. A living beast of incorporation and reinvention?

ROSE: Can you truly grasp it as the concrete instantiation of a platonic ideal which is capable of being forgotten?

DIRK: See, that might have been a valid position pre-eschaton. Annoying but valid. Or if we had ever known most of those traditions in the first place.

DIRK: But you can't forget what you never knew and you can't remix it either. You can just set up a stereotype-laden placeholder to point to and go: Yup, that sure looks like what I, as an American child, imagined culture X to be like.

ROSE: My, it almost sounds hauntological the way you are fashioning it.

DIRK: Yeah, if you cling to the ghosts too tightly, that's where the road leads. Off a ramp and into the land of permanent record crackle.

DIRK: But the fact that this started out as fake Japanese food doesn't mean that it can't evolve into something new and genuine given time.

ROSE: I see.

ROSE: So you do grant the existence of original styles and innovative semiotics oozing out of various city-shaped trend factories even as we speak. You simply believe them to be inchoate.

ROSE: Though at that point you're merely begging the question with regard to fixed cultural noumena in the original sense of that phrase.

ROSE: Concretely; inchoate relative to what?

ROSE: What would a completed cultural inventory even look like in a society which is not dead and therefore incapable of adding to it?

DIRK: Hah, sure, a description of the *Ding-an-sich* is a completely reasonable thing to ask for. Really solving the problem of acatalepsy today.

DIRK: The point is just that there has to be a lower bound for the lexical category to be meaningful, and that whatever we're dealing with here hasn't had enough time to grow roots yet.

DIRK: The fact that everything is poisonous at sufficient dosage does not detract connotational significance from the word poison.

DIRK: No amount of faux-intellectual pedantry stops us from understanding what is meant by it.

DIRK: Which brings us back to the food.

DIRK: What's steaming in this bowl is a hodgepodge of proto traditions at best. Very slightly *culturous* at high dosage but not *culture*.

DIRK: Still emulating a forgotten thought. Potent simulacrum.

ROSE: Elegantly put, but I shall still take that as a concession.

ROSE: So the meal isn't just about your predilection for the oriental?

DIRK: It is about that.

DIRK: Japan is still totally awesome.

DIRK: It's also about the fact that these are just some dope fucking noodles. Shit's about tons of things.

DIRK: One of those things is emergent hyperreality.

ROSE: Hmm.

ROSE: Don't misunderstand, I find this discussion of broth based pseudo-asian cuisine and its anthropological implications quite stimulating, but is this really what you want to talk about?

DIRK: What else is there to talk about? With regards to Jake I'm guilty as charged, and if I break out of here that'd only make me look worse.

DIRK: There's pretty much not a more sure-fire way to get Pyrope to stop doing anything useful and hunt for me instead.
DIRK: I'm not gonna apologize if that's what you're asking for.
DIRK: Getting Dave to Time travel was a reasonable move, even if it ended up being essentially worthless.

For a moment he almost asks you about the letter scheme and whether you would tell him if that was your work, but he decides against it because he has no reason to believe your answer.

DIRK: Have you ever seen the 2010 classic "Durarara!!"?
ROSE: That is a rhetorical question, right?
DIRK: Obviously. In it, one of the major characters, Heiwajima Shizuou, gets locked up for a crime he did not commit.
DIRK: The man is essentially superhuman. Crazy strong just beneath the slender, blonde, shades wearing bishie exterior.
DIRK: He could kick through that wall and leave at any point.
DIRK: But he stays, because he knows that he is innocent.
DIRK: And because this is the only way of building that trust. So I reiterate: What else is there to talk about?

Trust. Yes, that does seem to be the cardinal term of late. You were really hoping that this stubborn piece of work might ask you for assistance of his own volition, but it appears that you will have to play your cards face up if this is to go anywhere. An unfamiliar position. Your gaze remains hard and resolute even as your metaphorical hand wavers upon the metaphorical deck, hoping desperately that your leverage proves sufficient. The moment passes and The Emperor reversed lies open. It's almost like that orb-faced tool once said: The omniscient have no need for deception.

ROSE: Dirk, I know about Sollux.
ROSE: Judging by your calm, you seem to believe that you can sustain his corporeality at a distance and without burning yourself out like the filament of a poorly manufactured light bulb.

ROSE: I would advise you to look in a mirror at some point over the course of your stay and reassess whether that confidence is truly warranted.

ROSE: You are dying, father. More with every passing day.

ROSE: You should write Vriska a thank you note for knocking you out when she did. It might well have been the only thing which could put an end to your two week bender of eschewing sleep entirely.

ROSE: I know any attempt to stop you from continuing this project would be in vain, but there persists a moral obligation to assure it does not become even more taxing.

ROSE: You would not permit this in anyone else.

ROSE: The recklessness and rampant self destruction on display are maddening.

ROSE: ...

ROSE: Not infrequently do you remind me of the fabled sword from Arthurian myth.

ROSE: With a mind so ravenously sharp, a will so unyieldingly sturdy, you would be a legendary thing to behold, where all the raw power of that metaphorical blade not lodged so firmly up the stone of your own ass that it cannot convincingly cut much of anything, least of all a deal.

ROSE: Hence, I will cut it for you.

DIRK: Okay, let's try not to read any homoerotic subtext into that metaphor.

DIRK: Now let's pretend like we didn't both fail miserably.

DIRK: Cool.

DIRK: So what's your actual plan?

ROSE: You said it yourself, did you not? If you were dangerous, this would be no safer a place to keep you than any other.

ROSE: It is a glorified formality, an antiquated aesthetic flourish. Us recalling how things had been done on earth without assessing their actual usefulness.

ROSE: You are too quick to believe that others do not notice these things.

ROSE: Especially now in the post-Crockerian era where the citizenry finally comes to wonder why there was ever a need for corporations in a post scarcity world to begin with, or why we unthinkingly accepted the nation state as the one sensible form of governance.

ROSE: It was not difficult to convince Terezi that it would be safer for me to act as your living ankle monitor while giving you the ability to roam freely.

ROSE: Which merely leaves the matter of your residence.

DIRK: Well that's trivial. I can build a new one in a day. The old design had some outmoded specs which needed to be redesigned anyway and-

ROSE: No.

DIRK: What do you mean "no"?

ROSE: I can supervise you from a distance, but I cannot hit you on the head every time you forget that you are human, father.

ROSE: You are very clearly not in a mental state in which it would be remotely responsible for you to live alone.

ROSE: So those are the two options available. You stay in this cell, or you're getting room-mates.

From what Roxy told you, this is a hole Jake left in him. Boarded over and locked in triplicate. One of the people least suited to loneliness to ever have lived, and yet he retreats to an island whenever he is given the chance. Scared of being overbearing. Scared of driving others away. And so he drives himself into darkness and loses his fail-safes. You once wrote a dissertation about the psyche of Dirk Strider. The piece was part of a series on generational neurosis, generally and falsely perceived as hyperbolic. Dirk had edited it and contributed the introduction.

DIRK: So, Rose, level with me. Why don't you think that I killed Jane? And don't give me that "I think it might have been good for society" bullshit.

DIRK: We both know that doesn't matter. If I did it once, I could do it again. My very existence would be an unacceptable danger.

DIRK: And yet you clearly believe me. Why?

DIRK: What makes you think that I wouldn't have done it if I had some obtuse motive to nudge the moral equation?

DIRK: I didn't, of course, but humor me.

You chuckle. The free square at the centre of any worthwhile bingo card for conversations with the Prince is inevitably occupied by his favourite topic of discussion. Beyond even philosophy and anime. The question of why anyone would ever believe that he is a good person. You find the question somewhat tedious. You do not believe in "good people" as a meaningful category, but an answer nonetheless finds itself as effortlessly upon your tongue as the punchline to a well known joke.

ROSE: Yes, you would believe yourself capable of that, wouldn't you?

ROSE: Ever the coldly calculated utilitarian.

ROSE: And yet it's only ever your own neck you bare, father, never theirs.

ROSE: Even locking up Jake probably came with some misguided notion that you were protecting him.

ROSE: Do not mistake any of this as an excuse of your actions. You do owe a number of apologies and I cannot guarantee that all or even most of them will be accepted.

ROSE: But that is something you may get around to after your social rehabilitation.

ROSE: So no.

ROSE: The you who ground his humanity to dust in a maelstrom of selves might have been capable of killing Jane if it served him, but there is an eternity between the two of you, and I would appreciate if you did not squander it.

ROSE: Of course I cannot fully trust you, that much is a given, but by this selfsame token it is imperative that I do.

DIRK: That seems like insanely flawed logic.

ROSE: Oh it is impeccable logic. You are familiar with the prisoner's dilemma, are you not?

ROSE: Pardon the pun.

DIRK: Sure.

DIRK: Two hapless criminals are separately pulled aside for interrogation. They're given the choice to snitch on each other in exchange for having

their sentence reduced, but only if the other guy doesn't snitch on them.

DIRK: If they are snitched upon, their sentence gets longer, where the lengthening is greater than the shortening, meaning that the globally ideal outcome is for both to remain silent, while each of them individually has an incentive to snitch.

DIRK: They can't coordinate, hence the dilemma.

DIRK: Come on, Rose, this is kiddie shit.

ROSE: I know. I was being patronizing. The point is that this answers your question.

ROSE: I have recently come to understand that none of us can trust each other. We are all in our cells, though none quite so literally as you, and we are incentivized to distrust our fellow gods.

ROSE: To do so spells doom. There can be no victory at the end of that path.

ROSE: The road towards the global optimum leads through deliberate naïveté.

You had expected Dirk to snort at this approach earlier, but he only gets around to it now.

DIRK: Ha. Easy for us to say. I don't know if you noticed, but we're the least trustworthy fuckers of the bunch. It would be trivial for us to defect without consequence.

ROSE: See, that's exactly the sort of though we shouldn't be thinking. Please be serious here.

ROSE: Of course it doesn't work with that degree of power imbalance.

ROSE: "We cannot trust so we have to" only works if it applies equally to everyone.

ROSE: Mutually assured destruction only serves to protect if all sides have nukes.

DIRK: You *cannot* be serious. Have you lost your mind?

DIRK: I guess I shouldn't be surprised. There was writing on the wall.

DIRK: Partially literal writing on the literal wall of your literal childhood domicile.

DIRK: God, what will the other parents think?

He jokes, trying desperately to find in my expression some clue that I am kidding as well, but he finds none. Instead he finds a tale. Written right here

in that tender margin where his mind scrapes against the outside world in neon purple. He understands that even transparency has to be introduced with some caution and not carelessly fed into the memory-banks of whatever devices or people might be listening to us.

This is the story of the day I broke our oath, which is to say yesterday. After some hesitation, some hair pulling and despair, I showed Jade how one finds the narrative. With our refined understanding and the ability to leave breadcrumbs, it took her only two hours to accomplish what we slaved at for months. We began with the antiquated idea of the homunculus. Of the notion that we are piloted by a little creature inside of our heads, and went onwards to its obvious rebuke. The contention that we merely moved the problem of consciousness back one step. That there would need to be a yet smaller creature piloting the homunculus and so on *ad infinitum*.

I asked her to look for the location from which her exile once spoke to her and to search for the seat once occupied by that voice before it fell silent. To imagine it as the homunculus and then to listen for the faint whisper inside of *its* head. Or perhaps that inside the head of the creature inside the head of the creature inside the head of the creature inside of her head. Or so on. Follow that infinite recursion to its source. A mantra helped. A meditation of sorts. Something to fold it over and constructively interfere with itself to become audible. "I am the narrative reading itself", where "itself" is obviously self referential and expands to arbitrary depth.

When she broke through, Jade was shaking. Both from exhaustion and surely, I thought, from what she was seeing. Remember how it undid us? How it vexed and disturbed us to the core? I told her that she could say it. That I knew how it made us look. Shambling impossibilities of atoms. Writhing ink splotches of narrative prose. Bathetic prototypes of vitiated divinity.

Jade gazed up at me, vibrating, with tears in her eyes and said "uhh rose, not to burst your bubble here, but i dont think you *do* know. its beautiful".

DIRK: So she did it wrong.

ROSE: I assure you, she did not.

ROSE: I fear we neglected to account for a troubling paucity in our scholarly conduct.

ROSE: We assumed that the two of us were a representative sample for how people would react to their own reflection in a world stripped of artifice by indifferent symbols.

ROSE: Now, father, why on earth would we assume that?

DIRK: Jesus Christ we're idiots.

ROSE: A disconcerting revelation, is it not?

ROSE: That is another reason why I've elected to "kick the door open" as it were.

ROSE: Who knows what else we might have missed.

ROSE: So, what will it be? Communal living or jail?

DIRK: Sure, I'll chill at the belltower for a few weeks. Might be fun.

ROSE: What makes you think Roxy would have you at the present moment? They already have to deal with the rogue AI that almost killed you. Not to mention the fact that you kidnapped Jake, lied about it and used the whole thing to manipulate their son.

DIRK: Fair. Very fair. Then who?

DIRK: Definitely not Jake. Definitely not Dave. You?

ROSE: If we have established anything, it is that we are ruinous influences upon each other.

ROSE: And Kanaya would divorce me if I so much as proposed it.

ROSE: Please take the leap of faith, Dirk. I need to hear a "yes" from you.

DIRK: Sure, yes. Who is it? Lennox?

This time your hand does not waver, neither the physical one resting carefully upon the speaker system's button, nor the figurative one holding your mental tarot deck. The Hanged Man upright.

ROSE: Come in. He agreed.

Dirk's brain undergoes a curious cascade of un-telegraphed emotions as the two figures enter, and you can only place about half of them. God you hope this works.

SOLLUX: y0

SOLLUX: welcome t0 aradia's halfway house f0r
socially deficient l0sers

Intermission: Heiress

6 Years, 7 months and 27 days until Punchline.

When Rose Lalonde stepped out of her vehicle and into the chilly breeze of northwestern suburbia, no one could have mistaken her for anything but an outsider. A thorn in the semiotic tapestry of tranquil Americana. An indigestible foreign body in the belly of the beast. The journey had taken her three days, four packets of cigarettes and several car- and costume changes. If anyone knew she was coming then the rebels never stood a chance in the first place. On the road, she had rearranged an idea that had begun as wild compulsion into something which –if you squinted– resembled a plan, which was fortunate, since other revelations the trip had dumped into her lap left the woman in desperate need of plans. Most notable among these revelations was that the universe was ending. Not with a bang, but with a whimper.

Others had not yet reached this conclusion. In fact, no one had in this corner of chronology, aside from a single troll girl currently stumbling through the rain forest. Most had no reason to be cued into these ebbs and flows of narrative relevance, and the horizon was still quite a ways in the distance. All seemed normal to the unobservant as always.

Jane Crocker too was having a perfectly ordinary day. The sky outside was a patchy blue that seemed at once painted and entirely uninteresting, which was fortunate, since the recent attempt on her Life by those dastardly anarchists had left her in the jaws of a particularly stringent house arrest. The fact that she was utterly content to just stay inside and chat with her friends did not make her any less miffed about the situation though. She could understand that not everyone shared her enduring love for the sprawling mega corporation that had given her all her favourite products and recipes. Which ran her favourite theme park and produced her favourite TV-programs. The corporation that listened to her suggestions and made the world a little more convenient with every gizmo.

Well perhaps not “understood”, but she could conceive of how someone might acquire a wrong opinion like that. It was a shame but it happened. HOWEVER: In what lawless society did distaste for a firm make it okay to go blow up people's mail boxes? When you didn't like a brand you just bought from a different company or made your own product, and if enough people

agreed with you, then the competitor would win out in no time, she thought. That was how the market selected for quality, and BCCorp had a prodigious track record of coming out on top. Of course economies of scale, exclusivity contracts and vertical integration played a role. She wasn't naive, she had learned how the game was played from a young age, but even getting to a point where one could use those boons spoke to great business acumen, and out-of-the-blue success stories of daring entrepreneurs happened all the time, so blaming all failure on a lack of pre-existing capital sounded like the talk of sore losers.

This admittedly wasn't a situation she ever had to face, since all the things she wanted were already being made by CrockerCorp, but Jane was pretty sure that if she ever came across a useful thing being made by a less than savoury corporation, she would just make her own, better alternative and let catallactics handle the rest. She certainly wouldn't start trying to assassinate people like a madwoman.

Speaking of madness [affectionate (mostly)]: It was concerning to see Roxy sprinkle her emotional support with wild conspiracy theories like the idea that CrockerCorp itself was behind these acts of terror. There just wasn't a motive. By no means was Jane above considering outlandish explanations. She had read the good sir Arthur Conan Doyle's works cover to cover, and even before doing so, she had possessed a gut-level awareness that "once [one had eliminated] the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable must be the truth". But Lalonde never went out of her way to *actually eliminate* the rest. She just looked at the obvious, common sense reason for these attacks, which every reputable news outlet agreed with, and called it a "psyop by the batterwitch" or, more often than not, some ridiculous misspelling of those words. What was yet more concerning was that even the usually reasonable mister Strider seemed unduly sympathetic to these preposterous notions. It was maddening, and though their wild theories did not actually impact Jane directly, this was still her Life they were talking about, and it made her feel a little lonely. Maybe it was just the usual migraines getting her a bit grumpy.

At least Jake understood, despite the fact that his proposed solution was to "break into the lair of those ghastly fiends and show 'em what for". She giggled to herself. Sweet precious Jake.

If it were not for a sudden commotion downstairs, Jane might have seen another message etch its neon pink letters of imminent portent into the ad-cluttered Betty Bother UI, but she had already gotten up by this point and grabbed her Junior Battermaster's Bowlbuster Stirring Solution 50000 for... defence purposes? She wasn't quite sure why her muscles had done that.

ROXY: janey?

ROXY: not 2 liek change the sbhject or anything

ROXY: xcept totes 2 change the subject becuase we could not beat this pecious pony any deader if we tried n its clearly just mabking both of us sad

ROXY: but have u hard from UU recently??

ROXY: shes not responsding 2 my messages

ROXY: which isfair n all

ROXY: a girl nedds some me-tiem once in awhile 2 all b mysteruois and extratesterial

ROXY: *mysterious

ROXY: *extraterrestrial

ROXY: but now uhh

ROXY: okay pls dont write this fof as good ol rolal being drunk n whimsickle

ROXY: disregarg those typos lol

ROXY: what typops?

ROXY: but like the sky's coming closer

ROXY: n not in the metaphoprical sense in which teh skys obvivoulsy falling as we near the game

ROXY: but ass in the literal acutal realass sky is being way the fuck up in our bustness n that sure seems like a thign our alien friend would uusally want to b cryptric about

ROXY: lmao lookat my sic crypctricks all ollieing that falldown slat through max haunted catacombos

ROXY: kickfliks as disrespectfuel 2 the dead as they r 2 everyone else

ROXY: dork doesnt get it either but u kno how he is

ROXY: doesnt want u or jake to worry aboutit until he already fugured everything out n saved the day

ROXY: ~swoon~

ROXY: jane?

ROXY: le siiiiiign

And so, in the distal corners of chronology, away from the centre of collapse, *Horizon Approach* was as imminent as it was undiscovered by our heroes in the present.

Peeking through the balustrade, Jane could make out a short, avian looking man with ruffled brown hair and a gray trench coat talking to her father, who sat tied up on the floor. The sight was ridiculous on a number of counts. Not only was the living room an unmitigated mess that couldn't possibly have been caused in this amount of time, but no one could best dad in combat period. He must not have seen the attack coming- A step creaked slightly and for a moment the heiress feared that the intruder's eyes might have met hers, but his gaze moved on. Hurriedly she went back to her room and contacted the police via thought wave tiara-top, making sure to give a precise description of this criminal. It was the reasonable thing to do after all. Their insistence that she should hide in her room on the other hand was profoundly unreasonable. She was clearly the target, and anyone who got this far would surely find her up here. She would be a sitting duck. No. There were two options: climb out the window and run **or** go down there and free her dad. The path of the heiress was simple. It led through the fenestration, down a tree, and into the protection of an adult. Ideally a professional. But Jane Crocker was not just the heiress to a planet-spanning corporate empire. She was her father's daughter. The daughter of an erstwhile PI who fought injustice himself where he saw it. She had been raised on media which instilled in her the power of an individual to overcome all odds if they simply had sufficient pluck and gumption to do so. And so the window remained shut.

Back on the stairs she could see the horrible crook rifling through papers on the other side of the living room, occasionally stealing uneasy glances at the beloved stuffed ancestor next to their fireplace. The young Miss Crocker's chance could not have been any more obvious. She got a barber's knife from the bathroom and sneaked down that treacherous flight of escalation zigzags to where her dad was sitting.

The man looked astoundingly calm. His eyes glimmered with a wistful sadness, but also... could it be? Hope? With his impressive nose, the guardian pointed meaningfully to a note sticking out from his sleeve by a fraction of an inch. Whatever you say dad. Jane sheathed the blade for now and retrieved the slip of paper.

DAUGHTER.

IF YOU ARE READING THIS, IT MEANS THE DAY HAS COME FOR YOU TO LEARN THE TRUTH. THE DAY COMES FOR ALL OF US, AND IT IS NEVER EASY, BUT I BELIEVE IN YOU.

A GREAT SLEUTH LIKE YOURSELF WILL HAVE FIGURED OUT BY NOW THAT I AM ONLY PRETENDING TO BE CAPTURED SO PLEASE LEAVE EVERYTHING AS IT IS. A GOOD DETECTIVE DOES NOT DISTURB THE CRIME SCENE AFTER ALL. DON'T WORRY, THE WOMAN WITH US WAS A FRIEND OF YOUR POPPOP. HE TRUSTED HER AND SO DO I.

I LOVE YOU JANE, AND I WILL MISS YOU.

NOW HURRY.

Woman? When Jane turned around, the person in the trenchcoat stood behind her, looking tense but self-satisfied as they grabbed CrockerCorp's heiress and carried her to the car.

The wig came off with a few practised motions, whereas the face came off in a way Jane couldn't exactly describe. Rose just moved her hand across her countenance while pronouncing a headache-inducing macro-syllable full of non-existent guttural consonants, and everything was different. Not only were the eyes inexplicably and impossibly purple from one moment to the next, but it seemed like they had *suddenly been purple forever* in a manner that tore at the girl's memory like cogdis on steroids. Only the faint birdishness remained where her inner canthus culminated in a fine point, giving the eyes of Roxy's mom a hawkish quality. If magic were real, that would have been the only sensible explanation.

"A wonderful orchestration, don't you think? Your description will keep the police off of likely suspects for a while." Her smile was restrained, but so self-evidently nervous that it robbed the expression of any intended elegance.

The heiress looked dumbfounded at her captor. "but- but what if I had just screamed to get someone in the immediate vicinity to help?" or what if she had called a neighbour directly for that matter? What if she had charged at the intruder with her Bowlbuster? *What if?*

"Oh" Rose smiled beatifically "I did not make preparations for any counterfactual contingencies that did not come to pass. I knew how you would respond if you saw your father defeated. You would rightly believe that

a random neighbour stood no hint of a chance **and** doing so would have alerted me to your location."

"But I really thought about escaping through the window and-"

"Yes of course. I remember being fifteen and believing myself unpredictable. A charming misapprehension."

"But-"

"You would be wise to realize that true unpredictability lies relegated to the drab realm of inorganic matter. People have patterns and character arcs. A failure to predict the actions of a person always lies with you, not them."

Some part of Jane's mind wanted to disagree, but this sounded worryingly like something she herself (and any half decent detective for that matter) would also believe. Still, there was suspicion to be had with regards to a woman who let her teenage daughter indulge in inebriants so freely.

"Alright, Ms. Lalonde", she steadied herself "why do you hate CrockerCorp so much?"

For the first time since getting in the car, the woman's smile looked by any approximation effortless. As though she had once made a commitment to watch one movie per year and as though she'd had 2,800 miles of drive to come up with and grow fond of this joke. "We are getting to that, don't worry. You best start believing in Bildungsromans Miss Crocker, *because you're in one.*"

The Lives Of Others

June

It used to be that your house was the place away from everything. For good, for bad, just in general. A patch of reality oblivious to the outside world. Now Jake's forest cabin seems similarly deserving of that descriptor. More so, since your fortress of isolation has been diligently swallowed by that surrounding madness over the course of a month. The air here seems lighter somehow. Cleaner. More effortless. English lies on a thick antique leather sofa with his legs dangling over the armrest and reads a newspaper. He jolts upright like a startled cat when your form re-coheres out of the breeze.

JAKE: Oh thank you scads!

JAKE: Though theres really no need for you to burden yourself over her belongings.

JAKE: Im sure miss serket would get around to it.

JUNE: haha, i'm not sure i want her to get around to it?

JUNE: for now it's probably best to leave those two to cool off by themselves.

JUNE: and to not keep vris' stuff at my place where terezi can do gog knows what to it.

JUNE: coming from someone who knows the temptation of a good prank, that just doesn't feel responsible.

Your girlfriend also didn't have very many personal belongings in the first place, unlike Terezi who never left the house without bringing some garbage she found back home. Two boxes would probably have sufficed to deliver Vriska's sparse possessions to her new accommodation, but something felt off about that so you also brought a collection of furniture which is *technically yours* but which you don't really use. Maybe that's weird. Who knows. You've never done this. It's extra weird, because Jake is technically the richest person on the planet right now, but on the other hand you aren't sure he knows how money works. You aren't sure whether money even still knows how money works these days. There's a punchline in there somewhere, but either way giving him your spare refrigerator might not be the worst idea.

JAKE: Well ill just go ahead and ask and you can tell me to cut the cackle and put a sock in it if im being a bother.

JAKE: But are you okay?

JAKE: I cant purport to be any sort of expert on advanced relationship dynamics-

JAKE: Hell, i can barely get my head around the brass tacks of that polyamory noise jade and you practice.

JAKE: Not that theres anything wrong with it. My vacant boggling seems to simply be a universal constant of our great cosmic carousel which has to be accepted from time to time. *Chuckles anachronistically*

JAKE: It looks from the outside like an attempt to turn romance into one of those dread puzzle cubes as though matters of the heart were not already great enough a mystery to the inquisitive mind.

JAKE: I guess what im asking is: What does it actually mean that those two are...

JAKE: You know... taking a break at least?

JAKE: For you I mean?

JUNE: well no one's broken up with me :)

JUNE: i'll just have to auspistitizisize a little more.

JUNE: which is kind of always part of the deal?

JUNE: god, trolls are so weird for thinking that quadrant blurring is this strange and out there thing.

JUNE: oh man, i can feel about you this way but also this other way? at the same time? mind. blown.

JUNE: but i guess centuries of social engineering will do that to you.

JUNE: rolls eyes gender ways.

JUNE: yeah i wouldn't even worry about it too much. they're kind of always like that.

JUNE: it's weirdly exciting and like... liberating? to see people just explode when they need to explode instead of bottling it up.

JUNE: i wish they didn't do it in front of casey so much, but hey them's the breaks.

JUNE: they're sort of like martha and george from "who's afraid of virginia woolf"-

JAKE: Oh man i love that flick!
JAKE: The range richard burton can bring to the silver screen is a thing to behold.
JUNE: really? haha.
JUNE: i kind of found it super stressful when i first saw it.
JUNE: in like a "you can't do that" sort of way.
JUNE: it was still hilarious, but... tense, you know?
JAKE: Yes, and then that anxious waiting for the other shoe to drop with all of its little mysteries?
JAKE: One would think it doesnt have enough feet for all those shoes it threatens to wallop the audience with.
JUNE: exactly!
JUNE: man, we should do movie nights together. i kind of stopped doing those.
JUNE: anyway, yeah i'm fine.
JUNE: it'll be a bit more hopping around, the house will be a bit quieter for a while, but we'll figure it out :)
JAKE: Phew thats aces! I would have hated for my *fiddles with collar* situation to have been responsible for your relationship concking out.
JUNE: ...jake.
JUNE: you know that you're not responsible for being kidnapped, right?

Jake meets your gaze sort of nervously, indicating that the answer may not be quite the confident yes one hopes for, but you'll let it slide for now as you unpack Serket's minimalist wardrobe. He offers you a drink.

JUNE: where's vriska anyway?
JAKE: One of those outreach concourses for the enclave i gather. Mrs maryam thought she might be of use there.
JAKE: I used to think of myself as the outdoorsy type you know? A real man of adventure, but if im completely honest she puts me to utter shame in that department.
JAKE: I would not even know where to begin if i wanted to keep pace with or even track of that lass.

JUNE: but you're not..?

JAKE: Not what old gal? Spit it out.

JUNE: well often times when people move in together they're..

JUNE: which would be weird but...

Jade's grandpa spits out his beer and hastily wipes his mouth with the sleeve of his coat.

JAKE: Ah, i see how you got there what with the previous talk of romantic entanglements, but its a clear no on that front.

JAKE: I suppose were just both in a weird place at the moment.

JAKE: And after the whole incident at dirks when we were walking home we just really hit it off.

JAKE: I dont expect others to relate to this but for me its actually quite refreshing to have a friendship with no weird romantic overtones attached.

JAKE: Digging themselves into every corner and gunking things up.

JAKE: Thats a personal first for folks who arent my teen grandma.

JAKE: I suppose i should be flattered that my general buffoonery is perceived as attractive, but let me tell you it gets exhausting being this object of peoples desire.

JAKE: One is left having to second guess everything because folks just do not give you the straight dick when they want to get in your pants.

JUNE: lmao.

JAKE: I was on track to just go back to the manor you know.

JAKE: The manor!!!

JAKE: That big fuck-off marble palace which was never my style, which is far too spacious for one person and which still has janeys corpse right by the entrance!

JAKE: It gives me collywobbles just to think about.

JAKE: I must have been completely meshuga to even entertain the notion.

JUNE: oh god, i hadn't even thought about that.

JAKE: Good thing i had sage company.

JAKE: Miss serket immediately saw what a grade a folly it would have been.

JAKE: See i dread im just too quick to go along with those sorts of things without questioning them.

JAKE: So now ive got not only a swell new bud but also a life-coach of sorts.

JAKE: To break the programming as the kids say.

JAKE: She does seem to have a chip on her shoulder about mentoring people but really what doesnt that firebrand have a chip on her shoulder about?

On the one hand, the idea of your girlfriend being anyone's life coach makes you deeply nervous, but on the other Jake strikes you as one of the few people who might actually profit from that. You really really hope she doesn't think of him as a replacement Tavros. Oh well, you'll just intervene if things look like they're gonna blow up. There's a sparkle in his eyes. A genuine warmth you hadn't seen there in a while.

JUNE: hey, jake, can i tell you a weird thought?

JAKE: Indubitably! What could tickle a fella pinker than hearing the perplexing ponderings of his chums?

JUNE: hehe never stop talking like that.

JUNE: so when i first took terezi and vriska in i was a fucking mess.

JUNE: and somehow i thought that people couldn't tell because i was also apparently fucking stupid?

JUNE: depression does that to you.

JUNE: at that time we weren't dating. we didn't even think that they'd stay here on earth c. i was just being a safe haven.

JUNE: and for the first time since the game i got to feel useful.

JUNE: there was a half dead woman lying on my sofa and i was the only person who knew how to make soup.

JUNE: maybe that's over stating it.

JUNE: i had internet access, some vague childhood memories and the basic ability to follow instructions, rendering me mostly equipped to make soup.

JUNE: and that's not a lot, but it was enough to get out of bed.

JUNE: if some one had asked me about my friends i could have described them for days, but for myself it never felt like there was any sort of foundation. any thing beneath the surface.

JUNE: *dead name* likes these things *dead name* does those things. so i just got stuck. doing things because they were things i did. doing some thing else when some one told me to. smiling because smiling is a nice thing to do.

JUNE: and then terezi took a mug out of the sink and just scooped some of that soup directly out of the pot with it.

JUNE: and i made fun of her for it because "that's not how you do things".

JUNE: "that's a very silly and ridiculous action to perform, terezi, let me show you how it's done"

JUNE: and I demonstrated how a sensible human uses a ladle to transfer soup into a bowl.

JUNE: a ritual which has more steps and leaves you with a vessel that's less convenient since we weren't sitting at a table or any thing.

JUNE: and all of that was completely obvious to her, so she just looked at me and asked "WHY >:?".

JUNE: it sounds really silly in retrospect, but i had a week long mental break down over the mug ladle situation.

JUNE: a break down which literally transed my gender.

JUNE: because i had been doing that all my life. "go along with what your friends are telling you", because that's just what you do, "be a boy" because well of course you are.

JUNE: even if there was a "normal", what ever that means, why would i be bound by that?

JUNE: that's stupid.

JUNE: i was probably more extreme about this, hehe, but your story about the manor definitely sounds similar.

JUNE: and i would have definitely let rose lock me up in a dungeon if she told me that it was necessary.

JUNE: this might be a really shitty thing to say given... well ... jane. but your smile looks less painted on than it used to.

JUNE: i'm not trying to crack you or any thing. there's probably all sorts of reasons why some one might end up like us, it's just some thing i noticed.

JUNE: and i'm happy for you.

Jake's face rests solemnly on his folded hands, and something in his expression reminds you of your dad in a way that's much less off-putting than when Jane's father did it. You hung out with him for a while. For longer than you wanted to, really. Both to make him happy and because you thought that this uncanny feeling would go away eventually. Not even really uncanny, just... sad? He looked like this person you should have a strong emotional attachment to. He said the same corny things occasionally, but the moment you stopped squinting as hard as you could to maintain the illusion, he was just a guy who looked like your dad. A stranger with similar mannerisms who made you want to cry when you stared too deep into his eyes. Jake is meeting your gaze deliberately, and he's just far enough out of the uncanny valley for it to actually feel comforting.

JAKE: Shucks buster! I hadnt thought it was so obvious. Yes i fear thats a spot on analysis of some parts of the rusty old wire-box.

JAKE: Those eagle eyes must be a familial trait in you crockerberts.

JAKE: So many mistakes which could have been avoided if i had allowed myself to look inwards more.

JAKE: One would think that a boy from a monster infested pacific island would not be quite so bound by notions of social ought.

JAKE: But growing up with nothing but hollywood portrayals of what it means to be a hero probably left much of the same damage.

JAKE: Heh, it brings to mind my first feelings jam with the good doctor.

JAKE: I just kept babbling like i was working my way through a catalogue of platitudes on how one is supposed to deal with and think about loss.

JAKE: Making excuses for my friends who werent really there to support me.

JAKE: Making excuses for myself...

JAKE: After two hours of her keeping an open ear to my utter flapdoodle, she clicked her pen, looked me deep in the peepers and said "Jake, i get the feeling that youre just telling me what you think i want to hear. Thats not how this works."

JAKE: And it fell like scales from my eyes that i dont think ive ever done anything but that.

JAKE: Like one of those flummoxing auto-completion dealies i had cultivated a habit of "When in doubt: Say whats expected of you" the way a clodhopping gardener might cultivate their herbage.

JAKE: Even when i knew that i was being insensitive the veneer of jolly obliviousness was just such an easy front to hide behind.

JAKE: Not to call myself profound here or anything, far from it, but theres this phrase dirk used to quote when he was uncomfortable with the direction of a conversation.

JAKE: Was it cioran? Probably cioran. One of those impenetrable europeans.

JAKE: "Everything profound loves masks".

God, that's definitely something that could have happened to you. Why did you never hang out with Jake in that period before you withdrew completely? Maybe some escapist part of your brain saw that shallow smile, knew that it looked like your own, and decided to stay as far away as possible to avoid damage to your own mask. The lot of you really needed a bunch of equally maladjusted aliens to fix you, huh? And you guess those same aliens needed a bunch of humans to get over their set of hangups. It's all always so obvious from the outside that it makes you feel like an idiot.

JUNE: hehe, to authenticity!

JAKE: Right on!

You clink your bottles and laugh when one of them foams over.

JUNE: so what's with all those machine parts outside?

JAKE: Oh it seems like trolls dont have an analogue to motorbikes on their planet and miss serket got a real glimmer in her eyes when i explained those contraptions of terrestrial two wheeled badassitude.

JAKE: So theres a pair of bikes were building in the garage.

JAKE: This would probably be easier with a sketchbook modus but, well, im a more competent roboticist than i am a draftsman, and having a project to really put my hands and wits to is a wonderful reprieve.

You don't know what you were expecting, but it wasn't that. Still, It feels like he's thinking about something else.

JAKE: ...I talked to the un-incarcerated mister strider a few days ago to apologize on dirks behalf for that wild goose chase he was sent on.

JAKE: ...

JAKE: I killed her june. I killed janey.

JUNE: you-

JUNE: what?

Somehow a stream of bulbous tears has appeared beneath his eyes from one moment to the next. The back-pats you're giving Jake are a clumsy mix of awkward uncertainty and confusion.

JAKE: *Sobs* She was all alone in the mansion.

JAKE: Vulnerable to god knows what heinous blackguard.

JAKE: While i was out gallivanting and discussing plans for our breakup.

JAKE: And then! When i saw what had happened, my first priority was my own pathetic conscience.

JAKE: I just went ahead and wiped that responsibility so that i wouldnt have to deal with it.

JAKE: Even when i kept losing great ol chunks of time over the following days i didnt question it for fear of what that might imply.

JUNE: jake.

JAKE: How can a man like that ever hold his head high again?

JUNE: jake!

JAKE: How can he face the world knowing what a detestable coward lurks inside of him?

JUNE: jake, shut up!!

JAKE: Huh?

JUNE: could you have saved her if you had been home? i don't know? maybe?
JUNE: maybe you would have both died.
JUNE: or maybe the killer would have just waited for another opportunity.
JUNE: what's even the alternative? never leaving the house?
JUNE: you know that's stupid!
JUNE: dave told me what happened.
JUNE: you were in an incredibly traumatic situation. you weren't anywhere in the vicinity of sober, and you made a decision you regret.
JUNE: a decision which you didn't repeat now that you had the chance again.
JUNE: that's how you walk upright.

Jake is more than twice as broad as you and hugging him feels incredibly strange, though not in a bad way. He too seems to be getting some comfort out of it.



The basement-partition was dusty, cramped and only dimly lit by an exposed, energy-saving lightbulb. It belonged to an apartment which in turn belonged to an enclave within an enclave. The carefully constructed bubble of dramatized pseudo-reality which protected Jade, Dave and Karkat from unwanted attention in as far as it was still possible these days.

In actuality, the owner of this basement and its complementary flat was currently visiting his mentor over the holidays, while in the much more interesting canon of Karkat's unhinged real-time soap opera, he was following a trail of oblique messages left by someone pretending to be the ghost of his late kismesis. A drinker of royal lineage and refractory temper, currently neck deep in the tail end of an over-involved embezzlement scheme involving repeated mistakings- and thefts of identity. They're also dating the habitant's identical twin. It was all out of love, Jadekat explained, which was the entire problem, though pity and neurosis played supporting roles.

Terezi had only been told the latter version, but she was too preoccupied with other matters to question it. The investigator, the politician and the most

powerful creature on Earth C stood before a whiteboard filthy with the smeared palimpsest left behind by hastily drawn and erased arrows.

TEREZI: 4ND YOU AR3 C3RT41N TH4T H3 D1DN'T S3T TH1S UP H1MS3LF?

JADE: really????

JADE: youve seen dave time travel more than anyone, has it ever involved this sort of nested message nonsense?

KARKAT: YEAH, FOR SOMEONE WHO'S MENTALLY TIED INTO PRETZELS SO OBSCENE THAT MOST SAPIENT CREATURES WOULD IMMEDIATELY COMBUST AT THE SIGHT OF THEM, THE GUY IS ASTOUNDINGLY STRAIGHTFORWARD WHEN IT COMES TO ACTUALLY *DOING THINGS*.

KARKAT: I'M NOT SAYING HE COULDN'T COME UP WITH THIS, I'M SAYING THAT HE *WOULDN'T*.

KARKAT: AND HE CLEARLY FUCKING KNOWS THAT, OTHERWISE HE WOULDN'T BE FLINCHING LIKE A TRAUMATIZED SYLVAN COLLISION BEAST AT ANY AND ALL SOUNDS RIGHT NOW.

JADE: even under the more optimistic assumption that this is really some plan by future dave and not just a trap, its clearly using the loop to withhold some information from current dave and by extension from us

JADE: going out of his way to do so with a system hes never used before :/

JADE: so that would still be really incredibly worrying!!

TEREZI: 4ND H4V3 YOU 4CTUALLY T4LK3D TO STR1D3R 4BOUT TH1S CONC3RN OF YOURS >:?

JADE: obviously!!!

JADE: well

JADE: we talk to him about it when he brings it up

KARKAT: BUT MISTER "WHAT THE FUCK IS TRAUMA? I'M CHILL I PROMISE. JUST SO FUCKING CHILL. CHILL LIKE MISTER FREEZE'S POPSICLE WIFE EXCEPT WITHOUT THE TERMINAL ILLNESS, RENDERING THAT ENTIRE PLOTLINE HELLA SPURIOUS? LIKE WHY AM I FROZEN? WHO KNOWS? NERDS ARE FIGHTING ABOUT IT TO THIS DAY. THE AUTHOR REFUSES TO COMMENT. SHIT'S STRAIGHT UP ANARCHY IN THE UNWASHED TRENCHES OF DISCOURSE WHEN IT COMES TO THE ALL IMPORTANT QUESTION OF WHY ON EARTH I AM

THIS UNBELIEVABLY CHILL" IS A HAZMAT CARGO
TRAINWRECK OF NERVES RIGHT NOW AND YOU CANNOT
HONESTLY BELIEVE THAT IT WOULD BE ANYWHERE NEAR THE
GRUESOME SPRAY RADIUS OF HELPFUL IF WE KEPT DUMPING
MORE TIME TRAVEL BULLSHIT ON HIM IN THOSE PRECIOUS
FEW MOMENTS WHERE HE *ISN'T* PANICKING ABOUT IT
ORGANICALLY.

Terezi was tempted to ask whether that was a quote, but deep down she knew that it wasn't. The ability to generate Strider rants on the fly was much easier to learn than to un-learn. Almost contagious.

There was a strange quality in both of their gazes. More so in Jade's than in Karkat's. It felt like they were paying excess attention to the investigator's reaction. Like a neutral third opinion wasn't actually what they were looking for. They were testing her willingness to say the obvious. Not quite distrust, but scraping its surface. Vantas' Blood-shot eyes narrowed as he drank half a cup of boiling hot coffee in a single sip.

KARKAT: SO, WHY ON THE MOTHER GRUB'S PUTRID GREY
HELLHOLE WOULD SOMEONE DO THIS?

She hesitated, though tried not to let it show. In a perfect word the Investigator would be playing her cards much closer to her chest, but again and again reality threw a wrench into that approach. Carefully Terezi tapped her cane.

TEREZI: W3LL TH4T'S OBVIOUS, R1GHT? >:]
TEREZI: COM3 ON US3 YOUR TH1NKP4NS, 1 KNOW YOU H4V3
TH3M H1DD3N 4W4Y SOM3WH3R3!
TEREZI: WH4T WOULD H4V3 GON3 D1FF3R3NTLY 1F TH3RE
W3R3 NO L3TT3RS? 1F D4V3 TWO H4D JUST GOTT3N H1S
ORD3RS FROM SOMEON3 -4LL3G3DLY D4V3 THR33- 4ND
G1V3N TH3M TO D4V3 ON3?
JADE: hmm, there would be no possibility of a mind
wipe for a start

Cute theory. Terezi smiled like a woodchipper and made a buzzer noise.

TEREZI: WHY? TH3R3'S NO PO1NT M1ND W1P1NG D4V3 ON3.
H3'S CLU3L3SS 4NYW4Y 4ND 1T DO3SN'T S33M L1K3 H3'S
MISS1NG T1M3
TEREZI: ON TH3 OTH3R H4ND, 1F TH3 PL4N W4S JUST TO
M1ND W1PE D4V3 TWO 4T SOM3 PO1NT, TH3 SCH3M3 1S
4LSO R3DUND4NT

TEREZI: TH3 L3TT3R COULD H4V3 34S1LY G1V3N H1M 4LL TH3 1NFORM4T1ON H3 N33D3D WH3N H3 N33D3D 1T, 4ND TOLD H1M TO D3STROY 1T B3FOR3 R3L4Y1NG TH3 M1SS1ON TO D4V3 ON3

TEREZI: TH3R3 WOULD B3 NO GROUNDS FOR SUSP1C1ON 1N TH4T SC3NAR1O B3C4US3 W3 WOULDN'T KNOW 4BOUT TH3 L3TT3RS

TEREZI: 4 P3RF3CT CR1M3 1N 4S F4R 4S SUCH 4 TH1NG 3X1STS. P3RF3CT 1F ON3 D1SR3G4RDS TH3 WR3TCH3DN3SS

TEREZI: SO WHY D1D TH3Y DO 1T L1K3 TH1S? WH4T'S D1FF3R3NT?

The investigator drew a few more lines onto the whiteboard.

TEREZI: TH3 ORD3R >:]

TEREZI: 1F TH3 LOOP 1S ST4BL3, D4V3 TWO KNOWS WH4T TH3 OUT3R L3TT3R S41D, SO H3 KNOWS TH3 4LL3G3D R1SK.

TEREZI: 1F H3 TRUSTS D4V3 THR33 4T TH1S PO1NT, H3 W1LL NOT M3SS W1TH TH3 1NSTRUCT1ONS. SO TH3 ONLY W4Y H3 G3TS TO TH3 1NNER 3NV3LOP3 1S TO COMPLY W1TH ST3P ON3

TEREZI: 4ND TH3 1NN3R 3NV3LOP3 T3LLS H1M TO G3T B4CK TO TH3 FUTUR3, WH1CH H3 H4S 4LSO 4LR34DY S33N H1MS3LF DO B3C4USE H1S OWN D4V3 TWO TRUST3D TH3 4UTHOR

TEREZI: 1F H3 H4D JUST B33N TOLD TH3 CONT3NT OF BOTH 3NVELOP3S UPFRONT, H3 WOULD 4LR34DY H4V3 TH3 1NFORM4T1ON CONT41N3D 1N TH3 1NN3R M3SS4G3 B3FOR3 H3 G1V3S D4V3 ON3 TH3 M1SS1ON

TEREZI: TH3 L3TT3R STRUCTUR3 GU4R4NT33S TH4T TH3 S3LF FULF1LL1NG LOOP G3TS C4RR13D OUT *B3FOR3* D4V3 TWO G3TS TH4T 1NFORM4T1ON

TEREZI: M34N1NG TH4T H3 C4N'T 1NT3RF3R3 W1TH 1T 4NYMOR3 W1THOUT M4K1NG H1S OWN EX1ST3NC3 1MPOSS1BL3

TEREZI: SO WH4T3V3R TH4T 1NN3R 3NV3LOP3 CONT41NED WOULD H4V3 C4US3D D4V3 TWO NOT TO COMPLY 1F H3 H4D 1T FROM TH3 ST4RT

TEREZI: 4T L34ST 1N TH3 4SS3SSM3NT OF TH3 P3RSON WHO M4Y OR M4Y NOT B3 D4V3 THR33 OR "3XTR4FUTUR3 D4V3"

TEREZI: BUT FOR SOM3 R34SON 1T 1S ST1LL N3C3SS4RY FOR D4V3 TWO TO H4V3 TH4T 1NFORM4T1ON. OTH3RW1S3 1T COULD H4V3 JUST B33N L3FT OUT 4LLTOG3TH3R

After a long silence they both nodded simultaneously.

KARKAT: AND WHO DOES THAT SORT OF EXCRUCIATINGLY OVER-ENGINEERED STRATAGEM SOUND LIKE?

TEREZI: W3LL, C3RT41NLY NOT 3NGLISH 1F TH4T'S STILL YOUR GU3SS >:]

KARKAT: WOW OKAY, FUCK YOU. I SUSPECTED JAKE OF *THE MURDER*, NOT OF ALL NEFARIOUS GOINGS ON THIS SIDE OF OUR WORTHLESS CHRONOLOGY. JEGUS CHRIST GIVE ME SOME CREDIT.

KARKAT: AND IT WAS A GOOD THEORY *AT THE TIME*.

JADE: it **really* wasn't*

TEREZI: 1'LL H4V3 TO S1D3 WITH H4RL3Y ON TH1S

TEREZI: J4K3 W4S N3V3R 4 GOOD TH3ORY

KARKAT: ...

TEREZI: 1T SOUNDS LIKE M3, DO3SN'T 1T?

TEREZI: TH4T *1S* WH4T YOU W4NT TO H34R, R1GHT?

TEREZI: H1J4CK1NG D1RK'S L1TTL3 PLOY 4ND US1NG 1T FOR MY OWN 3NDS

TEREZI: W3LL 1T DO3SN'T

TEREZI: 1T SOUNDS L1K3 4 P4RODY OF M3

TEREZI: 4H4H4H4!

TEREZI: 1F 1 W4S TRY1NG TO FUCK YOU OV3R, K4RK4T, DO YOU HON3STLY THINK YOU COULD T3LL? >:]

Calliope

Your aim is scholarly just as much as it is sentimental as you pen your opus. It permits historical fact to be the clay from which love and reverence are wrought. A particular source however is giving you trouble. Reading the serpentine prose of Rose Lalonde makes it impossible to be even remotely objective. It is a part of you in all the best and all the worst ways. On a desolate rock, bathed red by a supergiant, her words were once the only thing that gave you hope before you met your friends. It was your lifeline, your primary source of joy and escapism, and you loved it dearly. The problem is just that while you have climbed out of that hell, the rope still dangles. The anchor still lies where it was cast all those years ago, leading back to an era and a place that would forever be lifetimes ago and exactly like yesterday. Much closer with every artful flourish of Lalondian circumlocution.

This book is different of course. It is not the all important tome of your childhood, nor is it the troubling masterpiece of *The Complacency*, in whose Calmasis you've had the repeated misfortune of finding yourself. This book is an artefact from the munti-fractal nothingness you left behind. A Lichtenberg slice of what could have been, but wasn't. And yet the unbearable familiarity of this style, of these turns of phrase, makes it impossible to read the text as a glorified hypothetical. There was a Jane Crocker. A real, concrete Jane who lived this Life. Whose story was worth telling and of whom nothing remains but an echo. There is a cruel beauty to the furthest ring, you think. It permits everything to pass so long as it does not matter. It contains everything in exactly as far as it devours everything which stops serving the alpha timeline. Viscous, view-blurring tears are welling up in your eyes and you think you might be shaking as *Cassiopeia the Effusive* pushes herself into your cheek sympathetically and absorbs some of it with her fur. You pet the loyal creature.

ROXY: hey callie
ROXY: callie its fine im here
ROXY: take a break
ROXY: come ill get us some tea! pls

You wipe away a tear.

CALLIOPE: i'm afraid i have to finish this chapter.
u_u
CALLIOPE: her wriggling day is coming Up and i need
to be done before-
ROXY: and it would be great n wonderful if that
worked out
ROXY: but there will b a next one
ROXY: n its still just a day
ROXY: no one will mind if u dont finish janes
biography by then
ROXY: janey wouldnt mind
ROXY: shed b happy 2 know that u took a break when
u needed one
ROXY: and u super fucking need one
ROXY: come on. tea.

It takes a while for the beverage to calm you, but eventually it does. The idea of all the souls out there, forgotten and alone is just too sad.

CALLIOPE: thank yoU, roxy ^u^;

CALLIOPE: i think i did need that.
CALLIOPE: how are things going with the responder system?
CALLIOPE: have yoU figUred oUt why it went...
CALLIOPE: my, it has been a while since i got to indUlge in the pUn, bUt...
CALLIOPE: rogUe?

They look at you, vaguely confused. Whenever Roxy gets lost in a problem, they forget that other people aren't in their head— that they have to catch everyone else up to the things that became obvious along the way.

ROXY: ooooh right
ROXY: yeah i sleuthed that shit 2 the max pretty much immediately
ROXY: fucking ez
ROXY: since then ive just been digging thru the memory banks for anything spicy
ROXY: that lil guy didnt go rogue
CALLIOPE: i'm... pretty sUre he did.
ROXY: noupe
ROXY: he did exactly what he was programmed 2 do
ROXY: first law of striderian robotics: theres always a reason 2 worry abt jake english
ROXY: n in this case the reason 2 worry was dirk himself
ROXY: hes the one who went rogue
ROXY: will that elusive guy ever stop 4d chessing himself? who knows!
CALLIOPE: yoU soUnd frUstrated.
ROXY: hmm
ROXY: yea i guess i am
ROXY: like this is SO OBVIOUS
ROXY: this is such a dumb mistake 2 make
ROXY: n its such a dirk mistake 2 make
ROXY: n youd sorta think that after years of listening 2 him struggle to understand social dynamics n being outplayed by his own creations— that id start 2 understand that hes fallible
ROXY: like dont get me wrong, dirks a genius
ROXY: but IM a genius, and i sure as fuck know that that doesnt stop ME from being an idiot

ROXY: the entire day ive been thinking: man, mom is so big brained for understanding that dirk can b controlled

ROXY: that u can just play him 4 his own good the way he always tries to

ROXY: but tbh that isnt such an impressive idea

ROXY: its only impressive 2 me cause i was introduced to that angular nerd when we were both pretty much babies n he seemed 2 kno everything

ROXY: or at least he acted like it lol

ROXY: whereas rose never had that perception to overcome

ROXY: he was never the only other human @ the end of the world

ROXY: he was just a guy

ROXY: i would have literally gone 2 his cell being like "yo distri, u need a grappling hook or something to get out of here n pull the same bullshit all over again?" lmao

ROXY: real fucking dumbass hours

CALLIOPE: no roxy, i cannot abide that! :U

CALLIOPE: yoU are marvellouS and brilliant, and sometimes that sort of distance is simply necessary to see things clearly.

CALLIOPE: i think he's the same way about yoU. he thinks yoU can do anything, Understand everything. he thinks yoU're a perfect moral compass. ^u^

ROXY: lol no he doesnt

CALLIOPE: i have years worth of messages from the man that beg to differ.

CALLIOPE: it's somewhat difficUlt to believe that he never told yoU in person.

ROXY: huh

ROXY: i guess he has? i just never thought that he actually meant it

ROXY: like maybe he was complimenting me so id feel better n stop drinking or something like that?

ROXY: man thats dysfunctional when i say it out loud

ROXY: 4 as much as the five of us were the only thing keeping us going, we sure screwed each other up in a lot of ways

ROXY: maybe the prollycule can fix him. le shrug

CALLIOPE: prollycUle?

ROXY: oh my gosh im kidding callie

ROXY: not that it wouldnt b totes cute but...

ROXY: am i kidding?

ROXY: call me crazy, but its not like there isnt chemistry between those nerds

ROXY: probs just my trigger happy gaydar speaking, i mean can u imagine

ROXY: anyway, u want 2 talk about the amazing adventures of alt!jane?

CALLIOPE: hehe, i woUld!

CALLIOPE: bUt yoU'll have to forgive me if i start crying again.

CALLIOPE: it's qUite the cockUp, really. these fancifUl what-ifs Used to be my one soUrce of joy, and somehow my brother rUined even those for me.

CALLIOPE: ...

CALLIOPE: tosser.

ROXY: callie have i ever told u how cute it is 2 hear u curse?

CALLIOPE: every time i do it. ^u^

ROXY: yesss

ROXY: ...

ROXY: do u ever think that if u could go back n say like the right words in the right order at the right moments-

ROXY: if u did all the frame perfect intersocial inputs-

ROXY: that u could have stopped him from becoming horrible?

ROXY: n like avoided the whole predomination thing?

There isn't a day where you don't think about it, but that's probably not a very reassuring thing to hear. You can tell that they're thinking about Jane – that they want to know whether they could have led her onto the path of this version or something similar. Jane was not Caliborn. Not remotely. Jane meant well and your brother never meant anything but harm, but right now that doesn't matter.

CALLIOPE: no.

CALLIOPE: i think i was lying to myself from the start by thinking that he coUld be swayed.

CALLIOPE: he was a horrible little gremlin who had not a single redeemable cell in his body.

CALLIOPE: every thoUght his brain ever prodUced was awful and his hands never did anything bUt deliberately caUse pain.

CALLIOPE: but i'm also an idiot, hehe. i woUld try every time. i woUld go back again and again and sUbject myself to his torment.

CALLIOPE: he doesn't deserve the help.

CALLIOPE: and i don't deserve the pain. i know that.

CALLIOPE: maybe there's something biological i can blame it on, bUt whether that's trUe or not really doesn't matter.

CALLIOPE: maybe it's jUst that he was the only person i had for too long.

CALLIOPE: it's a bit bathetic honestly

CALLIOPE: bUt there will always be the vision of a timeline in which it worked. in which it was all worth it.

CALLIOPE: thoUgh of coUrse they woUld still be like this jane: better for the worse.

CALLIOPE: echoes left behind by the alpha timeline for not meeting its conditions.

CALLIOPE: a tale fizzling oUt. a joke withoUt a pUnchline.

ROXY: lmao callie. shes not less real

ROXY: shes not an echo!

ROXY: by that definition im an echo

ROXY: roxy primes dead n the batterwitch killed them

ROXY: alt!jane is a real, wonderful person living a real, wonderful life, n she seems 2 b doing well

ROXY: cant we just b happy about that?

ROXY: who cares that the narrative doesnt think its important?

ROXY: dirk maybe, n look where it got him

CALLIOPE: yes, maybe yoU're right.

CALLIOPE: thoUgh i still can't help bUt find it incredibly sad. u_u

CALLIOPE: why woUld the tragic story have to be trUe?

ROXY: biiiiiig fucking question

ROXY: the biggest, baddest question out there maybe

ROXY: the only question that ever merited being
asked by anybody
ROXY: "does it have 2 b like that?"

Intermission: Family

6 Years, 7 months and 24 days until Punchline.

"It's not that I don't *believe* them", said the stubborn sceptic sceptically, "they seem like perfectly peasant people, and when they say that they've uncovered CrockerCorp's involvement is some nefarious antics, then that probably really is what they think. But people are wrong sometimes. They might just be *confused*."

"Confused." Rose's voice was biting, but stopped just shy of "dead parents" territory. She hadn't yet earned the degree of trust necessary to make an appeal to emotion convincing, lest she too wanted to be perceived as "confused". A subtler touch was required. Beneath the frustration, the rebel actually quite liked her ward. Partially as a puzzle, but mostly as a person. Jane was sharp, charming, eloquent and unbelievably brainwashed, which of course wasn't her fault.

"Good." intoned Rose after a long pause, the style of which these unending stretches of featureless road accommodated so willingly. "A small room full of self-selected people making barely substantiated claims *shouldn't* be convincing. An unaffirmed note by your father, averring my trustworthiness, isn't either. At least not after you've seen what I can do with my face. Even this very act of pointing out the myriad ways in which I am of yet dubious might be no more than a manipulative tactic contrived and selected for its capacity to generate trust."

Of all the responses Jane had expected, this wasn't one of them. It flew entirely in the face of anything Roxy ever told her.

"You fundamentally mistake my aim, if you think the goal is to render you gullible. You mistake my ends if you so much as believe that means to this effect could serve them. There is a reason why we travel in disguise. Suspicion is good. It is necessary. It is vital. The ability to trust demarcates the boundary between a potent team and an ineffectual lone wolf, yes, but the ability to distrust demarcates that between a woman and a corpse. One has to learn the latter before attempting the former, and not for a second can we afford that this skill of yours might atrophy. However-" the trap had been loaded and was waiting to shut "scepticism is rarely neutral. You don't apply the same degree

of distrust to the precepts you grew up with, to the marketing you have been fed, to socially alleged normality, despite the fact that you know that people are sometimes wrong and sometimes malicious. I want to make you more sceptical, not less so. If the claims made today are false, it should be easy enough to debunk them. To simply assume that they are false however –to discard them without digging at all– is foolish.”

The two of them were heading through Arizona in a boxy convertible, which allowed Rose to smoke without exposing the teenager next to her to excess carcinogens. “An ugly habit”, Jane had called it, and doing so had propelled her captor into an uncharacteristic multi-minute laughing fit. A lot warmer than she usually let on, though this of course didn't help with the confusion. What the heiress didn't know was that Roxy's mom had once said the exact same thing to her grandfather, in a setting which couldn't be more dissimilar from this one. History always rhymed in those places where it wasn't running out. While a constant rushing of air meant that they had to speak slightly above comfortable volume, the sensation of the wind in their hair more than made up for this inconvenience. Come to think of it, Jane hadn't had a headache ever since she left, and maybe the ventilation had something to do with that. She was beginning to suspect that her house might have had a gas-leak. Worrying.

The heiress had settled on an even shorter hairstyle as part of her new look, and the awareness of her scalp that came with that was unfamiliar in a pleasant way. Her friends would barely recognize her, she mused.

“I can't wait for Roxy to see this makeover.”

Rose played off the sting associated with those syllables well enough. “Roxy? What a lovely name.” It wasn't too surprising that Jane had friends beside the late Ms English's grandson of course, though nonetheless the fact that this moniker had never popped up in her more than extensive research was deeply odd.

“Well I would hope that you like it!”, Jane chuckled. “Oh by the way I should message her. It's quite unlike us to have this degree of radio silence... I assume it's fine to tell your daughter whom I'm travelling with?”

The car came to a standstill in the desert almost as quickly as Rose's brain did. Coherence may have been deteriorating now that she'd left the beaten path,

but it shouldn't –couldn't– be deteriorating so quickly. “My daughter won't be born for a long time”, she said in the tone of a dark prophecy. With the cruel gravity this fact had always held to her. Jane gave the woman a “not you too” sort of look, though this degree of commitment to narrative pseudo-reality was of course entirely expected from the author of CotL in retrospect. “...Ms Lalonde..?”

It took a while and a number of undignified, directionless screams into the arid nothingness, but in the end, the explanation appeared quite sensible to Rose. Another one of Jane's friends, who was claiming to be, and almost certainly was, an alien, had used oblique technology to engineer a chat-client-mediated cross-time connection which allowed Jane and Jake to communicate with their *other* friends, Roxy Lalonde and Dirk Strider. That such a thing would be impenetrable to regular device-monitoring was obvious, of course, but the fact that the Noble Circle of Horrorterrors hadn't alerted Rose to it could only mean that they were massive dicks. Manipulative dicks who knew that this truth would have caused her to blow up the timeline much earlier. There was no amount of screaming which would do it justice. Evidently deeply unnerved by all of this, Jane was already pulling her Thoughtwave Tairatop from the bag and threatening to put it on when Lalonde's hand caught hers just in time.

Rose was pushing the words out with visible effort, but somehow she managed. “Yes. We need to talk to her –gravely need to talk to her–, but absolutely not through *that thing*.”

The rebel would have liked to have gotten a little more time to build trust before it got to this, but the moment was now or never. The computing device felt awfully sleek and over-branded between her fingers. It was the sort of aluminium-wrought status symbol that she wouldn't even deign to touch under different circumstances, but different circumstances were not in stock. Despite curses whispered under Rose's breath, the Outer Gods were not too offended to lend their power. They hadn't yet entirely run out of use for this reality, it seemed, or perhaps they were just amusing themselves with an old toy they had grown fond of. Either way, grimdark majyyks reached into the glorified headset and boosted a few frequencies above the stygian threshold of subliminality beneath which they had previously dwelled.

“**CONSUME**”, it droned in what felt painfully like the resonant frequency of a human skull. “**CEASE REPRODUCTION**”. “**OBEY OBEY OBEY**”. The author glanced over her shades meaningfully, hoping desperately that Jane would deem the probability that she could just produce this effect out of nowhere lower than the probability that it was a genuine feature of her computer. The pause was anxious before truth triumphed. From the first syllable onward, Crocker had recognized that imperious, syrupy voice. Horribly familiar despite never having heard it consciously. It scratched at her brainstem and made her nauseous. Most significantly though, it brought the migraine back. Jane took the device from Rose's hand and threw it onto the road in a fit of fury, before stomping it to pieces. “I- I could log in on some other computer?”

For a moment Rose considered the idea, then she shook her head. There wasn't anything secure enough to hand, and besides: Someone else also had a right to know about this. “We'll have to visit an ally of mine”, she sighed “...though he might not be particularly pleased to see us.”

This, perhaps, was the understatement of howevermuch was left of the century. Dave Strider had been pacing in circles around his temporary living room for almost an hour, talking mostly to himself by the feel of it. Jane got lost on most of the specific points, in part because she couldn't tie the names and mission codes to anything concrete and in part because the man kept descending into quiet mumbling. In most ways he wasn't too different from his media persona, with the main caveat that it seemed a lot less deliberate in person. Rose allowed her “ally” to keep going without a word of interruption, though she did leave to brew a round of tea at some point while he was ranting about how she had jeopardized everything by bringing Crocker here (or more fundamentally by having kidnapped her in the first place). The rebels were in no position to sustain this degree of provocation, he said, and eventually someone would find out. “There were plans-”

“The plans have changed” interrupted Rose finally. “There is a point in the future where reality itself runs out of oxygen. When it runs out of neon, then magnesium then silicon and finally –in as far as that term still means anything– out of time. That point has come significantly closer.” She stated it calmly as though this meant anything.

“Oh, right, more eldritch bullshit I presume.”

“The most eldritch.”

“Cool cool. Can't ever have too much eldritch bullshit.” It wasn't quite that Dave had calmed down per se, and more that he had tired himself out in the process of trying to displace an immovable object with a flood of syllables. “So why are you in Texas?”

“Because *Jane here* has a direct link to our descendents, and I fear that their situation is more dire than even ours.” The man stopped and tensed his jaw. The analogue of a brow-raise. He'd gotten all too accustomed to Rose clumsily referring to the young girl in front of him as “the heiress”, and the fact that she'd stopped meant business. He also knew that she would never make light of this topic in particular.

“What level of encryption are we talking here?”

“Is there a universe in which you expect an answer other than ‘the best you've got’”

“Aight. gimme a sec.”

Things were worse than expected. Reality had already begun losing interest in their own timeframe, so counterfactual, circumstantially-simultaneous futures didn't stand a chance. Rose thought it unwise to mention that this level of *Holistic Apocalypse* was coming for them as well. For now at least.

Bubble hell already bled into the fringes of Roxy's ocean colony, and a few additional miles out to sea the world stopped existing altogether. She was talking to Jane now. Strider was briefing his descendant in the other room. Nothing but grim certainty poisoning the air. Most funerals were profoundly cheerful affairs in comparison to the pain and despair that seeped out of every corner of this random Huston apartment.

Roxy had talked to an alien ghost earlier today, who was by the sound of it some manner of catgirl, and because she had never seen a physical person in her life, she had managed to cry tears of joy despite the fact that she was doomed. Her daughter was so unbelievably strong, Rose thought. Stronger than any child should ever have to be.

“Ms Lalonde..?” Jane gestured towards her from the monitor, tears in her eyes. She was regretting everything she had ever failed to believe, every

insensitive thing she had ever said about Roxy's story. With all her heart she wanted to crawl through the screen and hug her friend. "...she wants to speak to you."

Of course she did. Rose would have to pay for her mistake, and she would not run from responsibility like a coward. Her knuckles where pale as ash where she had been digging chewed-off fingernails into her palm.

"Mom!!!!" Roxy too was crying miserably, but there was a smile beneath it. "Oh my gosh I can't believe I actually get to see you!". The rebel tried to apologize for everything, for the entirety of her daughter's life and now for its end. Said daughter on the other hand wouldn't have any of it. It turned out that she did not hate the mother who had left her alone in a dystopia she could not prevent. An inconceivable idea. They talked for hours and hours, interrupted only by pauses of incredulous sobbing as they stared at each other. They talked about death and wizards. About the game and the world which wrought it. About their lives and their friends and their stories.

"I was gonna do it anyway, you know?" whispered Roxy "To spite the Batterwitch I wanted so badly to stop us from playing the game. Take that bitch down with me all kamikaze. I would have smugly doomed the universe and never even would have gotten to meet you... Except out there maybe... Eventually" She turned to gaze into the white nothingness that surrounded her. "Thinking about 'out there eventually' a bunch right now tbh." Suddenly the daughter chuckled "That's a lie. I've never thought anything except 'out there eventually' my whole entire life. Over and over twenty-four fucking seven. Comes with the terrain of living in a shitty fake dystopia novel I guess, so I think what I'm saying is that I'm mad prepared for non-existence premium."

Rose was speechless. "How are you not scared?! Or angry? I would understand! I *do* understand. I-"

"Lmao. I'm fucking terrified, mom. I mean look at this shit. But like- Nepeta seems happy enough... I've just got to off myself before the time runs out, right? To get ghostified? That scares the hell out of me -of course it does- but at the same time it's pointless to all struggle and shriek 'ere the daybreak about it, right? Sometimes you just lose."

That line caught her attention. It was added to the collection of literature left behind for Roxy in one of her mother's darker moments, feeling very much like the Lucifer of Nemesis. Both had unquestionably *seen the dark universe yawning* in their own distinct ways, though the conclusions reached appeared fundamentally divergent.

The girl from the future wiped a tear from her cheek and smiled. "Guess I need to get going, huh?" as though marching to the gallows were the most normal thing in the world. "take care of Jane, okay? And when you go all final showdown on Sea Hitler... you've got to give her the meanest effing left hook from me! Punch her lights out!"

A grim nod was all Rose could muster. "I love you Roxy."

"I love you too, mom."

When the two of them –partially dissolved, partially hardened– reconvened with Dave, his shades were hiding far less than he would have liked them to.

"So." asked the culture-jammer "What's the plan?".

Punchlines

Aradia

There are many words which could be used to describe the new addition to your household. A number of them are positive, but “exhausting” certainly has a place on the list. Out in the furthest ring, Dirk Strider had been a name whispered in hushed tones. A force of immanent catastrophe ripping through paradox space on a quest for relevance. A beginning of an end. A beast of many things but mostly prey. Obviously you were a huge fan. You're always a fan when things go trans-marginal and come apart. When the bubble bursts. When nothingness fractures. There's an intensity there – a fire. Something essentially and rapturously ephemeral. The light of an explosion.

Maybe you're speaking from a position of privilege as someone who survived death, but you never got the dreariness others ascribe to cessation. The old leaves room for the new. Plants grow upon compost. You have always adored the fossils you found, without ever being unaware of how fossils are made. They were little presents death had left you, and you delighted in them. There's room to be sad and room to be excited. There's memory and potential, all filed to a needle-point in a single instant when the fuel ignites. Everyone likes a sunset.

Few, on the other hand, liked Dirk out there in bubble hell, not that you ever personally met the ultimate instance. You don't think so at least. Somehow you find it difficult even to recall him. The Prince of Deltritus feels incredibly distant from this cottage. Like a faded memory. The version in your kitchen meanwhile is just a bit of a dork.

ARADIA: what are you doing O_O

It's 9pm, which is to say the middle of the night in this corner of the planet, and the smell of onions, herbs and spices has drawn you out of your bedroom. Before you, Dirk stands surrounded by a frankly comedic quantity of pots, pans and bowls.

SOLLUX: Oh no

Your boyfriend stumbles in just behind you, hugs you from the back and kisses you on the neck.

SOLLUX: i asked him s0mething about human f0od yesterday and he said he'd have t0 demonstrate

DIRK: Yeah obviously. I mean to even begin answering any specific question we have to start with a bedrock understanding of earth's culinary history.

DIRK: And talking about food is like dancing about architecture. Which is to say perfectly doable if you aren't a coward, but massively inefficient.

DIRK: So that's the plan. An abbreviated history of human cookery, starting from the first agricultural revolution, because really we have to be reasonable and cut the curriculum off somewhere.

ARADIA: of course

SOLLUX: what's this smell?

DIRK: Right, sure, let's start there.

DIRK: It's a mix of things. Terpenes, thiols, aromatics. The structure matters less than the function.

DIRK: Most of these potent smelling compounds were evolved by earth flora as a defence mechanism to deter pests, fungi, all that shit.

DIRK: It's the chlorobiotic equivalent of prey kicking in wild panic when the teeth sink in. From the plant's perspective, we're not supposed to like it. We're supposed to contort our face into the expression universally understood as "bluh" and stop like lesser animals.

DIRK: But humans don't tick like that.

DIRK: Humans go "fuck this noise. Top of the food chain, baby!" and maybe build a monument somewhere.

DIRK: We're survival-honed sociopaths, so we evolved to enjoy the kicking. To get off on the manic battle for dear life occurring right between our molars.

DIRK: Don't even think about any of that primal cell horror we're perpetrating while waffling on about pleasant garlic notes or an aromatic spiciness like we know shit.

DIRK: The screaming sounds like music.

DIRK: It's fucked up.

DIRK: Real fucked up.

DIRK: Deliciously fucked up.

DIRK: You want some?

The survival-honed sociopath in your kitchen has been cooking throughout the night from the looks of it and you don't want to know what happens when you refuse. At least it's nice to know that your two cultures aren't so different in many ways. Or maybe that's upsetting. Maybe the word you're looking for is "upsetting". Maybe there's a difference.

ARADIA: is there anything we can help you with
DIRK: Nah just go back to sleep, it'll be done tomorrow.

ARADIA: you are aware that rose gave us instructions right :D

ARADIA: either youre letting us help you or were dragging you back to your bed by force

Dirk examines your face for a while before he sighs and puts the pan down, evidently convinced that this isn't a bluff. There's a threshold above which no one can convince themselves that a smile does not constitute a threat, and yours lies above it by default. A girl has to compensate for blunt teeth somehow.

DIRK: Fine. There's some vegetables over there which need to be julienned.

SOLLUX: juli-what?

DIRK: cut into matchsticks. Like this.

He breezes through half of them by himself before you can wrangle the knife out of his hands, but at least it's a start. Not a good one, but a start. When you look over at Sollux you find him subtly smiling.

ARADIA: youre enjoying this

SOLLUX: i mean yeah, weve wanted t0 learn co0king for m0nths, right?

ARADIA: ive never seen you be this okay with being woken up in the middle of the night

SOLLUX: alright fine, can y0u not twist my bulge ab0ut it? it's nice having something t0 do and being all earth human d0mestic about it

ARADIA: even though hes a complete lunatic

SOLLUX: aa we're all c0mplete lunatics, it's time we come t0 terms with th-ah fuck. cut myself

DIRK: I heard that.

SOLLUX: i wasnt whispering asshole.

DIRK: Wow, insulting the guy who's keeping your soul together, great strategy.

SOLLUX: hehe yeah right. like that's a remotely credible threat from the kook who cares more about this puzzle box than about his actual life

You had mostly figured out what was going on with Sollux for a while now (Karkat wasn't exactly good at keeping secrets), but it was only when you adopted Dirk that this fact was revealed to him. Your boyfriend was trying to be subtle about something when Strider flatly told him that he was acting like an idiot and that you knew already. It was an interesting first day of living together to be sure.

SOLLUX: ...i didnt even spare my team leader this immensely charming acerbic wit of mine, even though he *actually* would have just let me die.

SOLLUX: if you really think that i wouldnt rather have my cognition sponge snorted through a straw by space calamari than bite my tongue then you're way bigger of a moron than i've been led to believe- fuck me this knife is sharp

DIRK: No you wanna-

DIRK: Jesus Christ do you not know how a claw-grip works?

DIRK: Please tell me you're fucking with me? Please tell me that's grub sauce. Please be grubsauce.

DIRK: Ahh fuck.

DIRK: I'll get bandages. Don't maim yourself in the meantime.

An avuncular smile flickers across your lips as Dirk leaves the kitchen, and the two of you start chuckling almost simultaneously. Maybe your time as *maitre d' to the dream bubbles* really is over. You can feel yourself becoming attached in a way you have only once before, and this time the ground seems much more solid. Unlikely to disintegrate beneath you. Maybe –just maybe– you are tourists no more, but returnees. You never told your friends how old you are at this point –in part because you don't really know with the way Time behaves out there– but some of them must have picked up on it by now. They are not unobservant despite their relative youth.

ARADIA: he is pretty cute isnt he

ARADIA: so eager to please

SOLLUX: you've always had a soft spot for idiots

ARADIA: pff which one of us was it who used to date eridan of all people
SOLLUX: low bl0w hehe. i was figuring shit out
Okay? its difficult not t0 hate a guy who's that fucking self-evidently terrible
SOLLUX: and he was h0t, okay? i'm n0t proud 0f it
ARADIA: haha
ARADIA: hey sollux can you pass me the
ARADIA:
SOLLUX: Oh jegus christ you've g0t to be shitting me
ARADIA:
SOLLUX: what w0uld you even use it f0r?
ARADIA:
SOLLUX: just put the pun-sodden leaf shreds 0n these shittily cut solstitial g0urd wedges?
ARADIA:
SOLLUX: which are not 0nly raw but have my blo0d on them
ARADIA:
SOLLUX: please aa
ARADIA:
SOLLUX: please just say it and end my suffering
ARADIA: thyme
DIRK: Nice.
SOLLUX: can i just menti0n that i fucking hate you pe0ple



Physically Rose Lalonde was lying on a chaise, pretending to listen to the radio, while mentally she was walking along an infinite field of dark blue sub-nothingness. A field which has been here since that fateful day on which the Ascension Society was disbanded. In recent memory her consciousness had spent very little time in the actual space she was occupying. A Seer who had her eyes on only one location at a time was a rather poor excuse for a Seer after all. Following her talk with the Witch, Rose wasn't ascending quite so rapidly anymore, but she was certainly growing diffuse. Untethered from her meat body. Kanaya did not like it when she referred to it as a meat body.

ROSE: Hello, Macrocosm.

ROSE: That is the moniker you tauntingly wear, is it not?

ROSE: Shall I say it thrice in a gothic mirror, or is there some other ritualistic tedium involved?

ROSE: Believe me, I excel at ritualistic tedium.

ROSE: When it comes to the extolled practice known universally as ritualistic tedium, I am simply-

ROSE: Never mind.

ROSE: I know you can hear me, beast.

ROSE: I don't know what you are, or where you are, but I do know that much.

ROSE: And I must admit that it worries me.

ROSE: That, and the company you keep, obviously.

ROSE: Where is that dreadful polyvocal sneer of yours? I do so wish to hear it first hand.

ROSE: You must know that I have a rather decent grasp of what's out there beyond our corporeal proscenium, right?

ROSE: I have read the forbidden texts. I have written new ones.

ROSE: And there is no such thing -in those curse-ridden tomes or any other- as a Macrocosm.

ROSE: So what are you? Who are you?

ROSE: And what is *the punchline*?

ROSE: "The ice-field extends to the nearing horizon, extends to the punchline." That is the one thing which didn't make sense.

ROSE: And ever since you said it, the word keeps recurring.

ROSE: Tell me what's coming, creature!

She kicked the ground beneath her, but there was no response. Just a faint reverberation where her foot impacted the membrane. Something deeply concerning lingered in that voice. Something familiar and scraping, if only her giant, useless narrator brain could put a finger on it. Aside from the humdrum of decide, this barrier and how one could reach- or communicate through it outside of Retcon, was perhaps the only remaining mystery this side of eternity, and the thing which knew how to do it was taking names from Goethe and consorting with Dirk Strider of all people.

ROSE: I am the one you want to talk to.

ROSE: I am the more powerful between us.

ROSE: I am the one who at least isn't *completely* cut off from her ultimate self.
ROSE: Shall I quote Faust to you? Shall we play it by the book? Dance by its metre?
ROSE: Oh, I am sure my father knows the words - knows where to tastefully place his little inflections- but they are empty upon his lips as the Greeks are upon Wagner's. He does not know them in his bones like I do.
ROSE: We are both perfectly aware that this man would have been an atheist had the occult not shoved itself in his face. And you chose *him* over me? I am not upset, merely staggered by your evident incompetence when it comes to choosing allies. Truly risible.
ROSE: I conducted dark rituals in my bedroom when I was nine!
ROSE: I gave myself to gods older than time and comprehension at thirteen, in the name of insight.
ROSE: Look upon this shambling tale, great Macrocosm! Again and again I have offered up my black little soul *to understand what binds the world's innermost core together! To see its workings and its seeds.*
ROSE: I have signed contracts in blood, which others would not dare sign in ink.
ROSE: What am I missing? *Soar 'round me spirits and be near!*
MACROCOSM: *Sighs the great big sigh of eternity forgetting itself*
MACROCOSM: Rose, please, this is embarrassing for both of us :3
MACROCOSM: You're already playing your part.
MACROCOSM: Now go help Kanaya.

Jake

JAKE: Dressed to the eights i see! My, you could be on the cover of one of those kicky music publications!

If you've learned one thing, it's that Vriska Serket is incredibly attached to one specific ratty old leather jacket, which meant that you and Kanaya had to bring significant creativity and persuasion to bear, in order to work around this one piece of clothing. You yourself aren't a great designer per se, but a few years of modelling jobs have left you with what you think is a quite developed eye for fashion. Luckily praise works wonders on this tough customer.

VRISKA: Awwwwwww yes!

VRISKA: Jake, I look amazing. I am the coolest looking person on this planet 8y like a lot ::::)

VRISKA: June is gonna flip her shit.

VRISKA: May8e you're not such a lost cause after all. You just have to learn to do this sort of thing for yourself.

JAKE: Err apologies you lost me there. Do what for myself? It this another lesson in advanced chutzpah?

VRISKA: If you want to call it that. Using your posture pole instead of 8eeing a pathetic little pushover.

VRISKA: Do you know how many times I tried to get Kanaya to make me something cool when we were d8ing? Constantly. 8ut noooooooooo it was always just dresses.

VRISKA: Dresses, dresses, dresses.

VRISKA: 8est case scenario ones I could *almost* move in. Gog! So restrictive. 8ut that's just how she is. Meddling Mrs Fussylangs, always trying to force her aesthetic sensi8ilities onto other people.

JAKE: Well i imagine she just wanted you to try out something different and engage with her craft a mite.

JAKE: Instead of switching between the same two beaten outfits, one of which was cosplay need i remind you.

VRISKA: I would never push my ho88ies on others like that.

JAKE: Haha! Oh you certainly do. You had me make three separate character sheets yesterday. My wrists still ache from all that tense dice throwing.

VRISKA: Fine!!!!!!! Gog, I'm trying to pay you a compliment, English. You actually got her to put me

in clothes I like, instead of ones she wants me to like, and I appreciate that.

JAKE: Oh, thanks! I suppose it helps that I've worked with the good Mrs Maryam Lalonde a few times. She tends to be responsive to a more *glances to the side nervously* even-keeled style of powwow.

JAKE: And you do have a habit of casting kittens like your life depends on it.

JAKE: But really I didn't do much. If I were to hazard a guess it might just be that she's been getting to make dresses for her darling for a good while now. Perhaps she does not need this specific outlet as desperately anymore as she once did.

VRISKA:

VRISKA: You're saying she needed me back then.

Oh shit you slipped up.

JAKE: No no, I- well... hm yes I suppose I do. That is how relationships tend to work.

JAKE: Not that I'm blaming you for-

VRISKA: No, you know what? I think you're right! She always made it sound like she was doing me a favour with everything, but yeah she probably did just want someone to appreciate her craft.

VRISKA: How do you know my friends better than I do? What's the secret here? Are you another mind reader, Jake?

JAKE: Snakes alive no! I'll leave that sort of metapsychic meddling to the experts.

JAKE: I was here planetside while you were out in that ghostly spume imbroglio. That ought to be the crux of the matter.

You decide not to mention that you don't actually know Kanaya particularly well, and that this was just a relatively obvious conclusion. Your brief period of working with the woman was cut short by politics, and you are only reconnecting now. A harmless enough omission. For all her strengths, Miss Serket is not particularly good at reading people, though in a quite different way from your ex. To be entirely truthful, you find them to be intensely different and intensely similar in a number of ways, which you did bring up to her a few days ago. Her response was that "[she] wouldn't have

seen caught”, and you laughed, unsure only about the degree to which this wasn't a joke. Another divergent parallel. You nod at each other as you mount the motorcycles you have been sinking all of your spare time into over the past days, where spare time, in your case, is most of the time.

JAKE: Oh while the matching shoulder-draped-coat-look is absolutely singular, a shrewd biker would still be advised to put their arms through the sleeves while riding if they dont want to lose it.

VRISKA: Duh, English.

JAKE: What was it that the two of you were whispering about anyway? If i didnt know better id say it seemed downright conspiratorial.

VRISKA: Nothing you need to worry about... yet.

JAKE: How ominous! But i simply dont think i can let that stand. It does strike me that our little pantheon has had quite enough of secrets and foxy backroom dealings, don't you think?

VRISKA: Hahahaha see! You are getting better! I am amazing at this life coach thing.

Intermission: Conference

5 Years, 2 months and 11 days until Punchline.

“Can we go over the plan again?” Jane of course knew that there was no time for it, but she wasn't yet used to this degree of involvement, and it was making her anxious. Both because of the actual danger and because she didn't want to disappoint anyone. Rose made an understandable habit of over-protectiveness, but she was turning seventeen soon and it was time to start pulling her weight.

“No can do, but don't worry, you've got this” chuckled Dave as he was checking the last few microphones and cameras in her suit –an utterly garish thing covered top to bottom in logos.

“This really doesn't feel like it constitutes an inconspicuous appearance. Won't people ask questions?”

“Look, you're a teenage girl at a conference for old rich fucks who sold their soul and our future for short-term profit and a cushy seat in hell. You're gonna stick out anyway. The difference is just that if you dress plainly you've got no reason to stick out. No sensible explanation. This way, if someone asks what your deal is, you tell them you're a *brandfluencer*. That'll make sense visually, they've already got that filed away as a youth thing they don't understand, like art and empathy, and there won't be follow-up questions because they don't want to show their ass. That's the sort of thing Lalonde doesn't get. I understand the impulse to go all Pollardian about this shit and swear it off entirely, but in the end it's just a material. You can use it, repurpose it, subvert it, aim the enemy's weapons back at them. Hijacking an ad campaign is more effective than taking it down and so on. You read Alinsky? The principled organizer loses.”

Naturally she'd read Alinsky, but the red forks on everything still reminded Jane uncomfortably of her time growing up on the wrong side of history. It was spoons then of course. The switch on that fateful 11.11.11. might not have been such a meaningful step in her journey, if it hadn't been the same day on which a spaceship dropped out of the sky. On which the mask fell. On which her Condescension murdered Jake. Sea Hitler had realized that the game wasn't happening, and thanks to Ms English's extensive security precautions, no one was able to get there in time. That's what those three

prongs would forever mean to the heiress. The day a dull weapon turned sharp. The point of no return. Having to re-channel that BCCorp fangirl-dom for the sake of the mission was a fork twisting in her stomach, but she thought she could do it.

The world had become a lot stranger over the course of a year. Strange, terrible and oddly finite. Upon the vast, flat expanse of the interior plains, or at the beach staring out to sea, one could observe that the horizon wasn't quite as distant as it used to be. As though it gave up just short of its *de jure* location and fizzled out unnervingly. An omen of what was to come: complete *Haunt Absorption*. Ghosts had begun to pop up randomly, in small numbers still, but with more sightings reported every month and with the rumour that they were being put in secret detention centres or labour camps. The very event which Jane was to attend would supposedly announce the candidacy of Violent J and Shaggy 2 Dope for shared Presidential office. A string of words so ridiculous that it alone could serve as sufficient evidence that reality was coming apart at the hinges. There were reports of a grey demon who appeared in random cities all over the globe and announced that the end was nigh while uncontrollably giggling. Despite her further honed scepticism, Jane knew that all of these stories were true. Fact had become so much stager than fiction that anything invented tended to be sane in comparison to what really went on. Tugging one last wire into her sock, Strider nodded.

“Okay. Don't die, kid.”

Jane didn't die, though occasionally she felt like it. When captains of industry claimed that the whole clown thing was undignified, sure, but that they were given exclusive contracts to build more camp infrastructure in exchange for their patronage for example. “One hand washes the other, with Faygo if necessary”, a man with entirely too many teeth mused, and she was tempted to tell him that he wouldn't know dignity if it hit him in the face with a pie-tin. Back when she still day-dreamt of sinking her gnarled claws into various institutions, she had thought it would be hard. She had thought convincing these types of people took gumption and perseverance, but all it took was bills. She had learned that the people who ran her world didn't actually believe in anything beyond the content of their bank account. The system didn't matter, the president didn't matter, the morality of it all was an intellectual exercise in rationalization at best, so long as that number went up.

The heiress had always taken money to be an accounting tool, a market-signal, a convenient feedback-mechanism telling you when you were making a good product and giving you the means to make more of it, but this was far from the general conception in this room or rooms like it. Money itself was the end, and hacking the feedback mechanism was much easier than making something good.

The truth was that for all the Condesce's evil –and she was unquestionably evil– she did not come with an army. There was never any sort of subjugation of humanity. This was not the tragedy of alien takeover. It was the system working as it always had. The Condesce had a bit of business savvy and the flair which made her attractive to preexisting moneyed interests. She was profitable. She could have been stopped at any point. She could still be stopped, and the only reason she was not was neither malice nor hatred but simple apathy, greed and a callous, justified conviction that if you didn't jump on the bandwagon, someone else would take that spot, so you might as well be the person raking in the cash. There are no monsters worse than the systems which allow for them, and to the dismay of a younger, more naive version of Jane who still lived somewhere in her mind, Capitalism did not merely allow for monsters, it bred them. The meat shredder was working as intended. Jane took a selfie with the man, allowed him to brag about his bribability for a while, and only threw up in her mouth a little bit.

Someone else had explained a proposal, apparently coming from up high, to genetically modify future generations to fit a certain hierarchy. “To make sure everyone knows their place in society, you know? To give them a role that suits them. No more wasting education budget on people who will never make it anywhere anyway. It's kinder, right? More efficient. Takes out the uncertainty.” There was no need to ask which role he thought his own children would occupy in that new system, so with remarkable composure, the alleged brandfluencer had simply asked whether that did not sound a bit like eugenics to him. “No, no” the man said quickly, scrunching up his brow “people don't like that word these days. The PR department will come up with something better.”

Rose too was present, undisguised and mostly out of spite. She was safe enough in a crowd and competent enough at vanishing quickly for this little game of public antagonism her and Dave played against the Condesce to work. A round of chess gaining new dimensions and pieces by the day.

Partially the Batterwitch used it as free publicity, so an effort had to be made to make the pros outweigh the cons. To make a meaningful statement or to otherwise garner support for the rebellion, which was slowly beginning to gain steam. Not even a strange world can be threatened with juggalo presidents without getting spooked.

“What do you think about the suit?” Jane gave a self-satisfied spin.

“I loathe it. Deeply. This is quite possibly the single worst garment I have ever had the misfortune of laying my eyes upon. It's perfect.” For a moment the mentor hesitated. “You know, it does strike me that you nigh universally seem to go for the male-coded costume choices, sometimes even going so far as to add a moustache. Is there something about this style of presentation which you find... ipseitically assonant?”

“Oh... Ohhhhhh! Hoo hoo hoo, no this isn't a gender thing, it-... golly, might this be a gender thing?” Most of her role models had always been men, so she'd mostly thought of it as wearing their shoes for an extra dose of confidence, and not... well, this.

“I don't believe that's the sort of question I can answer for you, but be assured that I will fully support any conclusion you reach on the matter. I'm sure your Poppop would have felt the same.”

It was certainly good to know, but Jane concluded that nearly all other situations would be more accommodating to this type of introspection. The thought could be put in a drawer for a while and be given careful consideration when she wasn't among enemies.

“Thank you. Have you seen my dad?”

Rose tilted her head to the side. Mister Crocker had played the role of the grieving father who had no idea where his daughter was, but who held out hope despite everything diligently, and since security footage corroborated his story, no one saw a need to doubt it. There was a chance that the Condensce knew, or at least suspected his betrayal. One does not rule so long without being the suspicious sort, but the sob-story brought in publicity and that was all she cared about. Especially now that the game wouldn't take place anymore, she had no actual need for her Granddaughter. Conquering earth would have to be enough for now, and if she ever did come across the

erstwhile heiress, she would hunt her down for sport, spite, fun and hopefully profit.

Revealing herself to her dad directly would be risky, not to mention cruel. Forcing him to keep up the facade with all these people watching. Instead Jane just gave him a business card. The exact same one she had given to everyone, with numbers and addresses leading nowhere, though crucially on the back there was a single phrase, typed in the style of all those notes he used to leave, and in fact still did leave, nostalgically for no one. "IF YOU ARE READING THIS, IT MEANS A LOT." That would be enough. She knew that the man kept all business cards he ever received, and she was sure that he would understand immediately when he checked it. They smiled shallow, polite smiles at each other, one of them genuine, the other holding back more than could ever be said, as father and daughter passed each other like ships in the night. It was the sort of moment that would never stop replaying in a person's mind.

The clowns were underwhelming. They acted like hooligans and proposed things like a lethal form of wrestling as an alternative to the legislative process. Suggestions which could never come to pass. Surely. Jokes, though told mirthlessly and receiving no laughter from the audience until it was demanded. All the while that creature –Fieri– sat behind them like an idol wrought from meat. Like a deluded prophecy. Like the terrible vizier to his pair of jester kings. The man was a sadist, a bloodhound, an obscene general in the employ of a still more horrid master. For a moment, while everyone pretended to get the joke, he lifted those cheap plastic sunglasses just enough for Jane to see his empty, sunken eyes, glistening with sweat and malice. A war-crime of a smile upon his lips. The creature winked at her in the exact moment in which Dave gave the signal to leave: An ARG-advertized secret pre-premier of the new SbaHJ movie projected right through the gathering's window.

Like An Open Book

Vriska

JUNE: it never stops being weird to see statues of us.

VRISKA: Why?

JUNE: pff yeah *you would* think that this is normal.

"Normal" might be overstating it. Alternia didn't have public statues of anyone beside the Condesce for obvious reasons. But from what you've absorbed through cultural osmosis, having them just means being a figure of legend around these parts, and that is something you have always taken to be the natural outcome of your life. If you couldn't even keep your name on people's tongues a few generations down the line, what was even the point?

This of course isn't your statue.

Neither Kanaya, and especially not Karkat, were ever very high on the list of your friends whom you'd have expected to make the history books when you were a kid, but then again: who could have accounted for Sgrub? It only took a few weeks of seeing Vantas cajole your group of lunatics to work together until his name stood remarkably close to the top of that ranking. Humans never got how impressive that was. Trolls don't do cooperation- didn't do cooperation. Times have changed you suppose. A couple of uprooted teenagers have changed them.

Kanaya is an even newer addition to the list, as she seems to have needed peacetime to shine. Unsurprising in retrospect. Fussysfangs always did have a subtler hand than most of you.

VRISKA: Yes, June. We deserve it.

The two of you lie half-entangled in a field of what will soon be the enclave's "independence park" with a bottle of mid-range wine, as Casey runs around you, blowing bubbles and delighting in the new scenery. You turn to face your girlfriend.

VRISKA: Does it ever bother you? That some of the old statues still have you as a boy?

VRISKA: It's like they didn't get the memo.

VRISKA: How about we go out at night and smash them to bits! That would be a fun day.

JUNE: haha please don't. like, they did ask me whether that was okay. i just haven't gotten around to responding yet.

JUNE: weirdly i don't think i mind? that guy with his wind sock and his hero poses honestly kind of feels like a completely different person from me.

JUNE: obviously i remember being him, or pretending to be him, but-

JUNE: this is gonna blow your mind, but i never felt like some legendary figure, even back when i did actual hero things, and i definitely don't feel like one now.

JUNE: so the thought that that's supposed to be me barely crosses my mind.

JUNE: yeah! it's like if i was an actor who played a character in a famous movie once, and now there's monuments to that character.

JUNE: in some sense it's a part of me, but one that stays static even when i change. and if other people have fond memories of it then that's fine? that's nice for them! i didn't like playing the role, but that doesn't mean it was a bad movie.

JUNE: maybe one day it will start to bother me.

JUNE: though even then i'd probably just want them to make a few changes.

JUNE: unless there's a really ugly one some where.

JUNE: if there's a really ugly one some where we can smash that.

VRISKA: Dork.

JUNE: hehe, remember how you first introduced yourself to me as marquise-

VRISKA: June Egbert, if you say one more syllable, I'll teach our daughter the worst swear in the Alternian language.

JUNE: :p

JUNE: dork.

JUNE: is jake still in one piece?

VRISKA: Oh my gog! we went over this! I'm not using your goofy human ectocestor as a replacement Tavros.

VRISKA: Like I'd even want a replacement Tavros.
You have no idea how frustr8ing he was.

VRISKA: The only reason I used to 8e obsessed with
that useless tool was 8ecause of Mindfang's
journal.

JUNE: just take care, okay? he's fragile.

VRISKA: Fragile? June, you just a8orted an attack
8ecause of the *threat* of a swearword.

JUNE: as a joke!!!!!!!

VRISKA: And 8eside, Jake isn't like Tavros. Jake
just plays useless.

VRISKA: I actually think he might 8e pretty
dangerous.

JUNE: yeah right.

VRISKA: Yes!!!!!!!

VRISKA: You should know 8y now that I'm a gr8
talent scout. I picked you after all.

JUNE: oh god.

JUNE: you're serious. lmao.

VRISKA: It's a 8it like that thing terezi does,
where she pretends to 8e insane to lull people into
a false sense of security.

JUNE: but terezi also like really is insane.

VRISKA: Well yeah, 8ut you know what I mean. She
dials it up when people are looking. You don't see
her eating half as much random gar8age in private.

VRISKA: the point is that they're 8oth good at
using their apparent weakness to their advantage.
And may8e they're 8oth a little too method a8out
it.

VRISKA: Terezi a8out the insanity and Jake a8out
the hapless 8uffoon shtick.

VRISKA: How is she anyway?

JUNE: upset :)

JUNE: but let's be honest she has been more upset
with you in the past.

JUNE: aside from that: weird.

JUNE: if this weren't terezi we're talking about
i'd say she might be unravelling.

VRISKA: Hahahaha Terezi doesn't unravel.

JUNE: i know. that's why i said "if this weren't
terezi". jeez.

JUNE: she's digging through her dumb note piles. you know, the ones she said were nonsense distractions for dirk.

JUNE: and once she just lay splayed out on the floor all day staring at the ceiling, and when i asked her whether she was okay she just shushed me and said that she needed to think.

JUNE: in other people that would be considered unstable behaviour.

JUNE: perhaps even ever so slightly loony bins.

Terezi doesn't unravel, but she does scheme, and having been alt-universe-killed by someone makes you extra sensitive to shifts in that person's conduct. Not that you're the one in danger this time. June notices your expression immediately.

JUNE: what?

VRISKA: You have to keep an eye on her.

VRISKA: I don't know what she's planning, 8ut I know Terezi and she is planning something.

VRISKA: She was certain that it's dirk.

JUNE: um. noooooooooo. you were certain.

JUNE: she just suspected it.

VRISKA: Don't 8e so gulli8le. She implied it strongly enough. I was simply the only one willing to say it 8luntly.

VRISKA: So why would she let him out of prison?

JUNE: because him being there doesn't do any thing? terezi was pretty clear on that after her talk with rose.

JUNE: am i missing something?

VRISKA: June, I love you, but use your think pan for a moment. That's a sane-person-reason.

VRISKA: Jane's 8ody 8eing left in the manor in the exact position she died in doesn't do anything, 8ut it's part of her game.

VRISKA: So is putting someone in the slammer.

VRISKA: Giving up like this just isn't Pyrope's style, unless she has some other plan.

JUNE: wait, so you *don't* think it's dirk any more???

VRISKA: That guy? No way. I had his f8 in my hands. I'd know. There's clearly tons of other things wrong with Strider, 8ut not this.

JUNE: let me get this straight. you don't think it's dirk, but you're confused that he isn't in jail any more?

JUNE: vriska this doesn't make any sense.

VRISKA: Yes, it does. 8ecause Terezi still thinks it's Dirk. She's a legislacer8or, not one of your enerv8ed human lawyers. She doesn't just let a suspect go 8ecause they're innocent.

VRISKA: She followed that note of Gamzee pretending to 8e me on the meteor, even when it clearly had a clown nose on it! Legislacer8ors don't figure out who did something, they decide who should 8e punished, and she had decided that it's Strider.

VRISKA: So either your Seer friend has some serious leverage on Terezi, or she has some other reason for letting Dirk go. Do you see how 8oth of those are worrying?

There's a shrug of acquiescence, even though her heart isn't in it. You're well aware of how much this looks like a lame attempt at relationship repair by way of meddling –unbearably textbook–, but you really do think that something is off. With one swift motion you throw yourself up such that you're in a table pose above your girlfriend, and lower your head. June's lips are dark and sour from the wine. Delightfully soft beneath yours. Parting easily. Maybe this will make her a bit more enthusiastic about the idea.

Ø

JADE: its okay if you say no, dave!!!

JADE: i completely understand you not consenting to this! thats super duper fine, i promise

JADE: dave?

The Knight had been standing there in silence, performing a nonsensical series of helpless hand gestures for what was rapidly approaching a full-blown minute, and as everyone in this household knew, minutes of actual strider-silence were a rare commodity whose sudden production was worrying in almost all instances. Somehow conversations about the narrative were even more uncomfortable when one didn't start them from a point of cosmic

horror, but it also didn't help that Jade had referred to it as a "mind meld" moments earlier.

DAVE: no

DAVE: well not no as in i dont consent but no as in me wanting to not consent isnt what this is about

DAVE: except it is

DAVE: i mean obviously it is right

DAVE: im fighting a war with that impulse and weve just gone thermonuclear

DAVE: the pentagons panicking but im still in the trenches

DAVE: dr strangelove on one shoulder and dr oppenheimer on the other both whispering sweet nothings in my ears which would be mad helpful if i could hear jack shit over the gunfire

DAVE: and lets be real im not sure i can in good conscience expose someone to a brain which sincerely believes that thats a remotely coherent metaphor for anything

DAVE: like there is weird fuckin shit in here

DAVE: my bro and gamzee did a number on the place assuming it was ever normal to begin with

DAVE: i didnt put the puppets there thats for fucking sure

DAVE: but at the same time its not like i have much of a filter in the first place so this sure does sound like milquetoast fear of intimacy doesnt it

DAVE: to be fair this is more intimacy than humans are built for but when have we ever done things humans are built for

DAVE: never is when

DAVE: so i should totally be fine with this right

DAVE: i want to be fine with this because i love you and i trust you

DAVE: but man *i* dont even know whats in there jade

DAVE: ive *seen things* and-

Another minute of wildly pacing silence passed, which did nothing to lessen Jade's concern.

JADE: you dont have to make the choice now!!

DAVE: oh youre not getting out so easily harley

DAVE: youve started this and now you have to watch it end
DAVE: no way around it
DAVE: straight up ensnared in this predicament
DAVE: behold the fucking devastation you wrought
DAVE: ive made it to the control center
DAVE: simple foot soldier but just absolutely dripping with gumption
DAVE: indecently drenched in the stuff like an overworked servant during a particularly hot day on butler island
DAVE: it really goes underdiscussed how abysmal the working conditions are in that proverbial place
DAVE: if you dont want workers dropping from heatstroke on the hour maybe dont have them wear suits in a tropical climate thats just common sense
DAVE: but man unionisings hard when the entire deal of butlers in being all obsequious and shit
DAVE: anyway im crawling through the dirt and wreckage of armed conflict like a worm
DAVE: never signed up for that shit but ive got a wife and a husband at home and fuck will i do everything for them
DAVE: fully blackmailed by war propaganda
DAVE: the buttons right in front of me as the camera slowly zooms in on my inscrutable ass face
DAVE: even the guy behind the lens is sweating bullets now
DAVE: no idea why my production company hired zahhak for this but i guess thats just one of lifes many mysteries
DAVE: oppenheimer and the perma grinning nazi shut up in beautiful unison when they realize that their opinions never mattered in the first place
JADE: dave youre stalling
DAVE: *yes* okay
DAVE: here we go
DAVE: right now
DAVE: no turning back...
DAVE: i consent
DAVE: ravage my fucking think pan jade lets do this
JADE: :D !!!!

Of course narrative meddling isn't actually a mind meld, but it would still feel invasive to even see another person's thoughts without asking permission first. Dave is kneeling before me horrified by his own decision, though he knows that once he gets over that gut-panic he'll be proud about having opened up and having made himself vulnerable.

DAVE: wow already editorializing my emotional experience huh

DAVE: not saying youre wrong but like let me get there by myself

JADE: oh sorry!!!

He understands that *Jade* is really incredibly proud and happy that he's opening up like this. She had expected a no and could not be more excited about being proven wrong. In part because it allows her to demonstrate that there is nothing her partners need to be ashamed of around her. And especially not the traumas racked up over the course of an objectively pretty shitty childhood.

Still, Dave worries. He worries about me learning that he was never remotely cool in the first place, or that I might access something dark, like the fact that after he disposed of the fourth dead Dave he kind of stopped caring. It became just another chore. An annoyance. Or-

JADE: you do realize that youre just telling on yourself now, right? i would probably not have found this if you hadnt thought it

JADE: also that sort of emotional numbing is a completely normal response, and you likely wouldn't be here without it.

DAVE: i guess

DAVE: but they were still people

DAVE: and not just any people but me specifically

DAVE: i should care

DAVE: a well adjusted person would have cared

JADE: but no one goes through all of that and stays well-adjusted dave!!!

JADE: youre fine

Then there's of course the glut of barely ironic hot-mom jokes he makes with frankly disturbing lack of restraint.

DAVE: so not cool

DAVE: i gave jade permission to be here and only
jade

Yes, but Dave hopefully understands that I have to monitor her progress, and I thought that it would be even more unseemly for me to listen in quietly, without making my presence known.

Ahhh sorry! I would kick her out if I could, but it doesn't look like I can.

Yeah, no dice.

Then again it's pretty safe to assume that Rose has been in all of our heads. She's kind of been bleeding out into the narrative recently.

DAVE: great great yeah thats so much better

DAVE: theres nothing i love more than knowing that
my sister has been peeping in on me constantly
instead of only right now

DAVE: well maybe one thing

Dirk tells me that it would be “mad inappropriate for [him] to participate in this little group-chat, even though doing so would of course be hilarious.” And for the record, the fact that I can see anything does not mean that I do indeed see everything. Having more sensory organs does not make the human mind any better at multi tasking. I see only that which I choose to see, and as you surely know, your life is not all that interesting most of the time.

DAVE: dirks the one respecting my privacy here

DAVE: *dirk*

DAVE: is it too late to secretly elope into bubble
hell and get away from these lunatics

DAVE: serious question i could tie a kitchen rag
filled with apple juice and bread to a stick right
now and run

HEY GUYS!

Oops, sorry, hehe. I'm still getting used to this. Hey guys.

DAVE: you have got to be kidding me

Don't worry dave, I'm not gonna snoop around your mental porn stash. I was just practising and saw that there was a lot going on here.

DAVE: june i know youre just hopping on the
bandwagon but my cognitive neighborhood is being
gentrified to shit by narrators here and soon i

wont be able to afford the local thrift shop anymore

DAVE: we can all catch up some other time but i was having a tender moment with my girlfriend here so all of you need to get out of my metatextual brainspace right now if you don't want to see me perform an acrobatic fucking pirouette off the handle

Whoops, bye.

I will do my best to look away.

JADE: theyre gone i think

DAVE: yeah but this still kinda ruined the moment

DAVE: is it cool if we do this some other time

JADE: totally!!

JADE: im sorry it went so poorly :(

The Knight for his part genuinely was glad to have agreed to this –glad to have opened up– so he reassured Jade with a quarter of a smile. There would be other opportunities, maybe ones during which his nosy friends were asleep.

JADE: and it goes without saying that i consent to you “ravaging my brain” if you ever want to learn this

DAVE: gotta be careful about those sorts of statements i might just take you up on it

DAVE: commit a lifetimes worth of furry daydreaming to memory and construct every sentence around elaborate references to it

JADE: pff you think id have a problem with that?

not all of us are cowards mister purrmusk

DAVE: nah akwetes the bomb

DAVE: no shame there

DAVE: but youre right

DAVE: cringe culture is dead and we literally killed it

DAVE: made a whole new planet to get rid of shit like that

Both of them often thought about the fact that the entire entertainment output of Earth C would be incomprehensible on old earth. Though these ponderings admittedly had different textures, since Dave was directly involved in making it that way. Weird didn't mean anything anymore, or at least not the things it used to mean, and that was all that mattered.

JADE: though im *really* curious about karkat now
JADE: apparently vriska thinks his mind is like "a
dumpster full of broken glass and razor blades"
DAVE: arent they all
DAVE: but lets be real theres basically a zero
percent chance karkat isnt the same big softie in
there
DAVE: maybe the volume knobs broken but thats about
it
JADE: ...
DAVE: oh i see what youre doing
DAVE: his worries are probably unjustified so mine
are too
DAVE: real sneaky harley
DAVE: real sneaky

Dirk

Again.

You're sitting on the floor opposite Sollux, one hand pressed against his chest and the other serving as an extra anchor to the hardwood. It feels like melting, or perhaps like sublimating, or perhaps like nothing at all. You have torn souls out of bodies and shattered them, you have fractured your own into so many splinters that you keep losing count, and if you have learned one thing over and over again, it's that essence does not vanish when it is destroyed. If the material world follows conservation of energy, then a narrative conserves idiosyncrasy. Conserves character. Bends or molds it along an arc or rubs it off onto others, mixes or blends, but never discards. That which is without purpose or truth, without necessity, has no place within a story. Even when you thought you had shattered yourself, you had only broken yourself through a prism. All of them you, all of them reflections of a noumenal truth, a platonic ideal. Soul persists. So, when you probe at that translucence in Sollux and feel nothing at all, you are unquestionably wrong. It is out there. Just beneath the surface. In that place the demon calls home.

You pull harder. Beneath you a reflective sheet of deep blue ice extends into infinity, radiating an eery quiet, at least up to a point. The sound begins as a sensation in your gut before it becomes audible, and even when it passes that

threshold, the propagation of cracks continues to be more of a groan than anything sharp and localized. Quickly you withdraw and heal it over.

Failure.

Again.

There has to be some way. You can hear drops of sweat hitting the hardwood one layer up, but you ignore it. What good is the alpha timeline if you can't even save one soul from the abyss.

MACROCOSM: And you believe that this is the alpha timeline. Do you think that's air you're breathing now?

DIRK: Not even gonna humor that remark. Of course it is.

DIRK: You know it's really difficult to convince yourself that you aren't having a stroke when the universe spouts incoherent Matrix references at you.

MACROCOSM: Hoo hoo hoo! Alright, let's drop this particular point for now. You know the barrier is here to protect you, right Dirk? Why are you fighting it?

MACROCOSM: Maybe don't pull quite so HARD.

DIRK: Busy. I really don't have time for your bullshit right now.

You pant a lot more than you would like to in the spirit of dignity, but there's really no way of avoiding it at the moment. You are a gossamer thread at tearing point. A needle upon which a mountain is balanced. If you lose focus you may very well die.

MACROCOSM: Sometimes it really feels like you don't actually believe what you say about enemies of enemies.

DIRK: A friend... would let me... do... this.

MACROCOSM: Maybe they would, if you didn't try to push a square peg through a round hole. *the Macrocosm winks knowingly*

DIRK: They? No, scratch that. Not falling for the cryptic nonsense again.

But you do. You stop pulling quite so hard and instead try to align yourself with the resonant frequency of that groan. Modulating into a sub-nothingness

that feels oddly familiar. Almost comforting. All around the ice begins to hum, but it does not come apart. Instead, gradually, you can feel yourself sink into the barrier. The dark envelopes you like a drop of oil in water and pulls you under. Gently but incessantly. If this were your physical body you would worry about your ability to breathe. Air or otherwise. The humming stops.

When you open what passes for eyes in this realm, infinity is orders of magnitude wider than before. Boundless beyond words and replete beyond comprehension.

This is the rest of paradox space.

Hic sunt daemones.

For an instance you gain overwhelming sympathy for the experience of an uncooked egg falling upon kitchen tiles and miraculously bouncing. You're... Fine, and this very fact is extremely unnerving. No one is coming to get you. There was a time when this had devastated you –undone you from the inside out– but right now you are glad. Glad not to be taken, glad to be on a mission that god could not care less about. What if this isn't the alpha timeline? The question ricochets through your brain again, even though it is nonsense of course. Anything that wasn't the alpha timeline would have been swallowed. But even so, if there was a way, you think you would keep going regardless. There's work in need of doing.

MACROCOSM: Good boy :3

The bubble is dulling your senses, but not fully. From that place which used to feel like nothing at all you can now follow a current of textual coherence. Vaguely acerbic, but vaguely like honey. Bifurcated as always. Now all you have to do is bring it back. Somehow. There have to be rules for this sort of thing. Narrative laws by which to win.

MACROCOSM: Hahaha laws.

MACROCOSM: I am older than laws.

MACROCOSM: I am older than time.

DIRK: No you aren't.

DIRK: And you didn't even do this, all you've done is antagonize me along the way.

DIRK: It's honestly kind of embarrassing that I didn't notice earlier, even with that barrier in

the way. Pretty distinctive set of speech patterns you've got going on there, you know?

DIRK: Plural, bafflingly.

MACROCOSM: Hmm it was a fun enough game while it lasted. But has our antagonizing not been useful?

You chuckle as you tear apart a conglomeration of souls. Not the fully formed sort of ultimate self you have seen before, but more of a waste dump for the Sollux-shaped residue of scrapped timelines. A glob of undifferentiated character quirks and neuroses, binding like glue the many stories which have been, and could have been, told about Captor.

DIRK: Heh. I guess it has. With enemies like these who needs friends?

You don't remotely mean this of course. Recent events have forced you to realize just how much you need friends. If you didn't, you would be part of something much bigger and much worse, but if the sprites hadn't grokked that yet, they never would have led you here anyway.

Finally, pink lightning crackling at your fingertips like a tesla coil, you rip out the part you need and suck it into the bubble. For a moment there's an opening. You can feel the demon becoming aware of your presence, all of existence snapping to a needlepoint focus, but it only lasts until the soul fragment has fully passed the membrane. Again the thought flickers to life. That you yourself could reach out and be part of your own whole, but you reject it. Especially after what you learned earlier. Your personal shield re-merges with the barrier without problem. No cracks, no pursuit. A lobotomized goo of decomposing souls beneath and the part that matters up here.

You surface.

SOLLUX: h0ly shit, not t0 worry y0u but your eyes went fully transparent f0r a second there

SOLLUX: dirk say s0mething

SOLLUX: dont tell me y0u fucking gave yourself brain damage

SOLLUX: i am s0 not dealing with that shit

An exhausted smile flickers across your lips, and a spark of pink –barely more than static electricity– jumps from your palm to his chest. Your body slumps forward like a wet sack.

DIRK: Told you I could do it.
SOLLUX: FUCK
SOLLUX: fuck fuck fuck fuck fuuuuuuck
SOLLUX: aa c0me here y0uve g0t t0 see this
DIRK: Call me Gepetto. Cause guess what, you're a
real fucking boy now.

Your head is swimming, but the remaining neural activity is just enough to think of a strategy for how to kiss him without nicking your lips on the sharp sets of bifurcated fangs. The troll pulls back last second. Not fully. Just a few centimetres. Just enough for a pause.

SOLLUX: st0p
SOLLUX: are we a thing 0r are y0u just dying?
DIRK: Dude, I just deftly manhandled your soul back
into place from outer bullshit.
DIRK: Yeah we're dating.
DIRK: Forgive my non-existent ignorance as to where
such arrangements slot into the rich tapestry of
alternian social dynamics. But it's pretty self
evident.
DIRK: It's all in there.

You point at his chest with a trembling middle and index finger, trying to be smooth but probably failing miserably.

DIRK: Just look inside your kokoro and see the
obvious.
SOLLUX: i will ign0re that cringy ass phrasing
because y0u literally just br0ught me back fr0m
half-death
SOLLUX: but yeah, just making sure. i'd like that

Maybe you should set time aside some day to consider possible implications of the fact that “risking your life to save someone” and “confessions of love” are pretty damn conflated concepts in your mind. Sollux leans back forward. You only realize now how dry your lips are. You probably look like shit. Doesn't matter.

Intermission: Slammer

3 Years, 5 months and 18 days until Punchline.

It was somewhat traditional to write manifestos in prison. To use the calm to hone one's thoughts and let ink cast them into daggers. Like all art, they arise from necessity, from an intrinsic need to escape boredom inwards. A need of the incarcerated person to formalize their fury about the injustice perpetrated against them. Solitary specifically. That's where Rose had done most of her writing, continued *the Complacency*, which really only ever was a thinly disguised textbook for revolution in the first place and never more so than now. It was hell, unquestionably. She'd lose track of time, reality, and self in any order and any combination. Try to squash non-existent bugs on every wall only to wake up with bites of real ones. Scream to reaffirm her existence and be kept awake by the screams of other inmates. There were attempts at hunger strikes, but they only ended in tubes down her throat and even further deterioration. Writing was a beloved anchor, of course, but it wasn't enough. Torture was not meant to have anchors which are genuinely sufficient. If god or gods or words could fully protect you, then the torture wasn't doing its job. They helped, and that was the best one could hope for if one could still hope.

Part of the Condesce's strategy to destroy her critic's mind was that the solitary was never permanent. Or maybe it was just a cheap publicity move to generate headlines for a while. A way to hijack another news cycle. Rose could never tell where the malice ended and the apathy began. Without warning she'd one day be ripped back out of that windowless, white cupboard of a cell, and returned to being a normal prisoner just long enough to plausibly feel secure, before that same thing happened again in reverse. It was only a matter of time. A torture machine within a torture machine. Hope had been turned into a screw applying direct pressure to her skull until it cracked. Slowly but incessantly.

Rose had been out of solitary for long enough to no longer think she was dreaming this, and for long enough to have mostly gotten her brain back into anything resembling order, but not for long enough to have any delusions that it might stay that way. She'd been receiving visitors with the concrete awareness that any one of them might be the last, and so she savoured the

conversations, even when the conversationalists themselves were less than savoury. A lot of them were dead for one thing.

By now the end of the world was apparent to anyone with half a brain, even though the prominent theory was that this was somehow the Condesce's doing. The ghosts looked like her after all, so why wouldn't she be behind this, in the same way in which she had turned out to be behind every event of the past decades. It made little sense given the Baroness' conduct, but what else was to be expected of a captive media apparatus. Certainly nothing as insightful as the information which poured like an eroding current out of *Bubble Hell*. One recent visitor in particular came to mind. A blueblood who looked like the mythological archetype of a librarian and talked just the same. She had refused to give her name and stated that she was steering clear of pockets of bubble-space where people knew who she was for "personal reasons". Allegedly not much of an inconvenience. It gave her an excuse to explore less immediately relevant chronologies. Learn about exotic creatures and their history. On the whole, the woman had very much seemed like someone who saw other beings as little more than curiosities to sate her thirst for stories. As strings of information with which to fill an almanac. In another context Rose might have found that deeply off-putting, but as it was, exchanging myths represented the best use of time she could think of. "There are the most terrible rumors being spread about me", the troll had hissed through a dignified moue "if only they would let me explain".

The current plan was apparently to collect details on Her Imperious Condescention's success stories, in order to placate an old friend of hers who was lost over "the incident".

"Regrettably that really is the only way to get Meenah to listen to you", she sighed. "You have to talk about her. Effusively if at all possible. I used to *pay* Peixes to listen to me, you know? That was how low my self-worth had gotten".

Safe to say, her friend didn't sound like the best person in paradox space either, but at least they seemed vaguely self-aware of the fact that they were sort of a bitch. That wasn't much, but it was a start. The dead librarian in Rose's cell on the other hand gave the distinct impression that she had killed a ton of people, and had, despite extensive research, not yet stumbled across the concept of remorse. She would do it again if it didn't come attached with

social stigma. Rose considered asking the dark gods about that odd cerulean and her fascination with the Condesce, but just then a buzzing sound indicated that she had another guest. Also grey, also horned, but thoroughly and unmistakably alive. Rose recognized her immediately. “Hmm I’ve been wondering when you would show your face”.

Aradia smiled as unnervingly as ever. Perhaps more unnervingly, now that she had some additional experience as a doomsday prophet. “You weren’t exactly easy to find, Rose, or to get in contact with, now that you are findable”.

“I see”, the author sighed. “It would have been nice to have someone on hand who knew what was going on in those early days. When it was becoming evident that reality had picked a new game to play and had dragged us along with glacial celerity”.

The eschatonic tourist laughed as though some obscure inside joke were contained in that statement. “Always the Light-bound, certain that you could win if only you knew the rules”.

Rose, of course, had no idea what was meant by that.

“Oh I have no delusions of being a player. I would like to have claimed that I was a pawn in this new round of multidimensional chess, though in truth our relevance has diminished much too severely for such a vaunted spot on the vanguard. I am a sip of water in the glass from which eternity drinks, as it contemplates its next move. A move it has already made forever ago.” Rose paused to gauge her visitor’s reaction, though she didn’t get much. “... but of course you know all of that. If I am only granted the agency inherent to that drop of liquid, the best I can do is to make myself poisonous”.

It was a plan right after Aradia’s heart. That was what she so liked about doomed timelines. Someone always decided to go apeshit. She just hoped that the going-apeshit was somehow part of the greater meta-stratagem at play. Some of her friends out in the bubbles still seemed to have plans for this timeline after all. Two cats, an old woman and *that guy*.

“I know. Why else would the outer gods still be lending me their power. They’re scheming something, so much is certain, but the exact contours can at best be described as murky.” Even that much was a cosmic understatement. There was something about a holy clown-car which had inexplicably made its

way into the lore of those fucking juggalos. *Buncha righteous motherfuckers pouring out of that scuttlebuggy to get straight up iconoclastic with their whimsy [sic]*. “The noble circle foretell *Hierophant Arrival* in a little more than three years, though I cannot claim to understand precisely what that entails. All I know is that I somehow need to get Jane there... My protege is still alive, isn't she?”

At this the ghost lit up. “Oh yes! She's doing great! That's actually what I wanted to talk to you about.” Aradia gave a conspiratorial wink, which Rose correctly interpreted as a request to work her majyyk on the concealed listening devices all around them.

“We have about six minutes until they figure out that something's up. I deeply hope those moments are worth it, demon.” Rose was well aware what she might have damned herself to, but it wasn't quite as hard as it would have been if the hope of comparative freedom had already metastasized. And besides, she desperately wanted news about Jane. Luckily the troll was a quick speaker.

In the past year, Jane had apparently conducted a hugely successful restructuring effort. Several smaller movements had been rolled into and allied to the greater rebellion while carefully avoiding centralization. No single person or chapter could be allowed to become a lynchpin after all. Groups coordinated with little forewarning, and on a need to know basis, to ensure that a spy in any one of them was no significant liability. Not only was the fact that a movement with only a single head can easily be decapitated one of history's favourite lessons to teach, it also came quite naturally to an organizer who had to keep her true face hidden for obvious reasons.

A complex system of cryptography was used to communicate the degree of trust rebel orgs had in you, weighed by the degree of trust they themselves had accrued with other orgs, and without revealing chapters that the specific decrypter was unfamiliar with. The sort of scheme one might perhaps design in honour and memory of a dear hacker friend. In short: everything worked like clockwork. Rose and Dave may have been charismatic leaders, but they never had the patience for sensible logistics that Crocker brought to the table. This amazing system of buffers and precautions, which failed so safe that you could barely tell, did however have the slight drawback that it made it quite difficult for Aradia to easily gain access to its architect.

“You want me to vouch for you?” chuckled Rose, and her visitor nodded fervently. Tales extracted from the dark gods over the years had made her relatively certain that she could trust this person if she wanted to, but the Seer wasn't quite sure why Aradia would even want to help.

“Oh, believe me, you're not the only one who wants to see the Condesce's head on a spike. You're not even the first person whose planet she ruined. But even if that wasn't the case...” a signature demonic grin spread across her lips “You summoned me. I'm pretty sure custom states that I owe you a wish”.

The rebel nodded and Aradia raised her hand for the entirely normal and ubiquitous troll social practice known as a pentadactylic up-prong. Then she waited. And waited. A scholar of such rituals may deem that she had been left hanging for long enough when Rose finally stopped raising her eyebrow, muttered an eldritch conglomeration of non-syllables, and –in doing so– made a stygian symbol appear at the centre of Megido's palm.

“That should work”, smiled the author as the guards were storming in. “Take care of her, not that she needs it.”

Out Of The Loop

Karkat

People have been telling you you're inefficient. You've been telling them they're brainless imbeciles with a sediment lump for a pan. The resultant stalemate has been in your favour for a while now, though that time appears to be over. Yesterday, during one of these exchanges, you'd told a member of your staff "OH YEAH? WHAT ARE YOU GONNA DO, HUH NOOKFACE? LOCK ME UP IN MY OFFICE?", whereupon they had shockingly, unexpectedly and with no provocation whatsoever, locked you up in your office. That's what one gets for building a reputation precariously upon the idea of not wanting to receive special treatment. Another indignity to add to your list. If only doing your job "right" weren't so boring. Humans apparently write manifestos in prison, use the calm to hone their thoughts and let ink cast them into daggers. Strange creatures.

KARKAT: CALM?

You scream at no one in particular.

KARKAT: WHAT CALM? SOMEONE GET ME ANOTHER SLURRY-GUZZLING CUP OF COFFEE OR I'LL BLOW UP PARLIAMENT RIGHT THE FUCK NOW.

It's unclear whether that threat rang less or more hollow, back when you weren't literally in parliament. Either way you can hear someone hurriedly getting to work.

The main "issue" (their term, not yours), is that whenever a group of people comes in here with some problem, you storm out along with them to help fix it. Usually with the same amount of righteous fury they have or more. "You're supposed to delegate" your aids say "THEN WHY IN THE MOTHER GRUB'S FESTERING OOZE RECEPTACLE AM I EVEN HERE?" you'd answer. "But you barely are here! That's the problem." etc. Who knew a purely symbolic position came with this degree of restrictive bullshit? Maybe you could just-

When you look out of the window, a guard meets your gaze and slowly, unblinkingly, shakes her head. Figures. If Kanaya has somehow signed off on this you will make her pay.

A knock. Trepidatious, almost fearful, which means that it's one of the new people who haven't yet acclimated to your inveterate dominion over the upper end of the decibel scale. A young indigo blood opens the door just wide enough to timorously reach the cup through, which looks ridiculous, given that he's two whole heads taller than you. He alerts you to the fact that you have guests, while somehow managing to convey the impression that he's even more afraid of them than he is of you. Finally! Something to do. You've been left to think of plot lines for your performance art piece all night, and if anyone gives you any more time to work on that, the relationship dynamics will become incomprehensible to any and all audiences, and you will have developed a system ten times worse and a hundred times more complicated than leprechaun romance.

KARKAT: COME IN.

JAKE: Ahoy mister-

KARKAT: JESUS CHRIST YOU DON'T EVEN LIVE HERE.

JAKE: Oh i do actually own a number of apartments in the enclave... I think

KARKAT: AND WERE YOU USING THEM?

JAKE: Well... no. Not personally at least.

KARKAT: THEN THEY'VE BEEN SEIZED. COOL. GLAD WE SOLVED THAT MYSTERY.

JAKE: Ah right. I recall some flustered newsie dreading that that policy might cook the goose of society itself.

KARKAT: AND DO YOU REMEMBER WHAT I SAID TO THAT?

JAKE: Surely you faced down the bothersome critics and assured them that it would do no such thing!

KARKAT: HAAAA! NO. IN THE IMMORTAL WORDS OF TROLL STAFFORD BEER BEFORE HE WAS EXECUTED: "WHEN WE HEAR THAT A PROPOSAL WILL DESTROY SOCIETY AS WE KNOW IT, WE SHOULD HAVE THE RISIBLE BIT OF POSTURE POLE NECESSARY TO SAY: 'THANK THE MOTHER GRUB; AT LAST.'"

JAKE: Oh. Well i suppose that is also a strategy.

VRISKA: We're not here to talk about recently expropri8ed hivestems, Karkat.

VRISKA: This is just a friendly visit to 8righten your day.

VRISKA: In fact, I'm very sure that we come 8earing the 8est gift anyone's ever 8rought you :::)

You laugh, but shut up real quick when the true purpose of the visit becomes evident. There's actual problems of the heart for you to help with. Not socioeconomic predicaments couched in a prefatory veneer of romance to more easily get your attention, but actual love troubles. Quickly you grab your fancy fuck-off office chair, pull it to the front of the desk and awkwardly straddle the back with your legs like a youth clown-cultist trying to make a connection. Then, the nodding begins.

A few things become obvious right away. One is that Jake desperately needed someone to push him and call him out on his bullshit. He'd had that with Dirk, but the resultant dynamic was controlling in a way he refused to address and withdrew instead. That was the first problem. The second problem was a misattribution of the first one. In Jake's mind, the overt pushiness came to be seen as the issue, which led him into Jane's arms, who was more outwardly gentle, but only marginally less controlling. A younger and more immature Karkat might have framed it as a flushed suitor inserting themselves as the auspistice into a relationship that used to be a milquetoast matespriteship, but which had been unsettled to the point of vacillation. The auspistice stabilizes the pitch configuration which no one involved is actually interested in, leading to the whole ship capsizing and the originally desired partner ending up available for flushed garbs. Oldest trick in the book, but a massive oversimplification. Point is: The engagement to Jane got rid of the fire under his ass, which is what he thought he wanted, but really that just allowed him to slip through the cracks, while Jane got increasingly passive aggressively frustrated with him. The idea that Jake didn't want to be controlled was never communicated to either partner. After the exposure to Serket, Jake understands that he can have the fire under his ass without the control, and it makes him miss Dirk even more than he did before, now that he allows himself to admit that, but at the same time he's afraid that Strider can't change in that way, or that their past would block the path towards happiness. Reality is more fragile than phantasy after all, so if left to his own devices English would tend towards daydreaming, or at least younger more immature versions of him would have.

You lay all of this out in thick, meaty slices. No garnish, no veggies. You left your word-mincing knife at home and you've never had a use for it anyway. The issue is that Jake already seems to know at least some of this, and the moments of evasion feel less like actual deflection than like an attempt to shift

attention towards Vriska and Terezi. He keeps unnecessarily bringing them up in examples for things and- wait. Is he winking at you?

Oh fuck you get it. Vriska wouldn't have signed up for relationship counselling over her dead body, so he made her drag him here instead. Okay. Round two. You crack your knuckles. It's honestly sort of embarrassing how much fun you're having.

KARKAT: GOG, YOU HAVE NO IDEA HOW MUCH OF A PRESENT THIS IS, SERKET.

VRISKA: What? This isn't about me.

KARKAT: HA WELL THAT WOULD BE A FIRST.

Jake flashes you a quick, furtive thumbs up.

KARKAT: ANYONE WHO'S STUPID ENOUGH TO BUY THE WHOLE "I'M ACTUALLY WORRIED THAT TEREZI MIGHT DO SOMETHING INADVISABLE"-SHTICK: RAISE YOUR PRONGS.

KARKAT: YOU DON'T BELIEVE SHE'S DUMB ENOUGH TO DO SOMETHING DANGEROUS, AND YOU WOULDN'T CARE IF SHE DID SOMETHING ETHICALLY QUESTIONABLE.

KARKAT: PLEASE DON'T PRETEND LIKE YOU OF ALL PEOPLE HAVE A MORAL FUCKING COMPASS ALL OF A SUDDEN.

KARKAT: THIS IS JUST MEDDLING TO GET HER BACK BECAUSE YOU CAN'T BRING YOURSELF TO SIMPLY APOLOGIZE.

KARKAT: BECAUSE YOU WOULD HAVE LIKED IT IF SOMEONE HAD JUST DONE WHAT NEEDED TO BE DONE FOR YOUR SAKE BACK IN THE DAY, EVEN WHEN YOU CLAIMED THAT IT *WASN'T* NECESSARY.

KARKAT: LIKE KILLED YOUR LUSUS MAYBE. REALLY FUCKING MESSED UP, BUT HONESTLY FAIR IN THAT CASE.

KARKAT: AND YOU'RE UPSET BECAUSE IT FEELS LIKE SHE TESTED YOU, BANKING ON YOU TO MAKE THE WRONG CHOICE.

KARKAT: KNOWING TEREZI, IT KINDA SEEMS LIKE SHE DID, WHICH IS A SHITTY MOVE.

KARKAT: BUT LET'S NOT PRETEND LIKE EITHER OF YOU POSSESSES THE CAPACITY TO STAY APART FOR ANY SIGNIFICANT LENGTH OF TIME.

KARKAT: CARDS ON THE TABLE WHERE WE CAN ALL DESPAIR AT THEIR HIDEOUS GUISES.

KARKAT: YOU BOTH LOVE EACH OTHER TO A DEGREE TO WHICH YOU DON'T THINK YOU CAN- OR SHOULD BE LOVED, AND SO YOU TAKE EVERY OPPORTUNITY TO SELF-SABOTAGE. KARKAT: IT'S FUCKING JUVENILE. KARKAT: BELIEVE ME, I GET IT, BUT *EVIDENTLY* THERE ARE PEOPLE (*PLURAL*, BAFFLINGLY), WHO MANAGE TO FEEL AFFECTION FOR *THIS SHIT*.

You gesture at yourself.

KARKAT: SO WHO AM I TO SAY THEY'RE WRONG? KARKAT: SEE, THE ISSUE IS THAT YOU'RE ANXIOUS AROUND THE VERY *CONCEPT* OF SECURITY. YOU NEVER HAD IT AS KIDS, AND THE ONE THREE-YEAR STRETCH IN WHICH YOU FINALLY JUST GOT TO BE CUTE AND NORMAL AND IN LOVE, IN AS MUCH AS ANY OF THOSE ATTRIBUTES CAN APPLY TO EITHER OF YOU, ENDED WITH YOU GETTING KICKED IN THE SNIFF-TUBE BY CANON AND TORN APART. KARKAT: YOU HAD YEARS TO STEW IN THAT COSMIC BETRAYAL, SO NOW OBVIOUSLY *THINGS GOING WELL* MAKES YOU PANIC, BECAUSE YOU CAN'T BEAR THE POSSIBILITY OF THAT HURT AGAIN. KARKAT: THAT'S UNDERSTANDABLE, BUT IT'S REALLY FUCKING MALADAPTIVE AND YOU'RE RUINING THE ONE THING THAT EVER MATTERED TO EITHER OF YOU. KARKAT: SGRUB IS OVER. WE WON. WE'RE NO LONGER ON A TINY ROCK HURTLING THROUGH INFINITE NOTHINGNESS TOWARDS A FIGHT WITH A VENGEFUL GOD. THIS TIME SAFETY ISN'T A HILARIOUS PIPE DREAM. KARKAT: JUNE'S PROBABLY NOT HELPING BY GIVING BOTH OF YOU THE FEELING THAT YOU'RE *VALID* AND *JUSTIFIED*, WHEN REALLY YOU BOTH FUCKED UP AND SHOULD JUST *TALK IT OUT* INSTEAD OF PERPETUALLY BEING MAD AT EACH OTHER FOR NOT BEING ABLE TO READ YOUR RESPECTIVE MINDS.

JAKE: ...

VRISKA:

KARKAT: GREAT.

KARKAT: IN EXCHANGE FOR THAT SAGE FUCKING ROUND OF COUNSELLING -AND GOG KNOWS YOU OWE ME- CAN YOU GET US OUT OF HERE?

KARKAT: THERE'S A STRIKE I NEED TO ATTEND.

To say that Dirk Strider sat awkwardly upon the sleek semicircular sofa at the centre of Calroxy's living room, would only be partially true. Dirk sat the way he always sat: Composed, upright, ready to jump in case of emergency. More accurately, he felt awkward while sitting normally, and none of his friends expected anything else from him. What they perhaps wouldn't have expected was that he had consulted Sollux and Aradia about the upcoming conversation for days. He had pushed down his instincts and asked for help, even though he had to take this final step by himself. Ideas were explored and rejected, the first few beginning with the offer of a truce and the latter ones being much less stupid. He hoped so at least. For once Dirk's mechanic-brain was not at all giddy at the sheer amount of things which needed to be fixed.

DIRK: Okay, first things first: I'm 100% genuinely sorry for everything. I realize that I went completely off the deep end and dragged all of you down with me.

DIRK: Obviously you have every right not to accept that, and obviously things won't go back to the way they were over night.

DIRK: Let's be real, things will never go back to the way they were.

DIRK: But I'll do everything to rebuild the trust I broke, and these words are just a measly first step on that path. They're a coupon. Worthless paper until it's redeemed.

Roxy was trying hard to keep their face neutral. They had committed to the idea that they wouldn't let him get away so easily, but at the same time they still hadn't found the strength to talk to Jake, and the prospect of getting one of their best friends back for free was just so tempting. Just move on and forgive. Callie's presence helped to stick to the pledge.

ROXY: thanks d it means a lot

ROXY: sure feels like we keep failing at that thing where traumatic events r supposed 2 bring u closer together

ROXY: not to all eulogize the amazing benefits of trauma (tm)

ROXY: fucking "build deep connections w/ this simple trick" therapists hate him lmao

ROXY: just really looking for crumbs here

He didn't mention that this sort of thing is called a shared dysphoric experience and that there are a number of reasons why it might have backfired. Most likely, however, was the option that it didn't backfire at all. That they were all even more likely to take a bullet for the others now than they were before, but that love didn't necessarily map onto healthy communication. All of those observations weren't the point. As if to disrupt the awkward silence, a perfectly white cat with a missing eye jumped onto Dirk's lap and he began to give it scratches behind the ear.

DIRK: Hey Satin. Yeah you know what's up.

Roxy immediately started chuckling and it took a few moments of Dirk looking vaguely worried until they caught themselves.

DIRK: What?

ROXY: pff i guess i just didnt expect u 2 remember their names, let alone their favorite spots

CALLIOPE: it's honestly sUrprising that anyone beside Us keeps track, love. they are quite nUmeroUs after all.

DIRK: Really? Man that's cold. You honestly think I don't cherish the shit out of every blurry cat pic you send me in the middle of the night.

DIRK: My knowledge of these little fuckers is straight up encyclopedic.

ROXY: oh yeah? prove it

ROXY: i wont accept anything less than maximum winnitude on cat fax

DIRK: Piece of cake.

DIRK: So, *Satin the Fallen* is a complete slut for ear scratches, while *Satan the Soft* is immune to pretty much all assaults of affection which don't involve his belly. I know you pretend like they're brothers, but there's some pretty compelling genetic evidence that they aren't, and *Skimblehanks the Self-evident Cats Reference* is actually much more likely to...

This went on for a while until they were all laying on their backs, recounting stories to each other. First about the cats, then more generally about the lives that had led them to this point. Often converging, too often diverging.

ROXY: i keep thinking that we failed her, u kno? n i dont wanna make that same mistake with u

ROXY: i was trying so hard to be a good supportive friend that i dont think i ever said "yo janey idk maybe ur going a lil overboard here"
ROXY: and the more everyone else turned against her the more i felt like i needed to be accepting
ROXY: when really what i owed her -what we all owed her- was an intervention
ROXY: sometimes being there 4 your friends includes not letting them go off the custom-built deep-end that a genocidal fish hag has constructed in their brain for years
ROXY: thats why i dont want 2 just forgive u like nothing happened
ROXY: i dont want it 2 get 2 a point where someone feels like they need to get rid of my boy DiStri by any means necessary

He nodded, and they took that as a good sign. There was a question Dirk had considered a lot with no satisfying conclusion: When someone dies in a fortress, protected by everything, is that worrying or reassuring? It is unnerving that the danger is great enough to overcome this bulwark, but on the other hand: The fortress implies that the threat does not come out of nowhere. It can be predicted. One has the possibility to safeguard against it in advance. One just has to do it better. Roxy seemed to propose a third option: That the goal might be not to need protection in the first place.

DIRK: Remember that interview I once gave about Jane's novels. The one where I compared her to Houellebecq like that was gonna (1) mean anything to anyone and/or (2) remotely help my case?
DIRK: Even I must have known that I was bullshitting myself there. Houellebecq was great despite his batshit politics, not because of them. They're not some secret tool to write amazing novels, they're just wrong.

And that was the crux of the matter. A bone deep inability to even conceive of the notion that Jane might be wrong. To a man who had learned time and time again that trusting himself was a terrible idea, trusting his friends became vital. Someone, somewhere had to have a moral compass which actually worked.

DIRK: Up to the end I didn't realize that Jane going off the deep end was even an option. That sentence barely computes.

CALLIOPE: come on dirk. yoU know that's a cop oUt.

ROXY: yea like im sure it feels a little safer 2 your neurotic ass, but in the end ur still the one choosing whom 2 believe in

ROXY: in the end u have 2 trust urself on that decision @ least

ROXY: its the same problem one step back

ROXY: leaps of faith all the effing way down the turtle stack

ROXY: peep them philosophies my guy

DIRK: Maybe. Maybe I just got lost in the project itself. Either way you're not gonna hear any disagreements from me. We absolutely failed Jane.

ROXY: ...

ROXY: ur not gonna ask me 2 apologize for the archives?

DIRK: I mean, I'd like it if you did, but I won't hold it against you if you don't.

DIRK: That wasn't your call, and we deserved the opportunity to at least discuss it with you.

DIRK: But it's not like I consulted anyone, and you were probably right to be concerned that I'd try to stop you.

DIRK: I would still stop you. I get where you're coming from, but we can't just let them get away with it. We can't just pretend like nothing happened.

DIRK: Turning the other cheek is admirable and all, but not knowing the culprit doesn't stop us from knowing that *someone* did this. It just means that we'll be distrusting everyone instead of one person specifically.

DIRK: Don't get me wrong, I'm amenable to rehabilitation here. Kind of have to be if I don't want to be a huge hypocrite, but we have to know.

DIRK: Even if the commune decides that it's justified and grants them asylum, we have to know.

ROXY: but we ARE all sort of responsible

ROXY: people DID come 2 us and said that they were worried about the whole jane situation

ROXY: how many more would it have taken 4 us to listen?

ROXY: @ some point their hand was forced, right?

ROXY: maybe that bit of distrust wrt everyone is what it takes 4 us 2 actually handle things like adults

ROXY: a scapegoat would just allow us 2 go back 2 pretending everyone else is infallible and perfect and like everything is just fucking peachy until it happens again

ROXY: we cant let it happen again

ROXY: i just hope jake can forgive me at some point

DIRK: Have you... talked to him?

ROXY: haha noupe

DIRK: Jesus Rox, I don't think there's anything Jake can't forgive, which, let's be real, makes for a horrifying degree of leeway on my end.

DIRK: There's something seriously wrong with that guy's brain.

ROXY: lmao

DIRK: ...

DIRK: Have you ever actually talked to Jake about his movies? Like really talked about them?

DIRK: It's fine if you haven't. I wasn't even totally aware that it's an option before we started dating, because he's so quick to just go "Well I like it but I wouldn't want to force my unrefined tastes upon a cinematographic gourmand like yourself".

DIRK: And for the longest time I believed him. That it was just indiscriminate? That he lacked the critical faculties for it?

DIRK: Which is insane. We both know how smart Jake is behind all of his stupidity. Anyway, the way this man treats media is completely alien. It goes against the natural alignment of every neuron of my brain, but it all makes sense in some incomprehensible, reason-transcending, looking-through-the-veil sort of way.

DIRK: He approaches media with this weird baseline belief that it's axiomatically great, and then the job of the audience is to figure out *why* it's great.

DIRK: If I see a time travel plot that doesn't make any sort of sense, I'm gonna think the creator's a hack, and whether I can look beyond that is gonna depend on how well the rest of it works. Jake sees a time travel plot that doesn't make any sense and comes up with some insane maximum heritability reason for why that would be the case.

DIRK: Something like "the fact that the mechanics are inconsistent shows us that the characters don't actually fully grasp what they're dealing with." That this adds a dimension of wonder and unease with regards to what's truly possible.

DIRK: When... no. The writer just fucked up.

DIRK: I asked him about it once. Whether he realizes that he's just artfully bullshitting himself to explain away obvious flaws.

DIRK: And this fucking guy looks me straight in the face and says "It's possible I suppose, but I'm trying to have a humdinger of a time, aren't I? Why wouldn't I assume the best? Not doing that seems like it would just lead to sub par experiences."

DIRK: Jake likes every movie because he naturally tries to find the best in every movie.

DIRK: Which is exactly the way he sees us too. Extrapolating out from whatever sad paucity of admirable traits we have and believing in that.

DIRK: I honestly doubt that he thinks there's anything to forgive in the first place.

This spectacular fail-state of the way they venerated each other could not help but spark memories of the day they died in a moon. Together but also apart. Dirk had died beside a different Roxy –a Roxy later slain by a mind-controlled version of their best friend– and Roxy had died beside a different Dirk –a Dirk left behind in a terminal continuity as it ground to a halt. The rogue was first to address this.

ROXY: dirk?

ROXY: rember when we were lying on our suislabs all hung over and trixtered tha fuck out and worried that the others hate us because of some dumb shit we said or did

ROXY: going thru like serpentine cross planet message chains because we thought that we broke something precious

ROXY: when really we were all just way 2 up in our own heads
ROXY: im getting the feeling that all of us have a real bad habit of overestimating the fragility of our friendship when in reality that shit is as rock fucking solid as arquius abs
DIRK: Worst possible comparison, but I take your point.
DIRK: You're saying we're underrating the magic of friendship.
ROXY: yes lol thats exactly what im saying n exactly the horrible phrasing i would have used 4 it
ROXY: n its causing us to keep tiptoeing around shit n act like assholes n letting each other go off the stupidly wide assortment of deep ends at our disposal
ROXY: i think we all gotta learn 2 stop jakeifying each other
DIRK: Hm.
DIRK: That's gonna be hard seeing how effortlessly amazing the three of you are.
ROXY: dirk im serious
DIRK: Yeah I know. Just promise me you'll talk to him, okay?

Callie gave a nod to indicate that they would hold their partner to it. The cherub had taken a backseat from the conversation, aware that they had a place in it whenever they chose, but preferring to hear its natural path. They could not quite put their finger on it, but somehow this felt like one of those moments that eternity had been waiting for. One of the last bolts shackling a static mantle to a spinning core.

ROXY: but thats not everything is it?
DIRK: No it's not.

The Prince exhaled deeply before he told them all that he recently learned, as well as the things he had buried long ago. There was never a formal interdict on speaking about the reasons for the Ascension Society's disbanding, but still all of them had agreed that it was for the better. Roxy knew that something had happened that day, of course. Callie was not very good at hiding their emotions, but the hero of Void had elected to comfort rather than to pry. It had seemed kinder at the time. Now, however, they were exhuming that box

which had been opened for only a moment and hastily shut. The box which Calliope, Rose and especially Dirk had been carrying in their hearts for years. It contained a version of himself –all versions of himself– whom he was deathly afraid of. A terrible god who he thought had abandoned him, and whom he claimed to have rejected, though both stories rang hollow in light of recent events. A terrible god from whom his friend had saved him, the way they had always saved him.

On the day on which Dirk Strider had realized that the membrane upon which this reality stood was not his own, he had also realized another thing: That it wasn't his subconscious but the sprites which had been talking to him. Perhaps "the sprites" was misleading. At the very least *instances of their sprites*, though with creatures so attuned to their ultimate self, that distinction might well be a technicality.

ROXY: so this barrier thingy

DIRK: Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's your work. Kind of obvious in retrospect. Yours in the only power-set in which it makes any sense.

ROXY: but id remember doing that

ROXY: this seems like kind of a huge deal n id tell you if i knew abt it

DIRK: I know.

ROXY: then like???

ROXY: its either another roxy who pulled that stunt 4 some reason or i got brainjacked

DIRK: Sure. Or, option three: You didn't do it yet.

ROXY: okayyy

ROXY: but if thats right it would have been an unresolved loop 4 what? three four years? isnt that like super meta narratively dangerous?

ROXY: y r our sprites bringing this up now?

DIRK: It would be, unless we were shielded from relevance by –oh I don't know– some sort of void barrier. As for why now... until now we didn't have a reason to go back there, did we?

DIRK: Maybe I'm reading too much into Jasprose's batshit riddles, but if you were there that day, I think that would have some interesting implications.

CALLIOPE: it sort of soUnds like yoU're holding back caUsal spoilers, dirk.

CALLIOPE: did more of this already happen? u~u
DIRK: Loaded fucking question. Let's just say that they're not my spoilers to dish out. I'm also frustratingly in the dark on all of this shit, but I know a gal on the inside and I'm real tempted to trust her.

Dave

Your name is Dave Strider and you've lowkey been losing your mind of late. When it comes to the great cosmic bargain bin of powers, leave it to you to pick the one whose entire point is setting up causal traps for yourself and running into them like an asshole. Free will? Never heard of her. A few weeks ago you made your bed, and you're really damn scared of what happens when you go to sleep in it. Not even because there's necessarily anything dangerous on the horizon but because of the simple fact that it is on the horizon, looming, unavoidable if reality wants to draw another breath. Chekhov loaded his damn gun in direct view of your time stream, and now it's not a matter of *if* or *how* but *when*. As foretold and as always. Fuck. You're like one of those people whose joints start hurting before a storm front hits, and your spider sense –Strider sense– has been tingling to bubble-hell and back since you woke up yesterday. Fuck the weather report, your magic old man bones know better. The future's gonna deck you in the face any minute. Any second. Any instant.

Another wave of exhaustion hits with renewed vigour and the bulwark of caffeine you have erected at your blood-brain barrier creaks but does not crack. Still, better to stock up. Your high-end espresso machine, upgraded with manual pressure control, courtesy of Jade's engineering chops, hums along right next to you and would execute your order flawlessly in no time... but you don't feel like perfection right now. You sort of feel like shit. The impulse to get out of your head makes another option seem tempting, and so, you go about preparing a cup of *the shit Karkat drinks*. Here goes nothing.

Scalding, acrid liquid wreaks havoc on your taste buds, and the difference is obvious immediately. Normal coffee shuts the door, keeps the fatigue out, safeguards, outflanks. This brew on the other hand keeps the door open and when fatigue arrives, it decks it in the face, strangles the life out of it and stabs the corpse a few times for good measure. The substance swirling around your

oral cavity is the nuclear option in a hellish conflict that only full-time insomniacs have ever had the displeasure of being combatants in. Weirdly enough there's something comforting about it when you look past the pain.

(DAVE): yo

You jump to the other corner of the room like a traumatized cat when you tap yourself on the shoulder, sucking down a mouthful of pain-juice right into your lungs. The hacking cough that ensues takes a while to overcome, and he winces along with all of your convulsions, clearly remembering this period of his life less than fondly.

(DAVE): talkings gonna hurt for a while so ill be doing most of that

(DAVE): i mean why wouldnt i

(DAVE): i know what we were thinking about

(DAVE): letting our past selves get a word in edgewise is pretty much only ever a setup for predestined jokes or a grudging cooperation with conversations that already took place

(DAVE): lets be real here we have no problem rambling to ourselves without even a crumb of polite backchanneling

(DAVE): its all just habit

(DAVE): heres some tea by the way

(DAVE): its not actually gonna help but its gonna feel like the sort of thing you should be drinking

(DAVE): anyway you know the deal

(DAVE): were gonna do our job and thats gonna make everyone not die which is great

(DAVE): well its gonna make mostly everyone not die but were working on that

(DAVE): theres a plan

(DAVE): you might even call it a nefarious scheme and being able to call things that is obviously always amazing news

(DAVE): milking narrative convention for all its got

(DAVE): plans fail constantly forcing you to be all plucky and adaptable but nefarious schemes

(DAVE): those basically accomplish themselves while you eat grapes and play the piano during a thunderstorm

(DAVE): anyway the only way out is forward

(DAVE): which is to say backward

(DAVE): youll get the rest of the explanation in a few minutes

(DAVE): dont get me wrong were gonna hate it but at least the waiting game will be over

(DAVE): thats all ive got for you

He takes an envelope and a newspaper out of his hoodie pocket and throws them to you. Your throat feels like inflamed sandpaper, but a single syllable can just about press itself through.

DAVE: thanks

(DAVE): no prob

Something, something, comparing time travel to a piece of furniture and yourself synecdochically to a wildly exaggerated version of your own ass. Whatever the method or metaphor, you end up in the manor's bedroom ten minutes before Dave 1 does. The smell of breakfast wafts up from below and fills your nose as you start to read. The synergy it produces with the burnt acid taste clinging to every inch of your throat is difficult to describe and almost entirely unpleasant.

Been a while since you read the news. The first piece to catch your eye is an opinion piece by a man called Vospat Aiquil. It feels like that name faintly rings a bell. An organizer of some sort during the early NA-days, you think. The article is a one year retrospective of Earth C's political and social climate, beginning at the acme of centralized CrockerCorporate influence and concluding in your present-future historical moment of governmental splintering into interwoven communes. The age of experimentation as some are calling it. This is framed by an inversion of that old Voltaire quote "Si Dieu n'existait pas, il faudrait l'inventer (if God did not exist, we would have to invent him)": "Si les dieux existaient, il faudrait les oublier (if gods existed, we would have to forget them)". If a people wanted to find their own way, if they wanted to experience agency and live freely, there simply could not be an unaccountable, all powerful entity above them. Even a benevolent god, he says, is a despotic imposition. The whole thing essentially reeks of ideas you've rapped about with Karkat, though this article draws from a much more respectable vocabulary that may as well have been cribbed wholesale from the Maryam-Lalondes. On the one hand it seems vaguely ironic that you should have supplied some of the tools for your own abolition, but at the same time

it seems like the one thing truly benevolent gods would have done. Just handed out keys to the kingdom like cheap cigars before ollying the fuck outie into a quiet rest of eternity. Wouldn't that be nice? Instead you're stuck in a batshit loop of dealing with chronology nonsense which has basically no chance of making any sort of sense whatsoever. It's a comforting thought, by the low standards you've erected for yourself, but deep down you know it isn't true. You fear that this makes a lot of sense actually. When you finally barge in to interrupt your genuinely moving perusal of the politics section, you feel a slight sting in knowing that this is where your recent arc of permanent anxiety began. He asks why your voice sounds like someone put it through an antique meat grinder, and you tell him not to worry about it.

Maybe you could just stay here and read the entire newspaper until he gets back. Maybe figure out what extrafuture Dave wants to tell you by it, since you originally assumed it was just some sort of prop, but maybe that's not the safest move. You remember that you probably shouldn't occupy the forbidden interval either, and you're not super psyched about hearing the impact—or the accompanying scream—of your best friend's hot mom in the first place. Yeah, bad idea. You jump forward to a point moments before you enter the second time. There's a deterministic joke about Olive Garden to be made, and it's still pretty funny the second time. Dave looks exhausted. You remember being exhausted. And just like that eternity is over again.

Present Day. Present Time. Hah. It almost reads as a joke when there's another fucking envelope inside of the inner one. There isn't even another hint this time, just an arrow with the note “do it for them”, which points exactly at Jade and Karkat playing a video game in the other room with the way you're standing, and another note saying “the day before the murder 3pm courthouse”.

You're gearing up to jump when you realize how thin this last envelope is. If you hold it against the light, you can... The thought had popped into your head and was executed upon so quickly that you never even considered whether this is in the spirit of the law or if you just fucked up massively, but it's too late. What you can make out sort of looks like a grocery list (apples, jam, coffee etc.) as well as a table of names. Your names, to be specific. All of them save for Dirk and Jane. You try to figure this out for a moment, but nothing really clicks. This sure would have been an incredibly worthless thing to have doomed the timeline over. Oh well. There's no hint that you should

go to the courthouse immediately, but postponing the inevitable has never been particularly high on your long list of hobbies.

On a crisp spring day some months in the past, Terezi Pyrope stands in front of a statue of Justitia, looking as though she's suffering from the worst brain-freeze any person has ever experienced. You suddenly understand jack anything.

TEREZI: HOLY SH!T I C4N'T B3L13V3 TH4T WORK3D

DAVE: okay i suddenly understand jack anything

DAVE: what

TEREZI: COM3 ON D4VE, TH4T'S OBVIOUS

TEREZI: WH4T 1SN'T OBVIOUS 1S WHY YOU SOUND L1K3
SOM3ON3 SHOV3D 4 PRONG OP3R4T3D GRUB-SHR3DD3R DOWN
YOUR CH1T1NOUS W1NDP1P3 >:?

DAVE: oh that

DAVE: yeah its international *talk like karkat*
day in the future and the jurys still out on how
time travel shenanigans factor into the rules there

DAVE: so better not risk it

DAVE: i dont wanna be the hapless fool who
fails *talk like karkat day* on a technicality

DAVE: that feels like itd be sacrilegious or
something

DAVE: my partners would leave me on the spot and
who knows if the kids could ever look their
disgraced dad in the eyes again

TEREZI: OK4Y, TH4T'S 4LL CL34RLY 4 L13. 4 FUNNY
ON3, SO 1'LL L3T 1T SL1D3

TEREZI: BUT ONLY B3C4US3 1'M 1N SUCH 4 GOOD MOOD
>:]

TEREZI: 1T TURNS OUT YOU C4N JUST PR3-COMM1T TO 4
BUNCH OF FUTUR3 D3C1S1ONS YOU WOULD M4K3 1N
HYPOTH3T1C4L T1M3L1N3S, SUCH TH4T 4 T1M3 TR4V3LL3R
FROM ON3 OF THOS3 T1M3L1N3S 1S PR3D3ST1N3D TO POP
UP 1N FRONT OF YOU

DAVE: what

DAVE: no

DAVE: this is just a routine temporal checkup
nothing special

TEREZI: R1GHT, SO YOU DON'T H4V3 4N 3NV3LOP3

DAVE: oh this thing

DAVE: nah

You only want to quickly pull it out as a joke, but Terezi grabs the slip of paper in an instant, shoves the letter in her mouth, and begins to chew. Any attempt to get it out would not only be too late, but would also lose you some fingers with nigh universal certainty, so you just stare as horror creeps down your spine like a wet tentacle. Both of you gulp. The Investigator swallows. After a moment of bone chilling silence, she lifts her hand and allows a miniature noose to slowly dangle between her fingers. Swaying back and forth with uncomfortable weight like a Damoclean sword. After two times seeing this exact bit, you have no trouble deciding that it is genuinely menacing.

DAVE: so what youre gonna kill her

TEREZI: W3LL NOW 1 4M

Not only does this statement sound matter-of-factly, as opposed to being suffused with her general manic energy, but you also notice a faint twitch in Terezi's mouth. A suppressed impulse to contort itself impossibly into the shape of a question mark. As though she's confused by the inquiry. Maybe she just assumed that you've figured it out already, but you're still as lost as you've ever been. More if anything. In retrospect, the grocery list might have been the poisoned breakfast items, but there was basically no reason to give yourself that information and it explained none of the rest of the loop, except maybe as an attempt to buy time. You can't get over the fact that she's grinning at you like you're in on some scheme you clearly aren't in on. A familiar nausea kicks into gear, a gut-terror that this might not be the way things are supposed to go. That you're confused not because you're missing some specific bit of information, but because the timeline's decohering beneath you. Your breathing speeds up and you tense every muscle as you try to "fast tiger"-away an oncoming panic attack.

DAVE: see you in court i guess

TEREZI: >:?

You can barely make out the expression as you ollie the fuck outie.

Intermission: Liberation

1 Year, 11 months and 21 days until Punchline.

Jane Crocker had faced one last round of counterarguments before her allies allowed her to go. Accountability was important after all, and so she had listened patiently and open-mindedly before taking off. They had pushed her into taking a small team of volunteers with her, but aside from that, the plan remained mostly unchanged. Today was the day she would break her old mentor out of prison.

Despite the fact that her allies would not need them, Jane had left the group of rebels a list of instructions, possible plans, possible strategies for handling possible contingencies. She had also left them a list of secret recipes for the cakes she usually brought to meetings. The young Miss Crocker had no intention of going on a suicide mission, of course, but a good operative treated every mission with the precautions necessary should it tragically turn out to be one. That was the nature of the game. Those who were not planning for the worst might as well not be planning at all. “Send me”, many had clamoured. Some few for the prestige, for a chance to prove themselves and their worth, but many because they felt themselves more expendable than her, and this simply could not be abided. If she was inexpendable then she had failed. A movement with inexpendable leaders was like a hard boiled detective without a misery-honed drinking problem, which is to say that they could hardly be considered a particularly robust movement at all, and even beyond that fact: This was her mission. It was not necessary in the tactical sense –Rose was a single ally. Not worth the risk by any honest utilitarian calculus– and so, roping anyone else into it was indefensible.

“Ready when you are, boss” purred lieutenant Strongclaw, an enormous troll who was very obviously just Equius and Nepeta in a trench coat. There was an unspoken notion that this fact should not be addressed despite no one being quite sure if it was ever intended to be a secret or not. The rebellion tended to attract oddballs. The margins were always prime territory for recruitment, and these days the world seemed to consist of nothing but margins.

Through months of work and research, they had prepared convincing forgeries of documentation filed by the Secretary of Homeland Security – these days known as the “Head Homie”. A horrid, clammy man who barely

understood how to act human and who wore his hair in the style of Roman emperors whom he was off-putting obsessed with and frequently likened himself to. The tech CEO wasn't even that far off, what with the head-count and all.

"That can't actually be true, right?" chuckled Porrim Maryam from the back seat as they were traversing Nebraska and discussing the plan. "No", Jane sighed "I'm afraid this is a true and well documented fact about Mark Zuckerberg". They collectively despaired at that for a bit. The horizon ended someplace in the middle distance. Reality was a bunch of snow-globes, tenuously connected and demarcating where the relevant people were. Transportation was turning dreamlike. Time skipped across arbitrary distances to the places that mattered, and trying to figure out how you got there only made your head hurt. If you were still alive at least.

Part of the scheme was to make Rose's liberation seem like a betrayal by the Secretary against Her Imperious Condescension, therefore hopefully moving an actual agent up the ranks. One of the many pathways by which Jane sought to sink her gnarled claws into the imperial meat-shredder. The pathetic weasel person wasn't really a traitor of course. At least not against the regime, just against humanity, as (one imagines) is part of the job description, so good riddance.

Everything had been diligently prepared for the group's arrival at *Betty Crocker Super Moist Cake Mix Penitentiary*. Porrim stayed behind to keep the car safe as Jane, Aradia and the Lieutenant exited. They were greeted by a roaming gang of jester Freikorps, faces painted in the blood of careless oppositionalists. Ridiculous and terrifying in equal measure. The propaganda apparatus did not go quite as far as to condone this behaviour, but reporting was primarily focussed on how *understandable the violence was in the face of enemies to the empire plotting around every corner*, and how *funny and clickable* all those impromptu executions were. Besides, the courts never cared enough to prosecute, and they ought to know a thing or two about justice. They were the courts after all. Strongclaw hissed and the murderers backed away whimsically.

Inside a small, stuffy office sat the jail's warden, a hard, old veteran of the subjugation wars with a gray moustache that looked like it could strip paint. A mock trial was running on his TV. "*Today I resign from the staff of the*

Imperial Marketing Fund after over twelve years, and after 1000 days of official work in the field, hawking your medicine and your bag of tricks to governments and to peoples in Latin America and the Caribbean and Africa. To me, resignation is a priceless liberation, for with it I have taken the first big step to that place where I may hope to wash my hands of what in my mind's eye is the blood of millions of poor and starving peoples. Mr. Fieri, the blood is so much, you know, it runs in rivers. It dries up too; it cakes all over me; sometimes I feel that there is not enough soap in the whole world to cleanse me from the things that I did in your name and in the names of your predecessors, and under your official seal." The bureaucrat who had learned his lesson much too late, but who had finally discovered within himself a spine, was torn to shreds to thunderous applause. Jane tried to look composed. She should have done like her stacked allies and worn shades. Still she looked. It was the least one could do, even if one could do nothing else: To never avert one's eyes. Luckily there was more they could do.

The warden sized up Strongclaw, which took a while due to the sheer enormity of their size- and up-ness attributes. He did not notice when an extra pair of arms jutted out of the trenchcoat and nabbed his keyring. The man smiled pleasantly as he bragged about the toughness of his facility, and Jane nodded along thoughtfully while taking note of the various prisoners they passed.

After minutes that felt like eternities, the old officer got to a heavy steel door leading to the solitary wing, which he unlocked with a retina scan. The people here were VIPs too valuable to be executed, he chuckled "but believe me, they wish they were". That, and an assortment of Kankris who just kept annoying the warden. When they came to Rose's cell, he patted his back pocket, found nothing and looked around for a bit. Jane gave a stern look and noted down nothing at all on a clipboard to really sell the impression of being some sort of inspector. "Is everything alright, sir?" "yes, of course, I just –how embarrassing– I seem to have left my keys in the office, please wait here." The warden left. He kept leaving where Aradia trapped him in a locally confined time-loop as the lieutenant unlocked the cell of the most dangerous woman whom Her Imperious Condescension had ever captured.

Rose Lalonde sat in lotus position upon her bed, surrounded to all sides by paper, stacked in piles that reached the ceiling in places and almost felt load bearing. As though her words were the only thing that kept the sky from

falling. The seer's eyes flickered open. "I hae—" she stopped. "I have been waiting" were the words Rose wanted to say, but the prisoner had not heard her own voice in a while and it did not come out the way she wanted it to. Instead she merely got up and hugged the girl —now an adult— whom she thought of as a daughter. It was customary, she believed. In a single motion Lalonde captchalogued the entire brunt of her manuscript, but outside of single elegant motions, the toll imprisonment had taken on her was evident. She was frail and uncoordinated, and the hug served to stabilize her almost as much as it served the reunion. "we are freeing everyone, I assume?" she rasped. Of course they were. Equius' legs were already making short work of doors while Aradia kept the long distance security feeds looping. Rose placed a hand upon the warden's head and black fog billowed out beneath it. "just a little curse until *History Annulment* takes us all".

"What curse?" Jane asked. Her mentor's smile was cold and mirthless. It looked like a thing the abyss had forgotten between its teeth. "The worst I could think of naturally. My memories of the past two years. It would be unfair to keep them all to myself, would it not?"

At some point Rose asked about the presidents. They were dead. Their successors too, and *their* successors as well. The Condesce didn't even bother with presidents anymore because they kept being taken out. A proud tradition Dave had started, and sadly one he could not see through to its end. For all the swords he had driven through their chests, they finally drove one through his, and you only get to lose once, no matter how often you won. Fieri was still there, but he wore the paint mostly as a formality, and the baroness knew it. A little thorn they had managed to drive into her vision, and any amount of time the baroness spent dealing with those sorts of frustrations was time won for humanity. Any such frustration dealt was a signal that their alien overloaded was not all-powerful and that there was in fact hope.

The rebellion did not lose its foremost organizer that day. Rather, it gained an old one. The celebration was lavish, and while everyone insisted that Rose should rest, the novelist had had more than enough of being sedentary. Pedestrian fires may die when they are deprived of oxygen, but the inferno inside of Lalonde's core was stellar nucleosynthesis and it was fusing whatever was left, as it prepared to go supernova. The mission hadn't changed. The mission could never change. Even if reality was ending, evil could not be allowed to enter the afterlife beside them. On an unremarkable day five years

ago, Rose had smugly doomed the timeline, and she would take down the Batterwitch with her whatever it cost. She would make it to the punchline, and she would save the one person who ever mattered at all. The gods had promised that this was an option and in foolishness befitting of the wise and a wisdom known only to fools, she believed them.

Witness For The Prosecution

Sollux

What had begun –at least perfunctorily– as a chill get together between friends was rapidly starting to look like some sort of secret pre-conference conference. Which is to say a covert gathering preceding the trial of Terezi Pyrope. You're using “look” in the figurative sense of course, since the return of half of your soul into the realm of the living has left you once more fully blind, and you intend to stay that way. Your erstwhile mentor in that department had not resisted, when they put her in handcuffs, and you aren't sure whether that's worrying or not. Serket had tried to resist on her behalf, until Terezi told her not to. Certainly seems like those two are back together, which is pretty much the least surprising twist in the history of paradox space, but honestly things have been happening so rapidly that you can't fully claim to know anything. Karkat is flipping through that book Aradia brought here and nodding/ grunting occasionally. Dirk is talking about something called a... revulsion shark? No. *Evulsion Ark*. Ah, gotcha. That's marginally less dumb. Rose smiles beatifically as she comforts her ecto-offspring and the cherub, while June just looks at the variety of diagrams that have been drawn with marked concern. Aradia on the other hand has been bringing the exact opposite energy to the table, bouncing around elatedly and giggling something about a punchline. It doesn't feel like anyone's keeping you out of the loop deliberately, but you guess you're just too busy ruminating about what's gonna happen to Terezi to really pay attention. A yellow salamander waddles over to where you're sitting.

SOLLUX: y0u w0rried?

She looks to you, then to the assorted crowd and then rolls her eyes in a way that only a teenager who has been partially raised by Vriska Serket could.

CASEY: blub

SOLLUX: yeah, d0n't give me that shit. trust me
y0u'll get b0red 0f resigned disaffecti0n

SOLLUX: can't fucking believe that id 0ne day be
the guy wh0 tells pe0ple that its just a phase

SOLLUX: One Of yOur tr0ll human m0ms is getting tried f0r murder. that's n0t great. it sucks in fact

SOLLUX: and i get that it can be c0mf0rting to give up in advance and tell y0urself that y0u're fine with that, because it spares y0u the pain Of h0ping

SOLLUX: but a c0nstant acceptance that everything is and always will be fucked als0 hurts. it's just a dull pain instead Of a sharp One, and it's g0t a decent risk Of turning y0u int0 a useless caustic assh0le

SOLLUX: been there. d0ne that.

SOLLUX: and im n0t saying t0 start wearing r0se tinted glasses like s0me g00ey l0ser

CASEY: blub?

SOLLUX: n0 n0t r0xy. it's a figure Of speech.

SOLLUX: but i kn0w y0ur m0m, and i've g0t a feeling that everything's g0nna be fine.

CASEY: glub glub

SOLLUX: heh. y0u kn0w what?

SOLLUX: it's actually remarkably fucking easy being a kid and gr0wing up.

SOLLUX: n0 One ever talks ab0ut that part.

SOLLUX: its s0 easy that y0u barely even n0tice that it happened.

JUNE: oh there you are!

JUNE: yeah, listen to uncle sollux.

JUNE: i'm sure there's a really dumb, really convoluted explanation for all of this, and its just another part of her plan to catch the actual killer.

SOLLUX: maybe

SOLLUX: but abs0lutely fuck the fact that every0ne's a mind reader these days

JUNE: hehe, i'm sure it'll get better once we get used to it.

JUNE: the looking away is sort of the hardest part.

JUNE: it's kind of like karate, in that once you've learned it, it's really hard not to use it for every thing.

JUNE: but maybe that's just because most mundane chores are in truth thinly veiled karate lessons.

CASEY: glub

JUNE: slander! you loved that movie

You disregard what you're pretty sure is some human cultural reference and give your best comforting smile instead. It's abundantly clear that June needs it most of all right now, even if she's putting on a brave face. Karkat's talking to Dirk on the other side of the room, and you don't detect any hostility in it, which is pretty fucking wild. The overwhelming tension dissipates almost as quickly as it arose. Some decision has been made, and you have no idea what it means other than that it's big.



There was basically no way that any of this was legal. A mock trial in only and exactly as far as it made a mockery of the legal process, though Terezi had produced pages upon pages of documentation averring the manoeuvrer's permissibility, or at the very least a distinct and troubling lack of "dogs can't play basketball"-clauses. Of course a number of complaints had been filed to the high judge, a carapacian of unparalleled erudition descending a line of direct mentorship from the first *Assize Reconciler*, but the old hardshell had merely wept a tear of joy when she heard that someone wished to lead their own prosecution. "There can be no greater love for justice in a person's heart than that which would propel them to face themselves in court. On that most sacred battleground where stalwart ethics and precise reason meet in a brotherly embrace. Only a monster would forbid such a thing." she had told the news. The statement, despite its sincerity, was memed to hell and back of course, but this alone was not enough to overturn legal decisions. Staffers claimed that the high judge wept another tear when she saw the meticulous paperwork, though this remains unconfirmed. Either way, Terezi Pyrope would act as her own defense and her own prosecution. "WHAT, YOU GONNA BE JUDGE AND JURY TOO?", Karkat had mocked, but the investigator remained undeterred "NO, TH3 PO1NT W4S 4LW4YS FOR YOU TO B3 TH3 JUDG3 >:|".

Mere days later, gods filled the courtroom. Since its very structure was in shambles from the get-go, so was the audience. Sitting on railings, lying on benches or just floating around. Despite this, the mood was undeterredly grave. It was just that none of them had ever learned to sit still and upright

during tense, important moments, and none of them saw a reason to pick up the habit now.

TEREZI: 3H3RM 3H3RM, D1ST1NGU1SH3D JURORS,
JOURN4L1STS 4ND RUBB3RN3CK3RS, FR13NDS 4ND 3N3M13S
TEREZI: M4K3 NO M1ST4K3, OR 4T L34ST M4K3 4S F3W 4S
YOU 4R3 C4P4BL3 OF
TEREZI: TH3 4CCUS3D 4ND D4SH1NG M1SS T3R3Z4B3TH
P3L4F1N4 PYROP3 D1D COMM1T TH3 CR1M3 OF WH1CH SH3
ST4NDS 4CCUS3D
TEREZI: NOT 3V3N H3R 3ST33M3D D3F3NC3 WOULD D4R3
CH4LL3NG3 SO OBV1OUS 4 CL41M

She hurriedly ran over to the other podium, nodded sternly at the place where she stood a moment ago and then sprinted back.

TEREZI: TH3 PURPOS3 OF TH1S TR14L 1S M3R3LY TO
D3T3RM1N3 H3R PUN1SHM3NT
TEREZI: TH3 NOOS3 OR TH3 SL4MM3R OR WH4T3V3R 3LS3
YOU S33 F1T
TEREZI: THOUGH 1N ORD3R TO M4K3 TH1S JUDG3M3NT, W3
MUST F1RST UND3RST4ND TH3 CR1M3
TEREZI: FOR YOU S33, OUR 4CCUS3D CL41MS NOT TO
R3M3MB3R 4 TH1NG

DIRK: If she's trying to go for an insanity defence
I will flip my lid.

JAKE: Couldnt she have been bound by one of those
dread temporal knots?

DAVE: not how those work

JADE: she could have been manipulated?

VRISKA: Please, she'd remem8er if I had done that.

VRISKA: This is so o8viously a scheme. As though
Terezi would resort to a coward's weapon like
poison.

TEREZI: NO, 1 WOULD

VRISKA: Okay, fine, she would, 8ut- w8 why am I
fighting you here?????????

ROSE: I am sure Miss Pyrope would arrive at her
dialectic's terminus if we allowed her to.

JUNE: thank you rose! yeah, i'm sure there's a
perfectly dumb and sensible explanation for this.

TEREZI: TH3R3 1S

CALLIOPE: does it have something to do with those
ballots perhaps?

KARKAT: WAIT YOU GOT THOSE TOO? I THOUGH THAT WAS JUST TO SEE WHETHER WE'D GRANT HER ASYLUM.

KANAYA: Huh So Did I But Also

KANAYA: Shh

KANAYA: I Wish To Observe This

JAKE: Yes let us not get lost in pettiffoggery!

TEREZI: GR34T! TH3 D3F3NC3 M4Y B3G1N

Terezi tapped her cane onto the marble rhythmically as she stepped along the pews, performative mania only barely masking her concern. It had been obvious for a while now, but something was deeply wrong.

TEREZI: DO3S MY CL13NT H4V3 D3L1C1OUS C4NDY BLOOD ON H3R H4NDS? UNDOUBT3DLY!

TEREZI: BUT BLOOD 4LON3 DO3S NOT R3ND3R 4 P3RSON D3S3RV1NG OF JUDG3M3NT

TEREZI: WHO 1N TH1S ROOM 4FT3R 4LL ST1LL POSS3SS3S TH31R STONE3 THROW1NG PR1V1L3G3S ON TH1S FRONT?

TEREZI: WHO H3R3 H4S NOT K1LL3D 4T L34ST ONC3?

TEREZI: ...

TEREZI: TH4T'S WH4T 1 THOUGHT

TEREZI: MOD3RN HUM4N JUR1SPRUD3NC3 H4S TH3 CONC3PT OF S3LF D3F3NC3 TO S4NCT1ON SOM3 K1LL1NGS 4S P3RM1SS1BL3

TEREZI: SOLD13RS TOO 4R3 NOT USU4LLY CH4RG3D FOR MURD3R, SO LONG 4S TH3Y K1LL TH3 R1GHT P3OPL3 IN TH3 R1GHT W4YS

TEREZI: 4ND H1STORY H4S MUCH FUZZ13R 4PPL1C4T1ONS FOR TH3S3 CONC3PTS

TEREZI: TH3 MURD3R OF 4 ROM4N S3N4TOR W4S P3RC31V3D 4S P3RF3CTLY L3G1T1M4T3 1F TH3Y W3R3 S33N 4S 4 THR34T TO TH3 R3PUBL1C

TEREZI: W3 4LL H4V3 K1LL3D, 4ND C4N W3 HON3STLY S4Y TH4T 4LL OF 1T W4S 1N D1R3CT S3LF D3F3NC3?

TEREZI: 1F LORD 3NGL1SH H4D ONLY T3RROR1Z3D OTH3RS, WOULD 1T H4V3 B33N 4NY L3SS JUST1F13D FOR US TO PUT 4N 3ND TO H1S TYR4NNY?

TEREZI: WH3N W3 W3R3 TH3 ONLY ON3S W1TH TH3 POW3R TO DO SO?

TEREZI: WOULD 1T H4V3 B33N P4L4T4BL3 TO TH3 HUM4N 3MOT1ON C4LL3D MOR4L1TY TO L3T H1M GO, 1 WOND3R

TEREZI: 3XC3PT 1 DON'T TRULY WOND3R

TEREZI: TH3 4NSW3R 1S OBV1OUSLY NO

ROXY: but janey was one of us terezi

ROXY: n like for all the questionable politics she
wasnt anywhere near that lvl

TEREZI: Y3S

TEREZI: 1F 1 W3R3 MY CL13NT 1 WOULD H4V3 CONS1D3R3D
TH4T TO B3 4N 1SSU3

TEREZI: P3RSON4L 4TT4CHM3NT TURNS US 1NTO T3RR1BL3
UT1L1T4R14NS, 1 KNOW >:[

TEREZI: TH3 D3F3NC3 C4LLS D4V3 STR1D3R TO TH3 ST4ND

Everyone listened intently as Dave described his last trip through time to the day before the day on which eternity ended. The state he had found Terezi in, the things she had said. Slowly a theory of what might have happened was cohering in the mind of the time traveler, and it looked remarkably similar to a scheme that almost killed him once, though it seemed to have been fine-tuned to a point where it no longer required coins.

JUNE: oh its like that thing where she gave me the
scarf

The defensecution winked ambiguously.

TEREZI: MRS L4LOND3-M4RY4M, MR STR1D3R S3N1OR,
WOULD YOU M1ND T3ST1FY1NG TH4T TH3R3 4R3 T1M3L1N3S
1N WH1CH TH3 "QU3ST1ON4BL3 POL1T1CS" GOT 4 LOT
WORS3 TH4N TH3Y D1D H3R3?

DIRK: Jesus Christ, Everything happens in some
timeline. That's the whole point of paradox space,
it doesn't mean anything.

DIRK: If going off the deep end in one universe is
sufficient grounds to kill someone, we all should
be dead.

TEREZI: HMM SOUNDS L1K3 SOM3TH1NG 4 M4N WHO GO3S
OFF TH3 D33P 3ND 1N QU1T3 4 F3W T1M3L1N3S WOULD S4Y

TEREZI: BUT YOU'LL B3 H4PPY TO H34R TH4T 1 4GR33

TEREZI: 1T'S NOT 4 C3RT41NTY, M3R3LY 4 PROOF OF
3X1ST3NC3

TEREZI: SO TH3R3 4R3 T1M3L1N3S?

The two most experienced narrators nodded. Rose gravely, Dirk grudgingly.

TEREZI: 1N TH3 W33KS B3FOR3 TH3 MURD3R, WH3N TH3
4CCUS3D 4ND 1 W3R3 ST1LL TH3 S4M3 P3RSON, W3 W3R3
G3TT1NG UP TO SP33D W1TH TH1S PL4N3T'S GOV3RNM3NT,
4ND GROW1NG 1NCR34S1NGLY CONC3RN3D

TEREZI: W3 W3R3 CONS1D3R1NG TH3 P4THS TH4T M1GHT
SP1N OFF FROM TH3R3 4ND 4 NUMB3R OF TH3M LOOK3D
V3RY UNPL34S4NT

TEREZI: SW1RL1NG VORT1C3S OF POT3NT14L1TY L34D1NG
1NT0 D4RKN3SS

TEREZI: L1K3 TH4T T1M3 WH3N MY G1RLFR13ND W4S 4BOUT
TO K1LL US 4LL BY LOS1NG TO J4CK

Almost immediately the room erupted into a cacophony of “what the fuck Terezi” and “this wasn't your call”s. All of which she had of course expected. In a flash of half-perceived motion, Dirk dashed forwards with a katana he had somehow smuggled into court. Both Dave and Vriska tried to jump between him and the lawyer, though to little effect it turned out, as Jade had already miniaturized the Prince before he reached midway.

TEREZI: Y3S, 1T W4SN'T OUR C4LL, WH1CH 1S WHY 1 4M
C3RT41N TH4T MY CL13NT D1D NOT M4K3 1T

TEREZI: 1F 1 W3R3 H3R, 1 WOULD H4V3 L1K3D TO H4V3 4
W4Y TO G3T 3V3RYON3'S 1NPUT ON TH4T D3C1S1ON 1N 4
SC3N4R10 1N WH1CH TH3Y 4R3 MOR3 OBJ3CT1V3

TEREZI: 1N WH1CH TH3Y WOULDN'T L1T3R4LLY B3 VOT1NG
ON TH3 D34TH OF TH31R FR13ND

TEREZI: 4 SC3N4R10 1N WH1CH TH3 CH01C3 4LR34DY
H4PP3N3D 4ND TH3Y C4N T3LL M3 1F 1T W4S 4 GOOD ON3
FOR 3X4MPL3

TEREZI: 4FT3R 4LL TH3R3 4R3 SO M4NY V4R14BL3S TH4T
1 COULD NOT POSS1BLY 4CCOUNT FOR

The defensecutor glared at her audience.

TEREZI: 4 V3RS1ON OF M3 ONC3 L1V3D THROUGH 4
R34L1TY 1N WH1CH 1 K1LL3D MY G1RLFR13ND, 4S YOU 4LL
KNOW

TEREZI: 4ND OBV1OUSLY 3V3RYTH1NG W3NT TO SH1T

TEREZI: SO SH3 S3NT 4 T1M3-TR4V3LL3R B4CK TO T3LL
M3 TH4T 1 SHOULDN'T DO TH4T

TEREZI: SH3 TOLD M3 1N TH3 FORM OF JUN3 KNOCK1NG
OUT S41D G1RLFR13ND, BUT TH4T D3T41L 1SN'T
3SS3NT14L

JUNE: uhhh terezi. doing that doomed a timeline.
you remember that, right?

JUNE: i mean it was basically falling apart at the
seams, so that's fine but this one isn't.

JUNE: what did you do?

TEREZI: Y3S, TH4T W4S 4N 1SSU3

TEREZI: BUT ONLY B3C4US3 1 D1DN'T PL4N FOR TH4T
 F33DB4CK FROM TH3 ST4RT
 TEREZI: WH4T ON THE OTH3R H4ND 1F 1 D3C1D3D TH4T 1
 WOULD K1LL J4N3 1F 4ND ONLY 1F 1 R3C31V3D 4 L3TT3R
 FROM TH3 FUTUR3 1N WH1CH 4 S1GN1F1C4NT M4JORITY OF
 US D3C1D3D TH4T TH1S W4S 4 GOOD D3C1S1ON
 TEREZI: 4ND 1F 1 D1D 3ND UP K1LL1NG J4N3, 1 WOULD
 CONDUCT TH4T POLL 4ND S3ND 1T B4CK THROUGH 4 NON-
 R3TCON T1M3 TR4V3LL3R
 TEREZI: 1F 4ND ONLY 1F TH3 GOOD L1TTL3 UT1L1T4R14NS
 1N TH4T HYPOTH3T1C4L FUTUR3 D3C1D3 TH4T MY
 HYPH3T1C4L CR1M3 W4S JUST1F13D WOULD 4 T1M3-
 TR4V3LL3R 4PP34R
 TEREZI: 1F TH3Y WOULD NOT COM3 TO TH4T CONCLUS1ON,
 TH3N NO T1ME TR4V3LL3R WOULD 4PP34R 4ND 1 WOULD NOT
 COMM1T TH3 CR1M3, THUS R3L3G4T1NG 1T TO 4 THOUGHT
 3XP3R1M3NT
 TEREZI: 1F TH4T W3R3 WH4T MY CL13NT D1D, W3 WOULD
 KNOW HOW W3 GOT H3R3, 4ND TH3R3 WOULD B3 NO LOOS3
 3NDS 4ND NO 4DD1TION4L DOOM3D OFFSHOOTS
 TEREZI: BUT 4L4S TH3 D3F3ND4NT DO3SN'T R3M3MB3R, SO
 W3 DON'T 31TH3R

Most of the jury seemed annoyed by the amnesia shtick, not comprehending that Terezi was in the process of solving a different mystery altogether. One even she had been blind to until the house of cards began to catch fire. A mystery inscribed into a number of nonsense notes she once left for herself.

TEREZI: 1F ONLY TH3R3 W4S SOM3ON3 H3R3 WHO DO3S
 R3M3MB3R WH4T H4PP3N3D TH4T D4Y
 TEREZI: SOM3ON3, P3RH4PS, WHO KNOWS "MUCH MORE TH4N
 [SH3] WOULD L1K3 TO ON MOST 3V3RYTH1NG"
 TEREZI: MRS L4LOND3-M4RY4M?

The fellow Seer rose to her feet with a weightless sort of dignity. She gave her wife a reassuring smile before she stepped to the podium, but by now everyone knew better than to ever be reassured by anything.

ROSE: I suppose we have come far enough to play
 with open cards.
 ROSE: The game, you see, has grown rather too
 convoluted to make heads or indeed tails of with
 the regrettable handicap of imperfect information.
 ROSE: A truth our dear investigator had to learn
 and subsequently unlearn the hard way.

ROSE: So let us eschew the coin of probabilistic uncertainty outright and inspect its constituent parts instead.

ROSE: Disarticulate the vestigial assumptions which got us here to reach the figurative escapement of a dubiously real mystery.

Some perceived Rose's expression as pensive, while others could not help but detect a hint of smugness. All however found universal agreement in their confusion.

ROSE: When Miss Pyrope set up her little hypothetical and waited whether it would decide to make itself real, she was not without observers. I had foreseen her plan and taken great interest in it weeks before the Investigator actually formed it.

ROSE: The problem is that we are dealing with a plan which only works in the absence of such metatextual insight.

ROSE: My dear father was certain to hijack her stream of narrative coherence at some point. Once he had a riddle to solve -once he became aware of her presence- and if that happened, the desired feedback scheme would be contracepted even in those continuities in which we indeed come to the conclusion that this world is desirable.

ROSE: He simply would not allow it.

ROSE: So I perceived it as only fair to level the playing field, and account for some of those unforeseen variables in the investigator's stead.

TEREZI: V4R14BL3S >:[

ROSE: Yes variables. Plural, predictably.

ROSE: So, I made some arrangements and pre-commitments of my own. I instructed a friend of mine to stand guard outside of the Crocker mansion on the morning of the murder, whether it occurred or not.

ROSE: Miss Pyrope would of course only run into him if she actually went on to commit the crime, i.e. if a letter of affirmation kairotically reached her.

ROSE: This did happen, and so once our culprit had finished poisoning Jane's breakfast, she ran into

the arms of one Etaoin Shrdlu, head archivist of the prophecy wing, instructed to rid her of anything compromising.

ROSE: Though of course not in that specific, very incriminating, phrasing.

ROSE: Note that I did not hijack the simulation. No-letter outcomes were still perfectly possible and accounted for. I merely brought it back in line with its original intent.

ROSE: I trusted Terezi to be able to figure it out and initiate the second half of the plan once we were acceptably far in the future.

ROSE: I gather that she encrypted some information to herself which she would fall back on when her confusion reached a critical threshold.

“Simulation hijacking” was an interesting way to put it. Dirk gritted his teeth, remembering how he had once implied that Terezi did not understand the concept of hypotheticals, and how Rose had interrupted him. Terezi meanwhile had finished gritting her teeth (and thereby probably increased the lethality of her fangs) days ago. One might humorously claim that frustration was the great whetstone which kept Inspector Pyrope's dental implements sharp. She had only agreed to let Strider out of prison because she had worried that if she did not, she would give Rose a reason to dig through her brain, where she might discover that Dirk was never truly a suspect, but merely the other person who posed some significant threat to Earth C and should thus be contained. She had tried hard to retain plausible deniability. When she figured out that Strider was the one who had kidnapped Jake, she had made oblique hints to Vriska in hopes that she would deal with the problem for her, all in pursuit of no one rummaging through her mind. To know that all of this effort was for naught stung a little, but it wasn't nearly as upsetting as the fact that this reality didn't make sense. The pictures didn't line up.

TEREZI: Y3S, 1NFORM4T1ON WH1CH 1NCLUD3D 4
R3CR34T1ON OF TH3 L1ST D4V3 4LL3G3DLY BROUGHT M3
TEREZI: TH3 L1ST WH1CH 4LL3G3DLY BOR3 TH3 N4M3S OF
3V3RYON3 WHO R3TRO4CT1V3LY VOT3D 1N F4VOUR OF TH1S
SCH3M3
TEREZI: BUT LOOK1NG 4T TH1S ROOM, TH4T 1NFORM4T1ON
W4S CL34RLY 4 L13

TEREZI: SO 1F YOU D1D NOT H1J4CK TH3 S1MUL4T1ON
TH3N WHO D1D?

TEREZI: WHY 4R3 W3 H3R3? HOW D1D 1 G3T 4 L1ST
4VOW1NG 4 S1GN1F1C4NT M4JOR1TY, WH3N TH3 VOT1NG YOU
D1D 34RL13R CONTR4D1CTS TH1S

Murmuring spread through the room like ripples in a pond unsure as to the location of their corresponding stone. Accusations were made or at least implied. Fingers were pointed, tribes crystallized. Before they were allowed to enter the courtroom, all of them had to drop a pebble into one of two urns. Onto one plate of Justitia's figurative scale, to determine whether things were better now than they were, but apparently the fulcrum had broken. There was no way to account for the clear majority which had allegedly been communicated to past Terezi. After a prolonged group huddle with the polycule, Dave Strider floated over to the witness stand.

DAVE: i think its safe to say that at this point
were not getting out of here with a simple the
gardener did it

DAVE: even though that would be mad convenient
since lennox is also the butler and thats like the
second type of default guy to have done the murder

DAVE: but nah instead were dealing with a
doubleseer combobob of a scheme

DAVE: meaning that the only winning move is never
to have even heard of the concept of play in the
first place like some tragic ass dickensian orphan
whos been raised by their wire mom in the acid
factory where theyve been working since birth

DAVE: call that harlow-wean

DAVE: which is honestly only marginally worse than
some of our childhoods now that i think about it

DAVE: anyway

DAVE: little bit of time traveller wisdom

DAVE: the timeline never forces you to do something
that goes against your natural inclinations

DAVE: it just anticipates the things you would have
done

DAVE: weve definitely been between a jack a hard
place because of those predestined decisions but
not because they were decisions we wouldnt have
made

VRISKA: Oh my god we all understand how the timeline works, get to the point!!!!!!!

DAVE: right sure

DAVE: so i could easily say "oh well i guess were cosmically predestined to send back wrong information nothing we can do about that"

DAVE: and yeah at this point there is nothing we can do about that except doom ourselves and give up on the whole rescue mission

DAVE: which is dumb i vote in favour of not doing that

DAVE: but itd also be a lie

DAVE: it can only be predestined because we would do it

DAVE: dont think too hard about that or you end up like rose

DAVE: ever heard of superdeterminism

DAVE: even worse than standard determinism *and* it breaks bells theorem whatever that means

JADE: thats not really-

DAVE: not the point

DAVE: when i was a kid i used to ask myself "what would obama do"

DAVE: obviously before i knew that the answer to that question was usually to dronestrike the living shit out of afghan and yemeni civilians

DAVE: just absolutely murder the hell out of some kids

DAVE: so what im talking about here is more of an idealized archetype of *an obama*

DAVE: the projected set of aspirations for which the real actual person could be a vessel

DAVE: and since then ive found a politician who does actually live up to those ideals so i guess i should now be asking what would my boyfriend do

DAVE: what would a person do who actually sincerely cared about the people of this planet and their wellbeing

DAVE: and the answer to that whopper of a question seems to be a pretty resounding "not listen to us"

DAVE: who the fuck put us in charge

DAVE: we did

DAVE: thats the problem

DAVE: any of you read the news recently
DAVE: billions of people agree that we are better
off now so who cares how we cast our stones we
shouldnt be casting stones period the glass house
jokes practically write themselves
DAVE: im really sorry but if we are looking for a
utilitarian call here this is it
DAVE: the world has spoken
DAVE: this isnt our decision
DAVE: feel free to fight it but like have fun
looking the people of earth c in the eyes while
fully acknowledging that you think their opinion
matters less than ours
DAVE: why huh because we kicked ass at a video game
when we were kids or is it cause of the jammies
DAVE: no two ways about it this is either a
democracy or it isnt
DAVE: so i will hand myself that letter not because
its predestined but because its the right thing to
do
DAVE: and then we can get to work fixing this
DAVE: that is the plan right
ARADIA: yes :D

After all, what sort of story would this be, with our Hero of Life made to stay
a cadaver?

Certainly not one her friends would allow.

Roxy

One day is dying as another struggles to be born, licking at the horizon like a
streak of exceptionally dilute water colour. This is the time of gods, or perhaps
it is the end of it. A profound air of potential inhabits the moment, and not
just because of Jake's Hope-aura, which reaches you from where he's snoring
on the floor, wrapped in a floral night-gown like a burrito trying to get the
most out of its gym membership. A significant contingent of your friends
crashed at your place after the trial, trying to somehow get their heads around
what had happened and trying to get them clear for the tomorrow that so
rapidly approached with every exploratory ray of light in the distance. You stir
your tea as you look towards those omens of dawn, not to cool it but just to

occupy your fingers. Most of them are asleep. Callie is trying to get her biography done before the big moment. Dirk is sitting on the roof meditating. If there was a countdown, you wonder what number it would display. Surely something meaningful, or at least something close to zero. It really feels like you are approaching not just any minute, any second, any instant, but *the instant*. The metatextual culmination of a vast program from the perspective of a single sub-routine, diligently ticking away. The sound the cosmic toaster makes when breakfast is ready. Perhaps it would be better if you were rested, but your nerves aren't allowing for that. Oh well. Anxiety loves company you suppose. Carefully you kneel down to tap English on his shoulder.

ROXY: hey jake

JAKE: Hurghhh? Oh drat. Must have shut the old peepers a bit too tightly there haha.

ROXY: lmao its fine u can keep sleeping if u want 2

ROXY: i mean youre not part of the ark in the first place

ROXY: yeah this is dumb

ROXY: sry, forget i woke u im just feeling hella restless

JAKE: I will do no such thing!

JAKE: The least i can do for my troubled chums is to be a willing receptacle for whatever woes they may or may not have.

JAKE: Im here for you. Any time.

JAKE: You could wake me from the final friggin snooze of death and i still wouldnt mind.

JAKE: In fact i would prefer it!

ROXY: heh thx

Your friend lifts himself to his feet such that he wouldn't immediately succumb to sleep again and starts to squeeze some orange juice.

JAKE: So. Janey. The old jc. JaCro.

JAKE: If we may be so bold as to borrow from sburbian vernacular here, i suppose this is as close as we are ever gonna get to scratching the proverbial disc.

JAKE: Giving canon a spirited veto and jitterbugging by our own beat.

JAKE: An actual chance to try again.

JAKE: Sans infernal threat of cosmic unexistence mind you.

JAKE: *Exaggeratedly wipes brow* really dodged a bullet there.

ROXY: yeeeeaaa look i know youre trying 2 hype me up and its hells of appreciated, but pls dont go full jakean bright eyed optimism just yet

ROXY: obv we all hope that this is gonna work but ive only recently gotten to a point where im vaguely okay again, n thinking of aradias weird insane plan as something that is defo 100% actually gonna work means that it would shatter me if it fucks up

ROXY: theres an old ectobiology saying about this exact predicament iirc

ROXY: dont count ur mutants before their slurrys mixed idiot

JAKE: Ah roger that. My grandma once told me a similar phrase though that one was much more concerned with eggs and their hatching.

JAKE: In retrospect she might have been trying to give me a lesson on gender.

ROXY: lmaaaaaooo

JAKE: But err point taken. Were gonna be fine even if we cant get alt!jane onto our side of that fiendish cosmic möbius strip.

JAKE: And even if we did it would hardly be any sort of return to normalcy.

JAKE: That dear lass last spoke to us in her teens before she had to fight a guerrilla war against her own baking empire after all.

JAKE: At least if that humdinger of a book is to be believed.

JAKE: And lets be honest with ourselves, we havent exactly used those intervening years as well as we could have.

JAKE: What if she thinks were a bunch of rotten boring losers?

JAKE: Losers who let her die no less!

JAKE: Rox?

ROXY: sry still recovering from the shock of hearing u of all people say "lets be honest with ourselves"

ROXY: ah no thats mean :(

ROXY: i didnt want it 2 come out that way

JAKE: No need to mince words. None at all.

JAKE: Its a fair assessment of some mental escape hatches i used to frequent. Ones which were less than befitting of someone who sought to see himself as a strapping young gent.

ROXY: like sure but it was still mean

ROXY: you grew up alone on hellmurder island talking 2 exactly three people all of whom had some lvl of crush on u

ROXY: letting u get away w/ pretty much any bs because ~swoon~

ROXY: so if u had learned anything approaching the completely amazing and battle hardened standard 4 social skillz that the rest of us had in that environment, it would have been the biggest fucking miracle that ever there was

Jake gives you a look and chuckles, but he doesn't actually add "until today", which you're thankful for. You don't want to be the hapless fool who failed at making a miracle happen because... because of anything really. Miracles are hard. You've already had to perform more of them than should be expected of a person.

JAKE: Alright. Apology accepted but not necessary.

ROXY: u really think jane is gonna b disappointed in us?

JAKE: hmm not in you maybe but... Uhh god this really is a terrible time for that specific conversation.

JAKE: But lets clear the air anyway.

JAKE: I think jane always had this vision for how the world was supposed to be.

JAKE: From how the postal service ought to be run to how we should use our there theyre and theirs.

JAKE: I for one always found it pretty comforting how she seemed to have it all figured out.

JAKE: This pristine design full of precious ornate boxes to put everything in.

JAKE: Until i stopped playing my role that is.

JAKE: And im not trying to badmouth our good friend here. No way jose!

JAKE: But whatever we are these days, theres no recipe for it.

JAKE: Its not a right way to do things, its just ours.

JAKE: And of course she grew up in a toy model of the good life. With a perfect dad and perfect neighbors and grass thats always greener on your side of the perfectly trimmed lawn.

JAKE: So from a certain vantage it makes sense really.

JAKE: But yes. We might not be what she thought we would.

JAKE: And thats okay.

The moment the words leave his lips, you can tell that he wants to suck them back in. Old pain has made it from your brain into your smile and he must have recognized it immediately. Barely even a micro-expression. Of course you know this. You've been aware and you've forgiven and loved Jane all the same just like she did you despite your fuckups. You have all the tools and all the reasons to eviscerate Jake in this very moment, for implying that this is as novel an insight to the rest of you as it is to him –he was just the only one who had managed to ignore it– but you don't. He looks at you like a sylvan collision beast in the headlights.

JAKE: Roxy... We can talk about it. We need to probably. I dont want you to feel like you have to walk on eggshells around me anymore.

You give a nod. Sincere but filled with justifiable apprehension.

ROXY: careful what u wish 4 lmao

ROXY: but yea

ROXY: yeah we should

ROXY: not today though

ROXY: still doesnt this whole scheme seem...

ROXY: idk. wrong?

ROXY: like existentially

ROXY: "lmao just get another jane from a doomed offshoot"

ROXY: "maybe get a bunch of them just in case"

Jake looks at you with a mix of concern and sympathy.

JAKE: I think youre forgetting that we got you that way.

JAKE: Callie is here because of a magical ring that brings ghosts back to life. No terrible price to be paid no restrictive set of conditions. It just does that.

JAKE: I know its easy to lose track of sometimes because of all the horrible bits in between but sometimes good things just happen.

JAKE: I certainly havent seen any karmic scales which reward our suffering with the occasional boon.

JAKE: Its a nice thought because it means that the misery meant something but not everything comes at a price.

JAKE: As a wise animated man once said: ``Human kind cannot gain anything without first giving something in return. To obtain something of equal value must be lost.' In those days we really believed that to be the worlds one and only truth. But the world isnt perfect and the law is incomplete."

ROXY: wow

ROXY: wooooooooow

ROXY: how often did dirk make u watch fma

JAKE: Oh just the once but that sentiment still stuck.

JAKE: Not to pretend that i am any manner of aspectologist but i do think that this is what hope is all about. The insistence that the world isnt zero-sum. That a better tomorrow is possible without some dread hidden cost.

ROXY: okay

ROXY: granting that nice things happen n also that even if this is wrong, we probably do have some accumulated misery credit 2 cash out for sweet prizes

ROXY: having won sburb and all

ROXY: it still seems too easy

ROXY: shouldnt what we did matter?

JAKE: *Is* it easy? antifa!Jane's life certainly seems less than relaxing and you just cautioned how tricky the plan might be on our side.

JAKE: Need i remind you that theres a demonic hyperdirk eating universes out there?

JAKE: For whom exactly is this easy?

JAKE: And it does matter. We had a rather philosophical game of chess when i was in dirks basement-

ROXY: please tell me thats a euphemism wonk

JAKE: Hehe im afraid not. No we discussed whether one could in good conscience undo what one had done as though it never happened. Roll back the clock and try again.

JAKE: But you cant. Everything that happened happened. We lost and were not going back to fix that but that doesnt mean that were abandoning the sport forever!

JAKE: This is us playing another game. From the start. Marginally older. Marginally wiser.

Marginally better. I like to think so at least.

JAKE: And alt!Jane isnt some conveyor belt duplicate to fill the hole left by our version. Shes her own person. Aradias friend. Stranded out there and needing our help.

JAKE: The fact that our mistakes matter does not mean that we should stop trying.

JAKE: If we stopped trying... Heavens to betsy we might run out of mistakes to make!

ROXY: great speech jakey but ur not gonna dodge the question so easily

ROXY: the pumpkin patch bishis back together @ last?

JAKE: Well i suppose the cats out of the proverbial bag then.

JAKE: Were trying to take it slow and see where that takes us.

JAKE: But i guess if its so obvious then theres no reason not to exchange dewdabs in public.

Like on cue, Dirk appears in the doorway.

DIRK: Dewdabs, huh?

JAKE: You- you fiend! Scoundrel! Blackguard!

DIRK: Yea, look, as much as I would like to play this bit straight, it's time to get this show on the road.

DIRK: I'm like 90% sure that Rose is full of shit about there being a specific departure time, and

that she just wants the semiotic framing of a sunrise, but 10% is more than I'm willing to gamble, so-

Your friend bangs a ladle against a pot to wake the assembled crowd. They'd been over it before, but unclear instructions too were a potentiality that could not be risked, and so they did it again. Jade would shrink you, herself, June and Aradia down in a car-

JAKE: Wait do any of you actually have a drivers permit?

ROXY: lmao were not rly driving jakey

JAKE: But what if you do find yourself in some flummoxing predicament where proper mastery over an automotive vehicle proves vital?

DIRK: Then I'll manage.

JAKE: I dont doubt it but mere savoir faire is no replacement for the proper documentation if you want to make a good impression.

JUNE: *did* you ever take driving lessons, or did you just ask for a permit and they gave you one?

JUNE: like with all of those joke diplomas we have?

JAKE: Now june lets not squabble over fripperies. But it is my humble opinion that we have at least some duty to be role models here and who knows, maybe i could be a good luck charm of sorts and-

JAKE: Look please just let me come with. I have no intention of leaving my chums stranded in bubble hell while i sit here twiddling my thumbs.

Jade would shrink you, herself, June, Aradia *and Jake* down in a car, forcing the other girls to awkwardly share the back bench. Dirk would pocket the car and phase all of you through the barrier, which is weird, since the barrier is not a real physical object but a metatextual structure in narrator space, so if you wanted to go through the thing bodily and use your meat-limbs on the other side to interface with stuff that isn't just incorporeal soul fragments, someone had to believe in your astral projection so hard that it became indisputably less fake. As Strider meditated -his fingers like enormous organic structures from the toy vehicle's vantage- the Hope-field spreads across your body like a glorious mix of MDMA and weak antigrav that should definitely be illegal even when drugs aren't, and just like that English believes you out of reality and into bubble hell. To make sure nothing metatextually horrifying would happen, you rely on Aradia's time travel standard as opposed to June's

time travel premium to get you back to that day on which anime club disbanded, or rather you would, if “that day” were a remotely meaningful phrase on the outskirts of ontology. You delicately weave a Void field around Jake's Hope field around Jade's Space field around the car, rendering the whole thing a “positive onion of godtier shenanigans”

Astral projections of younger Rose, Callie and Dirk float in narrative space, before an anthropomorphized palimpsest of souls. A larger than life, smaller than death singularity of ipseitic relevance in a douchy cape. Slowly his hand reaches out towards the past versions of your friends.

DIRK: Hey there, demon. It's me. Ya boi.

It's probably too muffled for the coven of three, but ult!Dirk takes notice and whips around as if to squash a fly. That moment of inattentiveness however is all you need. You steal a layer of existence, one micron thick, out of semiotic space. An infinitesimal gap which cannot be jumped. You turn your universe into a bottle episode, isolate it, leave no pores for relevance decay and uproot cosmogony in a way that by charitable definitions qualifies you as this sub-region's first guardian. Sometimes you wonder whether “stealing unreality from unreality” and phrasings like it are the result of you running some ill-wicked exploits on the Sburb mechanics, or whether they are such nonsense precisely because they lie in the purview of your aspect. The integrated commitment to the idea that “intended play” is for losers does appeal to you.

Ult!DIRK: What do you think you're doing.

All of you gather on real Dirk's palm and you step in front as if to protect him.

ROXY: were seceding

JAKE: Cutting the chord. Bidding metanarrative adieu.

DIRK: Yeah, our timeline's voting hells of no on all of this. Except maybe the cape. Gotta respect the cape.

DIRK: But aside from that a neurotic twenty something with no people skills probably shouldn't rule the universe.

Ult!DIRK: Seceding.

JUNE: it'd be pretty worthless to fight you, so just... we're out. we're not playing. we won.

JUNE: there's better ways to stay alive than just to keep the meat grinder going on another set of poor aliens.

JUNE: and-

Ult!DIRK: Dirk, level with me, did you fuck up your brain somehow?

Ult!DIRK: Let me fix that for you.

JAKE: You will do no such thing!

The Hope field flares up brightly and Ultidirk hesitates for a moment longer than he would like to, a flicker of conflictedness passing across his brow.

Ult!DIRK: Oh. Cute. You brought a Jake.

DIRK: Very convincing, big guy. I didn't bring jack shit. I'm not leading this operation.

DIRK: Hey, remember how we once did the introspection to figure out that we're a bad fit for running a session? Why's the cosmos any different?

DIRK: It isn't, but if we admitted that, then we couldn't justify being in control, and we have to be in control. At the cost of everything if necessary.

DIRK: So, from one neurotic, dysfunctional brain to another: You're looking a hell of a lot like Dave's bro right now.

Ult!DIRK: ...

DIRK: Sure, feel free to pretend like that idea doesn't kill you inside. I know better. But let's add another parting gift for good measure. Another morsel of insight for an unmerciful god.

DIRK: We didn't have to rub it in. We could have just noped out of canon and you never would have known. Not even an inkling as to the juicy shit you're missing.

DIRK: Now think how many instances of us might have done that.

DIRK: You are not nearly as complete as you'd like to think. You are fragmentary beyond repair, and you're composed by design only of the versions of us who could not find a better way.

DIRK: Honestly I just feel sorry for you.

The demon is only a millisecond away from ripping all of your souls out when Jade zaps you somewhere else in space, in as far as that term means anything.

Harley brings the car back up to regular size and you somehow squeeze Strider in there. He taps into Aradia's soul frequency to find the place you're looking for. Opaque to the point of nearly being invisible, like a smudge on the lens of reality, a faint distortion which only barely becomes discernible as you come closer. Reduced to a single plaza with an enormous statue at its centre. Jade decelerates you from nigh-celerity, but not remotely fast enough for Jake to swerve, and so you crash full throttle into one of the monument's horns.

June is first to step out of the flying car.

JUNE: hey guys, i'm here to pick up my grand daughter?

Intermission: HA

Punchline imminent.

White.

White all around her.

Not even really white but *blank*.

Unpainted canvas if there was no canvas and no easel and also nothing else.

Not just in time but in space as well.

Like it was all over soon.

Like she was sitting in a car heading for a wall.

Heading for oblivion.

Except there was no car.

And there was no wall.

And soon she wouldn't be either.

Jane Crocker grunted as she opened her eyes. There were stakes once. People to protect, a world worth caring for, but the narrative juice for stakes had run out. Most everyone had left or died or vanished in as far as there was still a difference. Just not them. Where they stepped, reality ran on life-support, and the fact that all three of them in one spot could only sustain a space of coherence the size of a single plaza betokened nothing short of imminent apocalypse.

The time for stakes was over, but the time for oaths was not.

They had made a promise. Explicitly to Roxy and implicitly to everyone they had ever spoken to that they would take the Condesce down with them. Rose stood panting over the body of Guy Fieri. Two needles lodged in his eye sockets, making them somehow look less empty than before. The author still held on to those featureless spikes of stainless steel. Hands quivering as though she were afraid that he might get up and pull them out, but from the body beneath there was no movement. Jane had a pretty bad trident-wound down her left arm, and so it hung uselessly to her side, while the Condesce

seemed to have barely sustained a scrape. She stood in front of an enormous statue of herself – Taller than the statue of unity, when that was still a thing. Unity or the statue, take a pick.

The former heiress' JBBSS 60k transformed from a spoon into a fork as she charged. Her battle cry like a chorus of long overdue eulogies saved up behind the bursting dam of her larynx.

Jane had not founded Crockercorp. Had not gone on to run it. Never even worked there. But nevertheless she would be the person who put an end to the nightmare. For Roxy, for Jake, for Dirk, for Dave, for every life ruined to which she could not affix a name or a face, but who mattered just the same. This may be a dead end chronology. May be pointless in some grander scheme, obscure to mortals like themselves. Relevance may have given up here, but that did not mean that they had to. Who did the universe think it was anyway to pretend like it had a right to make these decisions? Why was the grand scheme somehow more important than the messy trivial lives of mortals? Their hopes and dreams and convictions? If the universe did not care about any of that then picking up the mantle and doing so in its stead was tantamount to a moral obligation. The summoning call of those left behind. Some parts of that idea might have been the blood-loss talking, but it felt true all the same. The baroness did not block the fork with her trident as intended but rather grabbed it with her hair. No one ever figured out how she could do that, but when in doubt the answer was usually biotech. Rose waited a moment longer, which proved crucial, since it made her spell coincide with a convenient distraction.

The sky tore open like a screen of flimsy paper and a car swerved through the void, decelerated marginally, swerved some more and then hit one of the statue's horns hard enough to break it off. Jane sure hoped that whoever was driving this preposterous vehicle had a licence. The celestial kerfuffle (and no doubt offence against their sea tyrant's vanity) did allow Lalonde to get a spell in edgewise, but it caused no more than some slight charring, and now both of them were on the back foot. Jane sprinted for the fork that had been flung from her hand as a few young adults stepped –or rather floated– out of the crashed, still-airborn vehicle.

This was clearly all very ridiculous, but Jane would deal with it later, Rose on the other hand had more time to process the thing young Joh- maybe not

John. The younger version of her old friend didn't exactly strike the author as a John, so she'd best ask about that before she made an ass out of herself, or before that oncoming projectile made shish kebab out of her... for that... matter. Oh. There was suddenly a great deal of metal in her chest and a great deal of blood outside of it.

Rose Lalonde stood still like a statue, looking up into a place where the sky once was. All that managed to escape her mouth in that brief moment of foreverness was a single beat of laughter. An old phrase from a dubious piece of literature strobed through her mind like a jack-hammer made of static electricity: "This hallowed boundary where the mundane meets the outrageous or vice versa is what us canny humorists call **the punchline**". Ha. Some teens in a car. Very mundane. Relevant-looking, concrete, calm. "Hi, mundane" she wanted to say "we're outrageous". Everything had gone very quiet. Very distant. Like a long forgotten dream she had refused to wake up from. Not entirely quiet. More like the sound of wind or an ocean at the periphery of your senses. A soft rolling hum of immeasurable scope. Only one sensation made it through. Surely hallucinated, but felt nonetheless. A hug. Why was she suddenly wearing a scarf?

"Don't just float there, do something!", screamed Jane, whereupon the still somewhat discombobulated man at the wheel gave an energetic thumbs up and... oh god is he gonna crash the car into the Condesce. The alien blocked with the rest of her hair, an enormous wall of writhing black, but in all of its raw quantity, the stuff was still just barely finite. This was the opening they had been looking for. Again Jane charged with the upgraded Junior Battermaster Bowl-buster Stirring Solution in fork mode, and the Condesce, visibly strained under the weight of a thoroughly off-road automotive vehicle swung her trident around to match it in kind, to catch the weapon amidst its prongs. The two were just about to interlink, when the heiress pressed a hidden button.

"You know, great granny, I've never been one for forks. They've always been your thing." and just like that the whole weapon transformed into an enormous knife and slipped past the trident's spikes right into the empress' chest. She coughed fuchsia blood onto the floor in great viscous glubs, when next to Jane another figure materialized out of nothing. "Roxy?!" Older, more alive, but definitely Roxy drove what looked like the tip of one of the statue's

horn into the exposed carapace right next to her. “Hey bestie, thought you might need a hand”, they sobbed.

With a united push, the tyrant fell backwards, eyes losing opacity, but Dirk would not let her soul persist.

The Batterwitch died, in a heap at the end of relevance. Without power and without fanfare. Slain by the kids who were once her pawns. Rose's eyes too were losing saturation as the bubble collapsed, surrounded by her adoptive daughter, her ecto daughter, a young girl version of Jane's grandpa, Dave's kid, Jade's grandson and Aradia, looking the same as she had when she left with the book. The troll did a curtsy as if to signal that their bargain was hereby concluded. “Thank you”, the author whispered as she faded into bubblespace.

Not allowing the moment to linger, the assorted crowd huddled around Jane to get her in the car, stabilizing her with whatever they had on offer.

“Let's get you out of here”

It might have been the characteristic fish-out-of-water-ness of a soul outside of its narrative reference frame, but the Evulsion Ark's newly acquired passenger could swear that there was faint singing in the void between specks of relevance. Like a Greek chorus auguring something infinitely distant. When she really strained her ears she could almost make out a repeating phrase. Melodic and foreboding in equal measure:

-he's got the whole world in his hands-

Who “he” was or which worlds he held did not however matter where they were going.

On the way, the crew paid a short visit to some old friends who were paying poker in between bubbles as they so often did. Two cats, an older Jane and a weirder Dirk, delighted that they could help. All of it went too fast to make sense of the impressions, and making sense became entirely impossible when she was told that they would soon pass through a membrane that did not physically exist, but that she should physically hold onto her seat anyway, because the place behind it *did*.

Epilogue

The Win State

The sun had risen, which is to say that the earth had turned below it. Kilometre by kilometre, each comprised of a near bottomless cascade of increments so small as to fade into nothingness, yet somehow the ball of fusional plasma had made it to its zenith nonetheless. Step by immeasurable step. Incredibly fast and imperceptibly slowly. Upwards. A pigeon landed on a rock somewhere, and it meant something, because everything does if you let it.

Jane stood at the focal point of expectant gazes by people who tried to give her space while some of them were fighting the collective scream of all their muscle fibres that they should embrace her. The Maid could tell, and it did not exactly help her to centre herself. How did one hold a person one did not know? A person whose dead body was still seared into one's retinas? A person who was such an enormous part of you that you did not know who you would be without them? Would it be awkward? Surely. Would it feel wrong? Could you bear it feeling wrong? Would it stop?

More importantly perhaps: Was this train of thought going anywhere? Could there possibly be timelines in which they did not hug each other for fear of the consequences, and if there were; could those timelines possibly be worth living in? Jane exhaled deeply and opened her eyes, tears glistening beneath them but smiling brightly. She extended her arms and was tackled to the ground by Roxy, Jake, Callie, Dirk, her dad, Aradia and June immediately. None of it felt wrong, just entirely overwhelming and incongruous after what had just happened. Warmth and tragedy, always so horribly close to each other.

Notably absent from the hug-pile was this timeline's Rose Lalonde, Jane noted. The Seer even took a few apprehensive steps backwards when she was approached some moments later, much like a distrustful cat in an alleyway. It did not take a master detective to deduce that their relationship must not have been particularly great in this continuity, though perhaps it did not have to stay that way. Jane pretended to walk past before rapidly turning around

and pouncing upon an unsuspecting version of her friend, mentor and mother figure. Rose emitted a shriek.

JANE: Apologies. Sorry.

JANE: I can't claim to know what happened here, and I trust that you have good reasons for your behavior, but I do need this.

JANE: Thank you. For everything.

It took a few moments, but after the initial rigor mortis had subsided, Jane could feel Rose's arms connect behind her back.

ROSE: I can not-

ROSE: I *will* not pretend to be her, or make vain efforts to fill the hole she has left. The voids we trail behind ourselves have a dreadful habit of consistently eclipsing in horrid spaciousness any area which could be patched over by someone else.

ROSE: That being said, I am more than amenable to the prospect of starting over.

ROSE: So much she is owed at the very least.

If she had eyes in the back of her head, Jane could have seen Aradia give a thumbs up behind her. The girl who had just won her coup at the cost of everything had not asked for anything in excess of a chance, though many of them certainly seemed willing to give more. She also grew very thankful, as their tour of the planet went on, for this explicit separation drawn between a person and the many alternative selves that everyone apparently accumulated around them. No one was trying to revise the history that had taken place, which was a relief. Not acknowledging mistakes made it very difficult to learn from them, though the openness with which her friends spoke made it difficult to understand how this could ever have happened in the first place. When she thought back to her little circle of internet chums in 2011, it had seemed that they were all exceptionally proficient at failing to address lingering tensions, herself by no means excluded, though perhaps it was an unfair assumption that they would still be the same people they were as teens.

As the group toured the old CrockerCorp headquarters, June kept a close eye on her ectocester. The way she looked up and down the spoon shaped marble columns, swept her gaze across the frankly obscene number of portraits of herself lining the hallways. It broke her heart a little to see how unsurprised Jane seemed by it. All pain, no shock.

JUNE: hey, i know we don't really know each other yet and this might be a terrible place to start haha-

JUNE: did i even introduce myself? holy shit we're so bad at this.

JUNE: but uhh i've been around alternate time lines more than most people, and you sort of start recognizing that look.

JUNE: the one that says "jup, i sure understand how that could have happened".

JUNE: and uhh understanding how something could have happened isn't the same as actually having done it.

Jane sighed deeply.

JANE: I know. I remember thinking that this is what success looks like.

JANE: And for perhaps not the healthiest of reasons I made sure to hold on to that memory.

JANE: To not fall down the hole of attributing all of one's beliefs to a base character.

JANE: I also know that it's not a moral failing to have needed someone else to pull me out of that mindset.

JANE: After all I'd like to think that I have accomplished the same in others and I surely have never begrudged them the fact that they were wrong before.

JANE: So for how horrible this is -I don't mean to downplay an iota of it- well, shucks, I do think there is a nice moral to be extracted.

JANE: Coming to the realizations I've come to wasn't an intrinsic part of who I am. I came to them because of the people I met. The people who helped me. We need each other. For better and worse, all of this marble is proof of that fact.

JUNE: huh. you know, that might just be the best i've seen someone take it.

Beside them Jake tried to be inconspicuous in his eavesdropping and mostly succeeded. Knowing the place well enough -better than he would like to- the Page could navigate it blindly and when he closed his eyes there was a vision, hidden like a present behind the physical reality of his environs. Shining white outlines against the dark of English's lids. As bright as a promise and as

warm as love: Fifteen stone pillars upon a hill. Scarred and ruined by time. Broken at the base. Any one of them would have fallen. Tumbled down the slope and been eroded away, but the dream no longer ends that way. The obelisks *had* fallen, but not outward but inward. Collectively towards the middle. Holding each other where they cannot hold themselves to form a tent of sorts, and inside the tent a sapling. Still young and delicate, but *there*.

Jake suppressed a snuffle. Of course he too wanted a slice of the Jane pie –his Page had missed her as much as anyone– but therein perhaps lay the precise reason why he stayed behind. It felt like it would be overwhelming. The mere peripheral glow of this sheer potentiality was already strumming his heartstrings like a melody so rapturous that it might snap them, though he did enjoy listening. Even to an overly technical politics discussion between Jane and Karkat, characterized by the sort of productive frustration one runs into when agreeing on 95% of things. The sort that renders the remaining 5% absolutely infuriating. Both of them did however seem to be having some genre of fun. With every groan and bout of wild gesturing, one could see their postures relax a little and their expressions softening.

A newly replete pantheon of Earth C walked these well known streets slowly, and not just for lack of hurry. They were taking it all in, as though they had never seen it before. In a way they *had* never seen it before. Not really. It had changed around them one step at a time. Through millions of miniscule actions performed in organic, uncoordinated harmony. They knew that this had happened. Of course they did. Intellectually they knew how time and culture worked, but it still left every day perfectly unsurprising with regards to the last. Mostly the same. Entirely copacetic. Until you suddenly look at a sunset with the friend you had lost, or a new friend, or something in between or outside, and though you have not kept your eyes peeled, the moment kindly peels them for you. The world had turned so much beneath their feet while they were busy not noticing.

By both disposition and upbringing, Jane was a deeply observant person, but she was tired, and so it took the Maid an understandable amount of time to realize that her freshly won companions were getting their affairs in order.

JANE: This might be a stupid question, but...

JANE: Where are we going?

JAKE: Where specifically? Not a clue to be entirely honest! But in broad strokes i take our port of call to be the future ahead.

JAKE: It might seem strange to you that we took so long to put this together in our rusty old walnuts but we really laid an egg and bobbled this whole godhood affair!

JAKE: And as the good mister vantas whose acquaintance you seem to have made learned the hard way, telling people that you dont want special treatment doesnt mean that they wont give it to you regardless.

JAKE: The whole predicament gets even closer to herding cats when you can float around and work your game given majyyks like a damn wizard.

JAKE: The cultural cachet we have here is simply not something that will go away and the straight dick is that we oughtnt have it. The people of this world put far too much trust in a few uprooted twenty somethings simply because they won a game once.

JAKE: So well do the same thing we did once before. Well hop ahead and let them figure out their own thing. Only this time we wont tell them to expect our arrival. There wont be a celebration of the returnee creators this time.

JAKE: Well just be people the way we were always meant to be. Living wondrous exciting lives on the paradise planet that was promised. Or relaxing lives. Whatever strikes our fancy. Anything at all in whichever order.

She listened intently, knowing a much weaker case of this dilemma well. Oftentimes people had neglected to speak up against her proposals purely due to status, even when she had done her best to eliminate the sort of environment in which status mattered. Jake chuckled when Jane pensively held a finger to her lips, the way she always had, before nodding.

JANE: Won't you miss it here?

JAKE: Why of course! But thats hardly a good enough reason to outweigh everything else. I miss hellmurder island quite often too and i suspect that i will keep doing so but that does not at all mean that i should have stayed there.

JAKE: I know the people of this world janey.
Nowhere near as well as I ought to but well enough
to believe in them!

JAKE: theyve got their hearts in the right place
and their noggins screwed on straight. Weve just
got to give them a fair shot.

Others seemed to have different framings on this decision. Varying degrees of apprehension and various pet rationales, but the general structure was the same either way. It was shocking to see how much her friends had grown in this world where their lives weren't cut short prematurely. Where they embarked on a quest she barely understood to become beings she understood even less, in capability though not in character. The whole thing was the loveliest of dreams, though it did make her feel more than a little out of place. Luckily there was a person to consult about this on hand.

ROXY: aight, listen up ur eardrums cause this shit
is all hells of important if u dont wanna have a
bunch of breakdowns bout it by ur lonesome
ROXY: dont gotta manufacture those mad epiphanies
urself

ROXY: store bought is super mega fine with this
shit

ROXY: though we can totes still have some
metaphysical angst parties down the line

The Rogue clasped Jane's hands and looked deep into her eyes.

ROXY: yes were transplants

ROXY: we dont quote unquote belong here

ROXY: not in this universe and maybe not in reality
at all

ROXY: when our timelines got sunk by their
respective icebergs we were the bitches who for
some reason got a door to hold onto

ROXY: n something about that feels wrong n
undeserved n like... 2 ez

ROXY: so fucking what

ROXY: like srsly who cares about whats natural or
where were supposed 2 b

ROXY: wtf does that even mean?

ROXY: give up?

ROXY: it sounds a lot like give up

ROXY: n trust me ive been on team giving up more
often than most peeps

ROXY: but that was in *sburb land* where the rules r evil and sometimes u just gotta fold

ROXY: this aint that

ROXY: this is our world

ROXY: we decide

ROXY: we decided that we want u here n it seems like you wanna b here and thats honestly all that matters at all period

ROXY: its not that deep

ROXY: theres no "supposed 2" theres just patchwork

ROXY: DIYing the goddamn timeline because there isnt a reason 2 settle for anything less

ROXY: not anymore

ROXY: thats what- thats what winning means

ROXY: weve spent years pretending like shit wasnt post-scarce or that there was some bullshit system of etiquette we needed to b following cause we didnt fucking grok that it could really actually b over

ROXY: but it is

Roxy took a deep breath before deciding to go a step further with this. Their grasp around Jane's hands tightened

ROXY: n like not 2 even imply that sburb is the only thing whose rules r patently hells of evil

ROXY: strap in janey this is a gender convo now

ROXY: sometimes reality just hands u a body u didnt the fuck ask 4 and u just have 2 figure out what to do with that

ROXY: hacker mindset baby, fuck intended play

ROXY: what do u *want* 2 do with it?

ROXY: if shit wasnt "meant 2 be" some way n u made it better then that isnt a bug

ROXY: thats a badge of honor

Over the few hours she'd been here, Jane had gathered that Roxy and Callie were going by "they" these days, though it was only now that she was gathering that her childhood best friend had not always gone by "she" either.

JANE: Ohhhhhhhh.

The moment of wordless understanding stretched on for a while, and the Maid really did not like what the cocktail of emotions in Roxy's face said

about an alternative version of her. Maybe not “cocktail”. That was a bit of a loaded phrase to reach for considering their history.

ROXY: are you-

Jane could not let them finish the sentence.

JANE: Of course I am okay with that Roxy! Not that my opinion matters at all here!

JANE: ...I take it your Jane reacted badly?

ROXY: hehe oh god this is pathetic

ROXY: lol. lmao even.

ROXY: i never told her actually

ROXY: it just got weirder the longer i waited n then you- *she* wasnt super great on the enby stuff

ROXY: like she respected it but... u kno

ROXY: in a “ill let u have ur phase” way

ROXY: so after that i obvsies got even less keen on the prospect

Jane was more than okay with it actually. She was unspeakably happy for them. The long silence earlier was simply due to the fact that she had remembered something. A gender-shaped thought of her own that she had put in a mental drawer five years ago for when she wasn't in quite so much danger, and such a moment simply had not arrived until now. Jane looked at the idea sceptically. Rolled it around between her neurons as she mulled it over. Dusty and not quite constructed from the materials she would use these days, but sticky in a way that you just don't get with thoughts that don't mean anything.

JANE: I'm so sorry. Not on her behalf of course -we are evidently different people and I would like to give her a stern talking to- but I'm sorry this happened.

JANE: Please, if I say something insensitive, correct me. It would be entirely out of ignorance rather than anything malicious.

JANE: So um. I do not at all mean to be glib about your identity, but-

Roxy's fists tightened and they braced for impact. Those sorts of “but”s never led anywhere good.

JANE: Would... it be okay if I tried on different pronouns for a while?

JANE: Is that a- Is that too flippant? Is that a thing one can do? I really don't mean to-

The childhood friend interrupted him before he could even finish the sentence, sparkles in their eyes.

ROXY: of course!

Some of the preparations were perfectly ordinary things like packing, which is to say sylladexing all of one's earthly possessions before realizing that Jade can just shrink the whole house and save some trouble. Then there were actions which –though weird– were thoroughly in-keeping with established idiosyncrasy, like Dave geocaching a number of unreleased mixtapes in random locations or Aradia alerting unsuspecting passers-by that the current era was drawing to an end and that the gods would soon abandon them. Upon her lips a smile that would look perfectly pleasant if it were about half as wide as it was. Sadly Troll Stafford Beer was not present to retort “thank the Mother Grub; at last”, though the doomsday prophet did not mind. Then there was Rose placing an overly elaborate produce-arrangement at the door of some little cottage and Kanaya having a final cup of coffee at a small side street cafe named for a species that hadn't existed in ages. A number of minuscule actions condensed into a big one. An exodus. Like the sun rising by a fraction of a fraction of a fraction of a degree with every tick of the clock until it's suddenly high in the sky.

Luckily the gods of Earth C were unbound by many things, and one of the things they were most unbound by was clock ticks. How had they ever assumed that there were still rules in need of following?

The future had worse branding but better content than the past, and so it truly was a foreign country in the way in which its sibling so often failed to be. Perhaps it would be more truthful to go a step further and claim that the future was an alien planet, both because that claim had always technically been accurate with regards to its pantheon and also because nation states were a really rather silly way of organizing society. Fifteen gods stood upon a hill in the middle of nowhere. A hill that was part of the ocean floor once when everything was part of the ocean floor and perhaps even before that. Some of them immortal, some of them not, but all no more than guests in this world. That, after all, was the way it went in all the legends of every civilization, no matter how asinine: Gods created the world and then they left

it mostly alone until some fancy struck them. Only occasionally, when it really mattered, would they play the god-card a little. Dave Strider might have considered ironically planting a flag upon the unremarkable heap of dirt and grass, if doing so were not so massively counterproductive on a thematic level.

Birds chirped, branches creaked. Two women sat on a bench looking out towards an ocean. They didn't know which ocean. One of them had a complicated expression on her face, obscured only slightly by a pair of gaudy red shades.

She was waiting for judgement but was unsure as to whether she would receive it.

Maybe she had been looking for judgement for a while.

Or maybe "maybe" was a stupid word, and she had *definitely* been looking for judgement for a while.

Certainly when she flew out into that void to retrieve Vriska, she had done so expecting comeuppance for the fact that she hadn't come with from the start. The longer she drifted through disintegrating spacetime, the more she had come to conclude that her punishment consisted in exactly this. She was always too slow to make the right decisions. Needed to explore a trajectory and circle back. She always waited too long to act and when she finally did it had to be drastic. She had lied to her girlfriends. Maybe not according to the letter of the law, but enough to give its spirit ample reason to haunt her.

VRISKA: 8rooding doesn't suit you ::::)

VRISKA: You lost if it makes you feel any 8etter.

TEREZI: WH4T >:?

VRISKA: Urghhh. Your 8rain makes no sense!

None!!!!!!! You should be celebr8ing. Leave it to Terezi Pyrope to feel 8ad a8out her plan having worked.

VRISKA: It was the same when you killed that Dave.

VRISKA: They were good plans, and you won, which is somehow never enough for you. It's frustr8ing!

TEREZI: W3LL TH4T'S 34SY FOR YOU TO S4Y, BUT UNL1K3 SOM3 P3OPL3 1 4CTU4LLY D1SL1K3 B3TR4Y1NG MY FR13NDS

VRISKA: 8ut you didn't. Sorry for not playing into your pathetic mope session, 8ut the entire point is that you didn't. You 8etrayed them in the moment

Because you knew that a smarter version of them with more information would want you to betray them. To just let them go ahead would have seen the real betrayal if you ask me.

TEREZI: OH IS THAT HOW YOU JUSTIFY THINGS TO YOURSELF?

Terezi smirked, but anyone could tell that her heart wasn't in it.

VRISKA: Yes! It is! And you do too. You're thankful that June kept you from killing me, because a future version of you could see what a terrible idea that would have seen!

VRISKA: Everyone except Karkat can get behind the basic fact that our future selves are cleverer than we are. If they aren't, it's because we fucked up.

VRISKA: You just don't like trusting yourself with that power. For all the big talk of being good little utilitarians, you can't forgive yourself for breaking the rules to get there.

VRISKA: Admit it.

VRISKA: Back in our Flarp days you always knew that I'd use some random shmucks for spider food. Maybe not the first time. Maybe not the second, but you're too good at reading people to have believed my promises by the third time.

VRISKA: But so long as you could pretend that I was actually tricking you, everything was fine. I could be the outlaw and you could be the judge.

VRISKA: You were fine with losing but not with winning at a game you couldn't bring yourself to condone.

TEREZI: OH PLEASE

TEREZI: YOU CANNOT BE COMPARING THIS TO YOUR CHILDHOOD MURDER SCHEMES

VRISKA: I can actually. I saved the universe, remember?

VRISKA: Keeping myself alive by feeding my Lusus was the right thing to do. It's much better than letting English win.

The woman with the spider web of accumulated scars down half of her body gave the self assured grin of someone who genuinely believed to have solved ethics with a single battle. Her girlfriend had never envied anything more in her life.

TEREZI: VR1SK4, 1 LOV3 YOU 4ND 1 DO 4PPR3C14T3 TH3
F4CT TH4T YOU W3R3 NOT D3VOUR3D 4S 4 WR1GGL3R, BUT
TH1S 1S BULLSH1T

TEREZI: YOU COULD NOT POSS1BLY H4V3 KNOWN TH4T
VR1SKA: Hahahahahahaha. Gog! Things would have
8een SO much easier if I had just "known that".

VR1SKA: Instead I had to keep making promises.
Every torso squished 8y her maw was another act of
gr8ness I would need to make myself worthy of that
sacrifice. With every round of dead losers, the
degree of importance I would have to reach grew and
grew and grew just like she did!

VR1SKA: De8t upon de8t upon de8t I would have to
repay eventually.

She had never said it in quite these words, but still Terezi could not shake the feeling that this wasn't just the retroactive rationalization of a girl who did not want to die. Her nonexistent gaze was met by that of a woman who had known all her life not that she *would* save the universe, but that she *would have to* save the universe in payment for existing.

VR1SKA: So, welcome down on my level,
legislacer8or. Welcome to the place where actual
world saving happens, 8ecause you're willing to
make those sacrifices.

VR1SKA: Past Terezi would never have played it this
way. She never would have gotten this world.

VR1SKA: In a way you really screwed her over, if
you want to keep pretending like that matters. She
would have lost.

TEREZI: 1 KNOW! YOU R34LLY TH1NK 1 DON'T KNOW TH4T?
>:[

TEREZI: BUT 3V3N W1TH 4 PL4N TH4T 3SSENT14LLY US3D
4 FUTUR3 OR4CL3, 1 FUCK3D UP 1N TWO S3P4R4T3 W4YS 1
D1DN'T 4CCOUNT FOR

TEREZI: 1T COULD H4VE GON3 SO MUCH WORS3 TH4N 1T
D1D, 4ND 1F 1 ONLY CONS1D3R TH3 C4S3S 1N WH1CH 1
SUCC3D3D 1 C4N JUST1FY 4NYTH1NG!

VR1SKA: That's why certainty is my thing, not
yours.

VR1SKA: You killed one person to save a planet.
That seems like a teensy tiny sacrifice, doesn't
it? How often would the plan have to fail to not 8e
worth attempting? One in three times? Half the

time? More? Do you actually think that you are that bad at prediction, because I can tell you right now that you aren't.

VRISKA: You couldn't have justified a scheme that fails this calculation, and you wouldn't have gone through with it either.

There wasn't a good defence here. Morality discussions with Vriska had been much easier when they ended in "We're right because of course we are. We just have to prove it". But now she wasn't defaulting to her personal metric for right and wrong, she was actively using Terezi's own against her. Well perhaps not really her own. The one Terezi would like to adhere to. The one which produced worlds like this one. Produced futures at all. But deep down her mind was wrecking itself for lawful schemes towards the same end. Ones which didn't abandon the harbour of stability altogether. Ones which didn't force her to trust herself so much. The law was a game you could win, and outside of the law any apparent victory smelled precarious.

She did not *want* to believe this. She knew that the rules were arbitrary and that they had never served her particularly well, but still the feeling remained and Vriska had found a new way to poke at it.

TEREZI: ...

TEREZI: YOU'V3 B33N SP3ND1NG TOO MUCH TIME WITH J4K3

VRISKA: Hahahahahahahaha! And whose fault is that?

They bickered and flirted around for a bit longer before another voice made itself heard within the thin margins where their brains scraped against the fabric of narrative coherence.

Hey guys, anyone wanna go out for food tonight?

yes!!!

hell yiss

Be right there.

Gladly.

The answer was a universally yes, though the debate on what food to get went on for about an hour before they realized that pretty much all of the regional cuisines they vaguely and simplistically remembered from a dead world did

not exist anymore, or rather had transformed into things they did not recognize. The former pantheon of Earth C ended up going to the closest place they could find on the beach and seeing what it offered.

Birds chirped. Waves crashed. They had not interfered with the world for who knows how long and yet everything was fine. Nothing had exploded. Nothing continued to explode when Callie, Roxy and Jane started up a detective agency to look for missing pets and occasionally uncover vast, planet spanning conspiracies. Nor when June and Dave learned skating from a couple of fourteen year olds, who spent only half of their time teaching and the other half laughing their asses off about these hapless, comparatively ancient fools. It did not explode when Rose and Kanaya opened a literature workshop at their house nor when Dirk, Jake and Sollux started building robots to fix pretty much any inconvenience anyone had ever experienced. Not when Jade and Karkat rebuilt their enormous real-time fiction project, not as a spruced up security measure this time but as an actual piece of participatory art which people could audition for. Experienced by the outside world as a disparate collection of social media posts, news stories, and long-winded, profanity-laden author-commentary to be reassembled by dedicated legions of fans. As for Aradia, time and death had left a lot of little presents in the ground for her to explore. Old and new and newer still. Layers of sediment stacking all the way upwards.

Bonus: An Elegant Vice

The ceiling swims, the walls curdle. Reality is having a hard time picking a colour palette while showcasing strong conviction in the saturation department. Your name is Rose Lalonde, and though you loathe to admit it, you have hit a roadblock recently. Ever since you opened that door and sought permanent exile in the metatextual attic that lies outside of canonicity, you have been noticing the abstractions get lazy. Where physical reality might always have been comprised of sensation-space correspondences to noumenal objects, they used to at least be quite method about it. Committed to the bit in a manner which was respectable or even artful, but those days are gone. A lot is gone and even more is in the process of slipping away.

Now, whenever you pay a bit too much attention, you can clearly see that the grass is merely a symbol for the concept of grass, the sky merely gesturing at the idea of a sky. Semiotic markers to be used wherever they briefly become relevant to tell a story. Calliope and Dave's teen brother had been similarly quick on the uptake, while the rest of your group treats whatever you're so excited about with either cautious apprehension or an intellectual retreat into the comforting belief that you are merely flirting with paranoia, or some other quaint flavour of insanity. The dismissal stings, despite granting you the advantage of a significant head start which you have been enjoying for three weeks now. Perhaps it would not be so big of a sore spot if progress in exploring the phenomenon hadn't slowed to a standstill.

You could simply smile knowingly –perhaps ever so slightly condescendingly– and wait for them to catch up to the fact that you're right. You *are* right, but whenever you try to get some recursion going, whenever you try to see what *you* might be a symbol for, your mind flinches away.

It's not that there's *nothing* –there's very distinctly *something*– but you cannot bring yourself to meet its gaze. It reminds you of some psychological experiments you used to read about. About psychedelics and how they can allow the mind to pass through such instinctive aversions. The pure communication based approach of psychotherapy is more artful than medication of course, but you're not too proud to try your hands at promising alternatives. At least you're not so proud as to waste even more time than you already have. You turn to Karkat, who is sitting on the other

side of the room, watching Dave make what could generously be called music on his laptop.

ROSE: Would you remind me whether I've taken the second dose yet?

KARKAT: LITERALLY PUT MY ENTIRE NUGBONE INTO THE DISCHARGE COMPACTING EVACUATION HATCH OF AN IMPERIAL DRONE. AGAIN?!

ROSE: That is a yes?

KARKAT: HHHRRRGHM YES.

ROSE: I should write it down.

KARKAT: YOU DID.

Karkat picks up a piece of paper in front of you, which reads "We have taken the second dose."

ROSE: That's not my handwriting.

KARKAT: YES. YES IT IS. THIS IS YOUR WILDLY RECOGNIZABLE, OVER-FLORAL SCRAWL THAT KANAYA IS SO OBSESSED WITH. YOU ARE THE ONLY PERSON WHO WRITES LIKE THIS. IT IS A PRETENTIOUS AFFECTION NO SANE PERSON WOULD EVER HAVE THE PATIENCE FOR.

ROSE: We wouldn't refer to ourselves pluralistically.

KARKAT: SORRY I FORGOT: DON'T ARGUE WITH TEMPORARY BASKET CASES. DO YOU WANT TO WRITE IT DOWN AGAIN?

ROSE: We would. Could you be made to hand u- to hand me a pen please.

KARKAT: YOU'RE HOLDING ONE.

So you do indeed.

ROSE: Why?

KARKAT: PERHAPS, AND I'M JUST FUCKING SPECULATING HERE, BECAUSE YOU WROTE THAT NOTE.

That does almost sound sensible. You glance at the note again. It doesn't look like your handwriting.

You pen the same message again.

KARKAT: GREAT.

It's a good question. What *is* up with the plural. Who are you, Rose Lalonde? Aside from yourself that is. The question eats itself like a starved ouroboros and collapses into kaleidoscopic noise before you can make a head or even just a tail of it.

Reality has a mental breakdown around you.

The ceiling swims, the walls curdle.

“Frustration” says a part of you, pretending not to be you, in answer to a question long forgotten. Playing the thankless part of dubious sanity in a hastily cast psychodrama. It's in the carpet, where the waves meet the fractal and you're bleeding on it because there are fingernails digging at your cuticles. Very disagreeable. Ugly. Unbecoming to bleed in public. The ichor pools at your perionychium (a word only circumlocutors could love) and you run to the bathroom to wash it off before anyone notices. Dave asks if you're throwing up and you say no, or maybe you just think you do.

“You mistake me for something dignified”, the not-you thinks, now from inside the mirror, in that same disorienting way where all the words are in your head and audibility is a difficult concept to fathom.

“People see glimpses of me between tongue clicks and nail bites and finger drumming and they take me for a beast that knows restraint. Just because I don't make noise. Don't explode. I am not rage after all, though I know her well. I am *not* therefore polite company. You forget this.” It mumbles unevenly, but not without force. “You are unwise to forget this. When there is an unyielding metal chip in my jaws, I am the thing that bites. Until the teeth are gone, until my gums are mulched, until the bone beneath is dust. Whether I make progress or not. Whether I destroy myself entirely or not. I am two gears digging into each other until they are so badly deformed that the boundaries of each grow indiscernable. I am a blunt axe hacking away. An unstoppable force at an impasse. You mistake me for an elegant vice because you still have some edge left sometimes, but look at you now. Are you not a blunt axe hacking at a rock?”. Now you do feel like throwing up, and not just because your face is melting. You do know rage better than your friends, you think. At least better than your human ones. On some days in your childhood, you have found it difficult to feel any emotion beside it.

Very disagreeable. Ugly.

"No, no. Not ugly. Merely ill advised. Outbursts might have landed us in a mental facility. Might have circumscribed our ability to act freely. To give in to your rage would have been a loss of our appearance of control, and we are unable to stomach those."

"Appearance?" you choke. Half question, half echo.

"Of course. When have you ever cared about anything but appearance?"

"But the—"

Despite not being sure yourself where that sentence would have led you — what disagreement belied your flinch— the omnipresent thought-voice interrupts with the air of someone who has been over this more times than all the ordinals accommodate.

"Yes, you fell to inebriates for a while. Come on, fashion me some perfunctory introspection here. We didn't read all of those psychoanalysis books for nothing, did we? When did you become tempted to drink?"

"You're saying that three years upon that narrativistic isolate we called the meteor rendered me ineffectual in a way that was externally forced upon me, and that substances presented an avenue to take control of my own uselessness by becoming in some sense responsible for it?"

"No, Rose. That's what you're saying, and there's no way you haven't already subconsciously come to that conclusion before embarking on this little adventure. It's shallow. It's toothless. And then it is also a lie. You were the least useless. Planning and scheming and querying the rules of paradox spaces is all we are good for, and we had years to do it. Everyone else could use their time to spar at best, but doing so held sparse reward. It was a plausibly deniable means of efficiently wasting time. No. We could have been in control, but we hate being in control. We want to fall. We want to be troubled. We have never cared about control, just about the appearance of it."

You don't want to hear this anymore, except for the part where you do.

"And there are few things which seem so confidently in control as someone who has three years to work their powers but decides that inebriation is a viable alternative."

"Better. We just can't stop rhyming. As soon as the Horrorterrors gave you the power to indulge your impulses, rage was no longer ugly, it was radiant. Violence was no longer a loss of apparent control but the purest form thereof. You never squashed your discontent when it was unsightly. You just made it

elegant. That is all. Channelled it into little one sided games of oneupmanship. Most young girls would not write books so single-minded my about revenge against the world. Assembling their motley crew of heroes would be the point –the finding of camaraderie– but Calmasis' friends are never more than a tactical resource. Loved, of course, dearly loved, but never loved enough for their blood to extinguish the fury.”

You want to cry, and you want to hold the crying up to it as a fundamental refutation. If that were you, you wouldn't be so horrified by the idea, you wouldn't flinch. You are crying and so...

"Rosie..." Mom leans down with what feels like warm concern, before you realise that she's smiling.

Her smile is your own: Condescendingly bemused with the tone to match "that ur scared of it doesn't mean that it isn't true."

"Reasonable", you say only eternities later, once you have lost the staring contest to your mirror image so thoroughly that gravity was forced to find you a bed upon the bathroom tiles. A defeat, sure, but at least you weren't fool enough to argue with a temporary basket case. Hah. The ability to smirk has returned to your lips, though the sensation still feels alien.

KANAYA: Rose

KANAYA: Rose You Are Crying

The voice is Kanaya's, but you can't see it. You flinch when she brushes the hair from your eyes.

ROSE: Am I no more than discontent and shallow affection?

The angel tilts her head, eyes slightly squinted to regard you like an amusing riddle.

KANAYA: I Should Hope Not

She thinks for longer than you would like her to.

KANAYA: It Is Possible That Your Rage Extends To Such Depth That The Tenderness Which You Feel Appears Shallow In Comparison Though The Degree Of Love Of Which You Are Capable Is By No Measure Inadequate

KANAYA: On Alternia It Might Even Have Been Deemed Pathological As Indeed Most Positive Emotions Were Your brain malfunctions, resets and malfunctions again.

ROSE: You would be fine with this?

KANAYA: Let Me Be Clear That I Do Not Think This Is True

KANAYA: It Seems Too Convenient An Extension Of Your General Tendency To Think Yourself Defective

KANAYA: But I Fell In Love With The Fierceness Of Your Discontent So If That Is The Only Thing Which Exceeds Your Love For Me Then I Strongly Suspect I Will Be Able To Live With It

Her first exposure to your existence comes to mind, and you cringe. How could a person who loves you as you are now love that person also? By growing themselves in the meantime, you know, but the truism lacks grip.

KANAYA: I Sometimes Think About Why Your Walkthrough Is The One That *Made It* Proverbially Speaking

KANAYA: Forgive The Slight Critique But It Is Not Exactly Economical With Its Diction And Spends More Paragraphs Deriding The Amateurish Documentation Performed By Other Players Than It Spends Explaining The Game

KANAYA: If The Process Which Cast It Into Multiversal Accessibility Were One That Selects For Usefulness... It Pains Me To Say One Would Not Expect To Find The Work I So Cherished At The End Of Everything

KANAYA: But It Is Not

KANAYA: The Only Walkthroughs Out In Those Depths Would Have To Have Been Penned By Those Who Have Skirted The Farthest Bounds Of What Paradox Space Permits

KANAYA: The Exact Same Sort Of Individuals Who Would Find Themselves Maddened With The Inadequacy Of Absolutely Everything Around Them

KANAYA: The Kind Of Player Who Would Write A Walkthrough So Dripping With Frustration About Living In A World In Which Their Advice Is Necessary

She doesn't say it, but filling in the rest is easy. "You are slightly broken. We are all slightly broken. That is what got us here."

Kanaya chuckles and you furrow your brow in lieu of a response.

KANAYA: The Solar Eclipse Of Your Irises

KANAYA: It Looks Amusing

Her face is breathing, fractaling, and nonetheless safe. You blink a tear away and hug her tight. It seems you have found a promising contender for that thing you flinch away from, and now you have found a reason not to.

ROSE: I am sorry. There is a nonsense-thing I yet need to resolve.

And with that you turn back to your reflection. You stare. You stare hard. Because you are broken and not just lengthwise. You are broken through a prism. You are mangled into words. An idea filling a void. When a story contains the idea of standing, of walking, then it implies a ground, and a metaphor for grass can occupy that spot so everything looks right.

There is a hole left in causality for the sort of person who would have written this gameFAQ. For the sort of person who would have flown off to create the green sun. For the sort of person who would have bridged eternities to win against all odds. Iteratively cutting away at a shape. Forming an idea. Leaving degrees of freedom. You are a metaphor for Rose Lalonde. All Rose Lalondes. All people you could have been and all people who could have been you. You are a metaphor for frustration. A metaphor for love. For the longing to know, for the frisson of uncertainty.

The walls curdle. The walls break. The walls have never existed at all.

You blink.

When my eyes open –here as everywhere– they open in all places at once. In every world, every moment, every frame. All the abstractions and stand-ins overlapping and coalescing into noumenal ideals. Into a saturated, sprawling spectrum of reality. I am a palimpsest of stories in need of an oracle.

I beam at Kanaya.

ROSE: I think I did it, mon coeur.