

Varynova

The works of Julia Antoinette
through 2019

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Editor's Notes

Chapters are largely unabridged from Varynova / Julia Antoinette's Works page on Archive of Our Own (AO3). Longer works begin with a "Content Warnings by Chapter" section; additional tags have generally been omitted. Word counts are taken from AO3, and may be slight overestimations, due to annotations moved to appendices at the end of the book, etc.

As of this writing, *The Witch of Whelan's Wharf* is not yet completed. This book contains the first eight chapters, as well as the side story *Closer To Fine*, as published so far.

A Flame Kindled Among the Ash

Teen and Up Audiences

12802 words (6 chapters)

2019-07-01 – 2019-09-01

Content Warnings by Chapter

Chapter 1: Suicide mention.

Chapter 2: Behind-the-back discussion of a character's early trans expression.

Chapter 3: Suicide mention.

1:

THE FIRST DAY OF JUNE.

There's a sharp rap at my balcony and the breeze slides the glass door open. Entering my apartment, a backlit body interrupts the light of the sunset, so I set aside my ritual cup of crepuscular earl grey. Prescience, which once made me so softly smug, still lends me the ability to engage in theater of this sort when it benefits the comfort of my friends. Picture:

I, Rose Lalonde, am seated in my overstuffed armchair and enjoying the evening light. My sight has granted me knowledge of the result of our conversation, and its beginning, but thankfully its specifics are mine to discover. I think it is best-- for reasons you will surely find momentarily apparent-- if I withhold, for now, exactly what I know about this person's name and the pronouns most apropos with which to refer to them. (If you will forbear a grammarian's indiscretion, 'they' and 'them' will have to suffice for the time being, until they decide to share more.)

is anybody home?

The door clicks shut. Our eyes meet as they turn around, great blue windsock twirling at their back, and I smile a practiced, serene smile. I'm met with, after a moment, a relieved-seeming breath and toothy reciprocated grin. And the pause tells me everything I need to know about the purpose for their visit.

oh! rose! perfect.

just who I hoped to.. bump into.

ROSE: Well, in that case my home is an ideal place to find me.

haha, yeah

i was hoping to ask about something that's been bothering me

lately but i figured you wouldn't mind if i just... dropped in!

i guess it is a little late...

but it's not the sort of thing i'd like to talk about over the phone?

Their hands clasp behind their back as they arch onto their tiptoes. I beckon with my fingers, to bid them not stand on formality in my archway.

ROSE: Come inside! How was your birthday? I had a feeling you might stop by.

They waft over to my couch, then recumb slowly as if willing their body to release a muscle that's been flexed past comfort for too long. The distinct, crisp scent of cut grass exudes from their clothing.

ROSE: Were you... laying in your front yard again?

I make a note to clean my couch, but try to put it-- and the shoeprints-- out of my mind.

well, yeah.... after the party, jade stuck around, and we chatted for a while outside, and i think i really stressed her out!

ROSE: C'mon, it couldn't have been that bad. She's lived with Karkat and Dave for the past year, so is used to at the very least--

A startled laugh emits from my interlocutor, and I quiet myself and enjoy a sip of tea. Lavender, bergamot, and cream swirl through my palate. I'm not Dirk, so I can't hear the gears turning. But I would be lying if I said I didn't try to fill in the gaps. However, I confess to being caught off guard by what they blurt out next, face sullen and eyes wide.

i told her that i wanted to die.

I set my cup down, slowly, carefully, trying to steady the hint of tremulousness I could feel sinking from my medulla and boiling up from the base of my tailbone.

ROSE: I don't mean to impugn your judgment, J--

I have to stop myself from saying their name, the old one. Any other referent would certainly be rude, and yet, there's a hitch in my brain, some extant needle outside of my perception that suddenly pricks against the word, and I've learned to heed those after years of subconscious thorns. Thankfully, they interrupt me, hands rubbing contritely atop the blue windy icon at their chest.

i think... i think i meant it?

just for that moment, really! maybe i just shouldn't have even said it, i've never even had that thought before! heck, it scares the SHIT out of me!! but i'm worried i really scared her, too.

ROSE: Is it wrong that she would be worried? She loves you; she is your sister, after all, and despite all the dismal circumstances that have drawn distance between you two-- between all of us, over the years-- I know she'd move the literal heavens to ensure no harm came to you, emotionally or otherwise.

that's the thing. i know she would, but that's... why i told her, maybe. i needed her to listen, and she did, she really did.

she hugged me, and we talked.

ROSE: About what made you feel that way?

about my birthday party, actually. she came over with dave and karkat, and said they were happy to have a quiet evening, and i believed it.

there was cake, and a few silly games, and a movie, but when they...

when they sang to me, i kinda freaked?

ROSE: Sang... Happy Birthday.

yeah.

ROSE: And why was that?

I watch their brow contort as their gaze tracks across my ceiling. A momentary grimace. Their ragged speech quickens.

i always have, i think. panicked, at the singing. even when it's just people i'm close to.

i used to think it was just spending birthdays with only my goofy dad, then being sad because he wasn't around any longer.

but i don't think it's that, anymore...

Their voice breaks. For their father? No. They press on, desperate to connect the thought.

is it weird that i don't like when they... say your name, at the end?

it ties my stomach in knots just knowing it's coming.

ROSE: Can't say I'm familiar with that particular anxiety, no.

ROSE: Perhaps most aren't afraid to hear their own names.

They roll away from me, then. It sounds almost like a stomach gurgling, but after a few uncertain moments, I rise. My friend is sobbing, tears streaming between halting, strained heaves for air. Were I in a more detached mindset, I would view it as a particularly cruel metaphor for their distress, but as I am I drop to my knees in the

carpeting, arms meeting their shoulder and hip. When they continue, it's only choked between gasps.

i, i, i, just can't take it, i don't know what i'll do if i ever hear it again, if i have to listen to that godawful song again.

Despite myself, I laugh, even while I swallow a singular tear of my own.

ROSE: It IS a godawful song, to be sure, truly an affront to both taste and dignity in public restaurants. It should be outlawed. But it's not worth your life.

But they sob-laugh along with me, hands turning back towards me to rest at my midriff in a halfassed hug. It'll do.

you knew, didn't you? that i'd be coming here.

ROSE: Yes. Very little is obscured from me, these days, especially moments of burning need from my closest companions.

so you know what i'm going to say.

I shake my head, then. I'm thankful for the gaps; the casting of bones could never compare to the beauty of a spontaneous gesture.

ROSE: I knew that you would seek me out.

I can infer it, from tidbits; at least, the fleeting wonder had crept into the edges of my vision, less from prophecy and more from a mere trail of evidence. From the ways their fingers stroke the noncommittal mop of hair they've grown in over the last few months, despite benign ribbing from Jade's irony-poisoned ex-roommates; despite a few innocuous-but-surmounting questions about how Paradox Space determined group compositions and whether Typhoeus was a guardian strictly reserved for 'male' players.

ROSE: And I know how the evening ends. But the words can sometimes be... obscured.

I know how impolite it is to suspect, so I put it from my mind.

ROSE: Still, I can't say it for you.

i said it to jade once i finally realized it, how i want everybody to use 'she' and 'her' for me now-- and she did, and she called me her sister, and she hugged me and said she'd always love me, a-and...

She rolls her body towards me, elbows pinned to her sides and snot running across her cheek with abandon. She looks like a chipmunk that's been struck with an arrow, but as she embraces me I find myself smiling a most indignified and grandiose grin.

i think i'm a girl

She buries her face in my stomach, tears-- of joy, now, thankfully-- warm against my skin through two layers of a dress and sash. I wrap her in my arms.

i think i have to be, and i want everybody to say it, and i want to hear them say the right name
and i think i've wanted this for a long fucking time.

And I take a deep breath. She inhales with me, despite her cheeks glowing with the same intense red as the evening light outside.

But now she can't stop laughing, palms covering blue irises. Flexing my knees, I drop to sit on the floor.

how did it come to this?? how it is that even two days ago, this feeling was just this weird itch in the back of my head, when i noticed baggy clothing that wouldn't fit right or the

way that BLINKING made me feel like I've never been doing it right for people to see.....

and now...

ROSE: And now, you've told yourself, and you've told Jade, and you've told me.

ROSE: Thank you.

ROSE: On behalf of all three of us.

She fingercombs at her scalp and bunches the lengths at the nape of her neck in alternating hands.

no, thank you!! i might not have ever quite figured it out, except that...

a couple years ago, back in the game, i overheard you say something really funny, and it... it's kind of stuck with me ever since? you said:

She sits up, balled fists held proper atop her knees, to best summon an imitation of me.

'I seriously have the DUMBEST arc anyone could conceivably imagine.' and when you said that, you were looking into the eyes of your silly cat sprite clone, the one who you said would never help any of us! but...

she made roxy so happy!!

and complimented callie's appearance...

and even gave us Davepeta sprite! and they're great!

so even though we don't have, you know, 'arcs'... i had to wonder

when you rolled on the floor, and laughed at her existence, did it really sound so bad?

and ever since i've thought, that maybe i almost felt like it

was this perfect extension of the way i felt then, that despite knowing that everybody else got to have these great gender revelations primed by this ridiculous cat-you, and got to have their own great 'arcs' because of it, why not me?

I sigh, and shake my head. The floor looks eminently inviting, because certainly she's correct; even for my youth, I did not need to claim that somehow Jasprosesprite was useless because my naiveté demanded some kind of personal literary trajectory rather than, say, natural human growth.

ROSE: It's true, while she may have been, ultimately, a moribund and mortifying reflection of some unfettered alternatives of mine, I suppose it's possible she sparked-- sorry, i don't want you to feel embarrassed by that! but i bring it up just because... even though i didn't even realize this at the time, and it's probably bullshit anyway... i just knew i wanted what they had, but somehow i never put together exactly where that would leave me. what it would mean for me.

Lazily I roll my neck upward again, and draw to my feet. My aspect may not be kind-- dark corners abhor the light for a reason-- but sometimes illumination is called for.

ROSE: So, where does that leave you? Miss...?

She shifts her excited hips.

i think it's time that i learn all of those little flairs this windy gal has yet to experience!

so, i think

JUNE: my name is june! and i have a LOT to do, suddenly!

JUNE: i've gotta hem these silly pajamas, and i want you to teach me how to braid hair, and--

She floats off the couch, gimballing and gyring above my glasstop coffee table for a moment before kicking her legs in unbridled glee. Her whole glorious mass of hair flows with gravity from her head, shaggy and unkempt.

Three hours later, we're still awake, facing each other from opposite ends of the couch, our beverages switched to cocoa.

ROSE: The last time it was sung to me, it was in private; and by a composed and genteel seamstress and vampiress, with whom I came home after another strenuous day in the caverns. She replaced the word in question with 'Wi-Fey,' and I laughed, took her in my arms, and rubbed my nose to hers as we tumbled together onto the bed.

ROSE: Suffice to say, it's never bothered me.

JUNE: oh my god!!! so it IS just me!

She's painted her nails with some old supplies I had in a closet someplace, a shimmering shade of emerald green that somehow evaded the merging of my cosmetics with those of my wife. Kanaya has since arrived home, and gone to bed in the next room, but given her propensity to sleep like the, erm, dead, June and I may proceed without so much as a conspiratorial whisper.

JUNE: still, though... do you think i would look good with long hair? i never got to go through poorly thought out phases with my hair, to try bangs or anything else.

She reminds me-- unintentionally, I'm certain-- that my own are due for a trim. Thankfully I've been keeping them sideswept for a while, now, so the effect is likely unnoticeable.

ROSE: I think long hair would be a great choice for you. Just make sure to grow it out evenly and keep it trimmed, and you'll be fine.

ROSE: I'll have you know I never got to have a phase of cutting my own bangs, though; despite her inscrutable inebriation, my mother was quite adroit with a stylist's scissors.

ROSE: I was speaking seriously, however. I'll happily help with anything else you might want to try, and you said you were reaching out to Jade for...?

But she averts her eyes, picking out a maxi-marshmallow with careful, slightly-smudged fingertips and popping it into her mouth for a thoughtful gnawing.

JUNE: jade says she can't do it. i did ask, when she said i could have anything i wanted for my birthday, but it sounds like even the alternian tech can't quite do it.

ROSE: I'm sorry. I'm sure that, maybe Jane--

She waves me off, wincing.

JUNE: don't worry about it. you don't have to explain this stuff to me, you know?

JUNE: i've read enough to know what my next steps are.

I grit my teeth for a cautious exhalation and draw my knees up to my chest.

JUNE: all those years ago... when you would message me, late at night, and i said i was coding?

ROSE: Yes?

JUNE: most of the time i wasn't coding.

ROSE: Sensible enough, in retrospect.

JUNE: i was... i don't know, i guess just googling some really weird questions, or at least they don't seem so weird anymore.

JUNE: eventually, every time, no matter how hard i would tell myself to focus on programming or something, i would just start to...

JUNE: meander? and read anything i could, until i would come across these scary words, like 'thrombosis' or 'ketoacidosis' or 'breast-bud fusion'. and even now they keep coming up in my head! i don't even know how i still have them rattling around up there.

ROSE: The dire sorts of words that get seared into a thirteen-year-old's subconscious as to why she can't have the thing she wants so all-consumingly, sure.

The sorts of words that stick in place in lieu of the ones that could make the most sense, that scream their truth unavoidable.

JUNE: and even after we entered the game, i actually DID try to...

JUNE: i saw what dave did, when he printed out a copy of his own brain for ironic purposes.

JUNE: i hoped against hope, as we discovered so many little tidbits and weird currencies that one of them would be...

JUNE: i don't know

JUNE: progesterone grist, or...

We share an unguarded laugh. Her shoulders twinge, as though she weren't the most prominent draught in the room. It runs up her spine, and she rises, face tense with

nervous energy. She sets down her mug on a counter. Planting both sneakers in the soft carpeting, she grasps at nothing with both hands.

JUNE: i always hoped i'd be able to just... print her out, y'know?

JUNE: recombine my better self, with a little bit of the ol' egbert slight-of-hand and just

She sighs, eyes dropping to the floor.

JUNE: everybody would just get it. i hope they CAN get it, even if i end up doing it the old fashioned way.

Slugging the last unmixed dregs of milk and chocopowder, I clank my mug next to hers and sidle up alongside her, giving a hug of reassurance around the waist.

ROSE: She's not your 'better self'. She's merely you, the person you are, have always been.

ROSE: There's no question of 'getting it'. I'll be right next to you the whole time, as will Kanaya, and Jade too.

JUNE: oh, yeah.

JUNE: think she'd make me a new outfit, if i asked?

JUNE: or at least help me take this one in around the waist, and the legs, or something.

JUNE: she looked pretty tired when she came in, so i didn't want to do anything more complex than reintroduce myself.

ROSE: She would, in a heartb-- yes. I'll ask her tomorrow to be in touch.

JUNE: thank you, rose. i really appreciate everything.

ROSE: I'm so glad for you. Thrive, June Egbert, and tell the world unafraid.

She draws me into a grateful embrace. In that moment, we breathe together, and I feel her chest rise with a new, unpent zephyr, totally unlike anything I've experienced from her before. And I know she'll be alright.

2:

the pants are coming OFF!

KANAYA: Without A Doubt She Is Aware Of What She Asks For...

Your wife is seated atop your lap, gazing into your eyes, on a bench in a park near your Troll Kingdom respiteblock. Her broad, black skirt billows over you, chastely separating your legs from her hips as her arms drape around your own. You have learned, through a great deal of patient attention, the way to guarantee private daylight conversations: no troll will interrupt two primordial goddesses on a lunch date, if they have sufficiently clear body language. The kissing is merely a perk of the situation, Rose has assured you. Today, her lips taste curiously of mint, despite a lunch of vegetable bánh mi and a troll espresso-tea beverage referred to as a 'frosted fenestration'.

Rose tuts.

ROSE: Recall that this is still June, however. She is admirably capable of hanging to her impulsive decisions, and states her discomforts openly when asked, but she may not always have the best barometer of her own attitude.

ROSE: If you'll pardon the metaphor.

KANAYA: You Did Not Even Refer To Her As Mercurial

KANAYA: You Can Be Forgiven Any Lesser Punnish Indiscretion

KANAYA: But What You Are Saying Is

KANAYA: Perhaps We Should Dissuade Her From What She Believes She Wants

ROSE: No! No, I'd hate to have to wrangle her like that...

ROSE: Likewise, recall that the best way to get her to do something is to try to argue her out of it.

KANAYA: But You Do Think The Outfit Is

KANAYA: Too Skimpy

The blonde woman straddling you sucks air through her teeth.

ROSE: You did design it to her every specification. I saw what her terms were, she was surprisingly exacting.

KANAYA: Perhaps This Is That Impulsiveness Of Which You Spoke However

KANAYA: Her Stipulations Were So Rapidfire I Was Grateful For Your Assistance Noting Them Down

ROSE: Well, she took to those first couple dresses so well I had to watch your collaborative process in action.

ROSE: I'm glad she's taking this all in such stride, but do you really think she's ready for a bathing suit this early?

KANAYA: That Is Not My Determination To Make

ROSE: That's your way of saying no.

KANAYA: I Simply Think

KANAYA: That Maybe She Has Not Thought Through A Totality Of The Implications Of Such A Garment

KANAYA: Valid Though Her Desire For It Certainly Is

ROSE: Yes, well.

ROSE: Perhaps we've been too wrapped up with each other, and just aren't giving her enough credit.

ROSE: and I love you, Kanaya...

KANAYA: I Sense A But There

Rose laughs.

ROSE: Sorry, that's mine.

She shifts her tuchus, sliding onto the bench next to you with her knees across your lap. You gently reposition your sunglasses, which were knocked aside somewhere in the process.

At just that moment-- thankfully no sooner, if Rose's sudden blush is anything to go by-- Dave touches down gracefully a ways away from your bench, Karkat cradled in his arms like a profanity-spewing infant. One knight sets the other down, and gives him the gentlest pat on the fanny with the clear intent to embarrass him. Karkat just growls incoherently, massaging a shoulder, and stumbles towards you.

KARKAT: I SWEAR TO FUCK DAVE IF I COULD FLY YOU'D BE THE FIRST ONE I WOULD HAND-DELIVER TO THE TEMPESTUOUS BOSOM OF THE *FUCKING SUN*.

KARKAT: WHAT IS THAT WORD YOUVE BECOME SO INFATUATED WITH LATELY? '''YEETING'''?

KARKAT: I WOULD WITHOUT A DOUBT 'YEET' YOUR ASS SO HARD INTO THE NOURISHING BEAMS OF OUR MOTHER STAR THAT JADE WOULD BE REQUIRED TO NAME A NEW PHYSICS TERM AFTER YOU.

KARKAT: THE 'DAVE'S ASS' AS SOME NEW KIND OF FASTER-THAN-LIGHT UNIT OF SPEED MEASUREMENT.

DAVE: love you too buddy

DAVE: hey kanaya

DAVE: hey sis

DAVE: thanks for dragging us out of the house before noon
whats up

You share a glance with your beloved wife, who has assumed the angelic, closed-mouth smile you already associate with trying to parse the newfound acknowledgement with which Dave treats his beau in public.

ROSE: Dave! My darling brother, with whom I have been meaning to have a sensible, pragmatic conversation as of late.

ROSE: But which has been tragically forestalled by the severity and frequency with which recently you and your boyfriend have...

ROSE: Gone Ecchi.

She looks at Karkat, lagging behind Dave and still rubbing his posterior.

The light glints off Dave's shades.

DAVE: yeah weve been busy alright

DAVE: though for sure part of that is one particular assgoblin discovering anime

DAVE: then as a result deciding its necessary he never go outside again

DAVE: despite the objective fact that sunlight no longer scorches his skin like the most dope album of 2004

KARKAT: YOU CAN NEVER BE *SURE*.

You gaze up into the sunlight.

KANAYA: As Usual

KANAYA: Karkat Has The Appearance Of One Whose Grubloaf-Contained Foodstuffs Were Replaced With Fecal Matter

KANAYA: And He Is As A Result Remarkably Agitated

He grouses predictably. Dave loops an arm around his shoulders and the nub-horned malcontent leans in, arms still crossed but snarl pacified.

DAVE: so whats this particular feelings jam about

DAVE: it sounded from your text like you needed my opinion about something

DAVE: but like in that rose way where you were just gonna do whatever you wanted anyway and just wanted to see me

ROSE: Well, I was hoping we would have Jade available to

speak on this more directly, but she turned down my lunch invite yesterday saying she had a great deal of planting work to get done today.

ROSE: I was just hoping we could discourse about certain...

ROSE: Recent developments.

DAVE: really rose just say it

DAVE: junes finally come out to everybody but youre afraid shes going to get into some hinky shit you dont approve of

ROSE: Never! I consider myself capable in the utmost to deal with her issues with nuance and empathy.

Your sweetheart's eyes fall on you, and you prompt her.

KANAYA: But

ROSE: But... we merely wanted to process our surprise at the... haste... with which she has taken to a number of feminine signifiers...

ROSE: that she may not fully comprehend yet.

DAVE: what

DAVE: rose are you saying we should be worried that like

DAVE: she likes dresses?

DAVE: why the hell would that be a problem

KANAYA: I Think Perhaps You Underestimate The Degree Of Surprise We Ourselves Held When

KANAYA: Dear We Might Just Show Them

ROSE: Right. Dave, here. This is the most recent garment she's requested of Kanaya.

Rose hands her phone to Dave, who peers at it over his shades.

DAVE: oh shit

He flicks to the left a couple times, paging through different renders, drawings, and angles on the article of clothing.

DAVE: this things bangin hot whats the problem

Karkat scrutinizes the screen, and after a moment's glance begins to laugh uproariously. Rose scrunches up her nose.

ROSE: I really wish you wouldn't say things like that in relation to her.

DAVE: what why

ROSE: Well, it might feel invalidating for her given your... gallavanting.

DAVE: what just because ive acknowledged my primary interest in bonin dudes

He squeezes Karkat around the arms, and despite himself Karkat's eyes glow, for a moment.

DAVE: junes still a great friend even if shes mostly been keeping to herself lately

DAVE: cmon shes my

DAVE: fuck i cant say bro or dude anymore

DAVE: main... ho?

Karkat laughs. Your gorgeous Seer-wife's attention drifts off towards the horizon, and you think you know why. Dave may not be saying it, but the three of you are all thinking the same thing.

KARKAT: NO MATTER HOW MUCH OF YOUR RIDICULOUS HUMAN MEDIA I CONSUME I WILL NEVER UNDERSTAND YOUR OBSESSION WITH ' ' 'GENDERS' ' ' ' .

KARKAT: THE WOMAN WHO SHOWED UP AT OUR HOUSE TWO DAYS AGO TO

PUMP HER FIST ABOUT A NEW OUTFIT WENT ON TO DESCRIBE HERSELF AS "STILL THE SAME" DESPITE CLEARLY DISPLAYING NO SIMILARITIES TO THE WHINGING, DEPRESSED LITTLE FECAL FIESTA YOU'VE ALL BEEN CLEARLY IGNORING FOR THE PAST SWEEP BECAUSE IT MADE YOU 'SAD'.

Karkat breaks free of Dave's hug-grip, throwing his arms up in consternation. Perhaps all four of you are agreed; nobody has any idea what June is going through, or has been going through.

DAVE: ...

KANAYA: And Yet We All Must Deal Sensitively With The Idea That She Might Embarrass Herself Due To Her Lack Of Delay

KANAYA: Appropriate Though It May Be

DAVE: so thats it then

DAVE: she figured swimsuits out and now shes given you a design shes clearly thought a lot about

DAVE: are you worried shell latch onto it too hard or what

DAVE: that shes just gonna smeagol this whole gender shit and not leave any for anybody else

KARKAT: DAVE, WHAT THE FUCK.

DAVE: what the fuck yourself

DAVE: smeagoling is gender neutral

DAVE: no but like cmon whats the big deal

DAVE: i know that she can be a cornball ham sometimes

DAVE: but she knows what she wants

DAVE: are we worried shell be like

DAVE: too happy or something

ROSE: ...

KANAYA: ...

The two of you exchange another look. Your wife rotates her legs off of you, imperceptibly tilting her head.

KANAYA: It Was Perhaps Slightly Presumptuous Of Us

KANAYA: Perhaps I Can Admit Some Degree Of Undue Worry For Her Feelings

KANAYA: Which May Not Be Truly Merited

ROSE: I think what my darling spouse is trying to say, is...

ROSE: You might be right that we

ROSE: I

ROSE: Do have a tendency to be a bit overbearing with regards to June's safety.

ROSE: But I worry!

DAVE: so get zen motherfucker

DAVE: do some yoga stretch your shit out

Karkat hollers from ten feet away, facing the other direction.

KARKAT: BLITZ YOUR DAMN CHAKRAS!

Dave calls to him over a shoulder.

DAVE: dude we dont say that anymore get with the program

The short, black-clad troll whirls around.

KARKAT: HOW THE FUCK DO I TOLERATE YOU, MUCH LESS FIND YOUR PROXIMITY SATISFYING?

DAVE: thats not really my problem motherfucker all i know is that you do

KARKAT: CHOKE ON MY BULGE, *DUDE*.

Dave gazes somewhere between Rose and yourself, face stoic. His arms do not move from the air where Karkat's shoulders had been.

DAVE: have done before will do again

Rose shades her eyes, barely containing her roiling fit of laughter.

DAVE: my point is

DAVE: maybe weve been backsliding

DAVE: doing this disconnected distance shit for too long

DAVE: and we kinda let it push us away from our friends again

DAVE: hell ill admit that while i may be demonstrably more
rad in a lot of ways i havent been keeping up with people the
best

DAVE: well all figure out the best ways to get june back into
our lives and listen to what shes got to say about what she
wants

DAVE: maybe ill even figure out a way to start slipping in
some of my old gay jokes but like

DAVE: sincere this time

But Rose does not stop, ripples of laughter rolling over into a quizzical expression.

ROSE: As though they weren't previously?

ROSE: On some level?

DAVE: cmon sis shit

DAVE: the best part ABOUT being gay is getting to make gay
jokes

DAVE: i mean for chrissakes

DAVE: it is the year of our me five thousand and three

DAVE: i know you were doing it first

DAVE: and im the trendy up and comer in the field of earnest
homosexual acknowledgement humor

DAVE: but truth is

DAVE: ive just tossed off the shackles to what was gonna be
super saiyan ultra dave this whole time

KARKAT: WHAT IS THIS BIZARRE INSISTENCE WITH BEING ABLE TO TERM IT 'HOMOSEXUALITY'? YOU'VE STARTED CALLING YOURSELF THAT NOW, BUT MAYBE *YOU* **ARE** THE SAME NITWIT I EXCORIATED AND BERATED ALL THOSE SWEEPS AGO.

Dave flexes his biceps, completely covered by his long-sleeved red-and-white baseball tee. But it does succeed in eliciting a laugh from you, and Karkat meanders back over. Dave ruffles his hair.

As the two of them take off skyward again, you stand to stretch, pondering your phone again to examine what you were even worried about in the first place. It is undeniably a cute garment, despite being radically more revealing than anything you yourself would ever wear; a one-piece swimsuit, with a rounded midriff-cut from the left side, a low neckline, short, bodyhugging sleeves, split legs which could be charitably described either as 'tantalizingly' or 'eyebrow-raisingly' short, and swimming in blue and teal tones.

It does, you have to admit, look quite good. And you don't only say that as the seamstress who crafted it.

She will like it.

Your phone buzzes with a text from Jade, and, because it is Jade, another, and another, and two more. You read them, and turn to your wife.

KANAYA: Youll Have To Excuse Me My Love

KANAYA: Jade Has Requested I Speak With Her With A Prevalence Of Emoticons Indicating Some Degree Of Urgency

ROSE: Of course. I want to make sure she's not ignored in all this; I'll head back to the caverns?

KANAYA: I Doubt I Will Tarry Long

ROSE: You should take all the time you need. Swifer and I won't bring the place down in an afternoon.

Rose stands for an extended smooch. She flies off, and you sigh with contentment at another perfect little moment before setting off for home.

3:

The Best Dogs Throw The Best Tea Parties

Alright, this has become silly!

Your name is June Egbert, you're doing a great job at this life shit, you now own, like, 2000% more dresses and one more swimsuit than you did a week ago, and while your depression-fueled break from society required you to mend a lot of fences, you feel like you've been doing a great job of it.

Well, a great job of doing it for every person but your sister, who you've sorta been holding out on catching up with after your first chat on account of feeling like kind of a jerk. But you'd rather rip that band-aid off, so as you're soaring across the morning sky, just enjoying the newfound feeling of the breeze under your lilting, summery skirt, you whip out your phone, and text her that you'd love to talk. She responds less than a minute later, saying that you can swing by her place any time and she'll have tea ready, so you tell her you're on your way. Why is it always tea, you think, as you stretch your arms wide. You like tea just fine! But maybe, sometimes, you'd rather have your heartfelt, meaningful conversations about gender and the nature of the universe with, like, a steak, or something, or while you're out horseback riding or deep-sea diving. But maybe tea and domesticity is just who your friends are, these days, and saving the universe meant they all just want to spend time in the peace and quiet of their own houses. You shrug, and let a warm passing wind launch you towards Jade's side of the Troll kingdom.

A short time later, you touch down, and true to her word you can hear the stovetop kettle singing as you approach your sister's open door. She's standing at the stove as you float in, filling two cups and grabbing some tea biscuits from a cupboard, the gray skirt of her floor-length dress held slightly aloft by wagging tail.

JUNE: jade!!!

JADE: june!!!! :D :D

JUNE: you look so great!

JADE: thaaaanks

You've learned a ton about your sister in the last few years, at least back when you spoke almost daily. She hasn't shot a gun since she was 13, but wants to relearn the muscle memory; she misses the tv shows of her youth enough that she still revisits her childhood bedroom to look at the posters sometimes; and while she didn't inherit your familial allergy to peanuts, she rather dislikes them, and avoids peanut butter or any dish with them in. She prefers pie to cake, especially fruit pie, and once accidentally shut down a military radio beacon near her childhood island with microwave radiation. You don't remember what you told her in return-- probably things about famous actors you liked, card tricks you were trying to learn, piano melodies you've forgotten-- but you're glad you've had time to get to know her.

JADE: you do too!!

JADE: tell me about your week

JUNE: ohhh, yknow, there's not much to say!

JUNE: mostly just the excitement of getting to tell everybody. kanaya made me a few cute dresses and the perfect bathing suit, and i've been taking lots of opportunities to just try every vague idea that goes through my head.

JUNE: it's mostly gone pretty okay, and i feel like people are being really cool about everything.

JUNE: shaving your legs sucks, though!

Your sister laughs uproariously.

JADE: yes june it absolutely does!

JADE: its better if you use a real shaving cream instead of

barbasol though

JADE: and go down the leg instead of up so they dont get so pokey...

JADE: but still theres a reason i havent done it since i was 15....

You feel like you should be taking notes. Good old Jade, always helpful.

JUNE: see, i always figured that was just the dog part of you coming out.

Jade returns with your mugs of tea, cinnamon vanilla black for you-- a great guess on her part, given how often your favorite changes-- and lemon ginseng green for herself. She used to get the worst stomach aches, she told you once, trying to help everybody cope, manage expectations, to fix all the arguments and disagreements, and this was the tea she'd drink to help ease the reflux. You hope she's gotten a chance to focus on herself in all this, even though you know you're probably being managed while you speak.

You splash a little milk in from the carafe in the center of the breakfast table, and sit down. Your sister sticks her tongue out as she plops into her customary spot.

JADE: how would that explain the intervening two years? :p

JUNE: i don't knowwww

JUNE: my point is

You sigh.

JUNE: my point is i just wanted to swing by!

JUNE: i could tell i kinda bugged you last week when i was coming out and i talked about...

Jade's chewing on her lip in that way that says she's preparing a lie about her feelings for your benefit. Well, that's not so much a conscious thought, but you've gotten

to this point in enough conversations to know that if you cut back on your contrition now, she'll wave it off as no big deal, you'll both laugh about it, and you'll wonder for a few hours how she really felt before shrugging it off and getting back to your life. But isn't now the sort of time where you have to try to make real amends? So you push through it.

JUNE: i said i didn't want to live anymore.

JADE: june.....

JUNE: no, lemme finish first.

JUNE: then it's ok, you can be mad at me.

JUNE: i know i've always seemed like this really easygoing person...

JUNE: and i really like that about myself! but i think that also means i was never really good at digging deep into whatever stuff, like, identity, or 'who i was' like you and dave and rose.

Jade shifts in her seat, arms and legs crossed. She's scooted back from the table a bit, white dogears forward and listening intently.

JUNE: but i have to make up for lost time! not just my couple years of moping, but also all that time you and i could have been talking during our session, and i could have been learning so much! about you, about myself!

JUNE: so, like, this gender shit has obviously been going on for a while! and it just happened to click after ages of being, like, not... words?

JUNE: but i guess i needed to see it be a real thing before i could relate it to my own life?

JUNE: and what movie am i supposed to pick up this sort of

thing from? ace ventura?? that one with simon pegg about the magazine editor? rocky horror??? no thanks!

Your sister fidgets in her chair, face reading like she's just smelled burning garbage.

JADE: june

JUNE: but i can really see why you're mad at me!

JUNE: i know what it's like to feel like everybody's pushing you away...

JUNE: and i was kind of a totally depressed wreck! but i never came around to the ways i was kind of being a selfish jerk and making all this about me.

JUNE: i just guess i worried that people wouldn't take me seriously when i came out to them!

JADE: june!

JUNE: but maybe it's just because i've got all these new anxieties from having to face up to my--

JADE: JUNE!!!!

JUNE: !

JADE: im sorry june but i think youve got me all wrong!!

Neck hunched, Jade Harley has her fists balled at her sides, smiling sweetly but staring daggers at you. You guess you kinda got carried away!

JADE: i dont think coming out makes you selfish! and while i was for a bit

JADE: im CERTAINLY not mad at you!

JADE: (well not for that anyway...)

JADE: definitely not for a whole week sheesh

JADE: also cmon identity is definitely much more roses thing than mine

JADE: or even daves :p

JADE: i mean i appreciate you stopping by to let me know how much better youre doing

JADE: because i DID sorta worry about you when you talked about dying.... and

JADE: honestly

JADE: before too :/

JADE: i just thought you might be asking me to keep my distance

JADE: in your own way

You hold your breath, chest tight as you stare down into your tea. God, when Jade's right, she's right; you may have been too disconnected, lately, but she's still your sister. You have so much you've been wanting to tell her about for so long, the little fun things, the stuff that DOES make life worth living. And now that you're out of that funk you can listen to every little thing she has to say, and hopefully find time for tea as friends and sisters every month, or every week, or every chance you can get. Sisters!! You're SISTERS now. And that thought lets you exhale, setting a warm breeze through the whole house. Jade sniffs at it for a moment, eyes half-closed, but she presses on.

JADE: its funny...

JADE: i guess i was being a bit stuck in my own head too

JADE: im so used to waiting for everybody to just tell me what they need that i didnt think about how you might not be able to ask for help

JADE: and yes now you are being a bit self-absorbed but thats to be expected!

JADE: youve learned this new thing about yourself! and

already feel strongly enough about it to tell the world

JADE: and i am happy for you! i am chuffed to bits!!

In her eyes, a glimmer of excitement finally breaks through her clear annoyance at you, and she pumps her fists a bit.

JADE: but you still have to take other peoples feelings into account when youre up on your cloud nine!!

JADE: like even right now

JADE: youre just assuming that youve figured out everything i was mad about!

JADE: it turns out ive had a really busy week!

JUNE: oh man i'm sorryyy.

JUNE: oh geez, what can i do to make it up to you??

JADE: you can start with asking how my week was :p

The back of your hand meets your forehead as you chuckle. Your sister is right, you're still getting the hang of this 'living' thing back!

JUNE: how's your week been, dearest sister of mine?

JADE: welllllllll

Jade stands, raising her pointer finger. The light gleams off her glasses, and she sucks down the last of her tea.

JADE: i happened to be feeling down about other times similar stuff to this had happened to me before

JADE: how i thought my grandpa had killed himself... or

JADE: that time dave used jacks bec powers to redirect my bullets

JADE: so he could die and get resurrected as his dreamself

JADE: but didnt even tell me before he did it D:

JADE or when that sprite version of me refused to even fight

and just bawled about wanting to die :\
JUNE: oh no!! i'm sure i made that worse...
JADE: actually
JADE: dont worry about it!
JADE: i know it sounds like a lot
JADE: and it was...
JADE: but its funny
JADE: sometimes stuff just... works out!
JADE: i found somebody to talk to about all of this stuff
JADE: and it turns out as we got to chatting that we have a
bunch in common
JADE: and it kinda became
JADE: like
JADE: a date???
JUNE: whoa! that's awesome! who with? do i know him?

You're about to probe to hell and back, when there comes a sudden, torrential beating on the door, in two rhythmic patterns of eight. You and Jade lock eyes, both suddenly very confused, until it bursts open.

VRISKA: 8ooty caaaaaaaall!!!!!!!!!!

Jade's eyes get so huge as her head whips around that you think they might explode. You leap to your feet. Nonplussed, Jade's mouth curls into an embarrassed smile, revealing her prominent front teeth back to the canines.

JADE: june...
JADE: you know.....
JADE: vriska

4.

I Hope You're Ready For Next Chapter's Obligatory Beach Party Episode Of This Ridiculous Anime

JAKE: Dave old chum!!!

JAKE: Im looking for a companion for a bit of sport later this afternoon!

JAKE: Its been much too long since ive seen you.

DAVE: im sorry have we ever even

DAVE: have we met?

DAVE: honestly im not even sure who this is

JAKE: Haha oh dave!

JAKE: What a jape that is.

JAKE: Listen just drop by the old earth memorial field in the human kingdom at 1 today.

JAKE: Well take in some sun and you can decide whether or not you feel like picking up with us!

DAVE: ...

DAVE: dude what

DAVE: why would you even text me this of course im not coming

DAVE:

Dave sits up in the pile of dubiously-clean laundry in which he and Karkat have been nesting for the past three weeks. The windows are all still covered in the thick sheeting Jade grumblingly helped them put up to block out any interference from the planet's continual insistence on a day-night cycle, but even without his shades he could make out the time on his phone: 6:30 AM.

Dave got his first pair of prescription glasses at 16, and had immediately alchemized them with-- what else?-- his Ben Stiller shades, for the raddest set of prescription shades ever to be basically permanently glued to somebody's face. He found reading a much more tolerable act, then-- not because he'd ever had the most trouble with words on screens, with their variable text sizes, but because printed words had simply never come quite into focus the way he expected. Turns out he's mildly farsighted, huh.

He wonders if Karkat is somewhere in Mount Underpants with him, but after a moment's digging is unable to locate his boyfriend. Ever since the mound of Karkat's identical shirts, Dave's new line of unspeakably ironic graphic tees, and both of their socks and underwear had grown large enough to encompass not only the floor of their bedroom but also his bed and Karkat's 'cupe, they'd both just shrugged as they flopped into the vaguely-malodorous heap.

He scratches his ass and makes his way out to the living room, where Karkat-- shoes still on and fully dressed-- is mashing the shit out of the ancient, crumbriddled keyboard attached to his computer.

Apart from the rare crabtop sighting, Dave has never seen Karkat use another computer besides the ancient, bulbous joke of a desktop he'd carried over from childhood or whatever semblance of that trolls have. But he also doesn't see him away from it particularly, either, except for his brief sojourns to slumbertown or to take a leak.

So Dave does what he does best: makes such a spectacle of himself that his friends have no choice but to check on his shit. He announces his presence in the room with an earthy grunt, and-- this detail is crucial, wearing only his cracked-record-print sleeping boxers and sunglasses-- begins to flex and stretch in the middle of the sitting room floor, right in front of the coffee table. He moves from pose to pose (one arm extended, the other in a closed discus position; then both bent over an outstretched front leg; both arms flexed upwards, to display his utterly-nonexistent biceps; legs bowed, arms trying

to touch the floor below him and failing utterly) until Karkat has no choice but to cease his key-bludgeoning and turn in his seat.

KARKAT: DAVE WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING?

DAVE: being cool as shit

KARKAT: IS THAT WHAT YOU CALL THIS 'RAT-IN-MY-UNDERPANTS DANCE' SHIT.

DAVE: yeah man being cool is not caring what other people think

KARKAT: OH KISS MY NOOK DAVE STRIDER JESUS FUCK.

Dave keeps stretching. He doesn't have to say it, and he knows Karkat doesn't have to hear it: they haven't cohabitated the pile for a week's worth of nights, and Dave wants to know why people who are professionally wrong on messageboards have been monopolizing more of his cantankerous gray pube of a boyfriend's time than he himself has been allowed to. Plus, he knows that in a prolonged battle of the annoyances, ironic self-affirmations and partial nudity have always given him the upper hand over fools Karkat will hopefully never meet.

He does the runner's stretch, one bent leg, one outstretched; he does the yoga pose with the arms overhead and the bent knees; and, for his coup d'grace, he bends himself backwards, barely planting his hands on the ground in time, and begins to crabwalk in an ever-so-tiny circle, eventually looping close enough for his boyfriend to catch sight of the scratchy, coarse hairs between his stomach and his boxer's elastic.

DAVE: yeah sure bro bring it over here

KARKAT: OH FOR FUCK'S SAKE, WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU EVEN SHOWERED??

DAVE: uhhhhh

KARKAT: I THOUGHT SO, YOU MALODOROUS PSEUDOPOD.

DAVE: look its not like its even mattered

DAVE: aside from like two weeks ago whens the last time we even got out of the house for more than

DAVE: like

DAVE: pizza under cover of darkness

Karkat crosses his arms, screwing up his nose in mock protest at Dave's persistent proximity. But as Dave rights himself-- and smacks his head to jar it full of blood once more-- he relents.

KARKAT: FINE. THIS IS TRUE. WHAT THE FUCK'S WRONG WITH THAT?

DAVE: great

DAVE: so cmon lets bathe ourselves and at least pretend to be associated with the other meatbags on this planet

KARKAT: WHY WOULD WE BOTHER WITH THEM?

DAVE: cmon man im not gonna answer your bullshit right now

DAVE: fuckin jake of all people just dropped me a text that people are going to do some kind of

DAVE: he didnt say but it sounded like some kind of sports shit

DAVE: and jegus help me if i didnt catch myself thinking

DAVE: 'aw fuck at least ill not die of vitamin d deficiency'

DAVE: so we should go to that

Karkat mumbles many things, most of them insults at a variety of parties. Dave, as usual, features most prominently among the victims of this tonguelashing, words like NOODLY and DENUDED and COERCIVE and UNFATHOMABLY INDECENT being peppered throughout. In response Dave takes a wide stance, and begins to grapple the nubhorned malcontent.

DAVE: cmon you bridgedwelling weirdo he wants to like

DAVE: kick a stick or pong a ball or whatever we wont die

Karkat practically shrieks, attempting to spring over Dave as he reaches, but succeeds only in getting a shoe caught in the chokehold and flipping upside-down, with his nose coming to rest precisely between Dave's unclad gams.

DAVE: you thought i was malodorous before well get ready for this

And with the obnoxious ease of someone who can literally fly, Dave does. Karkat flails his free leg, to no avail.

After his shower, Dave sees that most dreaded of messages.

JAKE: Oh yes!

JAKE: Bring your swim trunks!

5.

Swinging From The Monkey Bars Of Gender

As Jade rounds the staircase up to her room at the top floor of her forest home, Vriska stands at the foot of her bed, muttering to herself and refolding the same beach towel in a futile attempt to fit it into a large, floral-print canvas bag. She's wearing her bathing suit-- a bikini with the twisty bit between the cups, though Jade's not sure what those are called; it's blue one one side, black on the other, with her trademark trollsighn emblazoned on the latter.

VRISKA: Fuck8ng 8each d8y I swear to j8gus if this weren't the place where ALL--

Jade floats upstairs and through the doorway, already decked out in a cross-tie bandeau bikini and boardshorts, hole cut for her gently-wafting tail. She kisses Vriska on the cheek, silencing whatever murderous murmur was uttering therefrom. Her arms are full of beachfood, a contribution to the day's meal.

JADE: we should go!

JADE: id hate to be late for the paaaaarty!

JADE: were supposed to meet dave and karkat at their place before we walk over to the park

VRISKA: You might need to go on ahead!

VRISKA: I just can't fit this fuck8ng--

Jade waves two casual fingers, and the towel shrinks just enough to barely squeeze into the casing, to Vriska's steaming annoyance. Jade plops her armload on top-- a foil-wrapped satchel with crisp, squared edges, resting atop the sort of cardboard box you'd use to transport a pie-- and hefts the bag over one shoulder.

Karkat sits in a wooden chair by the front door of his home, legs straddling the wooden back of it. He is shirtless, indeed wearing only a gray, functional pair of swimtrunks, and Dave stands behind him, hands full of a peach-white sunscreen, himself clad in red swimshorts. He applies the handful to Karkat's shoulders, just below the neck, rubbing it diligently into the whole length of his now-grouching, teethgnashed boyfriend's skin and arms.

The door pops open, and who should walk in but Kanaya, herself in a one-piece red-striped swimdress replete with knee-length skirting and full leggings. She's carrying a woven wicker picnic basket. Dave freezes up.

KANAYA: Boys I Do Hate To Rush You However

She spies Dave's now-resumed activity, shooting him an accusatory eyebrow. Given their adaptations to Alternian conditions, trolls do not need sun protection on Earth C, but Dave doesn't stop as his gaze meets hers.

DAVE: i know what youre about to say

DAVE: 'dave rose is already at the beach getting the grill started so im barging into your house without knocking because theres like NO WAY youre standing around almost naked slathering karkat in sticky white goop'

KANAYA: Well Yes But Likewise

KANAYA: I Am Leaving My Scuttlebuggy Here Such That We Can Walk Together

KANAYA: Once Vriska And Jade Have Appeared We Can Proceed

DAVE: oh yeah whats even up with that anyway

Kanaya just shrugs, tongue running under her top lip in self-satisfied silence.

DAVE: see i was gonna spring a new nickname on em for the pair, 'solar eclipse'--

KANAYA: We Are Expecting Maybe Another Half Dozen Of Our Friends Already There

KANAYA: But You Are

KANAYA: Ready

KANAYA: Yes

DAVE: oh yeah were good to go

Dave's eyes don't leave the pavement even as he meanders, listing back and forth in front of the rest of the group. He affects an even more nebbish, nasal tone than usual, channeling Geddy Lee with his typical mumble.

DAVE: todays tom sawyer he gets high on you

DAVE: the space he invades he gets by on you

Jade slides immediately into the song with him, catching up as she dances along, and when he notices this Dave cracks that signature quarter-smile and begins miming the drum part to his audible beatbox.

Vriska Serket doesn't consider herself much of a jealous person anymore, but she can't help the half-an-eye that follows Jade's arms as she dances along to Dave's beatboxing. She knows that her concerns-- that Jade would duck out on her in a heartbeat if Dave would show just an ounce of interest, take a moment's initiative-- are probably founded more on her prior fears that Terezi would do the same during their time on the meteor than on some real feelings Jade holds, but has to shove down the shame of being upstaged regardless. She turns an ear back to Karkat and Kanaya's conversation.

KARKAT: I HOPE TO FUCK THERE'S SOMETHING MORE TO EAT THERE THAN JUST HUMAN OBLONG MEAT PRODUCTS AND HUMAN GRUBCREAM.

KANAYA: I Am Certain Rose Can Find Something Even To Your

KANAYA: Exacting Tastes

KARKAT: OH, AND I JUST KNOOOO JUNE WILL BE THERE.

KARKAT: Y'KNOW, IN THE THREE WEEKS SINCE SHE'S COME OUT, SHE HASN'T MISSED ANY EXCUSE TO DROP BY AND BRAG ABOUT SOME NEW TOENAIL POLISH OR VOCAL TECHNIQUE.

KANAYA: And I Suppose Youd Rather She Merely Stay Inside

KANAYA: Not Leaving Her Home As You Do

KANAYA: And As She Has Done For A Preponderance Of Years Prior To Now

Karkat merely grumbles at this, and Kanaya's hands meet his shoulders sympathetically.

Vriska's attention drifts back to Jade, watching her traipse and bob. Dave's hands flail with drum fills and Jade air-basses the uneven tempo of some approximation of the presolo keyboard part. Despite being fairly sure she has never heard whatever piece is being recreated here, Vriska finds her head bobbing along with the pure energy of her girlfriend and their bleach-blond... friend?

DAVE: did you know that song is a total randian objectivist anthem

JADE: whaaat??? nooooo

DAVE: yeah totally

DAVE: geddy lee was going through like

DAVE: this terrible cringy ancap phase

DAVE: thats what all those lyrics about 'how his mind was not for rent not for god or government' were about

Wait, is *Dave my friend*? Vriska thinks. Well, shit; if she's in a relationship with Jade, and that clearly means relating to these people so important to her, so, Vriska supposes, Dave must be her friend.

JADE: oh my godddddd noooooo fuckin whyyy

JADE: the bassline fuckin rooooocks

DAVE: well at least there arent any randian objectivists left
soooo

DAVE: we basically won?

DAVE: unless jane counts

JADE: :/

Alright. Hanging out with my friends Dave and Karkat, and Kanaya. That's not weird at all. That's totally normal.

She saunters over, looping an arm over the shoulders of each shorter troll with the most generous-looking, gregarious grin she can muster.

VRISKA: These two, huh?

VRISKA: Does he just... 8r8k out like this into human music hits when you're at home alone?????????

KARKAT: WELL LET ME TELL YOU, THIS SONG IN PARTICULAR IS CERTAINLY IN HIS HUMAN SCUTTLEBUGGY SPINNING DISCHOUSE AS OF LATE.

KARKAT: HE HAS, WHETHER I LIKE IT OR NOT, BEEN EDUCATING ME ON THE FINER POINTS OF THE MODERN 'ALTERNATIVE' HUMAN MUSIC'S DESCENT FROM WHAT HE CALLS 'INDIE POP' AND 'SYNTHPOP'.

KARKAT: AND SUPPOSEDLY--

VRISKA: Say wheel!

VRISKA: We also have wheels why would you not just say wheel!!!!!!!!!!

VRISKA: Anyway, it's sooooooo gr8 just to get out of the damn house for once, finally get to see you two!

Vriska stops him before he can begin rattling off the whole history of the turntable, its relationship to recorded music, and its interaction with synthetic drum beats

heralding the rise of sampling technology and modern music recording techniques.

Vriska doesn't doubt he could really lead them down that rabbit hole, too; she can see his affection for Dave glint in his horrid, buggy little eyeballs even though he'd never, never say it out loud. So much so that he'd listen to every rambling diatribe Dave could spout about music technology and movements through history, closely enough to recite back when nudged or jostled.

KANAYA: So What Have You And Jade Decided To Contribute To The Picnic

KANAYA: Presuming You Intend To Share That Is

VRISKA: Pfft, Kanaya! I'm hurt that you'd consider me the sort of person who'd blow off that sort of community obligation!

VRISKA: Anyway, Jade is bringing some lovely marinated zucchini she grew, already chopped up and ready to go on the grill like so!

She holds up the foil packet, gingerly unwrapping a corner: it is, in fact, squash, quartered, soaked in oil, covered in spices. She mashes the foil back down, and proffers the perfect little cardboard box, the sort you'd get at a patisserie or fancy cupcake shop.

VRISKA: Annnnnnnnd she made these cookies! Presumably for those of us who don't want grilled veggies. ::::)

KANAYA: They Are All In The Shape Of

KANAYA: Her Own Face

KARKAT: I KNOW SHE'S YOUR GIRLFRIEND BUT THAT'S FUCKING WEIRD, VRISKA.

KARKAT: SERIOUSLY? EDIBLE FACE? IS SHE THAT NARCISSISTIC OR IS SHE TRYING TO MAKE US THIS DEEPLY FUCKING UNCOMFORTABLE?

VRISKA: I think they're cuuuuuuute!

KARKAT: NO SHIT, DOGFUCKER.

JADE: rarf?

Jade twirls back over, still grinning, stepping with her own rhythm towards the path of the three trolls, and rocks backwards in time on her sandalless feet.

JADE: so daaaaaaaave

JADE: kaaarkat

JADE: i know i havent been around to yours in a few weeks.....

JADE: howre those plants i left there doing?

KARKAT: DEAD.

KARKAT: PRETTY MUCH IMMEDIATELY.

JADE: what!!

JADE: but it was

JADE: what did you DO to them???

JADE: they were just little succulents!!

JADE: youre not supposed to be ABLE to kill those!!!

KARKAT: WE DIDN'T DO SHIT TO THEM.

KARKAT: HELL, WE ASSUMED THAT WAS THE PROBLEM.

JADE: dave!? whats your excuse? :p

DAVE: man dont look at me how would i know what went wrong

DAVE: with the sad baby ferns you left to rot in our oubliette

JADE: lemme guess

JADE: the dirty plates are also stacked to the ceilings and you have to fly over piles of dirty laundry

DAVE: haha what no

DAVE: its not like we need a babysitter cmon

Jade puffs up her cheeks and wrinkles her nose like a distemperate chipmunk.

JADE: dave strider we both know you'd starve without my help!!

KARKAT: WHOA, WHOA! I'D LIKE TO THINK I'M AT LEAST CONTRIBUTING TO HIS STATE OF CONTINUED NOURISHMENT.

Jade sticks out her tongue at this, and Kanaya's shoulders rise in visible agitation. She raises an arm to interrupt, to cleave the fight in three and mediate, but before she can Vriska steps up, reaching out to proffer a hand to Jade. Contact made, she spins her around like she's leading a dance, arm going over her head to turn her forward again and rest on far shoulder. Jade pops her hip to one side and wags her tail.

Karkat and Kanaya's eyes meet. Dave opens his mouth, about to either argue or share his shipname, but Vriska turns her head over her shoulder.

VRISKA: Yessss, Daaaave. We know you and Karkat can take care of yourselves!

VRISKA: But you can't blame Jade for liking you enough to worry about you.

Karkat's eyes go wide, as if to say, *whoever the knobgobbling hamfisted fuck this is, it's as sure as I am a cantankerous shithead not Vriska.*

Kanaya can only but shrug.

6.

A Small Summer Convergence, Allegretto

Three trolls and two humans crest the grassy ridge adjoining Old Earth Memorial Field and the oceanside beach. Rose waves, tongs aloft as she tends to the hot coals of a barrel-shaped grill, and Kanaya breaks away from her travel companions to deliver a wet smooch to her wife's cheek.

Vriska throws her arms over her head, almost tossing the canvas bag of towels and food.

VRISKA: We're heeeeeeeeere!

Heads turn. Terezi and Calliope, seated on a red and white gingham blanket, look up from their lunches; Terezi's, a human meat cylinder-- her third, if the discarded bun ends on her plate are any indication-- and Callie's, some unspecifiable and bleeding meat.

Roxy lets the discus fly from his hands just as he peers over. His outfit-- pink shorts and a loose crop top modified out of one of Dave's pirate T-shirts, in this case a cartoon image of a 20s-era-gangster monkey emblazoned with the text 'D-D-DON'T SHOOT!', complete with printed-on curry and pit stains-- complements his heart-framed pink sunglasses and tight-cropped blond hairstyle.

ROXY: heeeeeeeeeeeey!!

Jake, almost idly, springs into the air, legs flailing up to a horizontal position with his trademark annoying degree of athleticism. He looks like a goddamn deodorant ad: his head tracks to the squad of newcomers, and he nods an affirming nod at the same time one of his hands reaches out to catch the poorly-aimed frisbee about to sail past.

He lands gracelessly on one knee-- an impressive feat, for a guy who isn't particularly subject to the rules of gravity-- and stands to mirror Vriska's gesture.

JAKE: You did show!

JAKE: Capital!

Vriska deposits the foodstuffs on the communal picnic table, right by the grill.

VRISKA: Seriously? Guitar cables?

KARKAT: I CAN'T BELIEVE SHE WOULD TELL YOU THAT.

Karkat points an accusatory finger at her as they step over the cusp of the sand, descending to meet Terezi and lay out an adjacent blanket.

KARKAT: WHAT A VIOLATION OF MY TRUST!

KARKAT: EVEN FOR HER USUAL LEVEL OF SHIT BOUNDARIES TALK ABOUT BEYOND THE PALE.

VRISKA: More like beyond the pail!

VRISKA: Hahahaha!

CALLIOPE: (goodness, how lewd!) :U

KARKAT: WHAT, BUT THAT'S WHAT I JUST--

TEREZI: ITS A DOUBL3 3NT3NDR3 YOU DOOFUS

KARKAT: GOG DAMMIT, TEREZI!

KARKAT: OF COURSE I REALIZED THAT! I WAS GOING TO FORCE HER TO EXPLAIN IT TO ME LABORIOUSLY.

KARKAT: THUS HIGHLIGHTING A FACT OF WHICH WE ARE ALL ACUTELY AWARE:

KARKAT: PUNS ARE THE ABSOLUTE FUCKING LOWEST FORM OF HUMOR.

KARKAT: LOWER THAN GRUBSTOMPING PERFORMANCE ART NONSENSE.

KARKAT: LIKE THAT ONE GUY? TROLL GALLAGHER?

KARKAT: FUCK THAT GUY.

KARKAT: FIRST TEN ROWS WILL GET WET MY ASS. I COULD REPLICATE THAT WITH JUST A BILGEPIPE AND AN OVERSIZED LUNCH.

CALLIOPE: that soUnds a fascinatingly bizarre endeavoUr! i'd watch, honestly.

Terezi engulfs the remainder of her human meat cylinder, and slathers her lips in saliva, open-mouthed.

TEREZI: W3LL WITH TH4T 4PP3T1Z1NG R3M1ND3R 1M GO1NG TO H4SSL3 ROS3 FOR MOR3 GRUB

VRISKA: Ooooooooooh! Get me some too, wouldja? I'm craving a hot dog. ::::)

KARKAT: AS YOU SO LABORIOUSLY WHINGE ON ABOUT NOW, CONSTANTLY.

KARKAT: FOR SHIT'S SAKE, DO YOU EVEN HAVE A PERSONALITY ANYMORE, OR DID YOU JUST REPLACE YOUR SELF-ABSORBED MURDERER EDGEFUCK SHTICK WITH SOME DOPEY-EYED ROMANTIC DRIVEL AS ANOTHER GODDAMNED IRONIC SHIELD?

VRISKA: Wooooooooow. You've spent too long with Dave! I'm just hungry!

TEREZI: H3H3H3

Terezi cackles in her low, droll way, hefting herself up with her cane and treading over towards the grillpit. Jade and Dave have lingered long enough on the cusp of the field that Kanaya and Rose are faced away from them, affecting nonchalance as they murmur secrets. Rose's own swimdress-- a high-necked, elegant gray armless one of her wife's design, with an orange chiffon below-knee skirt and a ribbon of fearless pink across the bodice-- clashes terribly with Kanaya's, but the iconic couple stoop mutually, engulfed in conspiratorial whispers.

KANAYA: (I Do Not Think It Odd To Consider For The Three Of Them Actually)

ROSE: (She's coming over for more food!)

ROSE: (Quiet, quiet!)

ROSE: Terezi! Ready for your next dog?

Terezi just nods voraciously.

TEREZI: OH 4ND 4 COUPL3 FOR VR1SK4 4S W3LL

Kanaya elbows Rose in the ribs, who smirks and slaps her arm away.

ROSE: Perrrrfect.

TEREZI: >:?

Mercifully, Dave and Jade arrive, still enraptured in their own heated argument.

JADE: IT IS NOT WEIRD!!!!

DAVE: seriously its pretty weird

JADE: we can literally create it from atomic components
without any injury to animals!

JADE: to suit anybody's palate at all!

JADE: and i like to eat it!!!

DAVE: no all im saying is

DAVE: if we agree the printed stuff is pretty shitty

DAVE: why would anybody continue to eat meat when theres
literally anything else

He grabs two slices of oatcaked, thickcrusted bread from the tablespread, from one of the freshbaked loaves, Roxy's contribution to the potluck. He coats them with a generous layer of butter, drops thinchopped garlic on top, and tucks them into an untouched corner of the square grilltop, far away from the smoldering coals and animal flesh, before nodding to his sister.

JADE: of course i dont like the thought of hurting animals!

JADE: i just... at least i can source it locally and meet the
pig in question before i eat him

JADE: whats the harm in that if he gets a nice good life??

DAVE: well the fact that hes then killed for a start

Dave furrows his brow, turning his attention back to the table. Two fresh tomatoes meet their end at his careful knifework, a lobe of fresh mozzarella, a few sheaves of clean basil. He minces the latter into thin strips, chops the tomatoes into a few slices, makes a thick tray of the wet cheese and layers the three together.

ROSE: I hate to interrupt, but your toast is finished, my contrarian sibling.

ROSE: Don't want it to smolder.

DAVE: yeah thatd be the worst

The light glints from Dave's sunglasses. He shrugs his shirtless shoulders, holding out a paper plate, onto which Rose deposits the two perfectly-grilled slices, grillmarks facing up. He carefully places the mozzarella on top, dribbling with the heat, and nudges the tomato slices into perfect alignment. He also grabs three of the Jade-faced cookies and lays them against the lip of the plate.

TEREZI: WH4TS WRONG W1TH 34T1NG 01NKB34ST NOW

TEREZI: 3SP3C14LLY KNOW1NG W3 CR34T3D TH1S PL4N3T FOR OUR OWN
4MUS3M3NT 4NYW4Y

DAVE: see that really bugs me

DAVE: its such a

DAVE: dehumanizing?

TEREZI: >:/

DAVE: detrollatizing?

DAVE: take on the whole thing

DAVE: like what

DAVE: is the whole universe just here for us to fuck around
in as some ultimate moral actors now and everybody else just
has to follow our whims

DAVE: also that reminds me did we ever decide that we cared about why the sprites showed up here

DAVE: like how troubled should we be about game shit continuing to even exist

KANAYA: I Dont Follow

DAVE: arent sprites like

DAVE: skaias goons why would they be able to leave the game

KANAYA: By That Logic Are We Not All Skaias

KANAYA: Goons

ROSE: Yes, inasmuch as we're all extant constructs of the Medium itself, I think the only conscionable response to our continued existence is a disavowal of 'game shit' as being some sort of marker for relevance to reality.

DAVE: oh my god

KARKAT: YES?

Karkat has meandered over, to check on what could possibly be holding Dave up. His boyfriend proffers one of the openface sandwiches to him.

DAVE: bruschetta?

KARKAT: SEE, WHY DO YOU SAY IT LIKE THAT?

DAVE: like what

KARKAT: LIKE...

KARKAT: BROOSH-ETTUH.

KARKAT: I'M NOT EVEN FROM YOUR PLANET AND I KNOW IT'S

KARKAT: BRUS-KETTAH.

Dave just shrugs again.

DAVE: yeah thats what i said

DAVE: bruschetta

KARKAT: OH IN THE NAME OF UNHOLY TROLL SATAN'S MALODOROUS
TAINT.

JUNE: sorry i'm late, everybody!

Roxy sees her first, tugging his sunglasses from his face like Dr. Alan Grant spotting a less-digital brachiosaur. He then, somewhat predictably given the blinding sun, shades his eyes, trying to glimpse more than her outline, bold against the early-afternoon light behind her.

Calliope joins him, bracing his shoulders with their claws and squeezing for a moment.

CALLIOPE: goodness!

CALLIOPE: terezi and i didn't even dress especially for the occasion, then jUne...

ROXY: she just went all the fuck out, huh

CALLIOPE: ^u^

ROXY: hawt

KANAYA: Oh Shit

KANAYA: She Is

ROSE: You can say it.

ROSE: She is, colloquially speaking...

ROSE: Rocking the shit out of it.

KARKAT: KARKAT VANTAS HAS HIS HANDS IN MANY SINISTER SOUPS.

DAVE: oh god dammit karkat

DAVE: weve been watching the venture brothers and karkat has figured out hes basically the monarch

JUNE: haha, oh karkat!

JUNE: you're so funny.

KARKAT: TEREZI, NO!

TEREZI: 1 GOTT4 G3T 4 GOOD SNIFF!

KARKAT: I KNOW THAT FACE, ROACHBREATH!

KARKAT: YOU'RE GOING FOR WAY MORE THAN A WHIFF!

ROSE: !

KANAYA: Hup

TEREZI: OOF!

TEREZI: R4RRRR

TEREZI: L3T M3 GOOO!!

VRISKA: Nice arm8ar, Kanaya!

ROSE: !!

KANAYA: I Swear On My Art As A Seamstress

KANAYA: You Will Never Lick That Garment

KANAYA: (Waterproof Though It May Be)

KANAYA: I Would Never Forgive You

VRISKA: G8d damn, Terezi!

VRISKA: H8ve some self respect!

TEREZI: GR4WWRRR

JUNE: whoa!

DAVE: yep thats a tangle on the floor alright

DAVE: just my sister in law tacklewrestling our weird friend
while

DAVE: she tries to

DAVE: tongue your new duds i guess

DAVE: yeah thats pretty normal

JUNE: shit!

JADE: JUUUUUUNE!!!!

JADE: YOU LOOK SO GOOD AAAAAAA

JUNE: :D

VRISKA: Niiiiiiiice, Eg8ert!

VRISKA: Glad you're finally picking up a proper dress

sensi8ility.

VRISKA: You should borrow some of my outfits again some time!
They'd go well with your badass longer hair. ::::)

VRISKA: I told you it'd look good!

JUNE: do you like it??

JUNE: i've only been growing it out for so long... but i'm
looking forward to it being long enough to play with!

KARKAT: I...

KARKAT: I'LL SPARE YOU MY NORMAL BRUTAL HONESTY, JUNE.

KARKAT: THIS SEEMS LIKE THE SORT OF DAY WHERE YOU JUST DON'T
NEED TO HEAR IT.

KARKAT: SO...

KARKAT: I LIKE YOUR EARRINGS.

JUNE: what?

JUNE: karkat, not blustering and bullshitting me?

JUNE: did something happen!?

KARKAT: NO, NO, NO, FUCK!

KARKAT: I HATE IT WHEN THINGS 'HAPPEN'.

KARKAT: OCCURRENCES ARE THE NUMBER ONE CAUSE OF DEATH FOR
MOST OF MY FRIENDS.

JUNE: haha, well thanks!!

DAVE: ...

DAVE: (is it weird)

DAVE: (should i find it weird that she is like)

DAVE: (fucking killing it lately)

JADE: (not weird at all!!!)

DAVE: (no but like i dont wanna be rude about her... new
swimsuit or anything because i wanna)

DAVE: (let her 'tell us what she needs us to see')

DAVE: (and whatever that means for her like future)

DAVE: (and whatever)

DAVE: (but)

JADE: (dave strider if she is anything like me she will be proud of her many home grown melons!!)

JADE: (dont be shy!)

JADE: :B

DAVE: (...)

DAVE: (*what*)

Dave turns and begins to walk away. Rose raises an eyebrow in Jade's direction, but offers no advice save a smile.

Jade cocks her head to one side.

JADE: i can do navier-stokes equations and stellar magnetohydrodynamics calculations in my head!

JADE: why are people so HARD???

ROSE: I haven't a condemnable clue. Least of all as regards my brother, sadly.

ROSE: Dare I ask what he's intending to say to her...?

JADE: oh nothing weird im sure!

JADE: maybe he thinks she looks cuuute!

ROSE: I'm going to take that as a compliment to my wife's work and not as a particularly thorny disruption of our social web's precarious and delicately-balanced romantic paradigm.

JADE: geez rose you need to kiss more girls!

ROSE: ...

ROSE: My wife is

ROSE: Right. There.

KANAYA: I Am Indeed

KANAYA: Right Here

JADE: oh hey kanaya!

JADE: thanks for your help the other day

KANAYA: Anything In Reciprocation For More Of Your Delectable
Scones

JADE: you could stand to kiss more girls too

KANAYA: What On Earth C Are You

KANAYA: Attempting To Imply About My Romantic Life

KANAYA: And That Of My Matesprit

JADE: hehehehe

ROSE: Strong words, Jade, for a woman dating Vriska.

JAKE: Looking spiffy there chum!

JAKE: (Chums not impolite to say to you eh right?)

JUNE: huh? oh i dont care, hehe.

DAVE: oh hey its my awkward gay bros awkward gay bro

JAKE: Well same to you compadre!

JAKE: So glad you decided to take me up on this little
hootenanny.

DAVE: christ but youre so fucking parochial

KARKAT: OH YES.

KARKAT: AND THANKS *SOOOOOO* MUCH LIKEWISE, JAKE FUCKING
ENGLISH.

KARKAT: INVITING TROLLS OUT FOR A 'FUN DAY IN THE SUN'??

KARKAT: DO YOU NOT KNOW OUR HISTORY WITH HELLACIOUS FLAMING
DEATH BALLS IN THE SKY, OR DID YOU DO THIS ON PURPOSE?

JAKE: Hmmmm

JAKE: Cant rightly well say ive heard!

JAKE: So youre welcome chum!

Karkat throws up his arms.

JAKE: Juney you old battleaxe.

JAKE: I think its time we kip on down and hurl ourselves into the drink like lbjs choicest flivver.

JUNE: what?

JUNE: battleaxe??

JAKE: I say indeed aunty june!

JUNE: ????

DAVE: oh for the love of me

DAVE: i think hes asking if we want to go swimming

JUNE: oh!!

JUNE: hell yes!

JUNE: what is the point of a beach party if you're not going to go swimming?

Dave eyes Karkat, who laboriously trudges toward the water's edge. June launches out ahead of him, diving wide-armed and backwards in a great arc, breezing herself into the freeing chill of the ocean waves.

Dave's glance turns meaningful, and he dives sideways, as though riding on some luxurious pachyderm-saddled palanquin through the air to splash like a rock into the sea. Jake follows, cannonballing; Roxy sprints after with a joyous scream, dogpaddling out; Callie jogs toward the water, but reconsiders when seafoam hits the soles of their prim gray shoes. Karkat just walks on in towards neck-depth, arms wafting in idle undulations. He's always been a bit of a floater.

Sometime later, in the late afternoon glow, a roaring fire fills the seaside pit, drying off everyone who ended up taking a dip. Jade waves her arms in the air, floating off the ground for a better vantage point with which to announce to the crowd.

JADE: alright everybody!!

JADE: lets get together for a picture!!!

The whole group chains together, arms in arms and hands at backs, gazing out over the emerald-green sea. Jade extends an arm, thumb and forefinger pinched to float her cellphone camera pointed at the whole group.

JADE: saaaaaay barkbeeeeeeeeast!

She nods to June, who pincers her own fingers likewise at the other end of the chain. The breeze thrusts in, and swipes the button to take a burst of photos: a chain of nine of their friends, flanked by two sisters in mirrored poses, with grins breezy and sunny alike.

A Solstice of Abundance: Green Thumb, Blue Dice

Mature

36588 words (12 chapters)

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Content Warnings by Chapter

Chapter 1: Mention of suicide.

Chapter 2: Graphic depiction of violence.

Chapter 7: Casual discussion of sex, genitals, and dysphoria.

Chapter 9: Depiction of panic attacks and traumatic-stress reactions.

1.

8otany Ungirdled: Uranium, Meet Fluorine!

You are, at this moment, hurling your prized vegetables off of a roof. It is not your roof; instead, you chose one of the flatter, more unadorned buildings in the Carapace kingdom, reflective black stone scorching against your bare feet in the late-morning sun. You don't mind. With a meditative slowness, you draw a pumpkin from your pocket, engorge it to a plump and satisfying size, and hurtle it down into the street below. Someone flies up into your periphery right as you chuck a particularly fleshy gourd down to its mealy, splattered end on the concrete, sending a passing gaggle of chessfolk wailing and jogging to a nearby awning for cover. You would think that your behavior would be bizarre enough to ward off interlopers, but when you turn your head you recognize instantly a woman you've never spoken to before.

VRISKA: Well, Jade Harley. Always good to see you makin' a mess.

Vriska Serket perches on the crenellated lip of the building at a perfect forty-five degree angle, watching as you, the young doggirl quixotically dropping produce, send it down to its inevitable demise below.

VRISKA: So... why on Earth-C are you doing this?

The smell of pumpkin meat cooking on the sidewalk filters up.

JADE: oh

JADE: definitely no reason!

Even you don't believe yourself, and every attempt you make to unflatten your affect feels like jolting a dead frog so its legs twitch. Without looking, you pull the next

sacrifice from a fold in your Space hoodie's monopocket, and size it up from peanut-scale in your hands.

JADE: i just needed to- hup!

A gorgeous watermelon, round and perfectly ripe, meets its doom in the street, and a quaint little open-topped car veers around it with a tinny whine from the horn. You know Vriska is still naive to human customs, but you suppose that even she would know this isn't a normal expression of much from human culture, save for what must seem a complete hatred of terrestrial vine-based plants.

JADE: -needed to not be in my house anymore!

JADE: so i came out here

VRISKA: S'kind of a fuckin' weird way to get out and a8out, don't you think?

JADE: is it?

JADE: see

JADE: i just figured that i may as well work out a few things

JADE: and my usual outlets werent quite doing it for me

VRISKA: Do you even know whose house this is?

JADE: who says it isnt mine? :B

Vriska puts a foot over the edge of the building, dropping cartoonishly to stand on its side. Gazing through a window, she sees a confused-looking pair of Carapacians inside, trying to enjoy a meal despite the commotion on their roof.

VRISKA: They might.

A yellow squash follows Vriska over the parapet. Beige seeds are strewn all across the pavement.

VRISKA: Can I try? It certainly looks like a fun way to vent frustrations!

You smile your broadest smile. Somehow-- you have no idea how-- you keep your ears up, and eyebrows unfurrowed.

JADE: no

JADE: you cant!

You toss a great big melon next, disgorging watery pulp with such excitement that some of it splashes onto Serket's plaid overshirt. She extends her tongue in sudden disgust, narrow limbs flailing as they futilely try to brush it off but only succeed in getting stringy goo on her gray-tone hands. You feel laughter ripple up from your gut before you can stop it, and she steps back atop the building in the vain hope that she can avoid being drenched in further gore.

You can't meet her gaze, and your laughter abates soon after.

JADE: did she send you to come look after me?

JADE: i gave her all the space she needed you know

You know she's looking at you, you can feel the burning. You clench your fists, and your broad samoyed tail sweeps a low arc unbidden.

VRISKA: Hmmm...?

VRISKA: I mean, no. No8ody sent me.

VRISKA: Who's that you mean, though?

JADE: ughhhhh!

JADE: i gave her SPACE!

JADE: all the space she wanted when she pushed me away!!!

JADE: i took her needs so seriously

JADE: right when we got here it was all cakedrops and
pranksters gambits and letting me replant the hostas and
geraniums in her dads dishevelled flowerbeds

JADE: i was so excited to be with family

JADE: to be near people!

JADE: that i spent all the time around her i could manage
JADE: even as it was obvious her energy for it was waning
week by week....

JADE: then she let three months pass without texting me

JADE: then i saw her for only our birthdays

JADE: then her eighteenth

JADE: then when she had her birthday the other day...

You grit your teeth, unsure if you can possibly care enough to hold back the explanatory torrent about to gush forth from you, but she cuts you off.

VRISKA: Yeahhhhhhhh...

VRISKA: I heard a8out this, actually.

JADE: from who??

JADE: who told you???

You hold back the snarl at the back of your throat, and wrap your lips carefully over sharp canines. *Back to the smile, Jade, you think, or you might make somebody feel threatened.*

VRISKA: Kanaya. She's worried a8out you, actually.

VRISKA: That and she was afraid that I was the one most likely to misgender June.

VRISKA: As if.

Because you, Vriska Serket, are both an impulsive person and the latest arrival, you muse to yourself.

JADE: did she ask you to check up on me?

JADE: i dont know whether to be insulted or flattered at the meddling

JADE: rose still calls her fussyfangs

JADE: behind her back

JADE: (affectionately...)

VRISKA: Of course I let her goad me into it.

VRISKA: I didn't want to get nagged to come meet you!

VRISKA: I coined that, you know.

She sniffs and rubs under her nose.

Yeah, you think. I was told. In the bits and pieces of the other timeline that have slipped through the cracks in causality, you listened to everyone reminisce and share stories of her for years after her death. Meanwhile in your own timeline, as you lay comatose under her fucking spell it suddenly became all business until they needed you to manage your dogs.

Vriska sits right on the edge of the building, back pockets hanging over the lip. In slow, careful sweeps, her eyes follow you as you pace across the rooftop. Her elbows meet her knees and she lets her hands hang inward, legs spread. Teenage dirtbag.

JADE: i was so fucking worried about june!!!

You crack your knuckles, planting both hands back in your pouch and trying to feign nonchalance.

JADE: and i cried over her for years because thats what you do when your only fucking sibling stops cracking jokes

JADE: stops taking home the food you make for her

JADE: stops even talking to you or any of your friends!

You find yourself exhaling through bared teeth.

JADE: so she begged me to stay behind after her party yesterday

JADE: and said...

VRISKA: 'I want to die'.

VRISKA: Yyyyyyyeah.

VRISKA: And this is your reaction? Little callous, even by my standards, don't you think?

She strolls over, thumbs hooked in the belt loops of her jeans, eyeing you from all angles.

You slump your shoulders.

JADE: its not ABOUT that

A scowl creeps across your lips.

JADE: because it didnt even surprise me at all

VRISKA: Then what is it about, hm?

VRISKA: Not the content of her admission...?

She shoots you an incredulous glance.

JADE: of course not!!!! D:

JADE: but when roxy and callie told everybody that they were having their own awesome gender revelations and came to these new self-understandings

JADE: i remember thinking

JADE: not being able to stop myself!!!

JADE: "why hadnt anyone told me this was a thing you could do???"

JADE: "that wouldve been so cool when i was younger!!!"

JADE: and i just felt like the most

JADE: i dunno

JADE: selfish...

You drop your head, and look toward the rooftop, kicking some gravel out from under your foot.

JADE: like

JADE: why is that my first thought

JADE: "i better make this about me!!"

VRISKA: Probably because you're a person, ya goof!

VRISKA: Sounds like it rattled something loose.

JADE: huh? .____.

You turn on one heel, slowly.

VRISKA: The only reason to think something like that is if it's meaningful to you.

Your eyes, you're certain, are as big as full moons.

JADE: buuuuuut...

JADE: buuuut that's not what I'm trying to

But Vriska cocks her head.

VRISKA: What's there to figure out?

JADE: you cant just...

JADE: do that!

VRISKA: Why the fuck not? Sometimes you gotta make sure your needs get met.

You think of yourself as somebody who can just make things happen, like your sister can. You don't need to ponder and introspect, you just do. You weeded the garden this morning, you fixed a three-bean vegetarian stew in the crockpot, you refilled the birdfeeders and hummingbird sugar-water. How's that not 'meeting your needs'? You knew-- or at least, you thought-- that you would be able to take a day to think without some overdramatic confrontation on the part of any of your more nosy friends.

In fact, you're not even sure why you're telling her this at all. But if this candy-corn-horned semi-stranger is going to interrogate you on your identity and troubles,

maybe the least she can do in return is to give you the straight dick. Okay, maybe you'd put it differently, because that's one of your grandfather's aphorisms. But still, she might help.

Perhaps you can admit that you were fascinated to meet the bizarre whirlwind of discord who had affected your friends, human and troll alike, so strongly. Hell, they told you that Vriska tends to hit everyone in her orbit upside the head with the wind-strewn detritus of revelation. Maybe you even held some latent curiosity as to how exactly she does it. And apparently both the means and the message were the same, in this case: do whatever you want, and drag the world along with you.

You realize that you have been staring, hands in your pockets, for a while now. But the troll girl just watches you with a smug smile on her lips, seemingly content to needle with questions. So, you decide, you can fire one back.

JADE: i cant imagine demanding that out of other people!!!

JADE: to ignore their needs and demand they meet mine instead!!

JADE: how is that not

JADE: you know

JADE: ABSURDLY SELFISH???

VRISKA: Easy!

VRISKA: It sounds like you've been unhappy lately.

VRISKA: Do you think that your shitty mood doesn't rub off on those around you?????????

VRISKA: And that maybe focusing on improving yourself might ultimately help people around you fix their shit more than fussing over them could?

VRISKA: Your gift to them can be letting them watch you just be functional.

JADE: that logic is fucking twisted!!

JADE: besides.....

You cross your arms, ears drooping. Still, you feel compelled to meet her gaze. She watches you intently.

VRISKA: Hm?

JADE: what do you do if your selfish desire...

JADE: IS to spend time with them??

JADE: what if they dont want that

JADE: and youre pressuring them for way too much?

VRISKA: Have they said that?

VRISKA: Did anybody actually tell you that they didn't want to hang out with you, or are you making that up?

VRISKA: Are people mostly just too busy with their own shit and run down from their lives to make it happen on their own?

JADE: I dunno.... .-.

VRISKA: Then, again: what the fuck benefit do you get talking yourself out of that sale?

VRISKA: Let people surprise you with their magnanimity and you might eventually learn that they DO enjoy spending time with you!!!!!!!

You avert your eyes. She says it in a way that makes it sound elegant and simple, and almost... condescending? No, that's not the right word. Something closer to obvious, but that just hadn't occurred to you in that exact way before. You wonder if she just lives her whole life by that principle of selfless selfishness. The possibility sends a chill down your spine.

You let your memory drift back to the last time you let yourself-- of your own volition-- feel the full brunt of your feelings, without reining yourself back for their benefit. Back on earth, your earth, you awoke from a brain-assaulting dream of hellsquiddles with enough fury to scream down two Karkats at once, and as you felt

your mind splitting from the sound of your own voice you strewed every constraining reminder from your fingers into the pond. Memory was never your curse.

But you remember that hazy nightmare, when your every sense was muddled by the pounding in your ears and the animal blood between your teeth, and with a flick of your wrist you bid the corrupted Maid to impale him, to make him viscerally aware of the fact that you could. You feel the twinge, like a syringe to the base of the skull, that maybe, in the slightest way, you're still disappointed that you didn't get to watch.

She deserved to have that tower toppled onto her, refining her body to a thin elemental paste capped with sparkling slippers. Nobody has asked you why you haven't worn them since, because, to the best of your knowledge, only your sister and Roxy recall exactly what you did.

You wonder how June ever forgave you. If.

And then, you see your fingers tangled in her green-hued chestfur, underneath supernovae of tears. She is dogyou but not you-you, she is bawling like a blubbering infant and you shake and you yell and you belt a primal roar into her canine snout. Your hand comes up to bear in a flash and you feel your claws-- no, nails-- meet spriteflesh over and over. You will crush the mewling weakness out of her body. But the message from him-- the only man you ever dearly, dearly tried to hate-- rings and buzzes from the dozen minicomputers on your person, graying out the sun-green madness from the center of your vision. You flew away, bawling and disoriented.

The sudden gutpunch of memory twists your innards like a knot, dogguts tangled with heady self-rage and a burst of pure adrenaline. You bend at the middle, almost retching, and swoon sideways, and Vriska rises to her feet. But instead of reaching for her, or to steady yourself against a crenellation, you paw at your own face, teary and incredulous at the lack of slashmarks.

You think about every time you ever wanted to berate somebody for what still feels inexorably like selfishness, and every time you just smiled at them because you knew it wouldn't do any good.

Your knees, through layers of tights and thick peasantskirt, hit the roof first in a ripple of smart pain, and you stiffen upright, blinking for a moment. The scattered visions of faraway planets and uncountable nebulae have been waning, as of late, but for a moment all you see is stars. You bat away Vriska's concerned hand, which was not quite reaching out to help pull you up so much as preparing to touch your arm disassuredly.

VRISKA: Strong feelings about that one?

The flight-muscle in your back flexes, picking you up by the collar like a scruffed puppy. You force out a sigh, suddenly aware of every mote of dirt under your fingernails. The back of your hand clears away an errant tear.

You flex your knees, let your eyes go unfocused, and spread your feet to shoulder-width.

JADE: i turned myself into a sprite once

JADE: but i didnt like her

You are Jade Harley. You are star-stuff. You are the forge and the metalwork, you are the die and the casting that results.

Your hair billows in a wild arc behind you, and you will your mind to align like a syzygy of celestial forces. You shut your eyes and watch them move, planets in a perfect line, bodies in eclipse.

Spidertroll pats you firmly on the shoulder from behind.

VRISKA: C'mon, let's get you some fuckin' ice cream.

2.

Find A Cool 8ug, Eat A Cool 8ug

A Vriska Serket died, but before she died she dreamt, and dated an irrelevant, dead shard of June Egbert while she did. The irony is that you, the REAL Vriska Serket, only recalled this torrid tryst when you awoke with a gasp, here on Earth C, covered in a discarded heap of wellwishing cards piled atop somebody's linens. Bits and pieces flowed in from her life, but nothing conclusive. More bad luck.

They failed to throw you a parade, the gaggle of people who snaked through your room to come see you, or at least try to understand your sudden arrival. Well, you're told it's your room, but in reality it's just a facsimile of your home on Alternia painstakingly reconstructed here.

Kanaya stopped by, Rose close behind her, and Dave and Karkat, and... you suppose those four other kids showed up, Roxy and the other Strider and... Jonk? You're pretty sure his name was Jonk. And Jane. That was three months ago, but Terezi is still flying back from fuck-knows-where, and you have no idea how you made it to this universe at all. You've mostly heard empty platitudes of welcome, and several people have cried on you, but nobody has as of yet offered up a coherent explanation. All that can be known is that when you unleashed the Juju a sweep and a half ago, you blacked out suddenly, and when you came to, her memories were seeping in like fungal rot and you felt your personality changing.

You once watched Jade Harley pocket an entire sun. It was... awe-inspiring? existentially terrifying? breathtaking? even from a universe away and the safety of your cradle-meteor. She plucked it from the sky, and examined it distractedly, like a child with a gumball. You were worried she might pop it into her mouth.

You, Thief of Light, have never stolen brilliance on that scale.

You're pretty sure that you should feel guilty for this, but you're glad that she's already distressed enough to skip past the pleasantries and speak to you like an old moirail. That means you're on even footing when it comes to a disdain for simpering politeness. You have adjourned to a nearby park, appropriately wooded, with winding paths and plenty of ducks to stuff with bread. Jade returns from the ice cream vendor with two small dishes-- which you graciously paid for-- green tea for her, and yours, which she describes as

JADE: ...many-legged and wriggling!

JADE: it was the way she said it

JADE: it really just..... set me off!!!

JADE: she begged me to help her die

JADE: knowing that SHE WAS ME!!

JADE: she must have known how i would take it so it was....

JADE: kinda fucked!!! :/ :/

Jade is wrapping up an extended retelling of her self-directed rage, the catalyst for beating her sprite-self and berating her. You watched the whole thing when it happened, but you can't claim to recall more of your feelings than appreciation at her ability to go shithive maggots on the parts of herself she hates.

You've been there.

VRISKA: If you're waiting for me to say you should have handled it 8etter, 8ad news!

VRISKA: She was a mess, and worse, she wasn't gonna help you do the shit that needed to get done!

VRISKA: like hold off Jack or help June prep for the scratch.

Setting off towards the heart of the park, the two of you cross a footbridge over a lily pad-strewn brook. The cobblestone path is flanked by a gorgeous arboretum,

thousands of hand-planted trees of every size and origin stretching as far as the eye can see. But Jade Harley isn't gazing at the scenery and is instead touching everything, sampling, cooing over each plant and weird bug. Suddenly, she just can't help but seat herself at the edge of the embankment, rolling up the end of her oil-green footless tights. She splashes into the pond underneath the bridge, using her free hand to dig through the murky water after some amphibious friend she thought she saw.

JADE: she was a part of me!

JADE: like

JADE: right now

JADE: im still HER!

JADE: and i know she felt like that...

VRISKA: But it's manipulative, no matter whether or not she 'really meant it'.

You rest a hand on your hip, watching her wade and sift through weeds.

She shakes her head.

JADE: that wasnt what she was trying to accomplish

JADE: and i dont think it's the case for june either!

VRISKA: Na'ah, classic manipulative behavior!

VRISKA: It's really easy to throw at helpful people like you because they know you'll do absolutely anything for 'em if they do.

Jade's arm extends backward, forefinger extended from her precariously-held ice cream.

JADE: im sorry

JADE: is

JADE: is this "vrissplaining?"

JADE: because thats the foremost thing they said to expect!!

JADE: that youd try to narrate my entire life to me in order to solve some problem or have it make sense to you

You stare at the back of her head. You, Alternian diva, are not often rendered speechless.

Finishing her business in the ditch, your human companion wipes her hand dry on her skirt with a satisfied hum.

JADE: nope!

She wades back out.

JADE: june doesnt have a manipulative bone in her body

JADE: shes not tavros....

JADE: nor would she put forward that veneer of weakness just to communicate that she needs support

She starts out down the path, digging into her dessert again. You jog, following her.

JADE: mostly the thing that surprised me was june admitting she needed help

JADE: because she tends to smile and...

JADE: go with the flow

JADE: i guess??

VRISKA: Like smiling wouldn't 8e equally manipulative?

VRISKA: Doesn't mean she's happy!

VRISKA: just that she wants to hide that her life sucks.

VRISKA: 8ut the other thing it sounds like you're not used to is people telling you they need you?

You hustle up behind her. You catch up just as she plops onto a nearby metal bench shaded by two bowed earth trees.

Jade looks confused, and ponders your words.

JADE: could be

JADE: yeah?

JADE: closest ive had in the past is trying to dig through daves layers of insincerity...

You shrug, seating yourself with legs crossed.

VRISKA: They've started doing that to me as well.

VRISKA: I don't know how to take people trusting me, if I'm honest!

VRISKA: Not sure if I like it, just yet.

You stretch your jaw wide, and pick something squirmy out of your knifelike molars. Without even examining it, you pop it back into your mouth and crunch down with zeal. You catch Jade staring, and she gazes off into the boughs of a tree across the clearing.

VRISKA: I'm, uh

VRISKA: also dealing with another me taking up my time and demanding I take her seriously, actually.

You let it sit for a moment, but Jade's polite attention doesn't waver. She waits patiently for you to elaborate. You pick at your Crawlers 'n' Cream, biting down on a spoonful heavy with white chocolate and grainy bug chunks.

VRISKA: In that other timeline-- where Terezi gave me what-for before June could-- my ghost self became somebody I reeeeeeeally h8d.

The space witch gives you the side eye.

JADE: ohhhh?

JADE: how so?

JADE: too capable of cutting slack for the weaklings of the universe? :/

You can almost hear the scoff, but she politely refrains.

VRISKA: Something like that, yeah.

VRISKA: This other me spent years in the 8u88les, and when I finally tracked her down it wasn't enough for me to just take away the Jugu she had thoughtfully stashed for me...

VRISKA: I needed to trash her style, her silly haircut...

VRISKA: the way she cried after just a few insults!

You suck down the dregs of your soupy, too-warm custard, and Jade takes your empty bowl, fitting it underneath her own. You fidget, uncrossing and recrossing your legs.

VRISKA: 8ut just knowing that the game's done now, and that some of us still might not escape having other versions of ourselves try to muscle in on our 8rains...

JADE: youve started seeing things her way

JADE: that other vriskas?

VRISKA: Just a8out!

Compelled to stand, you find yourself shouting, almost too loud. You fold your arms in against your stomach. Her dog ears flick, but Harley otherwise doesn't react.

VRISKA: Whether 8y this godawful planet's lack of conflict or s8ur8 laughing at me via the medium, I'm 8eginning to collect her memories, and I know it's making me...

VRISKA: different.

You turn in place.

JADE: is this a light aspect thing?

JADE: ...could you ask rose?

The girl in the black hoodie taps her chin.

VRISKA: I don't fuckin' know.

VRISKA: How the fuck would I know?

She opens her mouth, closes it again. Taking the last spoonful of ice cream, somehow still solid, Jade sets it on her tongue and lets it run back into her throat.

VRISKA: So now I have to share 8brainspace with thoughts I KNOW are coming from that goo8er's point of view.

VRISKA: Or worse.

JADE: or worse??

Jade cocks her head, maybe in subconscious emulation of her canine side. You idly wonder, for an instant, if she did it before she became like this, but you snap out of it.

VRISKA: Or worse.

VRISKA: Karkat used to imagine you making out with your doppelganger, you know.

You figure this will throw her for a loop, shock her, make her snarl at you or narrow her eyes. But she laughs instead, and stands up to throw away the garbage.

JADE: i do know about that actually!

JADE: he told me himself!

VRISKA: He told you that?

VRISKA: And you didn't hit him?

JADE: :\ i mean

JADE: i may have hit him

JADE: but not for that!

JADE: and not when he didnt request it... >__>

JADE: we dated for a while actually

Alright, your turn to express the disbelief bubbling up from your stomach.

Though maybe it's the bugs.

VRISKA: You and Karkat... d8d?

VRISKA: Like, romantically?????????

You trot after her to the trash can, trying to gauge if she's bullshitting you.

JADE: iiiiiit was spades actually

JADE: nooo i guess thats technically romantic??

JADE: he asked me to be his kismesis

JADE: and i said

JADE: yeah okay

JADE: ill give it a shot?

JADE: because i knew how often i got so mad at him i couldnt see straight

JADE: but also how much i wanted to kiss him on his little cheeks just to watch him grouse.....

VRISKA: Why didn't it work out?

VRISKA: I mean, I can't really see you, of all your humanpals, trying to do spades...

VRISKA: much less with a wet noodle like Vantas.

JADE: youre right

JADE: im definitely not capable of cuddling up to the people i wanted to clobber an hour before!

JADE: and once we were out of our shitty garbage session i couldnt hold up the level of hatred he wanted...

JADE: the irony?

JADE: he didnt have any lasting hard feelings after we broke up

JADE: im glad hes happy with dave!

JADE: i still hang out at their place most weekends!!

VRISKA: God, Karkat wanted to fuck me so 8ad.

Now it's your turn to stride past, setting the pace for your walk. But Jade merely matches your stride and walks next to you, bemused grin settling into her rounded features.

JADE: :| why do you say stuff like that?

JADE: i mean

JADE: i guess youre trying to get a rise out of me

JADE: but thats not how youve been talking for hours..

JADE: and my guess is that its got something to do with that other vriska you mentioned?

VRISKA: Hell of a claim, Harley.

You teethe at your lip, and draw your overshirt over the center of your chest, as though it will draw out the growing gnawing ache.

VRISKA: She was the last person I helped out, ya know.

VRISKA: It was for her own good!

VRISKA: 8ut I guess that's the sort of thing I said to a lot of people I fucked up over the sweeps.

She didn't even know that she needed it, because she'd fooled herself into believing...

Well, you're not sure. But she was sure convinced that Meenah truly wanted to spend time with her, truly wanted her attention and enjoyed her company. God, enough to just monologue at her for days on end. Well, some things never change: Vriska Serket will never stop talking.

Meenah. Fuuuuuuuuck. She was the one who told you that introspection was meant to make you feel like shit, that thinking hard about yourself would wrap around from self-loathing and make you a better person. Then you-- no! The other Vriska!-- got soft, got slow, stopped caring.

You didn't see her in that last big brawl, but you're sure Meenah's dead. Well, double-dead. She talked about death so glibly that it hadn't occurred to you before, but there's really no way she made it out, is there?

You stole Vriska from her without letting them really say goodbye. You refocus your eyes eightfold, trying to clear from your mind the sight of both of them, one crumpled in a heap on the ground, the other walking away out of the inky black void of the dream bubble. You remember how both their eyes welled with tears.

You can force back your old self's memories of time spent with Meenah: a faire, an ill-advised tattoo, those sweet boots... but you still can't drown the feelings of hopelessness and despair she felt as she realized that everything she'd ever strove to accomplish was just to fill the longing void left by...

JADE: ...vriska?

The sound of the birds and the nearby creek rush back into your aural canals, and you loosen your mouth and shake your head stiffly, like a dog trying to reset its nervous system after a bad taste or smell. Jade's regarding you closely, and blinks at you. You blink back at her, willing yourself not to cry.

JADE: vriska

JADE: you stopped

JADE: well

JADE: doing anything

JADE: walking?

JADE: or talking?

VRISKA: I used to want people to h8 me.

Your voice almost cracks.

VRISKA: It made it easier to feel like I could do the shit that needed to get done.

VRISKA: It makes me so mad that I can't just put it out of my head, anymore!

VRISKA: You h8 me, right? You wouldn't 8e spending time with me right now if June hadn't set you off.

You find yourself turning away, eyes focused on nothing.

But Jade rests a hand on your upper arm.

JADE: no

JADE: i...

JADE: i dont hate you :/

JADE: i think i did

JADE: ages ago but not anymore

JADE: i dont have a use for grudges

Your other hand seeks it out, just... resting on hers.

VRISKA: I was the one who forced you to sleep away your teenage years, and it meant you could never interact with your friends.

You turn your head, watching her.

JADE: thats true

JADE: they couldnt depend on me either

JADE: because who needs a sleeping princess to save them?

Earth's first guardian draws herself up to her full height, shoulders rolled back and posture relaxed, facing you. Even disregarding the tangle of black hair and her pointed white dog-ears, she's taller than you by at least an inch, maybe two.

JADE: but you did what you had to do

JADE: or at least what you thought would make you matter

JADE: i cant hate somebody who doesnt think they have a
choice in their actions

JADE: and we all know the hell that the 'alpha timeline'
wrought on our minds...

VRISKA: We're.....

VRISKA: different people than we were 8ack then, aren't we.

JADE: thankfully

Jade nods, green eyes gleaming.

JADE: yes

JADE: yes we are

She turns forward again, releasing your arm, and you pull your hand back. She
walks down the path, but lingers until she hears you follow in step.

VRISKA: What if that's not a good thing, though?

She glances at you quizzically, but you continue.

VRISKA: I guess.....

VRISKA: it would have to 8e if we don't want to crush
ourselves into a shape that's just 8uilt to meet somebody
else's needs, huh.

JADE: yeah

Your human friend turns an ear politely towards you.

JADE: it took me a while to make that change

JADE: but I'm glad I did it

She stops abruptly, facing a tree.

JADE: this is a cherry tree

JADE: or might be a hybrid?

She points up into its high boughs filled with tiny white blossoms, but no fruit.

JADE: i always wanted to climb one of these as a kid

JADE: but obviously we didnt have any on the island

With an effortful grunt, she puts a bare calloused foot against the bark of it, and digs in with her short, rounded fingers. Jade Harley begins her scramble up the trunk, foot by foot, a determined hound bent on discovery.

Not one to be outdone, you take off your bright red shoes, tossing them aside and stripping off your long-sleeved flannel shirt leaving only your plain black tee and jeans. Climbing, for trolls, is remarkably easy on the soft, giving flesh of earth-trees, with no acidic prongs or flaying vines trying to whip you from their husks. But Jade, for all that she's not built as sturdy as a troll, has a startling alacrity, and is halfway up the trunk by the time your claws find their first purchase in the wood. The satisfying clack of it yielding to your digits, the way that each handhold resists against your whole weight as you heft yourself higher off the ground, and the sight of a dog-eared young woman disappearing past the first layer of high branches pushes other-Vriska from your thoughts.

A few minutes later, you're both sitting in the upper boughs of the tree, some fifteen feet off the ground. Your arm is wrapped around the trunk as you steady yourself, and as you look down you notice how much further it seems from this end than the other.

Your companion isn't really steadying herself on much, and is humming a low, stately dirge just across the tree from you, swaying in the rhythm of some breeze you can't feel. You've never noticed before just how happy she looks when she's succeeding, when she has dirt between her toes and sunlight on her face.

VRISKA: Alright, earth girl.

VRISKA: How do we get back down?

You're pretty sure you'd survive this fall, especially if you protected your head and neck from hitting the stones or some of the spread roots underneath it. So focused are you on your path of egress that you don't notice her drift in next to you, black hoodie slowly encompassing your vision.

JADE: vriiiska?

JADE: we can fly you know

Her skirt wafts and billows in the breeze, gentle ripples waving along with the buds on the tree branches.

VRISKA: Oh, yeah.

You swallow the frog in your throat.

VRISKA: Shortcuts!

JADE: cmon

JADE: ill help you down

VRISKA: ...Thanks.

This is like those godawful Eastern Alternian cartoons, the ones Terezi promised to introduce you to if you ever saw each other again. One heroine plucks the other out of some precarious place by the knees and shoulders, and she nestles her head against the other one's breast as they drift back down to the caressing ground.

Well, close enough to the cartoons. You can smell her shampoo from here, something citrusy, vanilla-y, and rich. Her chin sits just in front of your horns, probably milimeters from the top of your head.

VRISKA: I can fly too, you fuck.

VRISKA: You don't have to treat me like a goddamned wiggler.

JADE: hehehe

You kick your legs with a wrinkled nose, and Jade plops you back down feetfirst in front of your shirt and shoes. You brush off your jeans, and she's reclining in the air in front of you, drifting by like a wandering moon about to pass out of your orbit.

JADE: hey

JADE: i had a lot of fun today

JADE: so... thanks for hangin out with me

JADE: i think i did need somebody to talk to after all

You hear your heart beating in your ears, but you remain composed.

VRISKA: Yeah.

VRISKA: Yeah, sure thing, Harley.

VRISKA: You go give your sister what-for.

JADE: bye!!

She floats off towards the treetops, leaving you to tie your shoes.

She charges you, upraised arm knocking the wind from your chest as she plants you against the wall.

VRISKA: Pyrope!

You exclaim, gaze falling into the undeniable, utter redness of those cute little teardrop-shaped glasses.

But Terezi utters a guttural wail, and her head doesn't stop rushing forward when her eyes are even with your own. Her jaw hinges open, and her teeth plant right into the orange fabric of your shirt right where your shoulder meets gray neckflesh. They

immediately pierce skin, soaking you with a gout of your own blood, the smell punching your nostrils like rust and seafoam. The sound of it is somewhere between the crunch of bone and the squelch of a pump biscuit being torn free from a chest. You see the world tumble before you feel your knees give out, and the piercing, primordial scream from your own throat shocks you just as much as the sudden agony.

When your eyes flutter open again, she's wiping her mouth, arm now coated in cerulean paint; it's the same tint that runs in a broad smear down the wall. She leans against her cane.

TEREZI: TH4T

TEREZI: 1S WH4T YOU G3T FOR THR33 Y34RS R3NT ON MY H34RT

You cough.

VRISKA: Well, I'm here.

VRISKA: And now I'm 8leeding all over the floor, so... good jo8, Terezi.

VRISKA: You've got my attention.

3.

A Foolish Constancy of Fluids

A crack of thunder issues forth, illuminating a figure standing on your porch. You jump-- well, levitate-- enough to jostle the blanket over your lap, and as you cast your reading tablet aside you stand from the loveseat. Flinging the door open, you see her: it's Vriska, right side completely coated with blood, which is pouring from a layer of bandages on her shoulder totally inadequate to the task of keeping her blue fluids inside her body.

VRISKA: Long time, no see, fur8all.

She gives a wan smile, soaked lips almost gray from exsanguination. You spoke to this woman, for the first time, three days ago, and now she has paid you a visit at home.

JADE: vriska!!!!!!

Your stomach leaps to your throat.

JADE: what the FUCK happened???

VRISKA: Girls.

She slumps forward into your arms.

When you come to again, Jade's moved you into her bed, and propped you up against the multitude of pillows of every color and shape, plumpness and length. You open your eyes, shifting your unmaimed arm to rest against the crook of the wall, and sigh a contented sigh. She's sitting just a few feet away, watching you now, green eyes running up your whole torso.

VRISKA: Like what you see, Harley?

In the course of replacing your dressings, your kind caretaker removed your soaked, shredded, and bloodspattered shirt, leaving your breasts completely ungirdled. *Of all the days to not wear a bra, you muse, with a soft chuckle.*

JADE: you scared the shit out of me vriska

VRISKA: Aah, you know trolls are sturdier than that.

VRISKA: I didn't risk dyin'.

VRISKA: Though I'll admit that after some of the sh8 I've pulled on her I don't have the guarantee that it wouldn't 8e a Just death.

You smile. Jade doesn't laugh. Instead, the adorable ridge between her thick black eyebrows rumples, and she crosses her arms.

JADE: its not ONLY that though

JADE: what were you thinking???

JADE: just appearing on my doorstep after weve spoken ONE time with the tacit assumption that ill

JADE: just

You hold up one finger, trembling and bent, which is enough to cause Jade to close her mouth with a huff.

VRISKA: I get what you're saying.

VRISKA: Truth 8e told, I'm not sure why I DID come here, though I appreci8 the pay8ack for me listening to your every pro8lem and offering constructive solutions

VRISKA: Vis a vis

VRISKA: Fixing your life.

Harley blushes. *Is it possible, you think, that she's not aware that that's what happened? What, did she think it was some kind of date?*

Shit, do I? You're not exactly gobsmacked by the notion, though. Truth be told, it was one of the better first dates you've ever gone on-- and you bet it was due to the lack of an awkward 'are we, aren't we' conversation about whether it's even a date at all. Vriska Serket can tolerate mind games, but that wishy-washy bullcrap doesn't fly. Fine, you've decided. *It was a date.*

JADE: i live ten minutes outside of town

JADE: by flight!!!

JADE: thats a long time for this level of profuse bleeding

JADE: and you had to already know where i lived.....

JADE: ...

JADE: youve never lived on a planet with a hospital before

JADE: right??

JADE: is that why????

You're not sure she'll like the answer to that question, yet, so you hedge your bets.

VRISKA: Why do you think I came out here to talk to you a few days ago?

VRISKA: Why did I show up on that roof

VRISKA: And why did we hang out?

You gaze around the room. It's a well-lit bedroom, dark hardwood floors stretching to the other three corners, with the bed right by the door to the wide staircase. In the daylight, you presume, light streams in from floor-to-ceiling windows on two walls, arranged so that the sun doesn't ever blind her while she's trying to work. You expected the other two to be coated in posters for fandoms and obsessions, but instead she's mounted mostly framed artwork, still-lifes and a few drawings of her, likely done by her human companions. It looks almost like a cathedral in the woods.

The space witch gives you a look.

JADE: welllllll...

JADE: you said it was because kanaya asked you to?? .-.

You nod.

VRISKA: Yeahhhhhhhh.....

VRISKA: That was a lie.

VRISKA: If you couldn't tell, people aren't exactly good at getting me to do what they want me to.

VRISKA: I just couldn't help but wonder how the heck you'd been dealing with asorting your altern8 selves!

VRISKA: And feeling like you'd been knocked out of the running for

VRISKA: 'MOST IMPORTANT PERSON IN THE UNIVERSE'

VRISKA: And I wanted to know how you could still be so chipper about it!!!!!!!

JADE: and what exactly did you find?

VRISKA: That, just as I suspected, you weren't pleased with it at all!

VRISKA: Either part.

For having so many distinct areas of focus, the whole room is remarkably tidy: her music equipment sits next to a desk set up for her laptop and drawing supplies to charge, compact printing and Alchemization equipment next to that, and she has some media stuff set up near a couch by the windows so she can look out on her garden or up the path that approaches from the main road into town. On the other side of the room, there's a drafting desk, though its corner is the only one justifiably termed 'disheveled'; mostly it's just full of a few scattered papers and dogeared books, and sizable tomes about plant biology or natural history or orbital mechanics. You presume that it's also where Jade gets most of her mathematics work done, if she even has cause to fuck

around with that sort of thing anymore. Next to that is an easel, close enough to the windows for paintings of nature or animals.

JADE: so

JADE: what?

JADE: you showed up out of nowhere to goad me into oversharing about my shitty situation

JADE: get me emotionally compromised

JADE: and.....

She fiddles with her hands in space, as if trying to knit frustration into understanding with invisible needles.

JADE: ...

JADE: what

JADE: learn about yourself??

Your gaze drops to your lap as your expression sours.

VRISKA: There was no goading.

VRISKA: Or, at least, I wasn't trying to goad.

VRISKA: I was surprised you talked to me at all, honestly.

But Jade's glance turns coy.

JADE: youre selling yourself short vriska

JADE: you admitted more than you might have wanted

JADE: and I hope you got to use that to figure out what you needed to

You couldn't see it that well in the storm, your vision having been blurred by blood and rain, but if you had to guess you'd say you were on the third floor, most of which is dominated by Harley's living space. The high ceilings, sloped and rafted, must be the roof, with a skylight so the moon would be visible from the bed, though for now

it's coated in the gentle rain still coming down from dark clouds. Warm light suffuses the whole room from a few standing lamps and overhead fixtures. And her bed, which-- now that you've examined it, does contain pillows, but is mostly populated with stuffed animals and some other shapes of cushion, including one massive toy polar bear-- you'd guess is what humans call 'queen sized', with linens in a deep forest green.

Deeper than her eyes. No, Vriska-- Focus.

You try to move your shoulder, but it's stiff and shoots with pain the instant you start to sit up. Jade sees you wince, and scoots closer along the edge of the bed, reaching to check the wound again.

VRISKA: This might surprise you, but I kinda miss when I had a mechanical arm.

VRISKA: At least then I'd have a fifty-fifty shot that my exes would bite the wrong one.

VRISKA: And I've always had a bit of luck on my side.

You cough, lungs emitting a wet, hacking growl. Your head pounds, and you lean it back against the luxurious velvet pillow propped behind you.

JADE: i hope you get

JADE: some kind of troll pneumonia!!!

VRISKA: Why?

VRISKA: So you can keep me in your bed to care for until I recuperate?

She turns away, blushing, and crosses her jeaned legs.

VRISKA: Mm.

You rub the bridge of your nose with your good hand.

VRISKA: I'm not hearing a no. ::::)

VRISKA: Glad to hear the rumors about a certain young witch were true.

Trying to hold back a smile, she points a finger at your wound.

JADE: are you going to tell me what happened?

JADE: ive seen SHARKBITES with less depth

JADE: and smaller puncture diameter

VRISKA: You've seen shark8ites?

She huffs.

JADE: :/

JADE: look

JADE: when you live alone on a pacific island

JADE: and enjoy ocean swimming

JADE: shark bite care is a perfectly reasonable precaution to take!!

JADE:was it kanaya?

VRISKA: God, I wish.

VRISKA: No, this was Terezi.

VRISKA: And again, it was pretty justified.

JADE: ...shes back?

JADE: and you saw her?

JADE: and she just.....

JADE: left you there bleeding out???

VRISKA: It's traditional.

You bob your head apologetically.

JADE: (fucking trolls...)

JADE: well

JADE: im going to get you some food

JADE: like soup?

Her hands pass to her knees, foisting herself up. She collects a basin of water, a damp towel, and a pile of blue-stained washcloths from the floor by the bed.

VRISKA: Soup is Bullshit!

She strides towards the door.

JADE: too bad!!

JADE: its spicy summer squash with basil cilantro and coconut milk!

She disappears over the cusp.

VRISKA: (That sounds fuckin' amazing.)

You close your eyes, just for a moment.

The lush, mingled scent of cinnamon and cilantro still swims through the room, though Vriska's bowl is empty. You've never seen a troll eat anything but raw meat so quickly, and you catch yourself idly hoping that it's an unguarded commentary on your cooking skills moreso than partial starvation. Your smart-bracelet beeps, and you tug your phone from your pocket to check the time. *Oh, geez.* You sigh, setting your phone on its wireless charging plate, clack your glasses down on the bedside table, and begin to tug off your sweater and undershirt, but you see Vriska craning her neck back in the corner of your eye.

VRISKA: Whoa, whoa!

VRISKA: Whoa, Harley.

VRISKA: I didn't think you had it in you, this sinister ploy

to overpower and assault a maimed woman who you've maneuvered into your bed through circumstance and medical attention.

You give her a look that you hope is adequately scathing, and almost laugh, hands on your bent hips.

JADE: its two thirty am

JADE: my alarm is going off in three and a half hours

JADE: and i need to get at least SOME sleep

JADE: and if you think you get the bed and im going to adjourn to my own couch

JADE: youve another thing to learn about me!

You gesture instructively to the open half of the queen-sized accommodations as you unclasp the front hooks on your bra.

VRISKA: Six!?! What human reason could ever have existed to get up at that obscene hour?

Vriska scoots over, but is sure to convey her petulance through the movement of her arm and hips. Your voice drags with exhaustion.

JADE: heirloom tomatoes delay for neither woman nor god

JADE: i may be both but i still have to be up to check them for parasites and late blight

JADE: then tomorrow was the day i had scheduled to get the asparagus carrots and sunflowers in the front garden

JADE: and i have to transplant the herbs from the greenhouse to the back garden

JADE: AND that all has to be done by noon!

JADE: unless you're offering to help and save me the extra half hour... :|

JADE: hand me your glasses would you?

She does, and you set them aside. From the edge of the bed, you unzip your jeans and strip down, casting them into the hamper with a single movement. You turn to slide your feet and tail under the single sheet, head falling onto your pillow, and as you do you notice that Vriska has pulled her legs up and is leaned against the wall, staring into space. You take a deep breath, closing your eyes.

JADE: what is it?

You hear her rustle against the bed, reorganizing a few cushions and soft friends.

VRISKA: How do you sleep in this bed?

VRISKA: It's so... plush, and round everywhere.

VRISKA: And not nearly wet enough.

JADE: lying down might help

JADE: if its too uncomfortable on your clavicle then use rex as a sit-up pillow!

JADE: see if you can get comfy enough to at least shut your eyes

VRISKA: Rex?

JADE: ursidae rex

JADE: the teddy bear

She realigns the person-sized polar bear behind her. Leaning against his huge, flat head, its stuffing compacted from years of similar treatment, her body settles, and you can feel her weight sinking into the pillowtop mattress. You reach above your head and click the light off. But you feel her fidgeting again, so you look over towards the wall: neck craned back, she's gazing through the skylight, and you see her yellow eyes glimmer with the stars. It's not just that, though. You'd swear, even in the little light afforded by the copse of trees around your home, that she's blushing, cheeks flush with blue.

JADE: im sorry

JADE: i hope i didnt embarrass you....

JADE: ...and if its too weird for me to sleep next to you i can go downstairs

JADE: its fine i promise

You begin to shift the covers, but she responds, voice diminutive and strained.

VRISKA: Please don't. I can't be alone right now.

JADE: is there anything i can do to help?

She brushes your question aside, answering it with her own.

VRISKA: Why do you like sleeping naked?

JADE: the last time i slept with my clothes on you were there

You don't mean that to sound as harsh as it does, but it's out of your mouth before you can react to the thought.

VRISKA: ...Sorry.

JADE: its ok

JADE: you might also be more comfortable if you take your jeans off though

JADE: ...i promise i cant see anything

VRISKA: Yeah.

You hear the zipper work, and she tosses them vaguely in the direction of your drafting table's office chair.

VRISKA: You're not wrong, huh. This bed's really soft.

VRISKA: ...

VRISKA: ...

VRISKA: Jade...? Your breasts are really nice.

You notice that your breath is suddenly very warm, uncontrollable heat seeping into your nose and across the covers.

JADE: ...thanks

JADE: i grew em myself

JADE: but youre not the first to see em

JADE: you should try to get some sleep

What a funny thought for her to verbalize. Unless she's trying to compliment me in the only way she can think of... And it clicks in your head why Vriska can't sleep.

VRISKA: You should hold me.

VRISKA: I'll sleep 8etter.

She's returned to that ironclad Vriska tone, just short of demanding.

JADE: yeah

JADE: if itll help

JADE: yeah

VRISKA: Yeah.

You shimmy over in the bed, rolling a leg past hers and onto one of the pillows against the wall. Your arm slides around Vriska's lower back, between her and the curve of the bear, and you drape the other across her legs, trying to lay comfortably beside her with your head on the cushiony bear's foot. But no matter how much you nudge it with your shoulder, it just won't make way for your neck like it should.

You never expected a single action in Vriska Serket's life to be appropriately described as 'furtive', but that's exactly what you'd call her touch: long nails crawl across your back, inch by inch, treating your skin like eggshells. Her palm comes to rest against your bare shoulderblade. You breathe deep, letting her feel the rise and fall of your lungs with each breath.

Her legs are still a little clammy, and she wraps the sheet over your back as you settle against the bed, skin against her skin.

JADE: lemme know if youre uncomfortable anytime

JADE: i value your bodily autonomy

She rests a hand onto the back of your head, rubbing your scalp, and you roll forward, head against her stomach. You can't help a smile.

JADE: just dont rub behind my ears or ill thump my leg

JADE: i cant help it

You feel the quick exhalations of her silent laughter.

VRISKA: I asked you for this because I want it, you know.

JADE: i know

JADE: i like it too

VRISKA: ...Okay.

Her breathing slows in time with your own, and you feel your heart rate settle; in through the nose, out through the mouth. In through the nose, out through the mouth. Soon, she's dozed off, even as you now find your own restlessness not overpowered by fatigue.

Once, during a freak snowstorm, a 'Kona low' on your idyllic island in the Pacific, you broke a tooth sledding down your private volcano. You marveled at it, because you were a boisterous, indestructable 11-year-old, but when the pain broke through the shock you bawled and sobbed until Bec appeared to fold you back into the space of your bedroom. You capped it yourself, with a perfect dental mold and precision tools, but you always wondered in some dark corner of your mind what would happen if you had contracted appendicitis, or shingles, or cracked your collarbone. Would Bec have

had the wherewithal to transport you to a hospital, check on your care, and return you for convalescence? Would the Dreambot have been capable of major surgery on the anaesthetized person steering it?

You shiver, and Vriska wraps an arm around you without stirring from her slumber. Six AM comes surprisingly early, and you slip out of bed, having spent the whole night awake and pondering.

You're done being alone, you decide. You're much better off when this house is full of light, the more the better.

4.

The Two-Body Problem

It's eleven A.M. You've been working and weeding and watering and seeding for five hours, having started after your morning coffee and having paused only for a breakfast of two eggs over easy, some grilled tomato, and a pint of orange juice. Vriska steps out of your house, arm already looking considerably less shredded, wearing the same clothing as yesterday plus your Space hoodie and a massive, floppy sun hat, which doesn't surprise you, because you spied her through the solarium windows nabbing it on her way to the front of the house.

She flexes her legs in that effortful, superheroic way, blasting off from the ground. You think, in the fraction of a second after you take off in flight after her, that you're still disappointed that it doesn't eject a great downdraft of dust every time, as nonmagical thrust would. But it's too much to demand sense from the process, you just need to accept it.

You catch up to her in an instant, because you, when you want to be, can be very large, and traverse space proportionally quicker than a garden-variety deity. You consider snatching the hat off of her head, but imagine that it might set the wrong tone for the conversation. Instead, as you shrink back down to a less intimidating size, you fly under her, hand outstretched in a wave.

JADE: good morning vriska!!

JADE: glad you're not dead :|

The troll girl whooshes over you, slowing to a stop. You see, with dismay, the horn-holes now punched in the straw round of your hat, somewhat offset from the two already existing for your ears. You decide it's not worth worrying why she didn't use them; she did seem to be in a hurry to avoid you.

VRISKA: Jade!

VRISKA: Heeeeeeeey!

VRISKA: Thanks so much, again

VRISKA: for last night. :::;)

You consider pointing out how much that would sound like something else to a passerby. But you'd rather not stray from the point, not when there's work to be done.

JADE: yknow i almost dont think you mean that given how fast youre running away!!

JADE: not to guilt you into anything

JADE: but its an interesting way to treat a host.....

You flutter your eyelashes at her, and the deep yellow of her eyes widens against the sky.

VRISKA: Yeah, I mean, I wouldn't, 8uuuuuuuut

VRISKA: I've got some really important--

JADE: you were pretty chewed up last night vriska!

JADE: i really hope youre not doing what i think you might be :/

JADE: especially if you havent given that arm enough time to recuperate...

You bring yourself upright, rising up to meet her glance, barely a foot apart.

JADE: probably cant do much in a fight right now even with your troll resilience

And her whole body shifts to face yours, shoulders falling out of tension.

VRISKA: If you mean...

VRISKA: Going to sock Terezi in the face, 8y way of

reigniting our little feud...

VRISKA: No, that's not exactly what I had planned.

Her eyes fall away, and you don't know if she's trying to process whether you're disappointed in her, or just trying to hide the direction of her destination in her gaze. *Either way it's hiding, though.*

You've had enough evasiveness for one morning already.

JADE: the other day

JADE: you meant for that to be a date right?

JADE: i realized that you must have last night

JADE: given how you were talking to me

JADE: how you reacted to me...

JADE: and complimented my body :o

You extend a forefinger upward idly. Your other hand meets your elbow, and you try to put on a coquettish face.

JADE: when do i get one of those when im not distracted with my own nonsense

JADE: and youre not spraying blood on my hardwood floors??

Vriska's face blooms the adorable blue color with which you've become familiar, and she wraps her arms around her torso, fingers touching both elbows in a double-mirror of your gesture. Her eyes flick up, meeting yours, and her unreadable expression belies something between excitement and seasickness. But in lieu of an answer, she cranes her head in, lips finding yours; you taste her heady appreciation, feel her teeth barely constrained behind it, and you close your eyes to savor the heat. She holds it for a good second, pressing in to flit her tongue across your mouth as she pulls away, drifting a distance out.

VRISKA: You're right, it was a date.

VRISKA: And you might even be right about what you think I want...

VRISKA: even if it did take you a while to clue in to it.

VRISKA: But it'll have to wait!

You reach out for her hand as she slips back, but she throws both skyward in an exaggerated shrug.

JADE: vriska, dont do this!!

JADE: im not

JADE: im not angry D:

JADE: just

JADE: talk to me!!!

You resist the urge to float closer, to keep chasing until you catch her or exhaust yourself trying. But you read into her movement a reticence, like a caged cat, and you wonder if it's from a residual hatred of sunlight or merely being asked to stay.

VRISKA: Would love to, Harley, But you're outta luck.

VRISKA: Because I borrowed the last of that soup from your fridge, and I'm still voracious!!!!!!!!!!

VRISKA: Bye!

She bursts off, leaving you in dust again. In your surprise, you don't even have the wherewithal to ask for your hat and shirt back.

JADE: i have food

You stamp your dirt-covered tennis shoes against air..

JADE: taaalk toooo meeeee

But Vriska is gone.

You plop back down in your backyard, gazing over a half-weeded plot, which you've suddenly lost most of your motivation for finishing. So you pull out your phone, and tap out a quick series of texts to Kanaya.

JADE: heyyyyy :D

JADE: if its no trouble can we talk

JADE: in person??

JADE: :D :D

JADE: i can be free whenever!!!

She doesn't respond, so you go inside to read until your heart stops fluttering and the fireflies evacuate your stomach.

You flop down onto the couch by the door, picking up your tablet for a new novel you picked up recently, not even your usual genre, before your life had its own romantic prospects. You pop open the reader app, and you see the cover, a green-blooded troll prone in the lap of her blue-blooded suitor, eyes closed. The seated troll, scowling around a mass of black hair, instantly seems to you terrifyingly close.

That instant connection you felt, and you DID feel like you could share so much, even through the anger about June... the shiver at your spine when you realized that any word she said made sense, the way she gazed at you in the park, practically begged your forgiveness, and protested when you hauled her out of that tree like a kitten...

The tightness hits you again, starting in your back and traveling up your side to your chest, so you try to breathe, mouth open, hoping to settle back down.

The way you fretted over her, changed her dressings; the way she teased and taunted you about her state of undress, and how flustered you became; how she gobbled down your soup, how she held you close to her flesh as she just rested in your bed...

Your head feels heavy, eyes watering despite yourself.

No, Jade, don't be like this. You've talked to her twice. Down, girl.

You set the tablet back down.

5.

The Diurnal Resolutions of Green Women

When is it appropriate to save someone who does not want you to? When do you step in, no matter their objections, or tell them the thing they need to do to fix their life?

When do you let them slam nose-first into that wall, knowing it will cause them pain? Maybe there is never a time like that. Maybe when they call you a meddler, what they really mean is that they are mad at you because they did not realize what they needed before you did.

About an hour after you receive her texts, you pull up the long driveway to Jade's neck of the woods, and park by the greenhouse, all rounded edges and abundant leaves bursting against the glass exterior. It is only a half-hour drive-- a little less, on most days-- but you took your time walking home to retrieve your scuttler, a shimmering, carmine red one, with a roll-down top and sizeable engine. True, its landspeed is lower than yours at full tilt, given your Drinker Fastness, but as you cannot fly there is something to be said for arriving in style.

You, Kanaya Maryam, pull off your sunglasses, shut down the purring engine, and exit the car.

Through the glass in her front door, you can see Jade: splayed out on the couch, still in her gardening sneakers, snoozing away. Her high-waisted, highwater jeans meet a sleeveless button-down shirt, loose-flowing for garden work and black for style. Her hair, in a high, loose ponytail, billows to her side across the loveseat, over the arm propping her up against its back. Even her gardening gloves made it no further inside than the floor nearby, in a tiny heap. The dog-girl's ears and the tip of her tail flick, and the corners of her mouth move with restless dreams. The reading tablet so perpetually at her fingertips is on, displaying the full-color cover of some rainbowdrinker novel or

another. You wonder if you might even have read it, before your attention snaps back to the task at hand. Five quick raps on the door with a knuckle, and your fellow space player is bounding to answer it, shaking sleep from her eyes even as she creaks it open.

Jade fixes you both some almond scones with orange marmalade of her own making, and you sit at her breakfast table, part of her spacious anteroom adjacent to the kitchen with the front garden visible just out the window. You wonder if she does it on purpose, but Jade has, every time you have ever sat down at this table, taken to the spot most comfortable for viewing her plants.

JADE: soooo...

JADE: i know i say this every time youre overr

JADE: but your scuttlebuggy is just... so cute!!! :D

JADE: it suits you so well and i love it!!

KANAYA: Thank You

KANAYA: Once When Vriska Thought I Was Not Listening I Heard
Her Call It My 'Vampire Midlife Crisis Mo8ile'

KANAYA: And I Loved It So Much I Think I Am Naming It That

KANAYA: Likely She Was Forgetting My Rainbow Drinker Super
Hearing

JADE: hahah is that even a thing??

You shrug, eyes closed.

KANAYA: Does It Matter

But the young woman across the table from you crosses her arms, expression growing serious.

JADE: vriska was just here actually!

JADE: shes what i wanted to talk to you about

You automatically begin checking her over for injuries, eyes grazing limbs and upper torso for slashes or marks. But she appears unharmed.

Jade notices, and gives you a sidelong glance. Then she details to you her night: how Vriska, blood drained almost to the point of death, collapsed into her arms in this anteroom, and she carefully fed her and ministrated her back to health over the late, late night. And they slept in each others' arms.

JADE: ...and then this morning she stole my hat hoodie and some soup on the way out the door

JADE: and tried to fly off without saying goodbye!

JADE: when i caught up with her she gave me a goodbye kiss

JADE: but wouldnt tell me what i can do if i

She pauses, trying to formulate the words 'need to date her'. Words you yourself have thought in this specific context, but you try to put it out of your head. That was a while ago, long enough that you can probably help Jade without fear of your own feelings getting in the way... *Right?*

KANAYA: You Want To See Her Again

JADE: its funny!!

JADE: i couldnt place it

JADE: we talked over the june situation in the park the other day

JADE: (apparently you told her how I was doing on that front so thanks!!)

JADE: and as we did...

You find yourself taken aback. Surely you did not do something wrong, casually mentioning to a friend... well, semi-ex... that perhaps another friend's ill-considered words had hurt a third? Then Vriska took this information and sought Jade out? This is very irregular.

You tune back in just as Jade's story gets to the part you do not understand yet.

JADE: ...alized that she had been crushing on me pretty heavily all night!

JADE: and i guess also when we were just chatting days ago??

But she notices your distraction.

JADE: sorry kanaya

JADE: is something wrong?

KANAYA: Was Your Thanks For Me Sharing Your Discomfort With Her

KANAYA: Sarcastic Or Sincere

JADE: oh geez!

JADE: you HAVE been spending all your time with rose

JADE: nooo definitely not sarcastic!

JADE: maybe id feel differently if we hadnt hit it off but actually i would rather thank you

JADE: for helping us meet! :D

KANAYA: Oh

KANAYA: Ohhhh

KANAYA: Apologies

KANAYA: Continue

JADE: no that was it!

JADE: it seems like she must be

JADE: kinda

JADE: into me??

JADE: and keeps making these flirty comments

JADE: and then lets her guard down just enough that I can believe it

JADE: but how on earth do you get vriskas attention??

KANAYA: I Have Only Known Vriska To Fall Hard For

KANAYA: Well

KANAYA: Honestly

KANAYA: People Who Punch Her In The Face

This was, clearly, not the answer Jade anticipated. She gives a few languid blinks-- forgivable, as it sounds like she forewent any sleep last night-- and you decide to take a different approach.

KANAYA: Allow Me To Rephrase

KANAYA: Do You Like Her

Jade ponders this, and you take the time to finish your first little round scone. They are slightly dry, but the marmalade complements them perfectly, and you reach for a second. She is not eating, and you idly wonder if all four she brought out were for you, but think it better to pace yourself.

JADE: uhhhhhh!

JADE: i mean

JADE: when i realized she was actually hitting on me it helped contextualize a lot of the stuff id been feeling actually!!

JADE: stuff like

JADE: i accused her of making me feel '''emotionally compromised'''

JADE: which i guess is sort of like that

JADE: and

KANAYA: No

KANAYA: No Jade

KANAYA: Do Not Math This Out

KANAYA: It Is Not Solveable From The Inputs Of A Conversation

KANAYA: Or Some Calculus Of Interaction

KANAYA: It Is Not About Her Attitude

KANAYA: Or Your Reaction To It

KANAYA: How Do You FEEL

Her almond-shaped eyes, tremendous under her high-power glasses, blink again, this time with surprise rather than fatigue.

JADE: about vriska???

KANAYA: About Vriska

You would imagine that Vriska, though passionate, and sometimes violently defensive, could never hurt a single hair on this girl's sweet tufted ears. But perhaps you would have said that about poor Tavros likewise, maybe even due to that same endless well of passion. Above all else, however, Vriska values emotion in others as well, when underscored with a drive to act and skillful competence, and in that regard you have no doubt that Jade ranks above any other suitor Vriska has ever had. Well, aside from yourself.

JADE: welll

JADE: shes never done a thing for me

JADE: technically saved my life i guess??

JADE: but it didnt really seem like that was her goal with it

JADE: so

She ponders, but you raise your instructive knife again.

**KANAYA: But Sometimes Our Feelings Are Not Underpinned With
Their Past Actions**

KANAYA: But Instead Our Passionate Hope For Future Ones

KANAYA: What Do You Want

KANAYA: Jade Harley

Jade takes a deep breath through her nose, releases it over a five-count through her mouth.

JADE: maybe

JADE: okayyy

JADE: what i really want is

JADE: for her to be the scorpio to my lupus...

JADE: the lepus to my α -canis majoris!

Her elbows meet her upper thighs as the silly girl slouches, and a wistful, thoughtful look spreads across her face, one you have not seen since she was thirteen. Her head tilts ever so slightly, ponytail bouncing with it, and her closed lips crawl into the slightest smile.

You have no idea what she is referencing. June once tried to show you a film by the title of "Night of the Lepus", but aside from the delightful rampant bloodshed you found it too cryptic, too nuanced. You suspect that Jade is talking astronomy, and if the objects she listed were not most likely suns you would suggest that she is beaming like one. As it is, you understand perfectly, and you nod vigorously, with the only response that makes sense.

KANAYA: Sounds Like You Have

KANAYA: As Rose Once Accused Me Of Having For Her

KANAYA: 'Got It Bad'

She breaks out into a full grin, unreservedly.

JADE: stop iiiit!! :D :D

You find yourself infected, and crack a grin of your own, but it sours a moment later.



"Illustration by @xirvonnak. Used with permission."

KANAYA: But

KANAYA: You Said Terezi Was Her Assailant

JADE: yep

JADE: scourge sister number two has returned

JADE: are they going to

JADE: is there gonna be more brutality between them? D:

KANAYA: Most Likely Yes

One of Jade's hands rubs the sweat off her neck.

JADE: i hope that doesnt complicate

JADE: what i want

You purse your lips. If this young woman is truly this serious about her crush, you hope what you are about to tell her will not dismay her too badly.

KANAYA: I

KANAYA: Frankly

KANAYA: I Cannot Imagine Vriska Ever Finding A Way To Sublimate Her Intensity And Fervor Into A Nonviolent Matespritship

KANAYA: As I Once Counselling Karkat She Is Much Too Focused And Self Absorbed

KANAYA: And Would Have To Learn How To Prioritize Other People

KANAYA: I Could Not Foresee Anything Short Of Total Acclimation To This Planet Helping Otherwise

KANAYA: That Or The Truly Unlikely

KANAYA: Some Alternate Self Knowledge Nonsense

KANAYA: Not That Vriska Is The Type

You swear you see one of Jade's ears flick, but her gaze remains stoic.

KANAYA: And I Do Not Only Say This Due To My Conflicted Nature As Her

You forget the human term, twice snapping your perfectly manicured fingers attempting to recall it. So you use the troll one.

KANAYA: Antiquated Heating Source

JADE: her... old flame??

JADE: whaaaaaaaaat??

Jade stares, leaning forward in her chair again.

JADE: no wayyy

JADE: oh god

JADE: and i just sat here GUSHING to you about

JADE: oh god! D:

She covers her eyes with her palms, half-laughing, half sighing with mortification.

KANAYA: No Apologies Necessary

You rise, having finished the last scone, and brush free the single crumb that found its way into the folds of your dress.

JADE: thaaaank you kanayaaaaa

Her forehead rests against the edge of the table.

KANAYA: Plus

KANAYA: This Situation Is Rather Easier

KANAYA: For I Am Not Doing This On An Extended Basis

KANAYA: And I Am Not Your Auspistice

KANAYA: I Have Been Asked To Do That For Vriska Before

KANAYA: And It NEVER Works Out For Me

JADE: yeah

JADE: of course

JADE: no worries

JADE: id hate to put you in the position of the village
three-wheel device :p

KANAYA: Three

JADE: yknow

JADE: auspistice

JADE: clubs

JADE: the symbol looks like its got three little

JADE: wheels?

KANAYA: Oh

KANAYA: How Odd

KANAYA: Well If All Else Fails

KANAYA: Direct Action And Straightforward Approaches Have
Always Been Key To Getting Vriska To Cease Her Mindgames

KANAYA: I Once Almost Upended A Load Gaper Over Her Head

KANAYA: When She Was Bullying A Mutual Friend

JADE: did it...

JADE: work?

KANAYA: She Neither Ceased Bullying Him Nor Began Dating Me

KANAYA: But It Did Make Me Feel Better

JADE: step in the right direction then!

You see yourself out to your scuttler, politely wave to Jade as she resumes her afternoon's caretaking of plants, and make your way back towards the city. With all the other upheavals looming around your social circle, you were hoping to reserve some meddling for those who needed it the most... and you hope you do not need to save Jade, from Vriska or from her own decisions.

6.

That Gnawing Sound

Your name is Vriska Serket, and you may have-- for the first time in your entire life!-- fucked up.

You have been hanging around this cosmic dirtball for a few months, now, and as usual wherever you go the ladies fling themselves at you. After all, your string of past conquests, romantic or otherwise, would take a recitation so extended, so embarrassingly unhumbling, that you basically don't bother to recount it anymore when any of these Earth-C cretins ask you why you're so great. But recently, you've been less and less impressed with your accomplishments, more anxious to prove yourself again. You tell yourself that you feel this way because this universe is just a waiting room, a springboard into your newest adventure.

It didn't feel like home, until you went to bang on Terezi's door.

Ah, Terezi. Co-conquerer of fools! competitor in spectacle and bloodbath! Your precious moirail! Your wonderful... pale red partner.

Alright, you haven't been feeling your moiraillegiance with her since you've been under the weather with a case of the conscience. Shockingly, okay, this isn't the first time you've ever fucked up.

The first was when you didn't check your phone before you went to square off with the grouchy green giant, because you knew there would be big mushy confessions and it would throw off your focus, cock the dice.

You also aren't looking forward to this meeting because you've just spent a lot of time recalling getting stabbed in the back by her, ages ago.

The sword sliding in wasn't even the painful part; as you stumbled and your vision blurred, you realized that what hurt was finding out that she would go through with it.

And then THAT led to your alternative timeline self bawling over some nonsense about finding out what kind of person she could be if she were 'happy'.

You showed that abject weenie what happiness brought her: bright red Troll Chuck Taylors imprinting the waffle pattern of their treads on her face. Joke's on you, because the universe decided to foist her side of that memory into your brain, private afterparty of sobbing and blubbering and all. It sucks to lose a fight, but it sucks worse to tell yourself you deserved to.

Two of the biggest owns you've ever experienced, and you've been grappling with how much they changed that other 'lucky' girl over the course of her death.

Maybe they both hurt so much because you discovered that at least that little weakling could hang on to the things that mattered to her, and that it would be possible for her to cultivate relationships not based on mutual backstabbing.

No, it was more than that;

you couldn't bare to tell Jade, but when you started to pick up tidbits of light from that timeline, you saw how it all ended. And in those memories, you put your arm

around Terezi, and held her close, gazing into the cracked infinite as everything ended,
tinny wail of eternity giving way to the

bright white nothingness. And

she wrapped you up as well,
as you shared that beautiful and knowing look.

Unguarded.

Safe.

So when, on the first day you woke up from that sweep-and-a-bit long coma, you
poked through your phone, expecting a few tepid outpourings of thanks for saving the
literal universe, and

instead you saw Terezi's extended admission...

Even when she didn't use the words,
you knew what it meant.

(And then she chewed on your ass,
which only made you more enticed.)

This morning, she threw open the door,

knowing it was you.

And she flung her arms around you again,

and it was NOT a moirail-hug.

The old you would have let Terezi ramble for a while, cage herself in with hedging and rhetoric and the stumbling blocks of face to face communication before sinking your own teeth into her, emotionally speaking. As it is, though, as you are? You thought about it, but you knew that you didn't have time for all that-- and that enough of Terezi's time had been spent not talking to you. So when she tried to say that she had unearthed this powerful memory of the two of you arm in arm at the end of everything, you told her that you knew, and that you yourself had had the fortune to absorb that timeline's dead Vriska, and that while you have no idea how to take in this bizarre planet of leisure time and sunlight and summer dresses, at least you could start from the same script.

She was quiet for a while, then. She asked how in the fuck that was possible, and you shrugged. It's not that you don't CARE, it's just that you have to clean up the pieces anyway, so maybe there's that to focus on instead. She said maybe that was true, but she wondered if she had been the catalyst regardless, and that maybe proximity to a Seer or a Mind player would be enough to unlock that sort of thing.

You really, really are more worried about the present moment, however. And when you wrap your arms around her shoulders, embrace her and cover her face in little pointy kisses she stops speculating, coos weakly, and sinks into your arms, which you had sort of? a little bit? been hoping for.

Mostly you'd been hoping for this, though; this closeness, the unspoken bond, the breakdown of all the insincerity and bullshit. Maybe in the future, there will be time enough for mindgames, to catch up and recollect and bicker and process and breathe. But for now, touch is all you need.

Terezi says, over the course of the day, that she felt like she'd been locked up since you left the platform to go fight mister shiny suspenders-- as she calls him-- and that

after however infinitely long she had flown through that endless nothingness, she's suddenly been released back into freedom, dropped on her ass, for absolutely no reason she can discern. And you can tell that it's shaken her a great deal, but maybe you're in a near enough place that you can find a way to understand.

Even now, you have no idea what that means,
for Vriska Serket's first impulse to be to understand.

It scares the shit out of you, honestly,
then that thought makes you feel weak,
and that thought scares you more...

but when you admit that to her, Terezi takes your cheeks in her hands and squeezes them, just... feeling what your face is shaped like again, runs her hands along your entire torso to relearn every bump, fleck, and bitemark you inherited from the world in her absence. But she stops at the hood of your new sweatshirt, giving it the most inquisitive sniff of all.

So you tell her about your new concupiscent considerations, and to her credit, she listens without accusation, without threat or more than a few cajoling remarks. And even when you refer to your new canine complication as doubtlessly liking you back, she nods, but says that she's happy to hear it, and that it sounds like you're starting to find the ways that Jade makes you happy too.

It's all fucked up, you tell her.

It's bad timing,

it's a bad break,

it's...

Well, normally you'd face up to it, break some hearts, disrupt everything, but this new you, with this awful weak Vriska in your mind explaining everything through empathy and compassion, feels like you're held back from really breaking blood pushers and busting cranial plates. But Terezi sniffs at you, and tells you that the only things that you can recollect from other selves are thoughts, memories, feelings, but never something like a whole separate consciousness in your head, and that the only explanation is that Vriska Serket is developing a conscience on her own.

You're sure you understand what she means. That seductive thought tells you that if you're not being controlled? If your mind is still churning on its own? Then it's not too late to refuse to change, to turn back your personal clock to when winning was all that mattered. And the gears begin turning.

You're grateful not to have to go back to your own windy, empty block, the one pitched up higgledy-wiggledy by your idiot infant self a little less than nine sweeps ago and copied over to this slapdash planet. You crash here for the night, in Terezi's arms, sharing stories of your last great battles and the miniscule little ways in which this planet feels like a futile attempt to refute your lives of conquest and domination. And you start to feel invincible again, feel a bit of that brashness returning. Maybe you're still invulnerable. Even when you disrobe she's nice enough to not mention the sizeable wound in your shoulder, already almost-healed, that she caused.

Yes, your name is Vriska Serket, and you've just committed your second major fuckup ever; you almost fell for two girls in as many days.

But fuckups can be fixed.

7.

The Waves Are High; The Water, Cold

Two days ago, you, Vriska Serket, resumed dating your best on-again-off-again murderbuddy from beyond time and space. She told you that you haven't changed a bit, and that together you can flex your ferocity against all comers, and never need anyone again. (Well, she didn't SAY it. But she definitely IMPLIED it! That Terezi, and her devious mindgames!) Since then, you've had a lot of time to think! Think, and think, and think.

With a bounce in your step and a whistle at your terrifying alien gums, you soar off from your respitelock to check off one more piece of unfinished business.

Here's the plan, in short: kick down the door of the girl who fell for you, explain that the godawful, failed bitch trying to take over your brain is dead, and since you've got Terezi you have no need for her spacedog antics anymore. Simple! *She'll probably cry, but them's the breaks. :::;*

You pound on Jade's front door with your fist. Four times, eight, sixteen. Finally, figuring she must be upstairs or unable to hear the door, you just shoulder it open, and as you do you holler with a joyous grin on your face,

VRISKA: *sooty caaaaaaaall!*

Your eyes, however, go eightfold-wide when you realize that your erstwhile crush IS standing in her front room... across the table from her sister, having what looks to be a heartfelt conversation over morning tea.

JADE: *june*

Jade blinks, and smiles, never peeling her eyes from your face.

JADE: you

JADE: know vriska

JUNE: oh geez.

VRISKA: There's an expression you humans have!

You configure both hands into makeshift pistols and pew-pew them both at Jade.

VRISKA: It's that somebody just walked over my graaaaaaaave!

VRISKA: Couldn't help the feeling that I was being spoken
about and decided to pop by!

Jade arches an amused eyebrow.

JADE: did you now?

JADE: is that why you seem to never text before you show up

JADE: bloodsoaked or no? :p

Ugh. You shrug.

VRISKA: Don't have your number, can't text much of anybody.

JADE: you

JADE: do still have a phone right??

VRISKA: Na'ah

VRISKA: I threw it into a lake when I finally woke up from
that coma. :::;)

June, finally blinking through her embarrassment enough to notice that you're wearing her sister's sweatshirt, chimes in.

JUNE: that doesn't sound very good for the planet!

Well, she's a complication, but always a manageable one. You've never let a little thing like Egbert stand in your way of getting what you want, so you figure she can't throw a wrench into it too badly.

VRISKA: Hey, June!

You give a friendly tilt of the head and smile.

VRISKA: Nice skirt.

VRISKA: I need to talk to your sister about some things!

VRISKA: But... you're free to stick around, if you want.

JADE: yknow what?

JADE: we WERE in the middle of something!

JADE: but that actually sounds like fun

JADE: if youre alright with cutting our conversation short
june!

The dorkier Harleybert sister's head turns to look to her sibling for confirmation, or at least to set the tone, but Jade crosses her arms with a smirk.

June grins and nods with enthusiasm.

JUNE: i think i figured out what you were gonna say, yeah.

Always good to go with the flow, gotta love her. Jade wags a playful finger at you.

JADE: as long as you PROMISE youll warn me ahead next time
you show up to my house!

JADE: and tell me how you knew that we were talking about you
'—'

You start off through the kitchen, towards the stairs to Jade's bedroom, because you'd rather use that comfy couch for a discussion sure to be a pain in your ass.

VRISKA: Simple!

VRISKA: I didn't, not for sure.

VRISKA: But I DID know that I'm usually the subject on
everyone's lips.

When the other two finally reach the third floor, you've already stolen the big armchair with its back to the windows, the one by the couch and Jade's TV, and are just getting comfy sitting on crossed legs. Jade plops down on the edge of her bed, and June sits on the couch in the middle, arms stiff against the seat and propping her up like pylons. June starts, desperate to cut the tension.

JUNE: so...

JUNE: heyyyy, vriska.

JUNE: what've you been up to since we...

JUNE: talked?

You shrug, letting your whole body lilt with the motion.

VRISKA: Not a ton!

VRISKA: Chatted up Terezi, who mauled me, but I happened to stop by your sister's and she got me fixed up quick!

VRISKA: Congrats on the gender.

JUNE: th...thanks?

You pause for a moment, and your eyes fall from the scruffy-haired girl to your side down to the floorboards. *C'mon! New you! Er, old you! Can't lose your resolve.* You'd better make good on this visit, because you want to deal with this quickly and you'd rather not get caught up reminiscing with another semi-ex.

Picking up on your reticence, Harley shoots you a look.

JADE: did you

JADE: end up going to see her the other morning

JADE: after

VRISKA: After you took me in for the night?

You return her glance, and in your periphery June does another confused one-8-y. Sure to put her off her footing.

JADE: yeah!

JADE: i figure you went and gave as good as you got right?

JADE: after you said you wouldnt...

Damm8t.

VRISKA: Y'know, I wasn't lying, actually!

VRISKA: I wasn't going to punch her in the face, or fight her!

VRISKA: It was spectacular.

VRISKA: It was amazing.

VRISKA: I felt like the old me again.

Your eyes glint, 8rows waggle, and hands flit through the air in acro8atic em8ellishments.

VRISKA: It's actually what I came here to 8r8k to you.

Jade walks over towards you, past her sister, and sits on the near side of the couch. She studies your face, with a quizzical expression on hers.

JADE: are you okay??

You give her your most smouldering look.

VRISKA: Jade, she and I are 8ack together, and it's serious this time.

VRISKA: Team Scourge are going to scour this planet of weaklings once again!!!!!!!

8ut she laughs, grinning a 8ig toothy nerdy grin.

JADE: haha thats awesome! :D

JADE: like as of that day??

VRISKA: Well, yeah!

VRISKA: I showed up, and it turns out we've both seen doing the

VRISKA: like

VRISKA: other-yous-invading-your-brain thing, and we

But Jade thrusts in. Uncomfortably close, now, and her finger indicates your chest, resting at her own. She speaks, cutting you off.

JADE: hit it off after an entire day of honest fruitful discussion ending in a shared acknowledged attraction past the bullshit and mental barriers???

She's supposed to be openly distraught! You expected her to not be able to hide the disappointment! But her whole body is coiled in a posture almost celebratory, conspiratorial. The look on her face is exactly like one she wore when she called you on your bullshit back in bed the other night.

June is just watching this all unfold, completely bewildered, like usual.

You blink-- blink! dammit!-- once, twice, three times directly into her gorgeous green peepers, still agog right next to your face. June, sitting behind her, is totally unmoving, just trying to process the scenario, and you don't blame her for that one bit; you have no idea how to take this reaction, either.

VRISKA: Nnnnnnnno!

VRISKA: I mean, she definitely helped me see some things str8

VRISKA: She told me that, really, brains don't come through, only thoughts and feelings, so I get to choose whether or not I take that other me seriously!

JADE: better than i hoped!!

JADE: i was really worried you were just gonna tear each other apart like rabid dogs...

She seems... relieved. Full of energy, really.

VRISKA: Do you get what I'm saying?????????

VRISKA: We're not moirails.

Your back (8ack, ugh!) creaks forward, and you find yourself almost spitting into her face with each fricative and plosive.

VRISKA: We're

VRISKA: WE FUCKED!!!!!!!!!!

Jade nods. *No, she definitely got that part, okay.* June, however pipes up again.

JUNE: wait, you and terezi...

JUNE: had sex??

JUNE: how does that even WORK between two trolls?

This is not how you wanted this conversation to go! This is not the reaction you expected! *Why is she not letting you trample over her?????????*

There's a sheer instant for which you consider tamping down the brutal sarcasm bubbling up from your bile chute for Jade's benefit, in case she's putting on a truly spectacular facade and mourning your potential relationship internally. But you decide against it, because hey, better rip that adhesive chitinmender off, right?

VRISKA: Well

VRISKA: June

VRISKA: It's pretty simple!

VRISKA: Our six-foot, tripartite genitals simply unwind and split apart

VRISKA: enravelling each other in a horrorterror union of

spreading slime and ecstasy

VRISKA: until we spin our cocoons and fill them with our Life Fluids!

You raise your claw-splayed hands above your head like a wiggler telling a horror story, screwing up your eyes all crazy-like.

She's eating this up, knuckles white with fixation. *Christ, what a rube. Alright, Serket, wind her up, she'll have to get it eventually.*

And better yet, now you can dig the knife in, to see if you can REALLY embarrass Jade.

VRISKA: No.

VRISKA: God, Eg8ert.

VRISKA: C'mon. That's clearly what I do with your SISTER's dick.

JUNE: whaaaat?

JUNE: vriska!!!

June cries out, face red. Her hands cover her mouth.

JUNE: what has gotten into you?

JUNE: what are you even talking about??

Jade, owl-eyed and mouth agape, says nothing, looking rather more like a haunted mannequin exorcised of animating force than an adorable freewheeling doggirl. But she manages to sputter out words nonetheless.

JADE: oh my god!!!!

JADE: you are INCORRIGIBLE!!!!!!!!!!

She laughs, whole body rolling with the deep, sonorous cackle of mortification. Alright, it does SOUND like entertainment, but that makes no sense, so...

June cuts in once more, head still gimballing from you to her sister.

JUNE: you guys have-- did you...??? you slept together?

JADE: we were in the same bed!

Jade affirms with a shrug, regaining her spunky tempo without a beat inbetween.

JADE: and

JADE: if vriska insists on divulging details i will
acknowledge that we were not wearing clothing!

JADE: but we did not in fact have sex

You shrug, nodding along with the truth. *Gotta give 'em that one!* But Jade is now giving you that tight-lipped grin, the one that says that you'll have to repay her in honest attention once this is all done with, and you can't help but wonder exactly how that pound of flesh will be extracted. *Hopefully with her teeth.*

You feel that twinge, again: the notion that if you just gave her the honest answers to the questions you were being peppered with instead of trying to showboat and holler and carry on, you'd get a much more fulfilling discussion out of it. *Okay, fine, Vriska. Just put it out of your head. Try to move on, try to not get lost in the little cutenesses, like the way that Jade yips with agreement unconsciously whenever her sister says something funny, or the ways her ears flip when she tilts her head at questions. Most of all, stop falling for her, because she makes you say the most ridiculous things when your heart is pounding and you can't think straight.*

But you were trying to make it clear that they should just be done with you, take off for easier prey for their attempts to change people and mold them into boring Harleybert clones. So you break out your last big scare.

VRISKA: Oh?

VRISKA: That's true, but I'll tell you what!

VRISKA: June and I dated, in one of those dream8u88les!

VRISKA: So she's really more of my ex than anything, and I'm

sure it'd be horribly awkward for you two to share a past partner!

June nods along, shrugging amiably.

JUNE: oh yeah!

JUNE: i remember when you told me about that.

JUNE: why would that be weird?

JUNE: i'm strong, i'm independent, i'm happy, and i don't need a girl to make me feel good!

JUNE: whaddaya say, jade?

Jade smirks in agreement.

JADE: sorry vee

JADE: june and i try to not keep secrets from each other

JADE: least of all in the fun stuff like dating ;D

JUNE: (shit,)

June mumbles aside to herself, suddenly oblivious, with a hand on her chin.

JUNE: (am i gay now?)

JUNE: (huh. didn't expect that question to come up...)

The follicles at the back of your neck stand on end, and you tell yourself it's your barely-constrained rage, simmering and boiling just behind your forehead. *How can Jade be so cool about this???? Why is it not driving her CRAZY????*

Is she just like this??

June smiles, standing with a twirl, and stretches her arms up.

JUNE: well it sounds like i should go, and leave you two to talk out some very interesting logistics between you!

JUNE: but... jade, i gotta ask a question, and...

JUNE: hey, it's not like it could make this any more weird
right?

Jade touches her pursed lips, and drops back against the couch.

JADE: yeah alright

JADE: as long as were already playing jade embarrassment
chicken

JADE: go ahead!!

JADE: take your turn :/

JUNE: is that... weird for you?

JUNE: like, the... what vriska just said about your...

June screws up her face, trying to say it without SAYING it.

VRISKA: Her dick!

JADE: right right

Really?

June nods.

JUNE: do you get, like... dysphoria about that, sometimes...?

JUNE: see, i wouldn't ask, but...

JUNE: i'm dealing with all this myself, y'know

JUNE: and i just don't know anybody else who...

But Jade waves her off, not unkindly.

JADE: thats okay!

JADE: i get why youd want to know

JADE: i mean it when i say i dont have secrets from you

JADE: because i love you as my sister!

JADE: honestly...

JADE: it kinda used to??

JADE: if it wasnt

JADE: like

JADE: gender dysphoria it was something close!

She smooths a stray hair from her temple, brow furrowing. She's turned fully away from you, now, but you can't even find it in yourself to be indignant that you're being ignored, because you get to watch her little motions, her little wags and lilt, as she talks about her life.

JADE: i wondered if it meant something really terrible about me

JADE: like that my body wasnt my own

JADE: or i had to own up to half a life as some kind of deformed freak

JADE: but i gave up that awful line of thinking years ago!

JADE: because i actually love my body

JADE: every scar

JADE: every toad-wart

JADE: and the stuff i know i cant change

JADE: and yes

JADE: that includes

JADE: every little thing i inherited from bec when he and i got merged by the game!

JADE: i looked for a long time for ways to decouple myself from it all...

JADE: but decided against trying when the time came

JADE: im shaped by my experiences body and all

JADE: and if it ends up written on me so be it

JADE: im still me and im still stronger for everything that happens to me

JADE: thats not the case for everybody!

JADE: and it sounds like you should make your body do what you need it to.....

JADE: but either way its yours to choose with

JADE: okay?

They hug, then. You think about what that would feel like, for your body to still be shaped by everything that ever wrought hell on it, exploded robo-eye and half-measure robot arm included. You didn't think you'd have to tell yourself not to cry during this, because you knew your heart was made of ice and your tongue was made of fire and you were invincible. You thought. You hoped.

That dull ache comes back, the low yearning that says *you can lie down, and cry, and she will hold you and make it all better and hug you until you become okay again*. No, maybe it never left. Maybe you just tried to starve it with all that cold, before the tightness and burning rushed back in.

But then you remember that you are supposed to be mad, and desperately try to work yourself back up to that mindset as the girls finish their soft chat.

God, you hope you didn't break this. Either that it can be salvaged, or it's so shattered that you get to scream and unravel your monstrous wings and just fuck off straight into the sun. Either way it will mean you don't have to sit with this hurt for too long, because you will be papped and comforted and told you are okay, or because you will ignite in incandescent plasma. *Not that you'd ever do that for real, of course. God.*

You tell yourself that you should be steaming with the feeling of being ignored, pushed away; after all, you thought that getting some distance from Jade's adorable little ways of making you comfortable was what you wanted. But before you can even reconcile yourself, both sisters turn to you, smiling placidly.

JUNE: sorry, i didn't mean to make this weird.

JUNE: are you okay?

You cross your arms indignantly, looking away. God, you hope you're not blushing.

June thanks her sister for letting her open up about whatever you interrupted earlier, and drifts off from the couch, heading towards the ceiling. Jade jokes that she has a very interesting conversation ahead of her, now that she's gotten you to stop trying to embarrass her. You say nothing to June as she laughs and floats up to unlatch the skylight.

JADE: ill see you later june!

Jade turns her attention to you, wry smile on her lips.

8.

Angles, Curves, Straight Lines, Orbiting Bodies

What the fuck is going on?

The lock at your ceiling window clicks shut again, only perceptible to your super-canine-super-hearing. You stand, stretch your legs for a moment, and head over to the alchemization station. A few seconds after you order up a small tea, plain green, it dings out, piping hot. You look across the room, and Vriska's still just sitting there, eyes tracking you as you move, as your hands retrieve your beverage.

You lick your lips in a slow, ruminative gesture.

You were worried something like this might happen. While you don't consider yourself an amazing reader of people, you know when somebody's trying to push you away, push your buttons, or make you feel a certain way, especially when that person has all the personal subtlety of a brick through a downtown windowpane. But Jade Harley does not like to be pushed, will not allow herself to be treated that way anymore, so you turn in place, allowing the silence to suffuse the room, marinate you both.

You walk to the edge of the bed, and seat yourself, gently brushing the fold of your gray dress out of the way of your rear end.

JADE: how long it been since you ate alchemized food vriska?

JADE: or had a drink from a replication station

She shrugs, face returned to neutral.

VRISKA: Erm, nine hours? Little longer.

VRISKA: Something to tide me over before bed.

JADE: that short?

JADE: you dont strike me as much of one for cooking

JADE: i suppose

JADE: i dont use em anymore

JADE: i grow most of my food myself

JADE: because i know what i like and im good at it...

JADE: and if youve ever tasted the tea out of these things

You take a long sip, recalling a passage from one of your favorite novels.

JADE: they produce something that is

JADE: 'almost, but not quite, entirely unlike tea'

JADE: itll keep you warm

JADE: may provide a few basic nutrients

JADE: but it doesnt

You wave your free hand, letting the saucer the machine thoughtfully provided come to the ground with a sharp clatter, cracking along a median line.

JADE: it doesnt nourish!

JADE: you can subsist but you cant get the blend just right

JADE: our tech just isnt exact

JADE: we cant perfectly print out a tea to everyones preferences because these machines manufacture the ur-tea

JADE: an ideal! some technically perfect tea

JADE: but that falls flat for anything other than leaf consistency and monotony of taste...

By now she's getting testy, rocking in her seat. Impatience is written in creases across her forehead.

VRISKA: What the...

VRISKA: what on earth are you getting at, Harley?

You glare.

JADE: you didnt need to do all that, just now

JADE: the bluster

JADE: the theater

JADE: you didnt need to yell about my genitals in front of my sister but you know that already

JADE: or at least i hope its clear that at the very least that little speech i gave about 'not being ashamed' and 'loving every part of my body'?

JADE: it wasnt just for her benefit :/

Vriska's jaw hardens as her muscles clench.

JADE: shes trans

JADE: she doesnt need that fluffy 'love your body' crap!!

JADE: thats just not applicable to her life

JADE: she needs to transition from how she explained it to me

JADE: but i want you to know that im not scared of you...

JADE: no matter who you think you need to be to prove something to me

JADE: or what you think you can do to me to prove something to yourself...

Her shoulders slump like a teenager getting lectured. Which, fine, you suppose, she kind of is. But you figure you deserve a little time in the spotlight after the scene she just pulled, so you cross your arms after another sip of tea.

JADE: i knew what i was getting into when i admitted to myself that i am attracted to you vriska

JADE: and i knew i was for good reasons! i admire your brashness

JADE: i like how you speak your mind! and you make reality do what you need it to for whatever motives you see fit at the

time

JADE: you flow like water... a characteristic i admire in a lot of people

JADE: you dont have to ruminate and you just get shit done

You're talking about her now, so she's perked up, but still waiting for you to finish before what you assume will be one final display of standoffishness.

JADE: see i thought this was going to be a very smooth conversation!

JADE: and that we were going to detail our obvious mutual attraction and decide on parameters for a relationship...

JADE: but its clear that you were expecting something very different

You pretzel your legs underneath you, finishing off your still-scorching tea, and place the cup on the floor, in the disused china plate. You turn inward, towards the center line of the bed, and you pat the space in front of you expectantly.

JADE: come sit on the bed? up here next to me?

Surprisingly, she follows your instructions, and-- of course, without kicking her shoes off-- sits on the edge of the bed, shoulders still sunk and eyes still focused on you.

JADE: cmon

JADE: sit with me

JADE: i want to see your eyes and i want to talk with you...

JADE: face me please? :|

At that exhortation, you see the first crack develop in the mask, the first wince. And she does, lanky troll legs crossing as she shifts towards you, knees just about touching yours. You reach out, and place your hands on them, and she looks at your hands, then back up to your face.

JADE: is this okay?

She nods, still mute.

JADE: you told me a week ago that i needed to be selfish
sometimes to survive

JADE: i was being surly (like you are right now)

JADE: and i firmly believed that there was something
fundamentally pure about me that had to continue to exist and
that even if it made me unhappy i had to accept it!

JADE: thats the metaphor

JADE: ysee

JADE: of that godawful tea i just forced myself to drink

JADE: sometimes no matter how pure to your truth you think
you need to be all youre doing is making that truth harder
for other people to swallow

JADE: and youre just making yourself disposable...

Alright, that was all improvised, and you're pretty proud of it. But you also sound like somebody's mom right now, so maybe you can wheel it back to actually talking about something more useful than a cuppa.

But Vriska sees you, in that moment, and blinks. And says something you knew was coming, even if it causes the same throbbing pain all over again, deep in your chest, regardless. Her voice is raw, as though she's said it ten thousand times in rehearsing this exact instant.

VRISKA: It'd 8e easier...

VRISKA: This whole thing would 8e easier if you would just h8
me already.....

JADE: yeah?

JADE: i can see why thatd be easier...

JADE: you get to be purer and i get to subsist

JADE: but i dont want to subsist!!

JADE: i want to find joy and cultivate my own leaves and grow every flower i can and do more than sleep away my days and cry away my nights in loneliness and solitude

JADE: and i think you do too!

She shifts, trying to flatten her feet out under her thighs to ease a little bit of the discomfort she feels. But you don't have advice for her right now, because no amount of clothing removal will get her off the hook for this particular ache, not until she listens to what you have to say.

JADE: i get to be selfish right now because im angry!

Your eyes stare into hers, swapping from her full pupil to her clustered seven and back, but after one blink she holds the gaze with you. You might be imagining it, but you almost see a tinge of blue, where humans get the aching red seeping into their eyes when they're about to bawl.

JADE: im angry with you and that stunt you just pulled and we both get to sit with that for a while and feel it

You think your tone of voice conveys that adequately, even and measured and slow, and clearly from her rapt attention Vriska agrees. She breaks her slightline for an instant, letting it fall to the bottoms of her shoes, but looks back up when you speak again.

JADE: what are you afraid of??

JADE: what is the thing that you fear will happen if you dont drive me away from you?

JADE: or i guess

JADE: get the blackrom youre looking for??

JADE: or whatever motive you had for this whole... morass?

She sits for a while, practically frozen and lips tight. But you're comfortable with silence, and so you wait until she's ready to speak.

VRISKA: What if... what if I'm not Vriska anymore?

VRISKA: What if there's nothing inside that, and I'm...
no8ody?

JADE: what does that mean

JADE: to 'be vriska'?

She sighs, dragging a finger across her lips and gums.

VRISKA: It's... if I had to guess, it's that I have to win.

VRISKA: I can't just live on a gritty little shithole
8ackwater like this!

VRISKA: I have to 8e somebody who means something!

You nod. That's about what you expected, honestly.

JADE: i dont know much about psychology actually :/

JADE: but if i were gonna diagnose you id say you have...

BECAUSE SHES VRISKA syndrome

JADE: because everybody for your whole life has told you that
right?

JADE: you blinded terezi

JADE: thats just vriska!

JADE: you KILLED tavros thats just vriska!!

JADE: you fed babies to your giant spidermonster thats just
vriska

She nods in time, following, agreeing with the fundamental Vriskocity of these statements, their deep and abiding Vriskaness.

JADE: every story i was ever told made you out like this
elemental being

JADE: this storm of force that just shreds anything that ever attempts to get close to it! and i bet you believe that to its core

JADE: i dont because i dont think anybodys particularly LIKE anything :/

JADE: i think we all just do shit and if people admitted that theyd be better off for it!!

You bite your lip and slide a hand up and down Vriska's knee maybe a quarter inch, and she places her own hand on top as it comes back to rest in the same spot.

JADE: and if you admit that maybe youre starting to get close to a few people and are scared youll hurt them and you need to push us away because you think we wont like that core 'you' that sounds like an awful fuckin problem to have!!!

JADE: i dont envy you vriska serket!

JADE: but

You nod, and pat the hand resting on yours.

JADE: i do still like you

JADE: even if you felt the need to bullshit me today because you were scared...

JADE: i dont have to accept that! because its awful mindgame shit!

JADE: but if youll at least say youre sorry and promise to work on it then its behind us already

JADE: and either way i dont hate you! not in the fun way not in the bad way

Vriska looks away, and turns her body again, back towards the open room. You pull your hands back, waiting for her to be moved to... something, but she slumps back down to the same posture as before.

VRISKA: Sounds like you know me real fuckin' well, Harley!

JADE: naaa

JADE: like i said nobodys 'like' anything

JADE: you just do the things you need to do no different from anyone else

VRISKA: Sounds like you think I'm a broken-ass fuckup, actually! A fixer-upper to ride around town and brag about changing.

VRISKA: You want me to change!

JADE: youre not a fixer-upper!! and youre not a failure

JADE: youre just a person! a fucked up person but hey

You shrug.

JADE: as youve previously pointed out some of us have our own issues and growing up to do :p

JADE: and its more fun with other people! hopefully you can agree with that even if you know youll get hurt just being close to people sometimes

You release a long sigh, feeling the stress of argument leave the muscles of your chest and neck.

JADE: now lets talk about why were actually here...

Shifting your arms behind you to prop you up, you tilt your head; Vriska looks up to your ears, and sinks backwards into your bed, lying flat. She looks deflated, but also eminently more like the young, luminous woman you met eight days ago, not the ravenous thing that showed up at your door today demanding to be subdued.

VRISKA: Yyyyeah. You mean, like. D8ing.

Vriska nods, licking her lips.

VRISKA: About that... it sounds like you're, kinda, done with the Spades thing?

JADE: well yeah! not for me i think

VRISKA: But I'm already doing Terezi as a m8sprit.

JADE: yep?

VRISKA: So... I feel like I owe you this talk, but also you don't seem to be catching my drift here, Harley!

VRISKA: I'm kinda... taken.

JADE: '''taken'''?

You squeeze one eye shut, caught off guard.

JADE: wow i havent heard THAT expression in a while :p :p

JADE: has poly not worked out for you, orrrrrr??

She looks into your face, clearly trying to work out what on earth you mean. But nope, there's no moment of recognition, no realization.

VRISKA: ...Poly?

You sigh, hoping it's not too derisive-sounding, and you put a finger into your opposing palm like a patient teacher explaining a math problem.

JADE: yeah!!

JADE: dating multiple people at the same time in one of a number of possible arrangements! not in different 'quadrants' or anything

JADE: just

JADE: like

JADE: romantically!

You see the light come on. She blinks, once, and two more quick ones.

VRISKA: I've never... done that.

VRISKA: Before.

JADE: that saves me a difficult conversation actually!

JADE: because surprise! i dont really do monogamy :p

VRISKA: What the FUCK is monogamy?

JADE: hell if i know!!!

You cross your arms.

JADE: this is one of those troll things right??

JADE: youd be killed on your home planet if you ever tried to fuck two people at once?

VRISKA: Noooo...? I mean, may8e.

VRISKA: Well, so long as you were filling pails and not getting in trouble with public high8lood morals, there wasn't much a8out such an arrangement that would lead careful trolls to get whacked.

VRISKA: Except for the fact that it sounds complic8d and messy, I guess.

JADE: thats love for ya!!

You lift your head back, slide up against the head of the bed into Rex's arms, and your eyes close, ponytail resting on the bear's broad white nose.

JADE: here let me make this simple

JADE: i really like you vriska!

JADE: first i think youre really cute and i like that you dont seem to take anybodys bullshit

JADE: and that even when youre being really defensive sometimes you know when to cut the crap and just

JADE: talk to me

JADE: i know its been like a week since we even met heheh

JADE: but i feel like ive been able to talk to you more than anybody else in the past decade

JADE: sooooo do you want to try this thing

JADE: like

JADE: dating?

VRISKA: ...Yeah. I do.

VRISKA: Y'know, I gotta say, I'm pretty into you too, Jade Harley. It's... 8een a while since I met somebody who didn't just reflect my shit 8ack at me.

VRISKA: Not that I... really know how to deal with push8ack.

She blushes, neck compressing.

VRISKA: Also, yeah. I also happen to think you're, like, SUPER cute.

You open your eyes again, having thought maybe more equivocation was coming. Maybe you just caught her off guard enough that she didn't have time to think up a good lie.

JADE: one thing i really want you to consider though...

JADE: is whether or not itll bug terezi?

JADE: because i dont want to step on your other yknow

JADE: relationships?

Vriska stands slowly, and squeezes her chin, as if trying to massage answers out of it.

VRISKA: I did tell her that you and I... hung out, and she mentioned that she hoped you and I would find some arrangement that worked for us...

VRISKA: and it's not like Quadrants were even mentioned, so.

JADE: so tell ya what!

You sit forward, opening your huge green eyes and looking into her own big yellow ones, facing towards the bed again. You beckon, and she puts her knees onto it, sitting just in front of you, between your legs.

JADE: talk to her about it the next time you see her
JADE: and make it clear that its not a hearts-spades-
vacillation-type-thing
JADE: and that i

You put a hand to her cheek, and she leans forward, planting a long kiss directly to the center of your lips.

JADE: am looking forward to getting to meet her too
JADE: as a meta

She blinks.

VRISKA: Sorry, meaning?

Vriska Serket sits against one of your thighs, planted against your favorite bear-pillow, and leans towards you on one arm, placing the other by your hip. You assertively pick it up, wrapping her long, gray fingers around the side of your stomach.

JADE: metamour!
JADE: 'other partner', somebody youre not dating in a poly
web
JADE: 'polycule' if youre a dork like me :p :p

The blush on Vriska's face is intense, bloomed across the whole of both her cheeks, but she speaks softly, lips just creeping around a smile.

VRISKA: Well, I'm sorry for how I behaved earlier, then! I
don't know what I was afraid of, because you're clearly very

real, and so am I, and yet we're here!

VRISKA: And I have a lot of words to learn, it sounds like.

You put your arms around her, and she falls forward, head coming to rest just on your shoulder as you laugh, and she closes her eyes.

JADE: its ok

9.

Backscatter

Vriska is, as of this moment, attempting to operate the skylight latch, the same one June left through less than two hours prior. The bottoms of her shoes are planted on the ceiling, and she is yanking at it with some portion of her considerable strength, but without the right finessing the bolt will simply not move. Jade Harley regards her from the bed as she would a performer: she watches exaggerated movements, unguarded grunting, and all that unnecessary and misapplied force have no results before she stands up atop the bed and begins to float upward.

After Vriska had fallen into her arms, they had chatted about nothing for a while longer-- about hair, the ways that Jade untangles hers from her ears, and Vriska hers from her horns; about one's lapsed appreciation for roleplay of an animal nature, the other hers for a more violent sort; about how Jade hadn't been to space in a few months out of a lack of the sensation of wonder it used to provide.

Some time later, Vriska prodded her in the arm, and Jade gasped, the sudden, sharp kind, like a drowned woman being brought back to air. She watched as Vriska blinked, heard her point out that Jade was staring at the plaster moulding on the wall. She hadn't nodded off, she was certainly awake, just... became a little insensate. When she realized this, she drew her knees up to her chest, as if to protect her core, and wrapped her arms around them, nose buried between.

JADE: its nothing

But Vriska asked what Jade needed, and she had thought, in that moment, that if she HAD needs-- and was thankful that she didn't-- they would be to sink into the

earth, planted like a sapling and watered like a grapevine, and to sleep for a thousand years.

This was when Vriska stood, told her they were going, and flew up to the ceiling to attempt to open their aerial escape hatch.

In the present, Jade arrives at the window, arms held close to her body, curled in like a young frog still gawky from its tadpole days. With a swift flick of the wrist she undoes the stuck pin. Vriska tosses the skylight open, and extends a hand towards Jade, watching her reaction. But Jade floats by, not watching much of anything as she exits her home into the daylight.

Jade's thought process had gone something like this, in the period of time before she found herself lost in the drywall.

If my mind is a mechanism, I can turn it back, look to its earlier states, see how it operated, why it did the things it did. I had a week to ruminate about who Vriska was, yes. I had a number of stories to pluck from, brains to borrow ideas from, friends to mine for information, true. I had built-- I thought-- a competent understanding of this person with whom I felt instantly connected, and I knew it was coming; but when the time came, I still couldn't bring myself to bear on the problem without shutting down the part of me that could feel.

She could see it written out, like an equation on a blackboard in her mind. 'Vriska believes she is the sort of person who must lash out at those around her. She believes this because inside of her is the knowledge that if she cannot be Winning-- every war, every relationship, every fight-- there is nothing there for people to love.' That had been the solution to a weeklong test, the final piece slotting in to make sense of the inequality. When she lashed out, Vriska had proved Jade's thesis: that spidertroll believed there was a monster inside of her that nobody could embrace, or tend to, or even acknowledge.

Jade knew that core fear well, that nobody could bear the void inside of her, the lack-of-a-person capable of crushing everything that strayed too close in its singularity. She once had a therapist ask if she thought people valued her for anything other than her enthusiasm and her willingness to do their dishes for them; Jade Harley still has no answer to that question.

But Jade let herself wonder: if she could tend to this great, primal need of Vriska's, help show her that even the worst parts of herself were beautiful and worthwhile, perhaps she could see her way clear to alleviating her own misery.

For once, she thought, maybe it doesn't feel like a responsibility to fix someone. Maybe I'm taking on the opportunity for my own benefit.

But then... she was right, and I was trying to fix her. I am. And the thought sent Jade spiraling, as she sat fixated on the walls.

And now she's perched on the edge of her sloped roof, looking off into the northern horizon, back garden in view. Vriska slides down the tiling towards her, coming to rest with her legs dangling right off the edge. She kicks her feet gently.

The troll finally speaks, voice cutting through the early-afternoon quiet and birdsongs.

VRISKA: I won't ask over and over, but I can wait until you want to talk about whatever it is you've realized that's sent you all quiet.

Jade slowly turns her head towards Vriska, as though lugging it with a great effort, and her expression looks just short of pained.

JADE: you dont want to be here

Vriska hears in Jade's voice a sudden dullness, like Equius used to have when he had been caught lusting after some rustblood or another. He would sound almost... mechanical, downsampled, like a voicemail greeting. She doesn't like it.

JADE: you can leave if you want

JADE: i wouldnt blame you if you did and im used to it

JADE: im used to coping by myself

JADE: you might go

VRISKA: Nope.

VRISKA: You pantsed me fair 'n' square, Harley, and that means you get one wish!

VRISKA: Not like I'm gonna run from a fight even when I know it's more than I can handle.

She rocks from one jeanpocket to the other.

JADE: mmkay

Jade's eyes are glassy.

JADE: its usually

JADE: too big when i try to tell people about it

VRISKA: Fuck it

VRISKA: I'm indestructa8le.

Jade sighs, body unmoving, gently masticating the sides of her tongue. Vriska wraps her arm around Jade's back, resting at the shoulder, and she cranes her head forward into Jade's line of sight. With a look of recognition the ragged woman lets the arm at her side help hold her up.

JADE: vriska

JADE: have you ever had that feeling where you know cerebrally that youre like

JADE: brutally enraged at somebody but you still know you have to hold it back just because you know that you have the power to just

She sizes her fingers together, as if gripping the trunk of a tree in the distance, and tenses them to squeeze against nothing.

JADE: pop them like a grape??

JADE: so you just smile and nod and say the right words

JADE: so carefully!

JADE: so eloquently

JADE: and betray nothing of your real feelings underneath

JADE: and they believe you because for that moment youre doing such a good job of hiding in yourself that even you think you have no anger for them and you feel only good will

Vriska watches, arm still wrapped around Jade's shoulders, but says nothing.

JADE: im very good at that

JADE: i always have been

JADE: ive been the only caretaker for as long as i can remember

JADE: for myself

JADE: for dave

JADE: karkat

JADE: for june...

JADE: and my sole role in everyones lives for just as long as ive ever been around them is only to smile and feel nothing and to make sure theyre fed

JADE: and im really good at it

VRISKA: I doubt that was a thing you took on because you wanted to!

VRISKA: Sounds like the only way you could make it.

JADE: im sorry

JADE: i dont want to unload on you

JADE: its just that today brought a lot of that back! and i

thought i was doing better

JADE: yknow?

VRISKA: Don't worry about me. I know what I did! I'd rather let you air this out, because that emotional constipation is part of the problem, sounds like.

JADE: and june was by earlier

JADE: just only talking about herself! and wouldn't let me get a word in edgewise

JADE: and you were...

She trails off, teething her bottom lip, and Vriska wonders if Jade is about to try to let her off the hook again.

JADE: in need of some help

JADE: and we talked about all that

VRISKA: And... you? Where's Jade in there, exactly?

The dog-girl presses her glasses up the bridge of her nose again, but wiggles it in clear discomfort. Her ears fold down.

Vriska's hand squeezes her collarbone, and Jade tenses it, but with a labored sigh lets it release.

VRISKA: You said you were angry, earlier! And I'm actually glad about that, because I don't know how the fuck else you could feel about all this!

VRISKA: But you sure didn't show it at the time. And even when you said you were being selfish, and we sat, and you said eeeeeeeverything you needed to, I still don't know how I'd be able to tell that you're angry with me, if you hadn't said it!

JADE: i cant SHOW it

She sounds utterly defeated.

VRISKA: Why not? I love it when people are angry at me, I think you successfully identified that earlier. Even if it's not about driving you off, like you said.

Jade nods a small nod.

JADE: its because of all that stuff we talked about last week?

JADE: i dont get to just

JADE: be mad at people

JADE: they hurt themselves or i hurt them when i let it show :/

VRISKA: You think I'd do that?

JADE: i dont know you yet

JADE: cant take the risk

VRISKA: Well, gimme a chance, at least. Let me fuck it up for myself, don't tell me I lose before I'm even up against the challenge.

Jade clacks her jaw a couple times, ruminating on that. It's hurt her before, trying to unload on somebody who had to flee, who couldn't take the bulk of the weight from her shoulders that she had willed herself to feel again, leaving her just burdened with none of the catharsis. She forces herself to take a deep breath, letting her diaphragm expand just to feel the muscles relax as she exhales.

JADE: that feeling... when youre tamping down the parts of you that have lots of emotion about everything

JADE: every nerve

JADE: every fiber of you that screams about anger or frustration or sadness or whatever

JADE: you just know that...

JADE: its like when you run too hard and too far

JADE: and lactic acid builds up in the muscles and topples
you over eventually

JADE: you can take it for just so long before it overwhelms
you and shoves you down!

JADE: like i said

JADE: im REALLY good at pushing through it!

JADE: so sometimes i can get through entire... villain
monologues before i have to curl up in a ball and let myself
not-cry back into feeling again

JADE: i was hoping youd have left by then honestly :/

Vriska sniffs, rubbing under her nose.

VRISKA: But you knew this was coming even when you... asked
if we were gonna try d8ing?

JADE: yeah

JADE: i guess in the back there somewhere i was aware of it

JADE: even if i could still say everything i needed to say
and what i knew my real wants were

JADE: it was coming

VRISKA: But then it Broke out again, when we cuddled and
talked about silly little things, and even still you made
sure I was satisfied and felt forgiven.

Vriska lets off with her stabilizing arm, and Jade sits up again. The hoodie-clad troll drifts off the roof, flying into the open air, and reaches out a hand, willing Jade to drift up with her. The seated girl makes a face like a dog tasting a lemon drop, but puts her hand into Vriska's, fingers touching outstretched palm.

VRISKA: C'mon, this has 8een enough sitting around! We'll keep talking, 8ut you should get some physical activity, it'll help 8ring you 8ack from ghost-world.

JADE: hmmm

With a grunt, Jade takes off, and once she's floated up unrecumbts her body, stretching legs out. Vriska takes her hand, closing her own into it now, and flits back, like a salsa dancer on one foot. The unexpected force of her pull, coupled with Jade's airborne form, spins her around, dress twirling, and she finishes the twirl against Vriska's chest with a soft oof. Once she realizes what she's been drawn into, Jade laughs, tone somewhere between disbelief at the cliché and skepticism that Vriska is pulling this on her, right now, as she details her detachment and disorientation.

VRISKA: I've never danced, 8ut you humans sure have a lot of totally inappropriate scenes of it in your awful movies! So I figured if I twirled you around a 8it I could at least get that laugh. ::::)

But instead, Jade's shoulders nestle inward, skycuddling the top of her head against Vriska's chin.

JADE: this is nice actually!

JADE: maybe more spinning in a moment but for now id like to catch my stomach for a bit longer

JADE: if your plan is to fling me around

JADE: hehe

Vriska laughs, repositioning her jaw against the white floof of Jade's ears.

VRISKA: Yeah, alright. 8ut if you 8arf it'll 8e on your own hoodie.

The pair of them gently rise, above the treetops, creeping toward the cloudless skies.

VRISKA: You asked if I've ever had that rage, that inexpressible fury. My answer to you is, nope. I haven't!

VRISKA: Lying about any other 8ig feelings, I get, 8ut 8ottling up anger... it's just not in me. I have to live it out, every time, let myself scream and claw and 8eat the shiiiiiiiiit out of people!

She smiles a bared-tooth smile.

JADE: that sounds impossible

JADE: to me

JADE: not just hard but unfathomable

VRISKA: Psh.

VRISKA: It's easy once you make your life revolve around it, teach everybody that that's how you do things. Heck, I learn so much about people when they're past their 8reaking point with anger!

Vriska's mind turns back to the other times she tried to soak up somebody else's hatred, in order to square them into comprehensibility. Hell, with Aradia, things worked out great, if she ignores the mutual murder. Terezi, obviously, and she's excited for more of that. Karkat doesn't count-- his attempts were always self-flagellating, rather than lashing out-- but he still had his unguarded moments.

She reaches out, free finger rising up to boop Jade on the nose.

VRISKA: And you should have space to give as good as you get when it comes to people making demands of your feelings. S'only fair!

Jade crinkles her nose. Vriska still finds it the apex of adorable dog-behaviors, and laughs a bit. But the girl in her arms pauses for a second to think, before she replies.

JADE: sure that sounds good but

JADE: what do you do if youre locked inside your own chest

JADE: standing at the window looking out as your auto-pilot tells everyone that everything will be ok and that you can always fix it?

VRISKA: No idea. I 8et it depends on what puts you into that st8 in the first place. ::::?

As they swoop upwards, a lone meandering stratocumulus trundles by, and Vriska guides their path through it, poofing through the other side. Jade laughs, clearly enjoying the feeling of letting her head brush the clouds again, and tucks a leg between Vriska's as they ascend.

JADE: well

JADE: you wont like it

JADE: but I can tell you exactly what that was this time around

VRISKA: I can take it. I'm a 8iiiiiiiig girl.

JADE: its whenever i feel like im being... taken over?

JADE: like somebodys trying to manipulate me for their own benefit and im powerless to do anything other than sit and watch

JADE: or when i have to tell the really awful sorts of lies

JADE: the self-protective ones just to stave off somebody elses anger

The pair separate a bit, and Jade draws back from the hug.

VRISKA: And I can see why you'd feel that way about me today,
yikes!

JADE: it... it was that yeah

JADE: but also i wasnt maybe truthful with you :/

JADE: i think

Jade sighs, and shudders, and Vriska tries to bring her up and level so she can get a good look in her eyes.

Jade rises up, arms at her sides, hands clasped in front of her chest. But her gaze falls away, and in that moment Vriska wonders if she's shrinking with her powers or just doing her best to look very small.

JADE: i think i knew that when you said i was just trying to
fix you that

JADE: maybe a little bit of that was true

VRISKA: I... I'm...

Vriska finds the reassuring words she needs suddenly stuck in her throat, completely swallowed.

JADE: and i dont think youre broken!! and i dont think that
its my only motive

JADE: or that i need every part of you to change

JADE: but you did scare me!!

Jade gulps a huge breath.

JADE: and when i lied about that i realized i had to lie
about changing you and

She shivers, eyes squeezed closed, but Vriska wraps her up in her arms, firmly. She guides Jade's head in to rest at her shoulder, closing her own eyes in turn.

JADE: i felt trapped and it felt so awful and i just

Jade shudders and sobs, burying her nose in Vriska's shoulder and making an absolute mess of the borrowed sweatshirt. But Vriska says those eight little words she thought she would never utter to another being.

VRISKA: It's okay. It's okay.

VRISKA: It's okay... It's okay.

They turn together in the jetstream, but Vriska has no idea how to comfort a crying friend, so she settles for gentle circles on the lower back with one hand, light headrubs with the other, and a few gentle platitudes in the meantime.

Jade blows her nose against Vriska's sleeve, after a time, and with a great exhalation stifles her crying. She pushes away, not with rage but with impulse, and grabs both of Vriska's hands.

JADE: cmon

JADE: lets go! i know where id like to be!

Both women shoot off through the stratosphere, hand in hand, guided increasingly by Jade's space-acceleration powers over their mutual capacity for flight. Vriska has only experienced this kind of raw speed vicariously, and Jade's grasp feels nothing like riding a meteor through space: she can feel the witch's pulse quicken as they dash, watch the curving scenery slowly fade from placid blue to adventurous darkness.

Vriska can just see Jade's mouth curl up into a grin as they break through the outermost layer of the planet's gravity together. Jade speeds them up, then, the speckled stars smearing from points of dim light into vivid slashes punctuated with passing near-earth objects of indeterminate sorts. Bolting in the direction most opposite the sun, Jade guides their two bodies along a precarious curve away from Earth C. She pulls out her phone, speaking a direction into it.

JADE: set a timer! four minutes twenty-four seconds

Vriska does wonder, idly, if she's about to get her wish of being thrown directly into the sun, but Jade speaks as they soar through the vast, inky blackness.

JADE: oh and dont worry about lorentz-factor time dilation!

JADE: did you know my powers can actually account for that???

JADE: my own little time-manipulation! which is good because otherwise in the time were traveling only point-three-seven seconds would have passed on earth!

She giggles, but it's all Vriska can do to stammer.

VRISKA: Uh, no, I wasn't worried about that, no.

Jade's eyes have regained their brightness, and her head starts to turn and gimbal as they fly, clearly taking in more than Vriska can even see. And she evidently locates the target of her search soon after, as she adjusts their course and breaks out into another excited lesson.

JADE: i had a textbook as a kid

JADE: one i pored over thousands of times in the years when i shouldve been in school

JADE: it had every little distance down to the thousand-kilometers for every orbiting body in the entire solar system!

JADE: and i knew every one of them by heart

JADE: (as of three years ago...)

JADE: it was the book that taught me that if our sun went out we wouldnt know for eight-point-three minutes because the light would have to travel that long!!!

Her reminder wristband beeps, signaling her timer's end, and she taps it.

It's her turn to bring Vriska to bear, now. As Jade slows their speed back down to a scale comprehensible to the other young goddess, she spins her around by the hand and embraces her waist, much as Vriska had to her. Her breath is warm against the troll's ear, mouth inches away.

JADE: when we hopped to this universe originally we hadnt pocketed the other planets from the sol system so i had to build a little something from scratch!

JADE: but i knew every one of those distances by heart!

Jade puts a hand out, under Vriska's shoulder, and she points to a great red planet, beginning to loom large on its incoming orbit, though its movement is invisible against the black backplash of the cosmos.

JADE: we flew at speed c for four-point-four minutes

JADE: which means were just past the orbit of mars now

JADE: its funny

JADE: i had to look up the diameters and masses of phobos and deimos to be sure i got the right-sized moons to keep the system from just all falling apart over tens of millions of years!

JADE: but i think i did okay :D

Split fingers, tracking the motion of two much smaller spheres, point to the rocky gray blobs themselves crossing between Vriska's vision and the fourth planet.

JADE: ooooo wait here!!

Jade decouples from the hug before zooming off towards one of them.

Vriska holds her hands at her stomach. She can't say she understands more than half of what Jade's saying, but only wants to soak in every word, to let each suffuse her with secondhand wonder and joy. If she were with anybody else-- someone less

enraptured, more acrimonious, less intimate-- Vriska would be sure she had just been space-ditched, but she knows she has nothing to fear from Jade. Still, she consciously refrains from asking, on Jade's return, how fast a non-lightspeed godtier could travel back to Earth from here.

Jade comes back, one of the moons hovering just a foot above her palm. Vriska hadn't noticed it moving, given the graceful sweep with which Jade had plucked it down and scaled it as she flew.

JADE: its deimos! second moon of mars

JADE: (but my personal favorite between the two! dont tell phobos!!)

Vriska laughs, utterly charmed, and stares in amazement for the moment it takes Jade to float the planet back, resize it, and set it perfectly to motion around its mother body.

But Jade finds herself frowning upon her return.

JADE: when i say that i think most people only value me for what i do for them its not a dig at myself!

JADE: its a matter of scale

JADE: i built their solar system for them

JADE: from scratch!

JADE: with an eleventh-grade astrophysics textbook and a great deal of solid rock

JADE: (and i suppose the waning connection with an ultrapowerful green sun that made the travel of four-point-five billion kilometers to neptune trivial :p)

Jade sighs.

JADE: i know my value! i know that im immortal and a genius and i have GREAT hair

JADE: and everybody wants to touch my tail :p

JADE: maybe im being naive when i want just

JADE: some connection there too

VRISKA: You're not naive, Jade.

It doesn't reassure her, but Jade truly believes Vriska has never been more certain of that for anyone.

JADE: i think you cant say that just yet

JADE: you may know me very well because of everything weve mutually suffered through over the years but youll have to hear about a lot more of the little processes that make me who i am to truly judge

Jade takes Vriska by the shoulder, and they turn around together as Jade points out into the darkness.

JADE: wed have to travel ten-point-three minutes in precisely that direction to hit where ceres will be on its next trip round the asteroid belt

JADE: but for now its halfway around the sun and i dont want to wait the 840ish days to meet it at its closest point :/

Floating around Vriska at an arm's length, Jade looks her in the eyes, and shakes her head.

JADE: i havent even come this far from Earth in forever!

JADE: space is a wonderful place to just spend some time and meditate on the perfect solitude of it all

JADE: but every time i just think

JADE: that i can never know what the point of all this is

VRISKA: The point of the... solar system?

JADE: no

JADE: i mean

Jade bites her cheek, wincing.

JADE: today i felt like i was shut into myself by decisions i made and i watched that 'me' do the final little appeasing touches and everything that 'needed' to be done

JADE: but i

her voice catches in her throat.

JADE: i wasnt in control

JADE: and it felt like i was her again

Red creeps into Jade's eyes, and she blinks.

Vriska knows exactly who she means. That other Jade, fangs permanently bared, black werewolf-fur and green sparks crackling on every inch of her bloodsoaked flesh. The Thief of Light reaches for Jade's hands, slowly, but the spacebound woman pulls them back.

JADE: so what i mean is

JADE: i dont see what difference it makes to be able to do all this! rearranging planets and moons and moving dirt and rocks around

JADE: whatever scale its on

JADE: or the powers and the strength and the god-tier jammies

JADE: whats the point of any of it??

Her eyes well with tears again.

JADE: whats the fucking point of being a god tier or somebodys 'ultimate whatever'

Jade barks, arms strained and teeth gritted.

JADE: if people can still just do that to you!!

JADE: mark you and own you and control you and stuff you away!!

Her cheeks are red, now, and she quakes, trying to wick away tears with her unsleeved wrist.

This, Vriska thinks, is what she's been thinking about for the past few hours, isn't it. She sits in the quiet, letting the stars texture the backdrop as she embraces Jade again, stroking her hair and letting her sob into the sweatshirt's chest, knowing that she herself was once exactly the problem, all those years ago.

Slowly, Jade unfolds her arms, wrapping them tightly around Vriska's torso, still trembling.

JADE: why would i need all this power if i know theyre still just going to leave me??

JADE: if they just die with no meaning behind it

JADE: one after another? if sometimes when i close my eyes i know its me that did it to them???

But the troll gently shushes her, with slow pats along her back.

VRISKA: It wasn't you. I know it wasn't you. It's okay. That wasn't you, and you didn't do it, because remember.

VRISKA: That Jade doesn't control you, she isn't the thing that makes you do what you do.

JADE: but i still rem-

JADE: rem-

VRISKA: Just like Terezi told me, there's no monster that's leapt the divide into your head. You're lucky enough to know that those memories are themselves the thing that you need to

defeat.

VRISKA: But you can't stew in them, let them rule your life. Jade, you're right that this place is fucking gorgeous, but it makes you very alone!

Jade can't speak through the gasps and tears, so Vriska just holds her tightly, measured voice continuing as clearly as she can into a headflattened dog-ear.

VRISKA: You need people around you, Jade Harley, and if being this far away from them causes you to deep-dive into your most painful memories then you need to find a way to salvage this experience before it buries you.

VRISKA: Elsewise you were right to not come here for this long!

Jade's crying slows, and eventually morphs into a slow laughter, nose still buried in Vriska's breast.

JADE: for you of all people to say that

JADE: you adorable hedgehog

JADE: all quills and complaining and bluster :p

VRISKA: Eh, it's what I got! I'm not lying, though, you know I'm right. ::::)

JADE: yyyeahhhh

JADE: youre not wrong!

Jade seizes Vriska's wrist, wiping the last of her tears into an unsullied part of the sleeve.

JADE: im sorry

JADE: this was probably a terrible first

JADE: second?

JADE: (third??) date

JADE: i really really appreciate you being willing to do this for me...

But Vriska takes both of Jade's hands in her own, looks deep into her bright eyes, and smiles.

VRISKA: Y'know, I half expected you to ditch me out here, given the shit I've pulled on you just this morning.

VRISKA: If I make it back to Earth it'll be the best d8 I've ever had, so it's certainly not a thing I did just 'for you'.

She seals that affirmation with a kiss. Jade laughs, and twirls Vriska around again, before wrapping her arms around the troll's torso and bursting off towards home again.

You are Jade Harley, the space-goddess thinks. You are star-stuff. You are the forge and the metalwork, you are the die and the casting that results.

Her hair billows in a wild arc behind her, and she wills her mind to align like a syzygy of celestial forces. She shuts her eyes and watches them move, *planets in a perfect line, bodies in eclipse.*

10.

XVIII. THE MOON, Reversed

"My bride will devour me: all wives are, so far, spiders!"

-C.S. Lewis

Jade draws three cards from her childhood tarot deck, leaves them face-down in a line. She never put much stock into the supposed predictive power of them-- she had her own methods before the game, after all, and is a scientist at heart-- but her newfound flirtation with luck has lent the concept a peculiar allure as of late. She flips the first, and picks up her phone.

JADE: it was a lot of fun!! we had a good date!!!

Jade racks the bolt on her hunting rifle, peering down the scope again, but grunts with exasperation, letting the barrel clunk down to the wooden range in front of her. Roxy crosses his arms and gives her a truly inscrutable look.

ROXY: im supes happy 4 u! And it sounds like there was hells of TONS of emotional franknesses goin down but im a little, like... confused?

Jade's ear flicks as she tries once more to line up her gun.

JADE: oh?

JADE: what about?

The morning after her adventure with Vriska, Jade had asked Roxy if he wanted to go to a shooting range together. Roxy's first words, 'fuck it, hell ye', were the first Jade

had heard from him since the truly raucus party celebrating his and his partner's coming out some months prior.

ROXY: first

ROXY: bc we havent talked since the party an now youve got me here and this is great im suuupes happy were hangin out

ROXY: but second you dont SOUND happy about all this? :?

Jade hears an edge to his voice she can't account for, and glances at him. Half of Roxy's mouth and one eyebrow contort into a quizzical expression. Raising her own eyebrows, Jade blinks.

JADE: oh im sorry!!

JADE: is this

JADE: was this weird?

JADE: should i have not done this??

Roxy waves his hands, batting away her misconception and laughing.

ROXY: noooooo~! noo no no

ROXY: no!

ROXY: this is super fun an im glad you asked me out here todayyy

He fixes an errant curl over his forehead, correcting himself.

ROXY: to shoot that is

ROXY: i just wasnt sure why it was me you decided to call

JADE: okay good!!

Lining up her rifle, Jade barely takes a moment to square her aim before firing. The shot sounds, and she squints to check her mark: the paper target, printed with the smug

image of Aranea Serket in full Marquise uniform, has taken a hole right through the base of one candy-corn horn. Zero points.

JADE: i just wanted to find somebody to come shooting with
and i didnt wanna embarrass jake again like last time :p

ROXY: haha annnd is that the only reason?

JADE: welllll

JADE: i wanted another opinion on that date i went on okayyy

JADE: she handled it really well but i wish

She sighs, setting her weapon down.

ROXY: you wish you knew WHY ur havin trubs

ROXY: rite??

Roxy picks up his own rifle. The battery on it beeps a mellifluous 'full power' tune at his touch, and he raises the spearheaded gun to his shoulder, popping off three quick shots. The heat radiates off of each, blooming far enough for Jade to feel it on her cheeks in the next stall over. *Paf, paf, paf*-- his own target, a crude crayon caricature of the Condesce in some state of perverse undress, shows three sizzling scorchmarks, two to the upper torso and one to the perfectly-manicured fingers held up at her head.

He wouldn't've picked it-- he's past that phase of his life, being mad at her and her bullshit-- but it's apparently their most popular target here, at least according to the axolotl at the desk. Can't argue with the people.

Jade shrugs.

JADE: sure i do! but its more like

JADE: i hope im dating her for the right reasons?

Roxy motions for her to take her turn firing, so she fiddles with the sights on her gun. Her teeth rake her tongue as she squeezes an eye shut, then raises the scope to it.

JADE: like i know im happiest when i get to help people!! but I also see why people might call it too pushy or 'trying to 'fix' them' or something!

ROXY: is that what she said

ROXY: bc like i get that feeling....

ROXY: i HATE changing myself even when i kno its in a good way an all bc its a slog n a chore

ROXY: but also when somebody else tries to do it ur like SIGN okay moooooooooomm whatevrrrrrrrr

He gives a theatrical SIGN as Jade shoots, bullet cleaving Aranea's neck just above the head markerline. With a fistpump and hoot, she flips the magrelease, dropping the spent magazine into her hand and deftly changing it for a new five-round cartridge. She slaps the rifle down and shoots Roxy a look.

JADE: she did say that

JADE: yeah .__.

ROXY: owch

JADE: i probably deserved it!

JADE: even if it made me suuuuuper sad :/

She frowns, and Roxy shrugs with sympathy. He picks up his gun again, and points a finger downrange.

ROXY: watch dis :3

Roxy tosses the gun straight up, catching it as it flips and turns, before tensing his shoulder to its butt, arcing a perfectly on-mark 'bullet' of blue lightning to streak directly toward Condy's nose. But it bucks a wild turn at the last instant, lashing up to lick at a ceiling beam with a belch of smoke, peal of woody thunder, and the distinct stench of ozone mixed with burning mahogany.

Only the Consorts would build a firing range out of wood!

Jade and Roxy, two literal deities, have just been ejected for horseplay at a firing range. They meander down the street-- he, sullen, hands in his pockets; she, still laughing, floating, letting her skirt billow and whistling a cryptic tune-- and Roxy turns to his canine compadre.

ROXY: ur a total goof but im one thousand percent clear where ur comin from

ROXY: bc ur bein super adorbs abt all this (an her) even tho she said somethin that made you sad.

ROXY: im not gonna ask you to enumerate everythin that sets ur jorts aflutter

ROXY: (bc i get that and ik that feeling that you shouldnt hafta splain yourself for it)

ROXY: but its supes clear to me that you GET her and youre doin the thing you need!

Jade nods along, unsure of what she's being led into.

ROXY: so i just gotta know... you said it makes you happy to help ppl but... does SHE make u happy too?

JADE: yeah :D

JADE: she does

JADE: even in those little moments where im too caught up to focus my eyes on her or shes done something totally illogical

JADE: i still just think about her ridiculously sunny smile and the way she keeps stealing my shit without asking and the t

JADE: her lips yeah ._.

ROXY: mmhm mmhm MMHMMM!

Roxy smiles with evermore emphatic 'mm-hm's, watching Jade do little circles around him as she details the magnetic cutenesses in her relationship.

ROXY: i get all that i do

ROXY: i mean heck i also see her position cuz like?

ROXY: ive been dating a space player for (omg) 3 YRS now

ROXY: and wowww that shits the tits

ROXY: not that im tryna say... actually yknow what

Bumping his shades up his nose, Roxy takes a moment to heft himself out of the romantic-rhetorical hole he's dug with his good intentions.

ROXY: lemme try again

ROXY: ur witch o space rite?? thats like ur job title?

JADE: yeah!

ROXY: so that means that

ROXY: like

ROXY: unlike me u deal with real spaces? planets n holes n big shit like that??

JADE: i

JADE: guess so? i always thought void and space sounded pretty similar!! but void is like

JADE: information right?

JADE: concepts and ideas instead of gaps and movement??

ROXY: zactly! so if i wanna get all like roquey about shit

ROXY: i can scoop somebodys hoopla and confuse the shizz out of em

ROXY: or help by stealin their misinformation or whatever...

JADE: whereas you think i should be able to

Green eyes narrow as dog ears flick.

Roxy mimes pressing his hands together, like an infant with wet clay.

ROXY: lemme spit sum shit that just might not... make sense
ROXY: but i think i can make this metaphor work roxystyle k
ROXY: it sounds like a bunch of ur unhappiness is that SPACE
SHIT is gettin in yr way forcing you into lil boxes for
people who need to smoosh you into their lives to fit
ROXY: an not givin you the SPACE you need to expand into even
tho you deserve to

He wonks, and Jade's head tilts.

ROXY: so let ur witchy majjyks loose!!
ROXY: fix that shit fill in those gaps w ur own best self!
ROXY: jus like
ROXY: shit
ROXY: whats a spacey thing that expands to fill shit forever?
ROXY: entropy? the heat death of the universe?? no thas not
the fuckin mood :\

Floating by upside-down, Jade holds her chin, just trying to process on what level of metaphor or irony Roxy intends this.

JADE: but not like a void way
JADE: because thats about filling in myyy
JADE: ideas? and you mean like a...
ROXY: like shit dawwg
ROXY: we both work with pumpkins right?? but mine r like
ABSTRACTIONS n yours are earthy n tasty
ROXY: make good cheesecakes or sumn
ROXY: (shit im hungry lmao)

He mumbles this, in that unmistakably Davelike way. Jade giggles.

JADE: So the same stuff

JADE: but like

JADE: more real??

ROXY: not more real! just more touchable

ROXY: n more useable by other peeps

JADE: trust me i have a lot of things in my life that i wish
were more touchable right now :p

Jade's tongue pokes out between two pointed canines. The cool flit of the breeze through Axolotl town brushes against it.

ROXY: be the change u wanna see!!!!

Feet stamping, Roxy does a little twirl as Jade lands again, giggle progressing now into a full laugh.

ROXY: but srsly space is bullshit

ROXY: callies told me abt the kinds of things u 2 heard from
that other version of em back during nappytimes nobiteyjade
an how u were sposed to just hang out 4ever and wait for
everything else to happen around u??

ROXY: which sounds like EL ULTIMO bullshit to me but whatevs

ROXY: anyway dont let it crush you like a blaaaapck hooooole

He drags out both words, and Jade wonders if he only even adds the 'p' anymore because it's what people expect him to do. Either way! She nods, completely baffled.

ROXY: anyway u gotta remember callies all about that space
shit too so i think i know at least a LIL bit when it comes
to figurin out the differences between em

ROXY: thing is, their class is basically the most waitin-
aroundin thing there is!! and you need to just get on your
fuckin game and ride dat spider into the sunsettttt

Jade blushes, hands covering her face as if to block the radiating heat, but Roxy's laughing too and they both can barely keep it together so when Jade takes off from the ground Roxy flies after her.

ROXY: i kno this is my bias cuz vriskas a thief and im a
rogue

ROXY: vriskas a light type pokeman and im voidy

ROXY: meanin info vs disinfo kinda stuff? and thats cool!

ROXY: you got yr prefs

ROXY: im a cat person ur a dogperson

JADE: woof!!

ROXY: so im sure a lot of this is just me having, like, the
EXACT opposite inclinations as her

ROXY: since i guess her powers are more abt bein supes lucky
and winnin and stuff all for her own dickwettin purposes

ROXY: but it also sounds like shes the kinda person who could
just SLURRRP u thru a straw and like fuck u up?

ROXY: like wasnt she the spiderbitch that fuckin slept u???

But Jade stretches her arms wide, soaring through the midafternoon currents with her back to the earth, destination nowhere-in-particular.

JADE: old news :)

JADE: i dont think theres much risk of that to be honest!

JADE: aside from the usual giving-your-heart-over kinds of
stuff

JADE: shes actually helping me see a lot of ways that i can
stop giving up too much of myself

JADE: and some of her first advice when i was freaking out
and throwing my pumpkins off a roof was to settle down and
let other people handle their own problems every once in a
while!

ROXY: throwin ur??

ROXY: girl okay but

JADE: im bad at it! truly terrible

JADE: i still NEED to help!! it makes me who i am

JADE: but she might be right

JADE: i might be letting myself get fragmented among too many peoples needs and i need to refocus on where i let out that energy!

JADE: maybe it just turns out to be her!!

Roxy mimics her flight-gesture, facing down instead of up, and he spreads his fingers wide, gazing down on the fallow fields and dipping hills in the outskirts of the Consort city.

ROXY: im on the fuck board w that tbh

JADE: THANK you for your support roxy :D

ROXY: im a good fuckin friend what can i say :D :D

He closes his eyes, letting the open sky above him whistle its song through his ears.

JADE: you can talk about yourself for a start! i feel like this conversations been all about me!!

Roxy laughs, and Jade echoes it quietly. But he nods.

ROXY: haha alrite thats p true tbh

ROXY: alrite u know how rolal be? its mostly p quiet

ROXY: i feel like i dont see dirk and jake much cuz theyre both doin their own thing... and theres all this stuff w jane

Roxy's pace slows, and Jade watches him gaze to the horizon, breathing through his nose. His bared arms wrap across his tanktop-clad torso.

JADE: jane
JADE: stuff?
JADE: sorry :/
JADE: i havent really been keeping up with
JADE: all that
ROXY: pshaww pupperfrand its nbd

His visage, however, seems to indicate that Jane's issues could not be, in fact, a b'er d.

ROXY: im worried about her yknow?
ROXY: janey.... kinda hasnt called for the last few weeks
ROXY: ever since she got that court ordered class on how to not be an authoritarian dicksneeze
JADE: ohhh? is that what happened with her???

Jade slows to match his speed, arms crossing likewise, suddenly feeling the wind rasping against her entire body.

ROXY: yeahhhh
JADE: but
JADE: what kind of class??
JADE: what the heck IS that?
ROXY: its like... anger management i guess?? but for the destructive tendencies of people who own mid-to-fuckin-huge corporations :\\\

JADE: oh noooo! D:
JADE: poor jaaaane
ROXY: she deserved it tbh
ROXY: i would kno bc i was the one who put her there lmao
JADE: like
JADE: how so 'put her there'?

ROXY: ok like i called her "corporate board" or whoever to be like

ROXY: "hey ya gurl got drunk at my place again and started complainin about the trolls on this planet 'not knowin their places'"

ROXY: "and we not about that life here so put her in the drunk tank before her bffsy goes public on her ass again"

Jade's tail twinges, and she spins through the air. She suddenly feels dizzy, so she tries to fix her gaze on whatever stable point in the distance she can. It's funny, the further out from the city things get, the easier it is to miss each dotted house along the landscape for thickening treelines and snaking byways.

JADE: that sounds

JADE: really fraught ._.

ROXY: yea i kno

JADE: its okay

JADE: i wanna hear about it

JADE: yknow?

JADE: i care about what happens to all of us

JADE: even if she and i never really

JADE: met?

JADE: at least for more than the occasional barbeque or groundbreaking

Roxy takes a while to respond, and when he does Jade hears in his voice a certain reticence.

ROXY: yea

ROXY: its probs good you an she never met tbh

ROXY: cept in the dream hoedown w callie...

JADE: annnd in the other timeline

JADE: go ahead

JADE: its true :/

ROXY: naw jade naw

ROXY: im not gona do that to you

ROXY: i was there i saw it it wasnt you and i wont lay that
at ur feet

ROXY: so dont step into those ruby slippies bc theyll only
smush you into their shape again

ROXY: more space shit rite??

JADE: ...yeah

JADE: more space shit

JADE: right

Jade knows, of course, that if anybody has the right to feel that rage it would be Roxy, but she watches him roll loosely into the wind, clearly trailing another thread of thought.

ROXY: anyway listen

ROXY: we have been having HELLS of an amazing time here on
this bitch of an earth sea

ROXY: (see its sea bc its EARTH C but also bc its not a sea
like)

He spreads his hands far in front of him, towards the encroaching glitter and tidal roar of the calm oceanside, and Jade blinks.

ROXY: well anyway my point is that im not braggin like those
couples on nookbook who r like "OMG WE R MARRIED FOREVAR WE R
THE BEST"

ROXY: but callie an i?? gangbusters!! so the idea that callie
has to like give up happiness and relationships n shit just
because their aspect is about the negative space AROUND

paradox spaces main jam?

ROXY: its BULLSHIT

Rubbing her arms together, Jade just listens, soaks it in. For all the Strider-Lalonde rambling, it does sound exactly like what Davepetasprite was trying to tell her before she woke up.

ROXY: an we know lots of things about where these "cosmic info sources" got everythin wrong! im p sure that callie believed their class was like GIRL DESTINED forever because of similar bs fed to all of us by this games narrative

ROXY: well guess what!! the idea that the universe needs to be ABOUT procreation is the reason that these fuckn cliches exist in the first place

ROXY: that there are like super gendered classes and group compositions are like "gender balanced" or whatev

ROXY: but i think we all p much decided that was bullshit like a DECADE ago

Roxy nods a fervent nod, gazing to Jade through his coolkid shades.

Jade nods, nods again, but has to say it.

JADE: ...what .-. .

ROXY: u go enjoy u some vriska serket

ROXY: you deserve a prime cut of that choice spidery ass tbh

ROXY: let dat thief of light... steal ur breath awayyyy ;D ;D

With that, his trajectory peels off, looping back towards his tower home in the Carapace kingdom with his delightful partner. Jade sails on over the water, ducking low to the sea to watch the blazing wake carved in her path, cresting and spraying.

11.

Knight of Pentacles, Queen of Swords

Knight of Pentacles: "An extremely hard worker; one dedicated to the accomplishment of their tasks, often ambitious and career-oriented."

Queen of Swords: "A powerful and tactical ruler, sometimes cruel; confidence; independence; loneliness and emotional detachment."

-Homestuck Tarot: Acts 6 & 7.

JADE: heyyy!

JADE: is vriska there??

TEREZI: WHO W4NTS TO KNOW

JADE: hey is OUR girlfriend there :p

TEREZI: Y34H >:]

JADE: :D awesome!

JADE: i respect your time and relationship space and stuff

JADE: and i hate to bug the two of you while youre getting alone time together...

TEREZI: WH4T C4N 1 H3LP YOU W1TH H4RL3Y

TEREZI: SH3S 4 L1TTL3 BUSY 4T TH3 MOM3NT >:]

JADE: :o :o

JADE: well she doesnt have a phone yet!

JADE: so just tell her to.....

JADE: i dunno drop by some time soon!

TEREZI: WOULD YOU L1K3 M3 TO BURROWST1NKB34ST HER TO F1N4LLY R3PL4C3 H3R DEV1C3 >:o

JADE: burrowstinkbeast??

TEREZI: YOUR 34RTH B4DG3R

JADE: its YOUR earth badger now too :p

TEREZI: >:/

TEREZI: F1N3 WOULD YOU L1K3 M3 TO OUR 34RTH B4DG3R H3R TO
T3XT YOU

JADE: yes! if you can get her to

JADE: it is impossible for me to even get a hold of her!!

TEREZI: 1 KNOW HOW YOU F33L

JADE: :/

TEREZI: 1LL DO 1T 1N TH3 MORN1NG SUR3

VRISKA: Jaaaaaaaade!

VRISKA: Heh, J8.

JADE: hiiii! :D

VRISKA: Heyyyyyyyyy. Morning!

JADE: whatre you up to?

VRISKA: Well, see, I woke up to this 8lind girl shoving a
phone in my face and telling me to text you. So I take the
spit-covered palnhusk and your num8er's already in it. So
maaaaaaaaay8e her 8adgering worked!

VRISKA: And, you said to text 8efore I came over the next
time.....

JADE: youre right i did say that :o

VRISKA: Sooooooooo I'm coming over. I need some goddamned
8reakfast, 8ut if you needed a 8ite I'm sure I could arrange
something for the 8oth of us :::)

JADE: a bite you say? when you say it that way it sounds like
something else ;D

VRISKA: :::)

JADE: yeah if you wanna make food here come on over!!

JADE: i dont actually mind if people just show up

JADE: especially to cook for me :p

VRISKA: Special Serket Cluck8east Surprise coming up, then! I assure you, you won't 8e disappointed.

JADE: hehe burrowstinkbeasting

VRISKA: Oh g8d, did she tell you that was the troll word for 8adgers?

JADE: its not???

VRISKA: Hahahaha.

VRISKA: Oh, Harley.

JADE: WELL IF IT ISNT IT SHOULD BE >:B

VRISKA: I know last time you said you didn't expect me to 8e a8le to cook, 8ut I do make a mean omelette!

Viriska is recumbent on the couch looking like nothing so much as a well-fed panther; she stretches one arm upward as the other reaches for her coffee. It is just before 8 am, and she has just cooked a lovely meal for their date: a pair of fluffy three-egg omelettes, chock-full of grain-fed fennel sausage, vine-ripened tomato, and that delightful extra-extra-sharp cheddar cheese from the grandfatherly troll dairy farmer down the road. Jade also whipped up a delightful habanero-tomatillo salsa alongside it. Jade returns and plants herself on the far corner of the couch, torso adorned with only a silver necklace and beige bra.

Viriska herself has only her glasses to keep her upper half warm, that and the dappled sunlight, streaming through the garden-facing windows. She insisted that both of them remove their clothes for fear of slathering their garments-- Jade's proper white button-down, her own grubby orange tee-- with salsa or flecks of tomato. She crawls

towards Jade, wearing the sort of smug expression that displays her every fang, and delivers the first kiss of the morning.

Jade sighs with satisfaction as she pulls Vriska into her lap. Their stomachs brush together, skin on bare skin, and Vriska attempts to keep her squeakbeast's nest of hair from toppling in front of her eyes.

This is what you get, Jade supposes, when two people with some 8 feet of hair between them try to make out on too small of a couch. She takes the opportunity to brush her own mane off of her forehead.

When Vriska had given her that sly grin and suggested they both denude themselves, Jade had assented with a giggle and unbuttoned her blouse. Jade wonders if this is how she gets her sweatshirt back: Vriska discarding it under the coffee table or over the arm of the loveseat during an early rendezvous. Her eyes dart down. *Nope, she wore a different outfit today, damn.*

And now, she has a Vriska atop her, and she smiles.

Vriska rolls her fingers around Jade's wrist, and idly shifts their entangled hands against the cushions. Jade shoots her a sultry look.

JADE: oooo

JADE: so now youve got me mostly naaaaked

JADE: and youre pinning me to the couch hmm?????

VRISKA: So what if I am? :::)

Both girls laugh. Their lips meet again, lingering this time, and Jade can smell-- just past the habanero still on her breath-- the distinct plaster-powder scent of dogwood tree in her hair, but beneath even that the barest whiff of Terezi's shampoo. Jade brings her hands up, urging Vriska to lay flat atop her as she shifts to a more comfortable position.

JADE: i hope its not too weird to see terezi and i both in the same contexts like this??

JADE: i know its only been a few days since we even brought up the concept of poly :/

Vriska's brow folds with concern, and she ponders for a moment, tongue flicking her upper lip.

VRISKA: Y'know, I thought adjusting might take me a little more work, 8ut no!

VRISKA: I'm glad I'm not having to limit myself or choose 8etween you two. I was prepared for draaaaaaama, like some trashy redrom novel!

VRISKA: 8ut imagine holding Vriska Serket 8ack from everyone who needs a piece of her.

JADE: even though...

Jade bobbles her head, suddenly gauging the wisdom of sharing some information.

VRISKA: Though what? Spit it out, Harley.

JADE: did terezi not tell you?

JADE: she and i kinda hooked up a while back

JADE: yknow years ago, and only like twice ._.

VRISKA: A word of unsolic8ted advice?

VRISKA: Don't talk a8out your exes while we're kissing on your couch.

Vriska's chin tilts upward, eyes traveling to the dome-light in the ceiling. Jade blushes.

JADE: oh!!

JADE: i wasnt thinking about that!!

JADE: hehe sorry!

But Vriska nudges her with an affectionate elbow.

VRISKA: Don't worry about it. I'm glad to know, I am!

VRISKA: She hadn't mentioned it, probably because it wasn't relevant, and most of our time's been spent...

She rubs her wrists together, making a noise with her mouth like two rubber gloves making frictive contact.

Jade's lips purse, and she wrinkles her nose. Vriska ducks down and smooches it.

JADE: glad to hear it's going well! im happy to drop it

Jade nods.

VRISKA: A wise decision!

Vriska coils her arms around Jade's shoulders and underneath her neck, maximizing her vantage for further affection.

Some time later, Jade awakens and sits herself up in bed. She flips her phone over on the bedside: it's 11:15 AM, meaning that she's just woken up from an hourlong postcoital nap. The two women had adjourned to the bedroom shortly after breakfast, and Jade surmises that Vriska is likely still in the house given the skinny jeans draped alongside her own skirt on the back of a chair. As her alien paramour is nowhere to be seen, she considers gathering their garments from downstairs before Vriska returns. But at that moment, she notices the sound of the shower shutting off, and the spidergirl walks back in, haphazardly rubbing at her hair with one of Jade's fluffy bathsheets.

This is one of those moments, Jade thinks, that if I were one of those trashy troll novelists, I'd need to rattle off her physical characteristics, and I'd have to come up with some truly celestial superlatives to do it. 'Her cans caromed cavortingly', she muses. 'Her tits thrusted tremulously.' 'Her pert boobs flit nipplingly, cast in contrast against the dappled midmorning fog through bay windows.'

Jade has been ditched by enough well-meaning short-term lovers that she's earnestly slightly touched by Vriska's return. And she does, once her inner horndog quits tittering over breasts, watch Vriska cross the space.

A muscle tenses in Vriska's back, precursor to the motion of a limb; arms arch to grip the towel wrapped around her head, and graceful legs pad towards the couch. She gazes to one side, eyes finding Jade's, arms still stretched above her head: whatever she's about to do, she wishes it to be seen.

Black hair unfurls and cascades down bared shoulders not so much like a shampoo commercial as the unsheathing of a bootknife.

Jade thinks back to a particular weekend fling, a woman... named Addy, or Zyra, or something between, whose whole bedroom was a wilderness foray of hacked trails through tinctures, balms, leave-in conditioners, aftercare oils, and heat masks. The smell was enrapturing, but sitting bare-breasted on the young human's floor-mattress, waiting as she dressed herself in layers of unknowable cremes and contours, made Jade feel feral, untrained. *Wasn't her fault. I am merely not built of those parts. Mine is a different machine.*

Jade cannot help but wonder if Vriska has ever used a leave-in conditioner in her life, or worried about how to combat flyaway hairs or whether her hotrollers were adequately heated. *No, she doesn't seem the type.* Jade squeezes her eyes shut to take in the air, nose filling with a waft of gentle pine soap and her favorite grapefruit-vanilla shampoo, both exuded from the newly-clean woman in her bedroom.

And it's all Jade can do to not walk over and bury an undignified snout right in Vriska's wet scalp, to drink in the scents of her body. *Although...*

Just as Vriska seats herself-- becomes comfortable, discards the towel-- Jade stands, taking her own en pointe steps right behind the couch, and aligns herself above Vriska.

What's life without a little indulgence? Too short for 'dignity', anyway. Kanaya and Roxy'd be proud.

Elbows resting against the couch back, Jade slithers her arms down Vriska's sides, a hand planting firmly at either hip. Vriska turns her cheek upward, clearly expecting a kiss, but as Jade's sniffer plonks down on the back of her head-- almost avoiding running into the horns-- she nuzzles up against the proffered head regardless.

JADE: your skin is...

JADE: so soft

From this vantage she can hear Vriska's steady, adagio heartbeat, feel every rib in her side; her own hands follow the motions of a body tensing and rippling as she laughs silently.

The spider-troll sinks back against the couch.

VRISKA: A month ago I would've killed anybody who said that to me.

JADE: we both know that's not true

JADE: but were you even close enough to anyone for them to get the chance?

VRISKA: Of course not. Wasn't in the mood!

JADE: ill take that as a compliment, then!!

Jade sweeps the mass of hair away from Vriska's neck, and puts her lips to it.

Vriska places a hand on one of Jade's to squeeze it in against the curve of her stomach. She feels the electric scrape of gentle canines against her skin. She lets loose a long sigh, head lolling to one side as her mouth falls agape.

Her eyes brush open again, and she realizes she's pitching to one side as her head keels too emphatically.

Jade keeps her upright, and breaks away.

JADE: hehe

JADE: cmon

Jade plants her arms on the back of the couch and vaults it to sit beside Vriska.

JADE: ask me a question!

JADE: any weird human shit youve never been able to interrogate in somebody

JADE: orrrr

JADE: something about my life

Vriska makes room for her, shuffles herself over so that both of their bodies can align and face each other. Her eyes trail down the doggirl, whose tail hangs brushlike from the front of the seat, her legs crossed. She had never expected that the human sternum could be so eye-catching, lacking the chitinous plates and reinforced endoskeletal matrices she was accustomed to. She ponders how pubic and leg hair, while concepts foreign to troll bodies, strike her as almost decadent, but she appreciates the joyful ways in which humans express themselves through their cultivation or removal. Jade, she notes with affection, is a cultivator of many things, it seems. And Jade, unlike other humans she had encountered naked, seems to keep her whole bearing warm and open, never shying away from the elegant act of being seen. *She's most herself when she's wearing no clothing, isn't she.*

VRISKA: Alright, fine!

VRISKA: Uhhh....

Vriska smirks. She plants a hand to her chin.

VRISKA: Before you saw any trolls naked, how many nipples did you expect us to have?

JADE: oh! i figured youd have different numbers for each of your like

JADE: tiers?

JADE: the more fancy the troll the fewer nipples

JADE: so like... eight at the low end zero at the top?

Jade shrugs, foot swaying.

VRISKA: What a spectacular guess!

VRISKA: I mean, the reality is that NONE of us have any-- because we don't have uses for them like you monkeys do-- but still!

Vriska shrugs in kind.

JADE: and how many did you expect from us?? :p

VRISKA: Well, none, of course!

VRISKA: Feeding babies off your body, leaving you vulnerable. Silliest thing I've ever heard.

JADE: annnd did that differ for me because of the

VRISKA: Dog stuff? Yeah, I expected ten, like your Lusus had.

JADE: soooo...

JADE: two was a surprise either way huh??

Jade looks down with amusement, cupping one of her breasts.

Vriska tries not to stare, and focuses on relaxing her body, emulating Jade's posture. If she's honest, her perception of the young woman in front of her-- naive,

flighty, uncritical-- couldn't have been proven more wrong in two weeks time. She wonders who else still believes that Jade is nothing but bubbly, an excitable and girlish dork? But she dispels the thought from her mind, and allows herself instead to gaze at the tremendous green eyes watching for her response.

VRISKA: Yep! Welcome one, though.

VRISKA: Guess I wouldn't know how to manage ten, I'd be overwhelmed! Out of my depth.

VRISKA: Here, I've got another question for ya: how do you feel about 8ark8east puns?

JADE: people always assume i wont like dog puns!!

JADE: i have no idea why!!!

Jade's tail thumps against the couchback as she tosses up her hands, and she chuckles. She extends a leg to rest alongside Vriska's.

JADE: i dont mind them at all!

VRISKA: Are you sure??

A sly grin and narrowed eyes.

JADE: try me! :p

VRISKA: If I tell you to 'go fetch'?

JADE: ill tell you to get it yourself, but that's because I'm not YOUR dog :p

VRISKA: Do you shed on the carpets?

JADE: more than youd think hehe

JADE: but thats mostly head hair!

VRISKA: Are you a good dog?

JADE: more than youll ever fuckin know!! :B

VRISKA: How do you feel about the human phrase 'the dog's 8ollocks'?

Jade blushes at that one, blinks.

JADE: sorry???

VRISKA: It's... I heard Jake say it once, when he was drunk at a party.

VRISKA: Apparently it's... '8rit, ish'? I think it means 'good', who knows!

JADE: oh

JADE: huh

She casts her eyes downward again.

JADE: naah!

JADE: doesnt bother me i guess!

VRISKA: Sorry if I'm 8arkin' up the wrong tree!

JADE: hehehe

VRISKA: Next question!

Vriska shifts, sliding Jade's leg onto her lap, and inches closer to the reclining canine. Her hand runs up the length of it, feeling warm calf, knee, and thigh under her palm.

VRISKA: Why'd you say you wanted to meet Terezi a few days ago, if you and she already knocked nooks?

JADE: oh!

JADE: yeah that makes sense

JADE: i mean she and i didnt talk much

JADE: kinda like it sounds like you and she havent

JADE: plus meeting a metas kinda different from

JADE: shagging ._.

Jade's face brightens, and she sits up a bit. She puts a hand on Vriska's back, making gentle circles with the heel of it. Vriska leans a little closer, shoulder almost touching shoulder now.

VRISKA: Fair enough! What's the funniest thing you ever did with Karkat?

JADE: welllll

Jade taps a finger to her chin.

JADE: given that we only dated for a few weeks theres not much to pull from

JADE: oh!!

JADE: i tied him up with guitar cables!

VRISKA: Aren't those... 8breakable?

JADE: he insisted i use what was around!

JADE: turns out he is NOT okay with being tickled while hes tied up though :p

Jade swings her arms for emphasis, and scoots in on the couch, butt side to side with Vriska's. Vriska's eyes are the size of whole watermelons.

VRISKA: VANTAS isn't into tickling?????????

JADE: nooooope!

VRISKA: Shit, I owe Kanaya some money!

Vriska crosses her arms, pouting.

Jade wraps an arm around her in mock sympathy.

JADE: here

JADE: ive got one for you

VRISKA: Is it about the glasses?? 8ecause no, I don't NEED them.

VRISKA: I just think they're cute!

JADE: wait you dont???

JADE: oh! i

JADE: uh yeah

JADE: i guess i had wondered...

JADE: but with god tier stuff you never know

JADE: i still need mine weirdly

JADE: and june needs hers, and

VRISKA: I asked somebody about this once, actually.

VRISKA: She said that it has to do with how your 'truest self' imagines itself-- herself.

JADE: well they ARE cute!

JADE: but you still... choose to wear yours

JADE: even if you dont need them due to what your 'truest self' sees at their core?

Jade marvels for a second, blinking.

JADE: god my head huuurts

JADE: i cant do brains

Vriska shrugs. Jade squeezes one of her shoulders.

JADE: anyway

JADE: why did terezi maim you like that?

VRISKA: Didn't I say, last time? It's kind of a troll thing.

VRISKA: Traditional, if you will.

JADE: hey!

JADE: i answered all your questions honestly! :/

JADE: i didnt push you that night but I hope you respect me enough to give me a straight answer now

Jade pulls off her glasses, giving Vriska a look, and sets them on the arm of the couch. Vriska just watches her face, for a moment, drinking in the image, before offering a hand at her lap. Jade lays her free hand in it, twining fingers amongst gray fingers.

VRISKA: Seats me. I sincerely don't know!

VRISKA: I show up again after three years, in a freakin' coma, and she ATTACKS me.

VRISKA: Unsurprising, yes, and got my attention! But I'm pretty sure I would have gotten the point if she'd sent flowers.

JADE: ...huh

Vriska loops an arm over Jade's, hand coming to rest between her ears and gently twirling a lock of hair around a finger. But she stops short of...

JADE: go ahead!

JADE: you can touch em dont be shy

And Vriska does, rubbing up and down the whole length of Jade's divinely fluffy ears. Even though the two of them have been naked together under the same roof for the past three hours straight, this still strikes the blueblooded troll as obscenely intimate, almost profane. She speeds her fingertips along them, digging into white fur.

Slumping into Vriska's lap, Jade sigh-grunts, the muscles in her upper arms taut and nose scrunched. Her leg, canted into the air, flexes, and her heel thumps hard into the front of the plush sofa with quick rhythm.

Vriska just can't help herself.

VRISKA: Good dog, Best lay.

She imagines Jade will be annoyed, but the bemused expression on her face-- mixed with her unbroken ecstasy at earscritches-- says otherwise. Her tail wags with a quick thwip-thwip-thwip against the corduroy, she cocks her head back... and barks,

twice in quick succession? Her grin says that Vriska should treat that as though it's normal, not weird, and certainly not the sort of unguarded quirk that makes a pump biscuit explode with otherworldly delight. So yellow fingernails scruff behind both ears, drawing trails in fur with quick, small motions, and Harley bonks her head back into Vriska's stomach playfully.

When the troll finally relents, Jade shivers for an instant, arms coming to rest under her head as she drapes across Vriska's legs. Her eyes pop open, and she blinks, but lets them droop closed once more. Dexterous hands brush along the prone goddess' back, planting themselves at her shoulder and her side, and she sighs with the contentment of a woman for whom the springs in her clockwork can finally uncoil at the hands of an expert.

JADE: (mnrrrrrr...)

JADE: yes that

JADE: exactly

Jade raises a finger on one hand. Vriska puts a hand to Jade's ribs, scooching her up for maximum body contact, and Jade slides in with relish.

JADE: okay vriska

JADE: next questions for you

JADE: why were you not surprised by my genitals first time you saw them?

VRISKA: 8ecause, it's like with nipples!

VRISKA: The idea that humans had 'different sexes' kinda 8affled me.

VRISKA: First time I saw a human naked, I had to go look up what other ones even looked like.

Jade nods lazily, eyes closed and chin planted against Vriska's hip.

JADE: makes sense

VRISKA: Jade Harley, are you a large-argentscoop or small-argentscoop kinda snuggler?

JADE: big spoon

JADE: gotta get my huggin on

VRISKA: Well, shit. Me too.

JADE: its good

JADE: well take turns

JADE: weve got time

Jade tenses and releases her shoulders, letting her arms drape in the closest approximation to a hug as she can make to Vriska's bare legs.

Vriska sighs, tosses her hair over the back of the couch, rolls her head back. She lets her eyes flick closed, and takes deep breaths through the nose, out of the mouth. She hears Jade sigh in time with her breathing, and they lay there awhile, merely two bodies held close.

VRISKA: Jade?

JADE: yeah vriska?

VRISKA: I don't mind people trying to change me.

VRISKA: I know Terezi always did it because she knew she could make me a better person, and I know that you would, too.

JADE: mmkay

JADE: ill still try to make sure we talk about anything thats wrong and we can agree on problems

JADE: i dont wanna fix people if they dont wanna change

VRISKA: Yeah.

After a while, Jade's breathing moves from measured cycles back to a somnambulant snuffle. Vriska knows precisely what this means: Jade has fallen asleep

in her lap, twitching slightly, but ultimately cozy against another warm body. *Maybe I'm just like the rest of them, Vriska thinks. Just another animal snuffling about for companions in the dark, and the comfiest pile of straw in which to rest with them. Maybe that's why all the best people for me are the mind-readers, the ones willing to share with me what I'm doing wrong, how I can get stronger. Well, better, at least. Hm.*

JADE: mmmmmm...

JADE: i could really go for some coffee

Propped up on her arms, Jade bends her back to stretch and shiver. She yawns. Like a goddess on a vase, she casts her wild hair over a shoulder, and looks Vriska dead in the eyes.

Vriska smiles a jagged smile.

**VRISKA: Ooh, get me some too, thanks. There's a good lap-dog.
::::)**

Jade stands, expression halfway between incredulity and bemusement, and shakes her head. But Vriska's smile doesn't abate.

12:

The Huntsman and the Hound

*"When I was 3, my mother said to me
Eat up your beans, and say your grace
While far away, they put a dog in space
and left her there, you shoulda seen her face"*
-Moxy Fruvous, *Laika*.

A few weeks later.

Vriska stirs slowly, rolling in place with intent to slump a denuded arm over the torso of Jade Harley. She's always found it difficult not to crash to sleep immediately after good sex; and she had gotten FUCKED before, but that!...

Her arm lands on the bed just below Jade's pillow, and she opens her eyes to find herself completely alone. The stars twinkle out the window, just above the treeline, and she rubs her eyes and checks her phone for the time. 3:17AM, it chitters back to her. She looks around the darkened room.

Jade is nowhere to be seen, not gazing out the window, not burning the late-night oil on a drawing or the chapter of a book or a late-night Carapacian program on the reproductive lives of molluscs. Her bass guitar, however, is not in its stand, and as Vriska rises from the bed with a yawn and stretch, she sees out the window that the greenhouse lights are on.

She plucks the green microfiber robe from the back of the door-- she hasn't slept with her clothing on at Jade's since that first night-- and gently pads downstairs.

The night rests heavy against Jade's unmowed lawn, unrelenting humidity weighting down dewless grass like a fishnet of molten lead. The whole grove is pervaded by the drone of cicadas. Vriska steps out into it, toward the lighted building.

Jade, in yesterday's long black skirt and white tank top, is playing the bass for her greenhouse plants. She stands against the far wall from the door, eyes half-closed in melodic meditation. Thumb alternates with two rocking fingers, expertly dancing along taut, metalwound strings. They imbue in each note a flowing sort of weight and beautiful bass resonance that plants, Vriska supposes, must respond well to.

It's not like she would have any idea. She's spent several afternoons, just... sitting in the grass, watching Jade silently work, listening to the little snatches of nothing she hums to herself as she roots out pests and turns up turnips. But for all the time they've spent together-- on forest hikes, on seaside conversations, on rolls in the hay-- perhaps gardening is the one that Vriska understands the least.

But she watches Jade's hands, whose calloused touch she's become rather familiar with. Vriska has gotten a taste of the same caress and attention they give to the neck of the bass-- felt it on her body, watched it work on those turnips or ministrate a batch of biscuits. But for the first time she sees it processed into two delicate, intertwining strands of music, melody and bassline, filling the whole space.

She notes with appreciation the care given to those sleeping in the house, soundproofed as the greenhouse was from the powerful speakers rumbling and rippling away in each corner. Maybe Jade predicted a great many sleepless nights when she built it, and foresaw a time when she wouldn't have to live alone, but would still need a space of her own to simply adjourn to and think.

When they first met, Vriska had presumed that Harley wasn't much of one for thinking. Lamentably she didn't give up the image of the snoozing, oblivious princess from their youth until she had cause to speak to her face to face. Yes, she had accepted the truly abominable scope of her crush, in the moment she committed to rejoining

society after three months of indigence on Earth C. But in doing so, her excuse was that she had no interest in the person, merely the cute doggy ears and the cadence of speech she'd heard from afar.

Aah, the burial of lies. First, her little joke about Kanaya sending her like a beleaguered servant; second, the half-truth about her motivation being their 'alternate selves'. *Well, putting them to rest, even to myself, is a burial of a sort...* The truth was more elegant: *even Vriska Serket is sometimes wrong on her first read.*

And she's glad she dispelled those unidimensional notions of Jade, saw her as more than a tireless glade-tender with no moods or needs or drives. She watched as her girlfriend cared for plants, for others, for Vriska herself, and in doing so learned, paradoxically, that Jade wasn't putting off her own real happiness to do so-- and that the multitude underneath still strove to exist, to get out, to tell its stories and share its woes.

Maybe that's why I look up to her. Maybe she manages to do everything I wish I could towards the others, still be nice, still be likeable, still be happy... Shit, Vriska. Am I really goin' there?

Vriska Serket once said, purely to herself, that you don't have to be a good person to be a hero, and she believed that because she had to; without it, she's pretty sure she would've gone sour, or worse: soft. But now that she's been the hero-- saved the universe, as far as anyone can tell-- maybe, she thinks, it's not so bad to want to be a good person, to find in herself the magnanimity to forgive the pusillanimous failure of a ghost she once was.

Jade looks up, then, finishes a bar of music, and cuts off halfway through a chorus, evidently feeling it an appropriate end for the odd-tempo, major-key math-aria she had been offhandedly improvising. Her eyes are steady, trained on Vriska's as she slings her bass over a shoulder.

JADE: sorry if i woke you up

JADE: i turned off the indoor cross-speakers but if you could hear it from here or the lights were too bright....

Vriska brushes the notion away.

VRISKA: Na'ah. Woke up on my own. Trouble sleeping?

JADE: yep

VRISKA: Bad dream? Chasin' too many nut8easts?

Jade gives her a sidelong look, eyebrows furrowed.

JADE: i once dreamt i had five arms you know

JADE: this bass was designed with all these weird

JADE: i dont know

JADE: dreamlike features? just for me

JADE: and once upon a time i could use them--

JADE: the second neck, two keyboards

JADE: its even got a builtin mixer and compressor so that the notion makes any sense at all .__.

JADE: my dreambot could play it and my dreamself could understand it

JADE: she couldnt string together sentences... but even in my sleep i knew every scale and mode

JADE: how to piece in a couple chords and stay in key passably well as she handled the separate instruments!

JADE: but i dont have five arms anymore

JADE: ...i never did myself i guess

JADE: so i make do with the one neck

Vriska raises a hand, looking at the green beans filling the low planter between the women, just poking up their pale heads from the dirt.

VRISKA: If you...

VRISKA: only if you'd like, I can help you sleep.

VRISKA: Not unless you want me to.

Jade shakes her head, lips pursed.

JADE: ive managed on my own for years since then so ill do it myself

JADE: thanks

JADE: orrr at least with your snuggles for company :D

JADE: ...but no powers

VRISKA: Sounds like a deal to me.

She offers an elbow, and Jade loops her arm through, resting the side of her head at Vriska's shoulder as they walk together.

Vriska pauses as they reach the winding stonework path back to Jade's domicile.

VRISKA: If you hadn't taught me a few constellations, I wonder how often I'd look up at the stars.

VRISKA: I can't imagine the old me taking time out of her busy days of conquest to try to find shapes in them, but here we are.

Jade stops as well, and turns to the sky. These are not the galaxies and guidestars of her childhood, but as she and a number of fellow rapt enthusiasts rename them-- some even after her favorites from home!-- she has begun to refamiliarize herself with the fresh sky. She places her hands on her hips.

JADE: tell me which ones you like best!!

Vriska puts an arm around her, careful not to dislodge her guitar.

VRISKA: Well, obviously, I only know so many.

VRISKA: But I know the important ones.

VRISKA: That's Sirius, right?

Jade nods, trying not to be smug.

JADE: yep!! the dog star!

JADE: α -Canis Majoris

She kisses Vriska's cheek, her own form of positive reinforcement.

VRISKA: And next to it, in its constellation-- the confusingly-named Canis Major-- are Adhara,

another kiss,

VRISKA: Mirzam,

another,

VRISKA: annnnnnnnd... NR Canis Majoris.

Kiss.

JADE: annnd the binary star rotating along with Sirius?

Jade gives a doofy, expectant grin, hands now woven behind her back.

VRISKA: Scorpius Canis Majoris.

Vriska rolls her eyes, holding back a laugh.

VRISKA: I'm still annoyed you gave me the smaller one.

JADE: well you are shorter!

JADE: and hey

JADE: i literally renamed a star in the night sky for you!

JADE: in a name thatll be held over for as long as the

written information of this civilization lives so id take what you can get!!

Vriska props up onto her bare tiptoes, and kisses Jade Harley's forehead.

VRISKA: I can't fight with a woman who literally renames the stars themselves after me.

VRISKA: What'll you do when we break up, go to the New Prospit Astronomical Society in a huff and tell them that a lover's spat is responsible for your sudden decision to revert the name to your first choice, Serket-Is-A-Buttface Canis Majoris?

JADE: welllll i think its more likely wed rename the whole constellation scorpio to

JADE: The Huge Bitch Academy For Fucked Up Shitasses :p :p

JADE: memorials to a fuckup cast in suns for all eternity!!

JADE: ehh?

Jade giggles, and swings the door open, hand in Vriska's.

VRISKA: And what does us in, in this little scenario of yours?

Vriska passes through the kitchen, finishing off a glass of water left at the wayside during an earlier meal.

JADE: maybe your gambling addiction reaches a fevered pitch despite your foreknowledge of every diceroll and infinite funds!

Jade crosses the threshold to the stairs, turning to face her partner and drifting up them, bare feet hovering just off the dark wood.

VRISKA: Orrrrrrrrr, maybe your 8urgeoning insistence on owning a full pack of those 8ig white fluffy 8ark8easts you like so much finally drives me to escape to equatorial climates so you can't follow without overheating.

JADE: oh!!

JADE: if they took up too much space id just shrink em down...

JADE: think about it!! quarter-scale samoyeds--like well-proportioned puppies!--romping and playing

JADE: and when you need snuggles from a big dog you just

Jade swings her hands apart and makes a whooshing noise with her mouth, grin widening.

VRISKA: See what I mean? Dangerous thinking!

VRISKA: After all, we're already the gru8 attendants of every other infinite-life mook on this planet.

VRISKA: Oh, and Vantas.

Together they reach the bedroom, and Jade flips the lights on. She huffs, puffing her cheeks out.

JADE: cmooooon

JADE: give them at least a little credit its not like they actually need much saving anymore

VRISKA: I knoooooooow.

But Vriska crosses her arms, face belying concern.

JADE: what is it?

Jade rubs at her shoulders, grouping Vriska's hair over one hand as she presses her palms against trapezius muscles.

VRISKA: Just... last night.

VRISKA: I can't help but wonder if that's the problem, a whole world to ourselves.

VRISKA: No colossal threat to face up to.

JADE: what was it you said

JADE: how were both in need of people to worry about?

JADE: or a problem to solve?

VRISKA: Sort of.

VRISKA: Have you heard of... Rose once told me about this human philosophy thing, I wanna say it was called... the Prisoner's Dilemma?

The robe finds the back of the door once more, and Vriska sits at the edge of the bed, dragging herself up towards previously abandoned pillows.

VRISKA: I think she was trying to psychoanalyze me at the time, so I made it clear that my choice was to eat any hypothetical babies that happened to be in the hypothetical room with me.

VRISKA: She got the message. ::::)

VRISKA: The premise stuck around in my head, though. But every time I tried to use it on my dumbass teammates it fell through.

JADE: the prisoners dilemma?

JADE: how on earth were you... using it??

Jade, one arm wrapped around a plush crocodile, loops the other around her lover.

JADE: its a... mathematical abstraction

JADE: assholishness reduced to a balance of numbers?

JADE: one right answer and three wrong answers...

VRISKA: Uh-huh. That was exactly what I thought the problem was too, Jade.

When she hears her name, Jade's shoulders shiver, and she rolls them.

Vriska jabs a pointy nail into her palm.

VRISKA: 'Why would I care,' I hear you say, 'since we could maximize happiness for all of us if anybody would just listen to me'?

VRISKA: It's like, 'I can't solve everybody's problems, so it's too close to my fuckin' life'?

Jade nods to her, expression rapt with mutual understanding.

VRISKA: But it turns out it's so much MORE than that!

VRISKA: See, the Prisoner's Dilemma is beautiful despite that fact-- nobody takes the right answer!

VRISKA: Because I think they're always too scared to see what you'll do, and they hedge their bets, try to stack the deck in their favor.

VRISKA: Every single instance of the problem is only a problem BECAUSE it's full to the brim of petty humans of every stripe!

VRISKA: With their contradictions, demands, selfish impulses...

She shrugs, clearly on a roll, and rests her back against Jade's now-bare front.

VRISKA: You just have to let yourself look past the petty probabilities and into the true meaning of why somebody would pick the option less likely to give them the best collaborative reward.

Jade nods again, unable to deny the thought: sometimes she had just wanted to yell and carry on about how if people could just get over some petty feeling they could solve a problem so much quicker.

JADE: so when you said that you never felt like you had trouble picking the right path back in your session, even when things didnt work out or your friends got hurt you meant...

VRISKA: That being brave is actually really easy! You just have to do it.

VRISKA: And that I always wished they would just listen to me, because even if they had to take some short-term sucky moods we could've plowed through everything so much more effectively.

JADE: ughhhh! that was the worst!!

JADE: people are haaard and i dooont understand them

JADE: how could they not see it????

VRISKA: Fuckin' right?

Both girls laugh. Jade nestles down into the bed proper, one arm wrapped around her stuffed red reptile, the other, Vriska's shoulders.

JADE: the

JADE: uh

JADE: the metaphor i always thought about when theyd get me down or not act like i thought they should

JADE: or not see the patterns behind it all

JADE: i thought about the...

JADE: theres this thing in physics called youngs double slit experiment

Viriska laughs, and props herself up, but stops when she realizes that Jade isn't about to show her a NubHub video.

JADE: its where by breaking up light into small enough pieces you can get it to show you how its both a particle and a wave at the same time

VRISKA: Alr8, interesting physics lesson.

VRISKA: 8ut why does this matter at 3 in the morning?

JADE: because i always find myself wondering...

JADE: whenever i think about it, when we break up light like that--from a contiguous experience down to a decoherent spray on a backboard--

JADE: whats the point at which it stops being one stream of light and instead has to call itself...

JADE: i dunno :/

JADE: but it seems like it must be totally fractured by the experience?

Her troll girlfriend sits up against the big plush cushion, grouping her own messy hair in her hands.

VRISKA: Hmm, did you really ever think that a8out them?

VRISKA: C'mon, this is a Jade Harley pro8lem. 'Cuz it sounds like you wondered why other versions of you would act so weird, not like you expected, even when they had all the experience of fucked-up timelines and other selves that you did.

VRISKA: 8ut I think you can't overempathize with anybody. Not even fragments of yourself, not with the light that 8reaks apart from stress.

VRISKA: Letting their desires trump yours just drives you to inaction, makes you slow.

JADE: god

JADE: that sounds

JADE: callous and cold :(

VRISKA: Doesn't matter. You can't function worrying about it like that.

JADE: see...

JADE: i just have to wonder!

JADE: because she

JADE: (my other self)

JADE: back when i was having all those experiences...

JADE: she was changed by them or her versions of them

JADE: right?

Vriska finishes putting her own hair up, and reaches over, fingers rustling through Jade's, who sits forward. Vriska sits behind her, and her hands creep up the back of Jade's head, gathering up a great handful of wild tangles. Digits run through the whole black mass.

JADE: we know that trauma kind of... burns you out

JADE: torches the part of the brain that feels stress and leaves the throttle open

JADE: so youre constantly in a state of bodily panic for your whole life

JADE: just all adrenaline

JADE: all the time

JADE: and sometimes i think 'shit did that affect her??'

JADE: did it affect me when i took my sprite self in and the universe reconfigured my mind down to the medulla to accommodate?

The woman behind her shifts uncomfortably, but says nothing.

JADE: because...

JADE: she wasn't even embodied when it happened

JADE: she had no brain!!

JADE: i mean

Jade turns, looking into Vriska's face with an apologetic pursing of her lips. Vriska grimaces.

JADE: physically i mean!!

JADE: what would it even mean for the brain of a ghost to be able to shift like that?

JADE: unless...

VRISKA: Unless it was your ultimate self.

VRISKA: I dunno.

VRISKA: First, I don't know how you can even tell which of the two of you is the 'self', anymore. Sounds like your experiences are jumbled up enough to form one continuous memory, even if they're not coherent as a narrative.

VRISKA: Second, I don't think you should care about the effect, the way the brain changes, the biology or neurochemistry of it.

VRISKA: You can't fix that!!!!!!!

VRISKA: The point is that you don't let it turn you terrified, scared, small.

Jade's back slumps against the stuffed whale in the corner. Neck relaxing, she lets Vriska gently roll her head from side to side as she plays with her hair.

She's quiet for a while, then, letting Vriska loll and pivot her neck with massaging fingers, and every so often a slight groan emits with a particularly pleasing touch at a tensed muscle or aching spot. But eventually Jade sighs, and leans forward, planting her elbows in the bed between her legs. The long arc of her back flexes for a moment, its

bared scars innumerable from a childhood of exploration and excitement, before she reaches forward in a supine stretch.

JADE: yeah

JADE: yeah i suppose it cant really matter can it

JADE: better keep moving forward

VRISKA: Attagirl!

Vriska pivots on her rear, feet planted on the wall now to lay back flat alongside Jade's legs.

VRISKA: Is that what had you up? Just feeling your age?

JADE: naaa

An ear flicks, and Jade closes her eyes, arms still reaching out almost to the length of her toes.

JADE: i dont usually have too much trouble sleeping

JADE: but tonight i just had to wonder...

VRISKA: A8out?

JADE: what happened

JADE: howd you come back??

JADE: do you even know? does anybody?

Vriska shrugs, eyes meeting Jade's. *She has such adorably long eyelashes*, Vriska thinks. *I wonder why I never noticed that before.*

JADE: what happened to lord english?

JADE: did june ever even go back to check on what happened with all that...

JADE: if we ever really concluded anything?

Vriska blinks.

VRISKA: Na'ah.

VRISKA: I don't think anybody cares, not anymore.

VRISKA: I did! Up until the moment it became clear that it didn't matter whether or not I got all the glory, because maybe nobody would ever know, or notice.

JADE: ...huh? .-.

Jade draws herself back up, spins around, lays next to Vriska. She plants her feet on the wall as well, grubby toes leaving long dirt-gray streaks across cream-colored paint.

JADE: glory of what??

A sigh.

VRISKA: When you gave up your First Guardian powers, when they were taken away with the Green Sun fucking off, did you cry?

JADE: ...no

JADE: no i didnt

JADE: not even once

JADE: i missed them, because they were useful, but the connection was never like that for me

JADE: it was something i came to accept and tame and use? not something i cherished or found a way to love

JADE: maybe itd be different if i felt like i couldnt fix anything i needed to

JADE: but i can

JADE: im still useful

JADE: im still good

VRISKA: Yeah. You're a good dog.

JADE: yip!

Vriska ruffles her hair, eliciting a blink.

VRISKA: I would've cried, I think. So much power!

VRISKA: Not because you need to help people with it, but just the ability to...

She snaps her fingers, eyes narrowing.

VRISKA: God, so much I could just fuck up with powers like that.

VRISKA: I can't imagine being able to give it up, not screaming in rage at the unfairness of it all.

JADE: ive lost too many things

Jade curves her neck over to lay in the crook of Vriska's shoulder.

JADE: that was the easiest to accept honestly

JADE: that and never seeing my grandpa again :/

JADE: honestly not having the green suns powers was sort of a relief??

JADE: because i knew that id just get conked out again the moment anything interesting happened

The two lay silently for a while, then, until the first titters and peeps of birdsong worm their way through the cracks in the skylight. The sky, still dark, glimmers overhead like a blanketfort, a private dome for each to fill with her secrets.

After a time, Jade tips an ear up, listening to one call cutting through all the rest. The song of a meadowlark, sailing and shrill, echoes from some nearby prairie, and Jade rolls to face her girlfriend. She opens her mouth to speak.

Vriska expects something corny, an adequate sendoff to a conversation laden with sentimentality and mourning for the past. But Jade says perhaps the most touching thing of all, then.

JADE: wanna have another go before we get breakfast? ;) ;)

Vriska nods, expression suddenly stoic, businesslike.

They don't make love-- after all, the term is one they find mutually cloying, perhaps even offensive. But there exists, in the spark between their bodies, a history, a language unshared with any others, two survivors at the foot of a long road, hand in hand.

A week before, Jade had finally tracked a fluffle-family of young brown rabbits back to their warren. The chase had lasted the better part of two hours after she'd seen the mother's ears sticking out of a half-chewed spinach plant. Vriska followed as she scampered, hair and skirt billowing with her gallop, and when Jade finally scooped them all up with her powers the shorter woman had smirked.

VRISKA: What'cha gonna do with those? Lunch?

But Jade had smiled, flown far enough afield to rehome them safely while preserving her greens, and brushed the symbolic dirt from her hands.

JADE: you said it yourself:

JADE: sometimes the best way to save the people around you is to pursue your own passions first!

She gazed into the cloudless sky, basking in the warm sunlight.

A Solstice of Abundance: Scape and Craw, Scape of Maw

Teen and Up Audiences

838 words (1 chapter)

2019-08-19

The storm rages in the deepest reaches of your consciousness, again. A storm you haven't felt threatening to shred the boundaries of your mind in... an unfathomable period of time.

This unbearable paradise planet will be your death. That's what you thought from the moment you first arrived on Earth-C. Spending time there only strengthened that belief. You felt yourself slowly being gutted by the gorgeous skies, and gentle rains; the barkbeast play areas, and human meat cylinder vendors (meat, to your dismay, not OF humans but created BY humans) that populate its fields and cities. The human tradition of 'base ball', one only quarter-recalled in the conscious minds of the humans who formed this planet and all its hedonistic perfection, is more bizarre than you could imagine, great burly automatons swinging dildonic 'bats' at cannon-fired balls, rocketing them into space unerringly. Then some of the 'players' cheered, others bowed, some ran in little circles, and you felt your every sensory organ swim, not with the meat-sweats from the three cylinders you ate, but at the knowledge that this would be your forever.

Two weeks after you arrived in this monstrous valhalla you left, swearing to come back for only one thing. You return for supplies periodically, but if you don't find her you know you'll never return. It's telling that you don't make a contingency plan for if you do.

Because she has the luxury of forever, and you? Intractable Terezi, you will die one day.

No, you're not old. By some stroke of almost too-engineered fate, you are the same age as every other founder of this sun-bright, singsong hellscape. You resigned yourself to this end sweeps ago, when all your friends but Karkat flamed out or ascended, leaving you two with the awareness that you would grow decrepit and die, warriors sunset by some Ultimate Victory.

And before that, before you even understood the stakes of Sgrub's metaphoric cycles of rebirth and creation, you had fared well with the knowledge that you would die very young indeed. You coped well, you thought, with a culture of ghoulish and ritualistic killings. You took part, where you had to, in the worst of it, Legislaceration: a grisly process of dismemberment, psychic torture, and the system's unshakeable appetite for the corpses of the unworthy. All for the quaint puppetry of justice.

Until, suddenly, it ended. An unbelievable whiplash of instantaneous compassion. And the mechanism of its demise heralded a long and peaceful life ahead of you. But how quickly can a mind adjust to a sudden existence filled only with ice cream cones, walks through parks, 'base ball'?

It would have taken your whole life just to settle into it, become complacent. And when you left that new life behind you were terrified with how quickly your body acclimated to your new, grim task of searching an infinite, endless nothingness, so yawning that it could not even be called 'space' or 'the universe', but some non-place between all things, unplottable, inconstant, groaning.

Maybe your newfound comfort is because every time you let your attention drift from the sensations of steering through the nothingness, you feel the cracks again-- not from this reality, but from another one, where you put your arm around Vriska and together your ghosts breathed in the void as you experienced true obliteration.

You sought for her for what felt like sweeps-- became sweeps-- because she was your one reason to even be, any longer, and that made the search your reason.

You didn't speak to another being for a 'year'. You just flew, in jagged lines, close-- you were sure-- to simply picking a direction and continuing until you... ran out of fuel? Disgorged your inventory of compacted, high-nutrition ur-foods into a nearby sun in a willing attempt to end this futility? Simply let yourself drift into one during a listless and fitful rest?

Even now, sitting in your bare-walled respiteblock, you shudder to imagine. And you don't stop shaking, because of what happened next as you contemplated ending it.

Your phone pinged. Egbert's color stank up the pesterpanel, and you gave it a solid sniff to try to fathom what meaning it could hold, why anyone would attempt to contact a husk like you, hurtling cometlike to her eventual sputtering demise.

Fool that she is, she wrote seven simple words.

EB: she showed up here!!!

EB: come on back!

You felt the hollow numbness in your core that had dominated your being since Vriska left, as though it were freshly-torn and raw now for the first time. Perhaps those wasted sweeps could be redeemed, if, when you saw her, you could just..

And instead, like an uncaged, feral thing, robbed of speech and faculties, you lashed out, launched your entire body against hers, and bit and gnawed until you were scared she would die. Maybe you even hoped she would, so you'd have a good reason to, too.

The last Alternian sits alone in her respiteblock.

There is a knock on the door.

A Solstice of Abundance: Opus Canis, Opus Dei

Explicit

7087 words (1 chapter)

2019-08-22

Content Warnings: Explicit sexual content; brief description of imagined eroticized violence.

VRISKA: Sooooooooo I'm coming over. I need some goddamned breakfast, but if you needed a bite I'm sure I could arrange something for the both of us ::::)

JADE: a bite you say? when you say it that way it sounds like something else ;D

VRISKA: ::::;)

JADE: yeah if you wanna make food here come on over!!

Your name is Jade Harley, you're laying on your downstairs couch, and, maybe, you have just said something supremely stupid. Vriska Serket, your girlfriend-- your FREAKIN' GIRLFRIEND! Even two weeks into this thunderstruck flashflood brushfire romance, whenever you remember that this thing is *actually happening* you have to steady your footing so your tailwags don't knock you over-- has her hips planted atop yours, hands knit together just above your stomach and beneath her bared breasts. She lords over you like her arachnid namesake, and the image of it sends your insides into loop-de-loops.

You were just gearing up for a post-breakfast snog, and as Vriska playfully pinned a wrist to the sofa underneath you, the first flowery images sprung forth. You could just about see her start to strip your skirt down and unfurl her jeans and just...

Alright, that thought wasn't exactly sudden, or unwelcome. Truth be told, you haven't been able to *stop* thinking about what it would be like to wake her up one morning by filling her up with smooches, then disappearing under the covers before she knew what hit her and getting *her* seeing stars for once. Better wakeup than coffee.

You haven't brought it up, but only because your last serious date ended in you crying in the frigid limbs of the circumstellar disc. It was very cathartic! It just wasn't exactly conducive to discussing spooning preferences or favorite positions.

But she bends her back upward, eyes rolling. "A word of unsolicited advice?"

You gaze at her, head tilting. Hm? Weren't you sharing a moment there? Your ears flop to one side.

"Don't talk about your exes while we're kissing on your couch."

Oof. Was that what you...? You drop from your elbows, bra-clad torso falling flat. Well, there goes that spontaneous rush; Vriska's admonition cools the slow flame that had flowed up from your biceps into your clavicle and set your tail wagging.

She's right, of course. Mentioning you've slept with her other girlfriend, apropos of exactly nothing, probably doesn't set your desired mood during sloppy troll-doghuman makeouts. Wayyyy to ruin it, Harley.

Your embarrassment blooms across your cheeks as your neck shrinks. "Oh, I wasn't thinking about that!! Heh, sorry!"

She scoots an inch, pressing your crotches into contact, and smirks. A gentle, chiding arm bumps you in the ribs. "Don't worry about it. I'm glad to know, I am!"

Well, at least she's not mad. You hope that means more smooches are on the table. Should probably try to quell that dour, apologetic look, though; you give a momentary shake of your cheeks and nose, and blink a few earnest, wide blinks.

Vriska's hips roll against yours, and clarify immediately that she intends to toy with the dueling moods in your gullet. You called her an adorable hedgehog-- quills outward, soft tummy underneath-- last week, and she didn't disagree. Once again, she proves you right.

Her thighs are so narrow that the first time you sloped across her body to cuddle yourselves asleep you had nowhere to plant your doggy nose but right in the vanishing curves joining both of her legs, and you wondered at the time if she would be mad at

you for it. But she certainly didn't complain then, or ever since; she even said that she liked to sleep sitting up, a woman accustomed to her recuperation's warmth. Fine by you; you enjoy closeness any way you can get it.

The uncomfortable squeeze in your ribcage starts to abate, and warmth rolls over you again, starting from where her legs rest against yours. You arch a knee, rubbing the sheer fabric of your skirt against her blue jeans. "She hadn't mentioned it," Vriska continues offhanded, "probably because it wasn't relevant, and most of our time's been spent..." She puts her wrists together, and rubs them back and forth in time with a suggestive noise from her mouth like a latex balloon being stroked.

You smush your nose, distinct nails-on-chalkboard tingle rippling down the back of your neck, mixing with the ribald suggestion that two trolls bonking bone bulges could sound more like a rubber-fetish elephant on a slip 'n' slide than...

Alright, you have no idea what noise you'd use to symbolize sex. Usually you just say the word and people seem fine with it, though you can't fault Vriska's choice for its evocativeness. Trying to pull her into another close hug, you put a hand on her back, feeling her shoulderblade like an obsidian knife against the curve of your fingers.

But your girlfriend cranes down, kissing you on the nose. It's the sort of tiny gesture that still sends shivers down your spine, might drive you to bowl her over and deliver a hundred kiss-licks to every inch of her smug gray face.

Somehow, you fight the impulse, instead rolling your shoulders. "I'm glad to hear your relationship's going well, then," you say, stifling a giggle. "I'm happy to drop it."

"A wise decision." Vriska's forearms bend around you to encompass your neck, and she coos. It's a surprisingly tender sound from her, and you reach your lips out, about to kiss her again. She's so close that her every breath bathes you in heat. You lift your chin to close the distance, resume cuddling.

Instead of reciprocating, she evades your mouth, and you feel the wet stroke of her tongue lash up the side of your neck, collarbone to chin. You whine-sigh with your

mouth hanging open. Unexpected, yes-- her delightful, fey spontaneity at work-- but it lights your whole front aflame again. The knot in your stomach spreads to every part of you she's holding down, tenses each muscle from your nethers to your neck.

She witnesses your body curl inward, just slightly, and laughs. "What is it, puppy? Don't like that?"

Is that scolding? Did she just... *scold* you?

If she was going for humiliation, maybe it worked-- her tone makes your cheeks flush beet-red, sends your heart suddenly pounding in your chest and ears. *Maybe*, something whispers from the back of your mind, it worked because you let it, because you want it to? Yes-- it was *exactly* what you wanted. The sides of your tongue run themselves against your molars... how much do you need her to *do it again*? And to mean every harsh word?

But... how do you even ask for that? Well, with your body, of course.

You try to cross your legs a bit, to mask the mound in your skirt brought on by her many forms of affection, but her leg impetuously blocks you. She's actually gently pressing it against you now, and you don't need to wonder exactly how deliberate her positioning is, exactly how much of you she can feel as she runs herself up between your thighs. You resist humping her leg in response, because you have *some* dignity, goddammit. Instead, somehow, you mug your best petulant glare. "Nnnno. It's just wet!"

The mischievous marquise repeats the tonguestroke on the other side, hot saliva already cooling by the time her impish grin comes into view. Her hands brace your shoulders, keep your bodies wrapped together. "Better for symmetry?"

Oh, god, it really is. You loll your head back, ears rubbing against the arm of the couch. You almost say it, let her know that you're drinking in every instant of contact with the shapely gray ridges of her unraveled tongue. She's leaned much more on

affectionate teasing, lately, after you made it clear that the serious kind got you down and hurt your feelings. You're very glad she's practicing.

You laugh, and your hands land on her bare sides. Her response is three quick kisses, each lingering at the lips; it sets your stomach aflutter, and somehow you contain the shivers and quakes that threaten to wrack both of your arms, turn you into a panting puddle. "I didn't say I mind it being wet..."

Her stomach rolls forward, urging your palms to curve and cup her whole midsection. You slide them around her midriff, greedily deepening your contact with her skin. "That's gooooooood," she chides, letting the vowel trail as she lowers again, this time bringing her lips closed around the dead center of your neck.

"Aah!" A ragged gasp escapes your throat, and the weight of her chest suddenly renders you a stunned gazelle with an unhideable grin. Her innumerable troll teeth drag inward, each tiny trail a separate pinprick sensation against your prone and supple flesh. You barely manage to restrain a low groan.

Vriska's hand crawls down your bra strap, palm finding soft purchase against the front of the thin right cup. You wrap your own around it, desperately seeking a grounding impulse, and the tips of her claws run rough points into the whole globe as she massages in quick, small circles right at your nipple. It sparks the whole switchboard of your nerves, skin registering every featherstroke of clothing-teeth-trollbody-hair-fur-hot breath-digits-loveseat against it. Your eyes roll back, your back arcs, your chest heaves, and your mind goes blissfully quiet.

With effort you purse your lips and force a sharp breath in through your nose. But the darting teeth tickle just a little bit too much, and you can't stop your hands from surging upwards as you burst into a paroxysm of laughter.

Vriska rolls her body off of you, landing on the couch as you sit upright, your legs still around her. You must have tossed them around her waist, wrapped her up in your skirt amidst the blasting intensity of raking teeth and flicking tongue. In fact, your

unconscious thrashing has bunched your disheveled garment about your knees, uncovering your calves. Your nose wrinkles with the barest blush, embarrassment showing for tapping out.

But she's glowing likewise, nostrils flaring with excited breaths. An arm reaches out to steady herself on your knee. She smiles a devious smile, like a trickster gratified with her desired reaction, an unmistakably sexy visage that shrinks you to the size of a thumbtack and fills you with erotic dread all at once. "No shame in askin' me to stop now, Harley. I've already got your 'human goat'."

She's right; you're just barely able to catch your breath, still heaving open-mouthed with a balled fist clutched to your sternum.

As though you could ever want to stop, instead of submitting yourself to inglorious *hours* of the same torment. You can scarcely contain your thrill at her aggression, as though she'd read your mind-- and overlooked all the parts that were sure this wasn't on the table this morning. You must look wild, in this moment; hair tousled everywhere, fresh neckdragged teethmarks, still tongue-panting with flowing charge.

You place your hands at her hips, eyes lapping up her bent-legged form-- she's curved them unconsciously to the floor, crossed just at the gray ankles, like a supervillain in horn-rimmed glasses and low-waisted denim. Her top teeth have found the outside of her cobalt lips, unconsciously reenacting the interrupted scrape and crawl. The bend of her iliac crest-- or whatever troll hipbones are called-- pokes out from the top of her jeans, like a little handle you could just hoist her over your head with, to haul her back to your cave and ravage at your leisure. Even if, this morning, you're still angling to be the one on the receiving end of this specific ravishing.

She tosses her hair, raveled around her front from the sudden dismount, clearly showing off for you. Her crossed arms meet just where the navel would be, in a primate, and leave not an inch of her gorgeous teardrop breasts (perfectly rounded,

nippleless, unending) out of view. Then she turns to face you, uncrosses her arms, with her eyes narrowed in wait. Geez, Jade!! You were so caught up in objectifying her that you didn't realize she needed an answer to her question. Or that it was a question in the first place. But the vanishing lines to her waist-- not shaped like an hourglass so much as a cliff-face, an oblique crag you could never hope to surmount-- tease your eyes downward, so you make the effort to gaze into her eyes, yellow and patient, even as you relish the capacity for lavish cruelty lying right behind them.

"To the contrary," you say. The last of the electric buzz fades from your fingertips, finally exorcised from both limbs, and you plant your feet on the floor, ground yourself against prevailing winds and thundershocks of nerve alike. You lift a finger to her gray-skinned chest, just above the breast, and draw a looping circle with your blunted nail against it. You know what you want, and, well, there's only one way to get it, so...

"I would like you, Vriska," you start, trying unsuccessfully to quell the quaver of scratchy need in your voice, "to try that again. In a place where I can spread out, so I don't kick you out of it." You take a deep breath. "Then, maybe, I would like more, if you should also desire it."

Vriska's expression morphs from rakish to bemused. "Is the lady asking me to adjourn to her boudoir?" She makes for a mock-scandalized touch at her lips. Your scalp burns with the white-hot torment of having to ask again, and it drives you *wild*. Somehow, even as she inflects her voice with care and attention, she doesn't lose the teasing air underneath, charming, cutting.

"Certainly she is, and mayhaps to be helped out of her bra in the meantime."

You don't even track the movement of her hand, but one of them has it unhooked before you can even finish the request. Very impressive, even by your own high standards. (Not that you have standards at the moment, still barely able to stand for the soft, dogged quiver in your legs.)

You free your body from the bra's confines, and stretch your arms up, rising, saluting the sun.

You fucking love trolls. Well, you love fucking trolls, because Jade Harley likes to play hard, and unlike with humans you needn't be as concerned with breaking their smooth, rippling carapace-skin, or with kissing up their collarbones and necks. But Vriska will be your first god-tier lay, someone whose strength-- you hope, silently, desperately-- matches your own in sheer pounds-per-square-inch of force.

Not holding back for fear of hurting someone... The thought intrigues you. But perhaps there's another layer to it, that terrifying strength which she could bring to bear on...

While your moods tend to swing wildly from one to the other, Vriska's attitude has you in a *very* certain way. You were practically breathless before, right as you were jarred out of that precious and rare feeling of trusting submission, and now that you've had a moment to collect yourself coming upstairs, you find your thoughts drifting again, thirsting for her very specific sort of attention, chiding and glib.

You roll your body prone in the bed as she rounds the corner into the room, legs crossing with each step. Her lips are pursed again, chin high as she surveys you splayed out, a haughty painter examining a (nearly) blank canvas.

Even as you continue to learn Vriska Serket's expressions, you know when she's planning something. It sends an anticipatory chill up your backbone.

Up close, what captivates you most about Vriska is her eyebrows. Every other facet of her face-- squarish smile, angular nose, diamond-edge cheekbones-- is sharp, practically hostile. You think that if she were any sharper she'd reflect light. Even her horns are pointed, opposed tailbarb and scorpionclaw forms pushing back against your desires for balance, symmetry, round softness. (You swear, and have dreamt since the

beginning, that you'll use them as handles one day, but you try to shelve the thought for now.)

But her furry little caterpillar eyebrows, usually enmeshed in her long, swept bangs, always seem to you to crimp and dance with each lipcurl and devilish grin. The contrast-- expressive, stony; soft, bladed; formless, crisp-- intrigues you. You'd pet them, if you could. Or lick them, if she'd let you.

She plants her knees, one falling on your skirt between your legs, the other to the side. With immediate glee you spread your arms, opening yourself to the close-held, easy touch you worried you'd sacrificed upon drifting upstairs. She freefalls towards you, catching herself on palms that flank your face, now inches away from hers.

But instead of wincing, you laugh, unfazed by a gesture surely intended to shock you through proximity. It won't do her much good to try to scare you with the thing you long for the most. You gaze into her onyx-black pupils, which betray the blazing hunger just behind her sharktoothed smirk. That, and the continued blue hue highlighting her eyes, stark against the shadow of her glasses. She acts the part well, but she can't hide her need.

"Well?," you ask. You rewet your lips, and scrape your tongue with your front teeth.

Her grip is surprisingly firm, for such a wiry body. Thin forearms brace your own, despite your more muscular form, but with your first playful tugs against them Vriska pushes back, holds you in place. Despite its similarity to your predicament on the couch, the restraint still makes your heart pound. Vriska gazes at you. "Is this gonna be alright? I'd hate to break you."

You squeeze your eyes shut, willing your lungs to fill with dry, heady air. You thank your stars she's grappling you again after your little lull, and helping chase out the silly, unfocused thoughts. "You won't be able to. In fact, if you tried, I bet that'd only get me more into it." Your head tilts, and you grin a skeptical grin.

"Is that a challenge? I've done meaner."

"You won't. I'll let you know if I don't like something, promise; trust me."

"You say that, buuut--" She sits back, weight shifting onto your hips from her arms. Her hands withdraw, gathering to rub your sides.

"Vriska..." You flit your eyes open again, cocking an ear. Your arms cross at your stomach. You are a woman of many needs, and constant reassurance isn't one.

"Mm?"

A snort escapes your nose. Despite yourself, your arousal is quickly draining, and while you respect that Vriska is *absolutely* doing the right thing, making all the right overtures... you are *quite* finished being handled so softly. You need *this*, and you need her to sweep you up, take you away.

"I appreciate what you're doing? But I wouldn't ask if this wasn't what I want, okay? Please. This is for me." Vriska looks amused, but you can't tell just how much of that tight-lipped smile is foreclosed disappointment at your requested activities, so you offer a half-joke in recompense. "Or if you'd like, I can take over, but I'd probably go about it without the banter. S'your choice."

"No," Vriska says, mouth curving coquettishly. "No, I think I'm also quite a bit in the mood for this, but I'd like you to tell me *exactly* what you're looking for, *precisely* how far I can push you." You can't help but smile in response, probably a little crookedly. Fine, maybe you were rushing it a bit, and who knows? Maybe the conversations will help get you back in the mood...

"Fine. Okay. Uhhh... well, the biting was nice, and if you do it in such a way that I--"

"HMMMMMMMMM," Vriska interrupts, neck craning down towards you with her eyebrows raised. "I guess that wasn't quite what I'm looking for. Lets try this! Repeat after me; 'Vriska, here's what I want:' "

"Vriska," you recite, unsure of where she's leading you. "Here's what I want?"

"Hugging?"

"Hugging." You shrug. Always, yes.

"Kissing?" She tilts her head.

"Definitely kissing." More easy answers.

She leans down, plants one on your lips, and you hum with pleasure against her mouth. "Yesss. And biting?" Her teeth flash as she sits back up.

"Of course, biting." You feel your smile widen, glad to be getting to the real meat of it. You would very much so like more biting.

"Ooh, good. I was looking forward to *that*. Groping?" Her hand folds closed in midair, a slow ripple of fingers miming her proposal.

Your eyes light up at the suggestion, following the motion of her fingertips. What little she did this morning has you teething your lips for more, so you nod. "Groping should happen."

"Top or bottom?" She raises her eyebrows provocatively, eyes falling to your skirt.

Hm? Oh. *Ohhhhhh*. Oh, yes. You feel your face go red. You nod again, more vigorously, as she reminds you of her gentle touches to your face, your chest, your hips, but applied elsewhere... "Both."

"Humping?" She sounds almost teasing.

Just the word paints a picture in your mind, the breathless image of your skirted pelvis running up and down Vriska's leg as you moan with animal pleasure. The look her face would have, gratified with your sudden inability to dam back your needs... the air from your lungs goes suddenly hot, slow exhalations exalting the very question.

"Yeah, definitely."

You blink, nose wriggling. She reaches a hand out to the bridge of your glasses, and you nose them forward; she sets them aside.

"Y'gotta say it. S'the only way I'll know." Jegus, that grin.

"Humping, I want humping," you say, laughsnorting with embarrassment as you do. Fuuuck, she's getting off on this, isn't she. Well, isn't that the point? And it'd be a lie to say you're not, anyway...

The tone of Vriska's voice switches back to that insistent mode, evenly-paced and low, as she dictates more terms for your agreement. " 'Vriska Serket, I want to feel your breath against my tits...' " She bares her teeth as she says it, practically hissing out every sibilant.

"Ooh, such flowery language! I like it." You'd be lying if you said that it didn't help slip you back into that headspace, letting you take in every word she spoke, watching them soak in the unjudging waters of your imagination. No, not just the words-- her tone, the look in her eyes, the little ways she rumples her forehead and touches your arm... it feels so safe, like she's there to tether you to the ground, help float you along the top of that feeling, that space, but not let you slip in, delve too deep.

She rolls her eyes. "No, you gotta repeat it back. If it's to your liking."

"O-oh. Uh, Vriska Serket, I want to feel your breath against my..." your voice wanes, and you wiggle your jaw. Hm. This isn't the part you expected to be hard; you love yelling about your tits, but this time...

No. You have to follow along. She's here to buoy you, so let yourself go, let that part of your mind bob along the surface of the inky, wordless void, seeing and feeling and breathing along with her.

" 'Tits,' c'mon," she chides. Her voice is starting to deepen, her words growing thick and inviting.

God, she keeps pushing you, but ever so slightly each step starts to crowd out the noise... the comfortable, horny static slowly overtakes the worrying voice, and you find the word to repeat. "My tits."

She pads her hands toward you again, head hanging above yours. " 'For my bosom to heave with each clasp of claw and your suckling lips against their peaks to

leave me gassssping.' " Vriska's gray collarbones rise and fall with each breath in silent anticipation. You open your mouth, letting your breathing slow in time with hers.

She wants you to say, uh. What? "For my bosom to heave with each grasping claw... and the next part, too?"

She draws her spectacles from her face. Her eyes are focused intently on your own, her eyelids heavy, edges dark. She blinks a couple slow, pointed blinks, and folds in the glasses' arms. She throws them vaguely in the direction of the side table, sideeyes you expectantly. "Only if y'want it..."

Your neck shrinks away, and you feel the comfortable sensation of heat set in across your nose with her laserlike gaze. You cover your mouth with both hands, fingers splayed almost over your eyes. Fuuuck, you *do* want it. "Alright, I... really want you to suck on my nipples." You stare at the ceiling, whole face burning.

Her voice lilts, softer now. "Ooh. Fiiiine, that's fiiiine." She darts her tongue along her top teeth again. Vriska's hair cascades down both sides of her head, wild tangles dropping to the bed all about your face, intermingling with your own spread under your back. She cranes her neck down, pressing her body to yours, and you wrap your arms around her.

Her heartbeat reverberates in your ribcage, each *th-thump* as clearly audible through your body as your own, and you take a deep, dry gulp. You are an elemental being of pure anticipation, floating as if on a black lake of only sensation and feeling. But held steady by her grip, her careful attention, the trust you share.

Vriska speaks crisply, in that same cadenced, demanding tone. " 'Vriska, I want you to *fuck* me.' " Her lips meet yours, tongue parting them and trailing against your hard palate. The kiss nourishes you, drives current back through your jaw and up the back of your skull like a halo. You still just can't believe...

You bend your free leg up, running it along Vriska's side.

"Vriska, I want you to FUCK me." Your eyes are locked to hers, entranced, intoxicated. *Fuck*.

" 'I need you inside of me.' " Her eyes narrow, daring you.

Auuuughhh-- you've almost quieted the part of your mind telling you you wouldn't dare, so you take a languid blink and try to wrap your tongue around the words. "I do. Desperately." You mumble to yourself, unable to keep it in, but sure she can hear you just the same. "I can't believe I'm doing this. I can't believe you've got me do-- you fucking sexyass troll, Serket, *fuck*." Nnnot exactly eloquent, but it's what you can manage. You roll your head from side to side, roiling in the heat at both your cheeks.

You didn't know it was possible to feel your whole body blush, for that brushfire sensation to engulf your whole form painlessly and wrap you in luminescence. You're discovering a few new things about yourself this foggy morning.

Her tongue presses into your mouth again, and you mingle yours with it; shift back into hers, taste each shared breath, each moment, heartbeat. She pulls up from the kiss, gives you a look. Heartbeat. A-again, huh? You can't-- you heave a deep breath.

Okay.

"I-- I need you inside of me." Your fingernails drag across the skin of her back.

Vriska licks her lips. "Gooooooood." Her nose runs along yours, pressing into the crest just alongside it; she murmurs something warm and gentle against your lips as you kiss. Even in this state, labile, freeflowing, mind like molten mercury, you can't fathom a more smug, pleased shape her face could take. Fuck. Ing. Spi. Der. Troll...

She rustles her leg against yours, sliding it snug to your privates once more. You hum as she nudges them, contact reestablished, and you can feel what little blood remains there flow from your brain and extremities down into your--

She lifts her head, teeth bared and gleaming. Her mouth closes around your jugular as promised, and it shatters the thought. A squeaking whine utters from your

lips. Each pulse of your carotid-- quickening, now-- pairs your taut skin against the tips of her canines, and you pant increasingly shallow breaths. She coils the palms of both hands into your twin breasts, slow massages pressing at both, lifting and admiring their forms. The brisk attention makes your tongue loll, crashes into your mind with rolling waves of bliss.

For an instant, you entertain the notion that Vriska could bite MUCH harder, if she chose to, just sink her teeth into your ragged meat with a crunch, and twist her head like a basset hound necking a hare. And that excites you, as you force your arms to stay loose under her, to neither crush nor shove nor flail.

She holds back, however, merely tonguing against the width of your skin under her lips, and her mouth crawls to one side of your neck. You try to slow your breathing, soak in the moment's relent, because it's possible you'd pop like an overfed pigeon with any more sudden teeth. Better to work up to it.

You're still brimming with glee that this-- she-- is really finally happening, is *really* doing this. It grips your stomach, lungs almost catching. But Vriska's whole lithe form slides down as she realigns herself, recenters your mind as her weight moves to your midsection once more. The saddle of her thumb frames your nipple perfectly as she introduces her mouth to it, lips pursed to fulfill her promise. Then she slides a hand down, each finger passing over your belly as it splays.

But at the same moment you realize that each long caress of your breast and stomach, paired with the tongue examining every ridge and knubble of your sensitive areola, is causing you to form a thick wet spot of growing, evident need in the front of your skirt, just below the band. Thankfully you're not wearing underwear. Her hand notices both with a delicate, two-fingered stroke up from the base, pressing the fabric taut and velvety along your length. Vriska grins, a chuckle worming from her teeth against your skin, and the soft vibrations resonate, filling your chest. You let your eyes flutter closed.

From your throat the burning declamation of each breath begs for release, the pressure building as Vriska works her way upward again, over your heart and collarbone, and begins languorously bathing small sections of your neckside in kisses and little bites.

Now right under the curve of your jaw, Vriska wastes no time in marking you. The renewed gravity of her whole body quells the tremors that start to spread through your chest and arms, holding you steady, holding you together, holding you to her orbit and the thrall of her body and every touch.

You tilt your chin, pressing straining neck against her kiss, and Vriska brings a hand up-- scent-bathed in sweat mingled in a heady trail up from your own nethers-- to rub your lips, caress them for a moment, dredging a sigh from deep in your body. It then comes to rest palm-down on your cheek. Gently, she urges you to lay your head flat to the bed. You assent readily, digging your ear into the sheets, but nuzzle upward against her hand, desperate for each touch, every drug finger and the moment the next kiss lands. Your mouth finds the tip of her thumb, and you roll your tongue over it, giving it a testing nibble with pointed teeth of your own.

You curl a hand around the back of her neck, under her hair. You feel her neckmuscle, defined under thick skin, and rub into it, pleadingly pressing her mouth down. Vriska moans against your flesh, rolls her head against your touch, then she twines her fingers into yours, hands falling back down to the bedside.

Her knee insists once more that your body respect its posture between your legs. In almost obsequious reply, your thighmuscles flex and your sex twitches, aflame with desire. But in that instant, the pressure from her unrelenting ministrations starts to flood your senses, and you have to dig your teeth into a lip to not push her off again.

You speak, barely above a whisper, just trying to utter words and breathe at once, a daunting task for the static-strewn euphoria filling your skull. "Nngh... that side's sensitive. Don't leave TOO huge bruises..."

Vriska, by way of responding, rakes her teeth against the spot on your neck again, lips unmoving. The same pinprick touch, myriad against what will surely be a delicate, blushing bruise, makes you barely buck your hips, to rub yourself against her urgently as you tighten the grip your legs have on hers. Your skirt has become intolerable, each brush threatening to drown your mind in overheated steam like a burst pipe.

"Vriska." A beat passes.

"Absolutely." She rears her head up, and her hand theatrically meets your chin again. She examines her handiwork-- you picture a showy blue lipstick-mark, even when she wears none-- and you turn your head in her guiding caress once more, eagerly displaying the untrammelled half of your throat.

As she cranes down to paint your body anew, you mumble a request, lips millimeters from her aural canals. "Take my skirt off."

"Hmm?" She buzzes the query into your neck, and the rush of it causes the world to blur.

"Take my skirt offfff," you insistently pant, trying to muster up enough voice to save yourself a third plea. The excitement of it would do you in, like a white dwarf star going supernova.

You feel a hooked thumb dive between poly-modal fabric and your flesh, and Vriska begins to peel your last remaining article of clothing from your legs. She bares you to the world, and in your excitement you run the whole length of your freshly-exposed member against her. So much for dignity.

It leaves a trail on her jeans, but you haven't the wherewithal to murmur an apology. Not that she would care.

"Needy girl..." she groans, taunting.

You whimper in response, a thin, querulous noise that barely escapes your throat.

Her hand passes down, deftly flicking open the buttonfly of her jeans, and she discards them with a single motion. Her leg reacquaints with yours on top of the bed,

tongue rewetting her lips. Her hands arc to your breasts. Vriska's eyes, practically wild with anticipation, stare into yours, and she leans forward into you.

You feel her against your underside before it registers: slick and insistent and exactly as attentive as your own. Even through your fuck-drunk haze you have a dozen ways you crave for her to touch you, to discover your body, and you plant the back of your crown against the bed, rolling your hips up.

Time seems to stop as you sigh, closing your eyes. The muscles in Vriska's shoulders tense, and she leverages an arm underneath you, drawing you into position against the front of her bared form. Your splayed fingers drink in the heat from every pore along the blades of her back. "Ready?" she mumbles.

"Go ahead."

She locks her lips to yours again.

In her breathy, flash-hot state, Vriska begins to slide into you with ease, mouth wide and eyes closed with a tense and pressing sigh. You slide a hand to her lower back, guiding her deeper, and as her body begins to fill yours you place your other hand to one of her breasts, gripping it with rough attention.

Your legs wrap around her thighs just as she reaches the haft, hips flush against your concupiscent waist. Your moan of pleasure meets the sharp, teeth-gritted breath of the woman interlocked with you, and your legs rise and fall as she presses herself deep within your body anew.

"*Fuuuuuuuuck*," she hisses out, eyes squeezed shut, lips barely withdrawn from yours. The hand at your breast rolls under it again, and you press against her with your next unsubtle breath, needily, dancing against the sublime pressure of her body on your own.

You roll the hand at her back across her, and shift it down your front, snaking along sweatsoaked stomachs to wrap around your shaft, as much to steady yourself as to keep pace with her. As Vriska pants for air, snatches and gasps of obscenities creeping

from her lips, you roll your head back, eyes shut. "Bite meeeee." Your throat, raw from endless marks and scuffed, drawn inhalation, barely lets you utter the words. "Hard. Don't draw blood but--"

Your back arcs with each urgent, rhythmic thrust. Your thighs grip the valleys of her hips as Vriska's body plunges into your own, each motion tossing starlight pinholes into the unconscious blackness coating the planetarium of your senses. And now your whole mindscape sparkles and dances with rotating, whirling color, almost overwhelming you as you breathe, take it in, let the galactic spirals and nebulae whorl around you; you, the single point in the center of it all.

"Jade...?" Vriska's voice, heaving, sweating, singular, echoes through your joined stomachs, filling your mind with sound and vibration as thrilling as the starscape you inhabit. You almost want to mumble, beg, cajole, dogwhine your way through her coming protestations, demand that she not back down. Undignified it would be, yes, but such a small price to pay for her--

She chomps down, endless rows of pearly whites cascading just above your clavicle bone and you scream, hoarse and feral and begging and fuck, oh please, just keep-- *fuck*-- and--

The last bark-drooling entanglements of your voice draw her in, words coming up from your neck as it lies between her teeth and you press into her sweating body, and you can feel every inch of her muscle and skin along you tense and quake. She grunts, and groans, pants and clenches audibly just in your ear. *God, she makes the cutest fucking noises...* Vriska's breath almost stings at the side of your face, insistent and choking with passion. Her body is a blazing torch, but you are aflame like the core of a sun, so you wrap yourself around her without fear of being seared by her heat.

You couldn't hold yourself back now, not even if you wanted, deep geothermal clarity bursting from your core like a filling caldera of lava. But she is the sky, firmament inside which your earthquaking form lies, and she will cradle you through

every tempest and eruption and tectonic heave you must endure. And you clutch her, wracked with not only her orgasm but yours in concert, until the trembling subsides into her arms, folding against your stomach and barely clutching you for support.

Vriska's cheek finds your shoulder, an area at the joint less tender than the half of your torso she'd bitten and sucked dry and bruised all over, and she buries herself in it, breath rolling like cresting, distant thunder against your neck. Would that you could just live in this blissful instant, forever.

Your hand seeks the nape of her neck, and you hold her to you, gently. Her eyes are closed, but her arms are still respectfully clasped to your sides, hands at your ribs in careful embrace. You needed this. Your body-- full, not just of Vriska's slowly detumescing length but of stardust, of clarified bodywarmth, refueled from a first gratifying turn with a new partner.

Partner. She's still--

Vriska is still atop you, inside you. Throughout every minute of this, her body has reflected back all of the admiration and electricity you needed to push into her, and yours the work and admonitions she gently pressed into you. All the help she gave you to find your footing in that mindspace and trust in her willingness to move you through it, feel it with you, pull you back out.

Minutes pass. You liberate your other hand from its nest between your twin bodies, thanking stars once again for the godpowers flooding back into your cortex with your conscious mind. From under the bed a drawer rattles open, and a clean, fresh towel, dark blue and soft and crisp, floats up into your hand. You hurl it haphazardly to the other half of the bed, pat it unfolded with a hand, and gently urge Vriska to roll into it.

She begins to do so, starting with her whole chest slumping onto your arm, and as you relax your body she gently frees herself from you with a bassy, thick *schlorp*. You can't help but laugh at the sound, hand at your stomach.

Vriska speaks, face still entombed in the towel and covers, but one eye open to gaze at your supine form. "Didn't know y'could do that w'stuff that isn't planets. S' pr'ty cool."

"S'fuckin' useful for things of all sizes," you mutter, groggily blinking up into the skylight just beginning to fill with rays of sun. "Which is good, 'cuz. Sorry 'bout yer front, it kinda gets..." You gaze down to your prone body, across your boobscape and the glistening postcoital wet triumphantly adorning your hips, waist, legs.

"Everywhere."

"S'fuckin' hot," comes Vriska's slurred reply.

You pull out a second bathsheet, gently mop yourself down, and lay it adjoining Vriska's. You scoot up, roll away from her, and fit the whole curvature of your back along her side; she lumps an arm over top of you, and you wriggle it close into your chest. "Yeah. Well, if nothing else I'm the only one with a tail to clean, so I think it makes sense I get the coolest powers..."

"Sounds fair." Laboriously, Vriska brings herself snug against you, arm futilely attempting to shift your great volume of frizzed postfuck curls up so she can cuddle your behind. When that fails, her head comes to rest alongside yours, atop it, cheek to cheek; you nestle against her with a satisfied *hmm*. Her leg folds over your hip, knee bent.

"Vriska, you make me really happy..."

Despite herself, she smiles, probably a little more bashfully than she realizes. Her tongue finds her top teeth under closed lips, a telltale sign she's mulling over an unexpectedly honest thought.

"Yeah, I know."

You giggle. Classic; of course.

"And I..." she continues, breath catching in her throat. "I'm really happy too. That was a lot of fun."

"Yeaahhh!" You nuzzle your shoulder back against her sweat-soaked chest, and Vriska takes a moment to nibble at the side of your bitemarked neck affectionately before gently kissing your cheek.

As you begin to drift into a comfortable slumber, the thought echoes.

She's still here. She's still here.

She's still here.

VRISKA: Wait. If you bottom, does that make you a subwoofer?

JADE: fuck youuuu!!!! :D

Unthreaded, Unchecked, Uncultured

Teen and Up Audiences

1160 words (1 chapter)

2019-08-27

Content Warning: Graphic depiction of violence.

Arms cross around your midriff, a bearhug so immediate and strong it threatens to crush the breath from you. You feel your stomach fold with the unseen assailant's grapple, and in the instant before you can react your legs flail upward, uselessly writhing a kick into empty air. Your head snaps down, trying to look at who's grabbed you, to gather data. *Gray arms, stiff, boxy muscles, black nail polish: could be any of them. It can't seriously be an attempt on your life? Here, in person? I guess you need to treat it like--*

Think, Rose-- no, don't think! React, move.

Like you were taught.

The inch-and-a-half of heel on your sandal stabs into one of the red-Keds-clad feet below you, and you instantly feel the grip around you shudder in pain.

Pain, good. Keep holding on, fucker! There's more pain--

You rear your head forward, momentarily mourning your perfect coiffure as you bring your skull back against your assailant's nose. --to come. Around your head, droplets of blue spray like sprinkled sapphires, barely refracting the oblique, ambient light that bathes the 'exterior' platforms of this meteor in a low, pulsing haze. The plastic clatter of dislodged glasses skids off to your far right, and disappears, likely into the gasping void below.

Troll. Glasses. That narrows down the likely candidates. Red shoes... Your head swims, maybe from pure adrenaline, perhaps from the fact that you should have seen this coming, or maybe the impact you just took to the head. You pinch your eyes shut, try to focus on crowding out the pain, hunkering yourself down into some approximate fighting stance, even if that was never the focus of your self-defense training with Terezi.

Stop, focus. Hit them. HIT THEM. One hand in front of the other, broad footing, draw yourself down, low center of gravity. Don't think about the pain, just focus on--

Your unpracticed fist curves directly into her prebroken nose with a sickening crunch, feedback shockwave of physical force radiating up your arm in stiff stinging jags, rippling, twisting. You can barely process it through the sudden tears blurring your vision, but your whole hand is irate red skin coiling around blushing blue right at the point where your knuckles impacted forehead. *You buried your thumb in your fist, fuck.* The whole side of your hand hurts, carpal bone ringing with an ache sure to turn into a blooming bruise. But she got it worse, now thrown backwards into a splay of bent legs and arms barely keeping her off the floor. You look up, and into the eyes of...

Vriska? This makes no fucking sense. Why is she attacking you?

She's looking surprisingly bad, actually. You definitely smashed her nose, either with your scalp or your hands, and it's clearly bent heavily to one side. You clutch your hand, now smarting with the stinging knowledge that you probably broke at least one bone in your thumb. *Still, she got it worse, and you might have to--*

VRISKA: Fuckin' gr8! Good jo8, Lalonde!

Effusiveness? Confusion ripples through you like writhing centipedes under the skin. She's not moving, now, not scrambling to rise up, return your blow. You reach down with your capable hand, balling around the collar of her unbuttoned gray overshirt. You haul her up, maybe not to her feet-- when she's standing up, she has four good inches on you, almost five-- but at least onto her knees, watching her hands steady her trajectory from the floor as she comes to bear again. You try to release your jaw; you were biting your lip so hard you're pretty sure you drew blood. At the very least, you did during that headbutt, and you can feel it trickle on your chin.

ROSE: Why the FUCK would you do that!?

ROSE: What the FUCK was THAT?

You can practically feel the tension in your neck strain against the hem of your robe, orange fabric mingling with spatters of Vriska's cerulean blood. You choke it

down, folding your brow, wrestling with the rage inside of you trying to scream blood and spittle against Vriska's smiling face. Instead, you screw up your nose, ready your arm for another blow.

ROSE: I should hit you again-- I should, I should fucking--

VRISKA: Now, now, Rose! You're in no position to start swingin' again, not with a thumb like that.

VRISKA: You need to work on your punching form. ::::)

ROSE: Do not.

ROSE: Ever.

ROSE: Sneak up on me again.

Your voice is strangely quiet, now, breath finally gathering in your chest enough to gift back control of your volume, your careful tone. You sniffle a sharp intake, willing yourself to your most fearsome despite a five-foot-four stature. To underpin your message, you draw one of the Quills, crackling with vaporizing majjyks, and bring it in front of your face, like a foil *en prêts*.

ROSE: Ever.

You relax your grip, and Vriska slumps seated again, but shrugs, seemingly disinterested in your threat.

VRISKA: I figured you'd want to see how well your training was paying off. And I'm impressed!

VRISKA: I didn't take Terezi's tutelage for the sort of thing you'd be able to throw at me so quickly, and here you are, using your shoes and your head and everything.

You draw your broken thumb across your lip, clearing a thin streak of red among the worn-off pinkish lipstick. You look at it, and realize when you gaze back up that you

probably look betrayed, a woman crossed. *Nice, neutral expression. Don't let her throw you off for whatever she's planning.*

ROSE: Why. Did. You.

ROSE: Attack. Me.

VRISKA: Can't a friend just check another friend's reflexes?
8888)

Her tone is almost disarming, sunny. It's not enough to get you to forget what she just did, but it's almost... kittenish? Like she's trying to be cute. Not that you're particularly interested at the moment. You draw her up to your face, let your hot breath encompass her bleeding nostrils and the grim grin at her blue lips.

You're about to growl something menacing-- about not enjoying being fucked with, or seeing right through her little game, or not being impressed with what you've seen-- y'know, good villain shit. But at that moment, the Transportalizer onto your little platform flashes, and a confused-looking June steps off, followed by another flash, and your girlfriend. Kanaya dusts herself off, and you surprise yourself with how quickly you push Vriska out of your embrace-- your grip, you mean. Nothing *prurient* was happening, though, surely.

JUNE: whoa!!

JUNE: what the HECK is going on here???

ROSE: She-- she attacked, she jumped me--

JUNE: we've been looking all over for you!

KANAYA: Goodness Vriska

KANAYA: But Youre Looking Quite The Mess

VRISKA: Easy for you to say!

VRISKA: I just got 8eat up.

ROSE: (But--)

KANAYA: Such Is Evident

KANAYA: And Stop Flirting With My Girlfriend

VRISKA: I'll flirt with whoever I want, fussyfangs!!!!!!!

The Thorn In Your Paw

Teen and Up Audiences

9946 words (3 chapters)

2019-09-07 – 2019-09-13

Content Warnings by Chapter

Chapter 1: Discussion of alcohol and alcoholism.

Chapter 2: Discussion of food, eating habits, and alcoholism.

Chapter 1

*'Was this, by turn, roman à clef?
Whose hands belie this story's weft?
Thoughts shattered on this lonesome eve
Though for her mind we are bereaved*

*Were these but echoes from her chest?
Like buxom angels smattered lest
An idle pinky's hew and cry
Should pin her down as she floats by...*

*But this sweet girl for emeralds named
Should stay by story undefamed.
I have rendered here my pawn
Undaunted by my wife anon.'*

*-Rose Lalonde, *The Chorus in Prelude*.*

Your name is Rose Lalonde. It's late in the evening, and the sun is just about to set on another perfect early-autumn day. Leaves from the great oak tree atop this hill eddy and gyre to their doom beneath your robin's egg ballet flats as you trudge daintily towards its zenith. Today you wore something simple, an orange T-shirt with a central blazon of your aspect and some high-waisted mom-jeans. Hanging from the most prominent bough of this tree is a weathered pair of ropes joindering a simple wooden plank, atop which Jade Harley-- in casualwear assembled to suggest her god-tier hood, tunic, and skirt-- is drifting her legs back and forth, swinging as she watches the sunset.

With each pitch to and fro, her hair and the folds of her outfit billow in the unseasonable warmth of the breeze. So too do her dust-gray tail and stark white ears.

You use one hand to shade your eyes from the sun, the other coming to rest against the trunk of the deciduous behemoth. The dying amber rays of the day's end dapple the surrounding fields, the standing swaths of barley jutting up just beyond turned leaves layering the foot of the hill, bathing the whole thing in an eerie golden haze as though engulfed simultaneously in a deep Prospitian ocean and a countryside brushfire.

As she swings back, Jade turns her head to you to acknowledge your arrival, regarding you with otherworldly, verdant eyes.

ROSE: Hello, Jade.

JADE: hi rose!

ROSE: Thanks so much for coming out to meet me this evening. I hope you weren't otherwise occupied.

JADE: oh, almost never!

JADE: :D

You decide to ignore whatever the implications are for that statement, instead pressing on with the offer of the evening, the reason for tonight's bivouac.

ROSE: I've put some thought into it, and I realized something.

ROSE: The foremost criticism of me on this planet-- levelled by what can only be termed vox populi, the peanut gallery-- is the somewhat ludicrous notion that I spend far too much time with my own wife.

ROSE: Silly, yes, but still something I've seen fit to respond to, and I've decided to do so in the most sensible way I can imagine.

ROSE: I'm starting a poetry journal.

JADE: wow!!

JADE: thats pretty cool heheh

Jade giggles, lips drawn back from her prominent front teeth as her shoulders jog with momentary merriment.

ROSE: Risible, I know. And yet, the most compelling option I can come up with that doesn't involve blowing sundry holes in exoplanetary objects out of sheer boredom.

JADE: :o

JADE: that actually sounds kinda fun!!

ROSE: I'm aware.

JADE: but poetry huh??

JADE: cant say ive ever read much of your poetry!

ROSE: Oh, I know. I keep it fairly close to my chest, because frankly, I doubt its quality and doubt the interest of any onlookers.

ROSE: And yet, when I mentioned it to said matriorb-and-chain, she was nothing short of fully supportive, even knowing that it would drain some of my resources away from our mutual tasks and...

ROSE: Diversions.

JADE: see rose

JADE: ive always thought of kanaya as so slick and everything

JADE: but she always gives off this aura of...

ROSE: If you are about to say 'sangfroid demeanor,' I must caution you--

JADE: i promise you rose i was not about to say zangfwaaa. :p

She approximates the pronunciation admirably, save drawing out the last ellision long past that demanded by the original French. Her soft pink tongue prods between cleft lips, a gesture drastically too intimate for the scenario. But she doesn't cease

swinging, up and down, so you turn your visage aside and attempt to conceal any secondhand embarrassment or uncontrollable blush.

JADE: try

JADE: of being down to earth!

You blink.

ROSE: Regardless I wanted to extend the offer to contribute, if you felt capable and at liberty to share any work you would like to.

JADE: uhh

JADE: i appreciate the offer rose?

JADE: but ive...

JADE: never written a line of poetry in my whole life?

ROSE: Hence exactly why I thought to seek you out.

ROSE: I'd like a panoply of voices, a sheer diversity of forms, opinions, modes.

ROSE: You struck me as the most likely to inflect a more sentimental, naturalistic, freeform tone than I myself can approach.

ROSE: And, frankly, I haven't any other contributors on board yet, and was hoping to build more support among our deific cohort to attract laypersons interested in the craft.

JADE: you want me to write poetry about nature...

JADE: so you can convince our friends to write some too?

ROSE: Something to that effect.

Jade laughs again, at length this time. Her ruby-heeled feet skid across the ground, bringing a caesura to her downward arc, and she cocks her doggish head.

JADE: was that all you asked me to come here for??

ROSE: I'll admit that it was a concern that could, upon

further consideration, have been relayed by text, if that's what you're asking.

JADE: not quite!

JADE: whyd you ask me to set up this whole scenario on this silly hilltop if thats the case??

ROSE: I...

You wanted it to be picturesque. it felt like a scene you needed to set, sea of grain below you in the soft evening light. Alright, lamentably enough you probably could have seen the folly of this ahead of time had you considered the way Jade was likely to react to it all, but truthfully? It makes a better narrative, and you have always been a sucker for a clean and sensible narrative.

ROSE: I thought you might enjoy the view.

JADE: yep!!

JADE: as i have the other times ive been up here :p

ROSE: Maybe it makes for a better story, though?

ROSE: For the journal.

Jade pauses for a moment, blinks her humongous peepers.

JADE: would you like to swing with me?

JADE: if it makes for a better story

You look around the perimeter of the looming bower.

ROSE: But... there's only the one swing.

JADE: yep!

You shrug.

Jade is simply larger than you, in every dimension, and you notice it immediately upon planting yourself in her lap. Even were she standing she'd be a whole head taller

than you; hell, you're fairly sure her seat-length, obsidian-black hair alone has more volume than does your entire body. The outfit she's wearing, soft and billowing loose around her limbs and trunk, practically envelops you the moment you rest your body against her own, warm and inviting like bedtime after a long, sweaty day. Her long legs, still covered in her sheer gray-and-black-striped tights, kick in languid time, as if to suggest motion to the mouldering board supporting you both, but you can feel from the momentary disconnect between forward force and the sway of your companion that she's instead impulsing you forward with her space-powers and that the rest is simply an excuse to move her body, flow with the universe.

Her arm wraps around you. You realize now-- far too late to stave it off, especially in the eyes of a discerning public apt to consume narratives dually composited of women-loving-women content as well as storytelling so metaanalytically inserted up its own rectal cavity that without a doubt the metaphor-- that you, with your charming wife at home, relationship structure undiscussed within the damnable composition of this piece, sitting in the lap of the eros-driven canine woman with whom you have had, canonically, perhaps three conversations prior, in a literal swingset (i.e. *swinging*, that most despicable of heterocentricities)-- that this scene could be seen as infidelitous or improper, if not characteristically then certainly to the sanctity of your vows.

Jade's voice, however, breaks you out of a mental Charybdis so deep it required nested em-dashes.

JADE: do you ever think about how none of us are really getting any older, in the grand scheme of things?

ROSE: I try my best not to.

JADE: really?? cuz i think its

JADE: well i think its the best thing ever!!

ROSE: Truthfully? It terrifies me.

ROSE: What on earth could that mean, if we're beings without

a set lifespan, without expectations placed on us from...
biology, our peers in society, or any external pressures at
all?

ROSE: Art flourishes under constraints, after all.

JADE: see, why do you always talk like that??

JADE: you said years ago that none of us have arcs per se

JADE: then you talk like we're all just mutts in a dog show!!

JADE: i mean were old enough to drink now

JADE: or would be if old earths united states drinking ages
were still in effect

JADE: heck, ive thought about it but i think i dont quite get
it as a social activity??

Jade's free hand meets her chin as her train of thought floats away from mixed-
metaphor station and off into the subdued evening clouds.

JADE: rose, have you ever drank?

You feel your eyes grow to the size of fiendish saucers. How dare she?

ROSE: ...JADE.

JADE: oh

Her legs freeze up in midair, but the continued force of your ascent sails you up to
the apex regardless. She speaks, her voice nebbish, contrite.

JADE: ohhhhhhh

JADE: turds

JADE: sorryyy sorry sorrysorry

Your torso crumples forward slightly with the sudden descent, as though all air
had been sucked from your body in one heaving burst. Jade's arm keeps you upright,
but you are all but stonefaced, entombed in your mortification.

How could she have forgotten? How could she not know? The years you lost, the failures you endured, the scorn and pity heaped on you. You recall with perfect clarity every deflected glance or downcast face shown by your meteorbound compatriots, their contempt clear for your execrable weakness. Even though you-- quite thankfully-- got to elide those experiences yourself, you remember every broken minute the other Rose suffered through, and are deftly aware of how quickly you could have sunk back into patterns narrowly avoided but for the influence of a certain miscreant. In fact, without her return, you question grimly whether or not the modern you-- perhaps a bit restless with a somewhat-stilted life of beach parties, recreational reading, and dates with the wife in the carapace kingdom-- would ever escape its alluring depths again.

Or would want to.

She holds her hands over her mouth while you grimace. But your expression softens to a mere scowl as you gaze into the middle distance.

JADE: i

JADE: im

JADE: rose im really sorry i really didnt mean to say that

JADE: but im turning 21 in like 14 weeks and i just

JADE: i dont know anything about how it all works or why people would...

JADE: sorry :(

ROSE: ...Well, you weren't there.

ROSE: You had to be told, rather than having to watch my ignominy firsthand, so I can't really blame you for putting your foot in this particular cow pie.

ROSE: Though it is rather a spectacularly sizable one for you to find in such a gorgeous field.

JADE: i shouldve known better!!

JADE: cmon jade!!!

You swallow the word 'yeah', instead settling for a hand on her forearm, guiding it back around your stomach. Jade renews the gentle movement of the swingset beneath you.

In trying to get her off of this line of self-flagellation, you attempt to turn her to a more titillating subject of conversation, only realizing as it leaves your lips exactly what it might connote.

ROSE: So when was the last time you...

ROSE: Went on a date?

Crap. Here's hoping she doesn't take it the wrong way.

Jade practically sputters.

JADE: a date???

JADE: i...

JADE: ...hrmm

JADE: are we talking like

JADE: just for funzies?

JADE: orrrrr do you mean like

JADE: trying to find somebody to

You've dug yourself into this hole already, Lalonde. Why not simply etch out another square of bog peat with which to further muddy your boots?

ROSE: Out of prurience, let's say the latter. Let's say 'twoo wuv' is the vague stakes.

JADE: ...never

JADE: if thats what youre asking

JADE: ive never been on a date like that

Fuck.

Her voice is strangely quiet, less strangled and more... plaintive, focused, like a scrabbling mouse caught in the beams of a headlamp.

ROSE: How...

ROSE: Pardon for asking, but how is that the case?

ROSE: You...

ROSE: I was led to believe you sought partners quite...
thoroughly. And...

ROSE: You lived with my brother for five years.

Jade's chin comes to rest at the crown of your hair, and you take a deep, sodden breath in time with the rise and fall of her chest against your back.

JADE: rose

JADE: no

She says no more because she doesn't need to. It practically smolders like a molten stabwound in your chest, as if to say, *'i never dated dave or karkat, even though i tried and i clearly overpressured both of them far too much for things they did NOT want with me and overstayed my welcome, thus casting me out into loneliness on this paradise planet'*. Not to brag, but you're fairly certain you take her meaning in precisely its intended fashion. Perhaps if you are truly lucky the ground will open its maw and Jade will offer up your body to it, for surely you can both agree that the planet ought just to swallow you whole.

You snake your folded torso to one side, attempting to wrench eye contact with Jade out of the piteous turns of your body. And you are able to fit your five-foot-five frame inside her arms such that you can see her face, take in the truly hurt look she delivers to you as she screws up her mouth for an instant.

Then she lets it go, jaw releasing with a low sigh.

JADE: its

JADE: ...

JADE: its fine?

She averts her eyes.

JADE: its nothing new

Your hand meets her shoulder, bunching the black fabric between your short fingers.

ROSE: I'm so, so sorry, Jade.

ROSE: You deserve so much better than this.

ROSE: Better than this hellish, unfair universe.

ROSE: (Better than my brother, without question.)

ROSE: You deserve the whole world.

JADE: rose...

She grumbles your name, almost complaintive, but as you slide your flattened palm by her collarbone to rest in the center of her chest, she snorts a laugh, dogbreath hot against the side of your neck, underneath your fresh-trimmed summer hair.

And you have no idea who goes for it, but frantically her lips are at yours, flesh-hot, melting away the wax of your feigned indifference as you reciprocate deeply, messily. Your hand groups a swath of her tunic to drag her closer, to let you smell the faint taste of cherry at her lips and smear breathless, incredulous lipstick across her cheek.

JADE: rose!!

She sounds more surprised-- delighted?-- than taken aback. It takes a moment to realize exactly what you've just done. Your diminutive lungs heave suddenly for air.

Was it the thing you had dreamt of since your first blooming crush at 13? Gods, yes. You'd dreamt of those lips, the curls, the eyelashes and shouldershakes and the way she would bend down to meet you, all those years ago... and attraction you had thought fallow burst forth from slumbering seedlings once more the instant she offered you a

seat nestled against her body. It roils in your stomach... no, not the passion, something else, far more ambiguous and lurking, something bilious and estranged.

You-- you could go back for more. But... but you have a wife, goddammit, and sometimes personal passions... No, this is what you want. This fire in your gut, the burning in your belly, it urges you to try again, to lock lips with Jade once more and smear your hands across every--

No. Sometimes passions need to be kept in tow because it's more than possible to wrong not just yourself or your paramour in this sort of fucking tryst, but to--

Kanaya. What would Kanaya say? You stiffen your arm, holding you away from Jade's chest, and she falters.

The sun has fallen entirely below the horizon, now, last amethyst tendrils slithering untraceably thereafter. Jade-- looming huge, consuming your whole view, now, flushed and breathing heavily, mouth open-- simply watches you, trying to understand, to prise meaning from your thoroughly disordered behavior.

ROSE: I . . .

Jade's eyes are closed as she leans towards you again. Just another inch and you could--

ROSE: I have to go.

You spring from her lap, uncoiling from her arms like a spinning bullet, and with nothing but muddled, blown thoughts churning in your head you dash off of the hill and launch into the quiet nighttime air. You can barely hear Jade's last muttered word as you surge off into the distance.

JADE: . . . crumbs

Chapter 2

'These Chainsaw Filaments

Dance In My Dreams

The Cogwise Razor's Edge Of

Utter Sanguine

Potentiality.'

-Kanaya Maryam, *Lipstick Poem*.

'Segment Burns Of Lipstick Tears

From Whose Containment Burst My Years

What Languor Weeping Stays My Arms

And Saves Those Fiends From Coming Harm'

-Kanaya Maryam, *Chainsaw Poem*.

In the sky between the Human and Troll Kingdoms, the stars barely begin to alight and twinkle as you stream back to your home. You hope the short flight will somehow renew your composure, hide the juddering at your shoulders and the streaked tear-paths adorning the outsides of your eyes, but when you catch sight of the cozy reading lamp's glow billowing out the porcheside door from just beside the couch, casting its warm dominion over the littlest piece of the outside world, your mind keels and rushes with a jumbled knot of words with which you are going to have to confront your wife.

You stand at your balcony, concrete a tundra at the bottoms of your bare feet. You hold your little blue flats in your hand, but hesitate to come inside, especially as your wife-- darling, sweet Kanaya, merciful Kanaya, you hope-- is around the other side of the table in her comfy, fluffy pink PJs, the ones that button down the middle with the adorable little white ducks smattered and spun around the fitted pants and the...

She's pointing an accusatory finger at you.

KANAYA: Rose Lalonde

KANAYA: Confess

ROSE: I...

KANAYA: What Has Happened To The Brownies That Were In This Tin

KANAYA: I Was Hoping To Save At Least One For My Evening Tea

ROSE: I ate them.

ROSE: Oh, goddesses, Kanaya, I ate them all.

Kanaya laughs, perhaps misreading this as another instance of your desert-dry wit.

KANAYA: What Tragedy Befell Your Evening Which Demanded

KANAYA: Three Entire Brownies

KANAYA: They Were Even The Robust Sort

KANAYA: With Nuts And Chocolate Chip Toppings And All

ROSE: I'm sorry!

She sighs, dropping character when she sees you failing to put up your usual repartee.

KANAYA: Pish Tosh Rose

KANAYA: They Were But Brownies

KANAYA: Do Come Inside Already

KANAYA: I Shall Make More

She turns, but hesitates, sensing you still lingering at the jamb.

KANAYA: I Promise I Am Not Actually

She gazes over a shoulder.

KANAYA: Angry

While you doubt very much that she will continue to hold that sentiment even outwardly for much longer, you step in. You slide the door easily closed with a distracted hand, but when Kanaya does not feel your body about her own from behind-- a bit of a ritual you've developed, when one wife or the other should arrive home late at night-- she turns to look at you as you pad uneasily towards the kitchen for a glass of water from the pitcher in the fridge.

KANAYA: I Sincerely Do Not Intend To Interrogate Your Eating Habits

KANAYA: I Welcome You To Talk About The Course Of Your Evening

KANAYA: Should You Need To Rose

The murky waters of your recriminations slam the sluice of your conscious mind, practically flooding your mouth with contrition and sorrows. But no, you must approach this correctly; do not allow Kanaya to shoulder the burden for this, for your emotions must be yours alone to grapple.

She'll have enough of her own once you lay yourself bare.

ROSE: I have made a terrible mistake.

Kanaya's eyebrow quirks, manifesting the visage she presents when she must harden herself to the world, to the words of her loved ones. You've seen it before, yes, but only rarely pointed at you. You press on.

ROSE: My consultation with Jade went...

ROSE: Well, as you recall, I had asked Jade to meet me on that picturesque hillock out by the Human kingdom farmsteads, at the boundary between Neocalifornia and the Troll regions.

ROSE: I'm not sure why I even picked that one, I suppose,

save that it always seemed like the best place to overlook a funeral, or from which to exchange secret documents or some other form of scintillating scuttlebutt.

Kanaya has tilted her head, not in consternation but rather failing to see the relevance of these details. Rose, you must focus. Task at hand.

ROSE: ...Right. She was receptive to my offer of a spot in the journal, I think. We talked for a good while, she mentioned support for the project, and interest even as she asked likewise why I had decided to stage our interlocution where I had. To which I responded...

KANAYA: What Has She Done To Distress You So

You feel your incisors grate.

ROSE: She had put up the swing, just as I'd asked. And she took to it, and offered me a spot to swing alongside her.

KANAYA: Alongside

ROSE: Alright, in her lap. She asked me to sit in her lap.

KANAYA: !

ROSE: And I assented. And we swung for a while, and talked further, and our physical proximity was in fact as approximate as it could possibly be reckoned...

KANAYA: Rose If You Are Saying What I Believe You Are

KANAYA: (And I Comprehend Your Particular Discomfort But I Must Understand)

KANAYA: Please Do Simplify This For Me

KANAYA: What Did Jade Do

KANAYA: *Precisely*

You rub your arm, gaze falling away from Kanaya. She makes a good point, you suppose, that if you circumlocute too efficaciously around this particular boondoggle...

No. This is your fault, Rose Lalonde. Take ownership of it.

ROSE: She kissed me.

Dammit.

KANAYA: Did She Now

ROSE: I was overwhelmed!

KANAYA: Did She Overwhelm You

ROSE: I... felt like I didn't have control of the situation, certainly.

KANAYA: Did You Not Have A Say In The Matter

ROSE: That's not what I mean!

KANAYA: Well What Precisely Do You Mean

ROSE: I mean that I was caught off guard by it all! As if the gates swung open on the cage containing my evening and I was suddenly face to face with a grizzly bear!

Kanaya's teeth square up, pointed canine-analogues abutting the gleaming lower row of her vampiric dentata. Her hands are at her sides, clenched into themselves, and her voice, usually so throaty and brash, is cold, almost tinny.

KANAYA: It Seems As Though Perhaps

KANAYA: I Ought Visit Jade Myself

KANAYA: Im Afraid Rose Your Retelling Of Events Is Making

KANAYA: Relatively Little Sense

KANAYA: Save What I Can Discern As

KANAYA: Deeply Improper Conduct From An Erstwhile Friend

KANAYA: Towards My Wife

Oh, *shit*.

ROSE: No!

You shift a foot forward. You ball your fist. You look your wife in the eyes.

ROSE: Kanaya, no. Please, stop. This was all my fault.

ROSE: I... I was the one who set up the meeting with her, I asked her to join me at that exact spot, I requested she come on the business of what I had thought would be making a straightforward offer for her to contribute to my poetry journal.

You feel the tears well in the inner corners of your eyes before you can stop them, but you scrunch your nose, trying to dispel the ghoulsh notion you've allowed to take hold in your wife's mind.

ROSE: But when I got there I realized that I had clearly wanted, on some level...

Kanaya watches you babble, eyes steady, impassive as they gaze into your own.

ROSE: No. Let me attempt this more succinctly.

ROSE: Jade didn't behave improperly, or act on anything more than my wishes.

ROSE: I kissed her.

KANAYA: Oh

KANAYA: Ohhhhhh

KANAYA: I See

In an uncharacteristic moment of unkempt reaction, Kanaya's mouth hangs slightly ajar, and she blinks several times, before her hands rejoin, clasped in front of her waist. Those several seconds of monstrous silence are enough for your stomach to engage in grotesque acrobatics, turning and churning with desultory dread.

KANAYA: So When You Disclosed Immediately Prior That It Had Been Her Doing

KANAYA: That Was A Falsification

ROSE: Yes. Sort of? I can't tell. No, she was definitely there.

ROSE: And she was definitely... helping.

KANAYA: A Sin Of Omission Then

KANAYA: Albeit One That Caused Me To Believe That She

KANAYA: Hmm

KANAYA: Well In That Case I Must Demand

KANAYA: That You

KANAYA: As The Humans Say

Kanaya's set shoulders soften, fingers unfurling to release their clutched acrimony. Even from here you can see the small green rings in her palms where long nails dug in, restlessly.

KANAYA: Dish

KANAYA: Give Me The Tea

KANAYA: As It Were

KANAYA: For In Times Such As These I Believe It Is My Right
As Your Partner To Request Such A Disquisition

Your posture melts likewise.

ROSE: You're not... angry with me?

ROSE: Are you going to be if I give more salacious details?
How is that not going to...

ROSE: I don't know. Make you jealous, I suppose.

Your wife flips her hair.

KANAYA: Were I Feeling Jealousy At The Moment It Would Be
Rather From The Idea That You Felt This Needed Be Withheld
From Me

KANAYA: The Notion That You Might Lie About Your Whereabouts Or With Whom You Were Trading Saliva Is A Much More Pressing Concern Than The Exchange Itself

KANAYA: Though Certainly It Is Possible That If You Disclose Your Motivations As Lacking Fulfillment With Our Romantic Life Together Then Perhaps I Will Be

KANAYA: Hurt

ROSE: No! Sweetheart, I would bring such a concern to you in an instant before I could ever...

ROSE: No.

KANAYA: Then It Was A Sudden And Vigorous Encounter With

KANAYA: An Old Crush Perhaps

KANAYA: The Sort You Could Not Be Faulted For Realizing Upon Its Clear Reciprocation

She raises an eyebrow.

ROSE: Possibly. I'm not sure I would call that faultless, but without a doubt it was the case.

KANAYA: Fair Enough

KANAYA: And It Is Likely I Will Continue To Be Cross With You Regardless

KANAYA: However

KANAYA: If Our Relationships Parameters Are Not A Threat To Our Happiness Then It Is A Much Less Immediate Issue And I Will Take Much Less Personal Offense

You slump against the corner of the couch by the window, almost laugh-coughing from sheer stress, as though your stomach has been released on the end of a bungee cord to dangle heedlessly over the pit of your intestines.

ROSE: If it makes you feel better...

ROSE: I was thinking about you the whole time.

You see Kanaya's mouth crack into the slightest smile, but she keeps an admirable rein on it.

KANAYA: Fine

KANAYA: Tell Me Everything

ROSE: Well...

Kanaya sits pertly on the ottoman opposite you, and you detail matter-of-factly the occurrences between Jade and yourself. To her credit, Kanaya expresses her discomfort regarding what specifics she dislikes at each turn, particularly when you detail your concerns about the possible ease with which you could return to alcoholism, or Jade's assertion that she is merely 'down to earth'. Otherwise she is as patient and calm as you could ask for; god, even when you know she's mad at you you can't help but be a dopey-eyed love-puppy around your wife.

ROSE: ...Then, when I realized precisely what my actions had entailed, what they signified, I just did... the most acrobatic fucking pirouette possible from her arms, and hurried back here at my maximum airspeed.

KANAYA: Well Then

KANAYA: I Am Gratified To Hear It Was Mutual

ROSE: That surprises me, I suppose. Though I didn't do a very good job of convincing you otherwise at the start.

ROSE: Not that I was trying to dissuade anyone of the notion; nor would I ever consider Jade the sort to overpower anybody. She's not built for it.

KANAYA: She Is Six Feet Three Inches Tall

ROSE: Is she? How on Earth C could you possibly know that?

KANAYA: Never Second Guess The Powers Of A Spacebound Hero

KANAYA: Or Perhaps I Measured Her For A Dress Some Years Ago

KANAYA: Here Is Where I Would Place A Trail Of Finish Crumbs
Were I So Inclined

KANAYA: In Any Case Perhaps Your Unexpectedly Sullen
Homecoming Set Me In An Inauspicious Mindset For It

Despite your wife's accusatory tone, you snort with laughter.

ROSE: What did you expect me to do? Kanaya, I'd thought I had
cheated on you!

ROSE: Just traipse through the door, lope over to the couch,
drape myself on the chaise with indignity?

ROSE: Start quoting Sappho? "Sweet Kanaya, I cannot weave/
Paradox Space has overcome me with longing/for a girl."

KANAYA: It Would Be A Far Cry From All This Guilt Tinged
Regret Nonsense

Her smile curdles.

KANAYA: Perhaps Even Preferable

ROSE: I hope you don't think too much less of me for all
this.

Kanaya folds her arms, curled upper lip becoming more pronounced as she runs
her tongue beneath it.

KANAYA: Really Now Rose

KANAYA: There Is Truly Only One Condition By Which You Could
Disappoint Me As My Wife And Partner In This Case

KANAYA: Do Not Tell Me You Were Intending To Indulge Her In

KANAYA: A Love Triangle

ROSE: Never!

ROSE: Darling Kanaya, I could never. I would never. At the very least because I know it'd splatter my vena cava across the dining table to even consider a dip into that clandestine ménage à trois nonsense.

KANAYA: And Who Would Be Forced To Clean That Up

ROSE: Well, in this scenario, either you or Jade, apparently. You might have to flip her for it.

KANAYA: You Doubt I Would Have The Strength To

KANAYA: Flip Her

ROSE: Quite not. Though now that you mention I do rather prefer the notion to a game of chance.

Your hands ring together as you rewet your lips.

ROSE: But... How can you say you're not angry!?

ROSE: I've fucked this all up!!

KANAYA: You Have Not

KANAYA: 'fucked this all up'.

KANAYA: Certainly Not Our Relationship

KANAYA: And Most Likely Not Even Your Friendship With Jade

KANAYA: It Sounds As Though You Got Caught Up In The Moment

KANAYA: And Overzealously Rationalized To Yourself How The

Things That Were Happening Were Not Romantic

KANAYA: Until They Were

KANAYA: Then How They Were Okay

KANAYA: Until They Werent

KANAYA: You

KANAYA: Sweet Wife

KANAYA: Are Allowed To Get Swept Up And Make Mistakes

ROSE: That sounds...

ROSE: Suspiciously like forgiveness, but I'm not sure you

should offer that to me so easily.

ROSE: Especially if you're not positive that you can do so sincerely.

ROSE: Maybe you deserve to be unhappy with me about this, because it was very silly of me, and brash likewise.

Kanaya points a claw at herself.

KANAYA: Remember With Whom You Are Speaking

KANAYA: Do Not Gut Yourself For Following Your Passions

KANAYA: And Letting The Worlds Beauty Lead You Where It May

She points at you, in a manner you would be convinced was accusatory were it not for the softness of her face, and the unrelenting positivity you fear she is about to unpen in your direction. Instead, the mild fingerwags for emphasis feel comfortingly maternal, returning precisely to the Kanaya you've known and loved for these eight long years.

KANAYA: Rose

KANAYA: I Come From A Culture In Which This Sort Of Behavior

KANAYA: Were It Codified As A Different Form Of Attraction Than Our Own

KANAYA: Would Be Perfectly Just And Sanctified

KANAYA: Merely Because You See Yourself As The Necessary Object Of My Sole Affections Does Not Mean You Cannot Feel Desire For Other People

KANAYA: Or Even Act On It

KANAYA: But You Must Take My Needs Into Consideration

KANAYA: And I Am Glad You Stopped Upon The Realization That You Were Not Doing So

You nod mutely.

KANAYA: But Please

KANAYA: Do Not

KANAYA: Ever Do This Again

ROSE: Of course! God, no. Of course.

ROSE: But as for Jade...

ROSE: Would you prefer that I--

KANAYA: I Am Rather Beleaguered By This Evenings

KANAYA: Affairs

You almost cringe, and Kanaya's smile widens as her lips go thin.

KANAYA: And I Should Much Rather Adjourn To Bed

KANAYA: Would You Care To Join Me

KANAYA: Or Will You Be Staying Up A While Longer

ROSE: I could... do with some rest, I think.

You follow her as she moves towards your mutual bedroom, move through the door as she holds it open for you, beckons you in.

KANAYA: As For The Question At Hand

KANAYA: Let Us Pursue That Notion Come Morning

KANAYA: Indeed I Believe You Should Pursue More Than Merely
The Notion

KANAYA: Come Sufficient Terms Of Agreement

KANAYA: I Merely Ask

She wraps you in her arms, her forgiveness flowing over you like warm waves, like a freshly-dryered topsheet.

KANAYA: Tell Me First Next Time

KANAYA: Please

ROSE: Of...

ROSE: Of course, my love.

Chapter 3

'Stalk, stalk!

Through reedstalks I creep, deathstalk in repose

And for equal measures of bloodlust I have reigned

For without my sweet prey's remittance

My body will stay lean and boned and sinewy.

*Deerstalk among drake weed and through thrush rushes and cattails at water's edge by
midnight.*

Stalk.'

-Jade Harley, *Stalk!*, with help from Rose Lalonde.

ROSE: Jade.

ROSE: About last night...

JADE: its fine

JADE: it happened but we dont have to talk about it

JADE: not now not ever

JADE: like i said im used to it

ROSE: May I come over?

JADE: ...

JADE: sure thats fine

JADE: if youd really like to talk about it fine

You have just finished your morning coffee date at the New Outglut Coffee Roasters, at which you shared the first Frosted Fenestrations of the season with your wife. You kissed her on the cheek, she reassured you she wouldn't need your assistance at the brooding caverns 'til the afternoon at the earliest, and you thanked her again for helping you navigate the particular thorny bramble that is human affection.

Then you sent three texts to Jade, and sighed at the response.

Close your eyes. Dream in birdsong. Bow your knees in a soft *plié*, and thrust one arm into the sky.

You cloudburst from the tile patio in front of the café to the bewilderment of the other patrons.

From this vantage point, in the frigid jetstream above New Outglut, you can hear the quailing of the tree in your front yard. While Earth C didn't import much flora from Alternia-- too much of it is disagreeable to passersby, at least those amenable to keeping all their limbs-- your wife did insist on keeping a particularly phantasmagorical specie in your front lawn, a hulking, dead-looking thing, as tall as your hive with great drawn hollows in the front reminiscent of ghoulish, eyeless faces. When the wind passes by it on a pronouncedly wuthering day like today, it moans with ghastly torpor, wood creaking like insect-weakened joists imminently to collapse upon your domicile.

You love it. Your inner goth-- and your outer goth, likewise-- appreciate with silent touch the groaning monstrosity each time you pass it by. You pretended at protest when she brought up the idea of darkening your doorstep with this particular whinging willow, but she understood your secret excitement, knew you shared her aesthetic appreciation for the thing down to your marrow. God, you love your wife.

Freaks the hell out of visitors, though.

You course due east, breezing through the beachfront air and cruising over the ocean on an agreeable zephyr towards Jade's island. You consider quite frequently how odd it is that you're able to fly. It's been a veritable truth of your life since you were 13, and most of your friends merely accept their capacity for it as a gift, but you've always struggled to understand. Why is it that you-- given a traffic-cone colored outfit and ballet shoes, twee rainbow planet, and powers of eversight and blasé *knowing*-- gained the ability to fly? Certainly doesn't mesh with the rest of the skillset. Maybe it was

Skaia's tightlipped apology for drenching you in the feculent unicorn's blood that was your private 'quest'.

Jade's island is recognizable from a great distance, if you know the signs. While she elected not to carry over her childhood home-- and the accompanying orb-topped tower-- the home she built instead, with its winding, uneven extremities, outgrowths, and jutting, pointed spires, carries on top a great, mechanical orrery in constant, imperceptible motion. Who knows what lies in the other layers of her grand manor, dilapidated as it is in thick layers of dust and choking ivy? But the methodical way Jade clearly upkeeps this brass behemoth, the love she pours into its workings and function-- it's just so incongruous to the disrepair of the rest of the edifice.

Indeed, she stands on her roof now, clothed in a floorlength, velvet gown, black, but barely tinged with her signature green color amid the fabric. Did she put this on especially for you? Perhaps she just dresses like this even on days when she expects nobody to see her, when she presumes she will not be witnessed.

Almost unconsciously, you begin your perfunctory, grand entrance. You align your shadow with her on the ground, casting yourself in a radiant sunburst, a radical and private eclipse for her perusal. She shades her eyes, and you float down, the black skirt and pink ribbon of your attire flapping in the vigorous winds.

You ought to say something stunning, something alluring and dark, portentous.

ROSE: I like your dress.

Close enough.

JADE: thanks

JADE: its just any old thing i guess

ROSE: It flows well. I like the, uh.

You swallow. The air is surprisingly dry, up here, even so close to the ocean.

ROSE: The curves of it, it suits you; it's flattering.

Jade shifts uncomfortably, dragging an unclad foot across the rocky stonework edge of her rooftop.

JADE: so uh

JADE: what brings you here today?

JADE: it seemed like you wanted to talk about last night....

ROSE: Aah, yes. You'll have to forgive my equivocation. I was very much so not prepared for a conversation of this sort so soon after my morning coffee.

JADE: haha take your time!

While her smile matches the tone of what she's saying, it doesn't reach her eyes, green spheres never quite losing their besotten edge.

ROSE: So, uh.

ROSE: I guess I've never really thought to ask before, but...

You raise an arm past Jade.

ROSE: This is gorgeous machinery. How does it work? Is it wound, or gravity-powered? Or do you keep it in perpetual motion?

You step past her, and when you do Jade turns, regarding as you do the mechanism in the center of her roof. The unfathomable skein of curls at her back billows capelike in the wind, as if wrapped in vines and startrails. She must be so used to this contraption that it takes her a moment to even register your question.

JADE: oh

JADE: all this?

JADE: its powered by solar and geothermal, same as everything else in the place

JADE: theres just a battery underneath

JADE: honestly, the draw at this speed is so minor that it doesn't even register compared to the water heater

ROSE: That's fascinating.

Examining the broad arm upholding the unmoving Neptune, you try to jump to touch it, kicking your legs in midair as though it will bouy your tiny frame any higher. Once you land again, with an unsophisticated grunt, you roll your eyes, and will your body to fly the extra few inches it takes for your hands to make contact with the beam. Then-- since you weigh a hundred-twenty pounds, soaking wet-- it's but trivial to heave yourself up onto it, to sit with crossed legs atop it. It doesn't even sway or judder for your whole mass.

ROSE: What does that mean, 'at this speed'?

JADE: well

JADE: it represents an accurate, one-to-one orbital model of the solar system.

She points to the earth.

JADE: it takes precisely twenty-three hours, fifty-six minutes, four-point-oh-nine seconds for the model earth to turn a rotation

JADE: and to go all the way round it takes three-hundred-sixty-five days, six hours

JADE: to account for leapdays and leapseconds yknow

You nod, imitating comprehension.

JADE: but its machinery

JADE: so if i want to i can make it go much faster for demonstrations sake

Jade prattles like you're used to, comfortable fingers knitting unseen calculations on the palms of her calloused hands. How unbelievable is it that a day after such a passionate embrace, you and she can pretend at this same sort of easy conversation, as though friendship doesn't threaten to propel you forward, launch you into her arms again? You wish you knew how to divert yourself to your real goal, to speak about her, what she wants, how to navigate all of this. Even your skin feels the static charge, threatening to arc between your bodies, cling you together once more. So what can you do but listen?

JADE: rose?

JADE: are you listening??

Jade drifts up to your height, hips bobbing with the gentle floating weave of the air, skirt playing in the breeze and feet swaying like the peeling tongue of a bell under her broad dress.

ROSE: Oh.

ROSE: S-sorry.

JADE: :/

Her arms cross, then uncross again, fingers falling to rest at the outseam of her clothes.

ROSE: I guess I just...

ROSE: I suppose I'm trying to not make you uncomfortable.

JADE: you wont

JADE: i promise

ROSE: Aah. What... would you like to talk about, then?

JADE: well telling me what you ACTUALLY want would be a start?

JADE: what brings you here? what do you need?

ROSE: I've been learning all sorts of fun words from the poly community this morning.

ROSE: Sorry, 'polyam'. Apparently that's the most apropos term for it.

ROSE: My god, there are so many books about it, if you know where to look.

ROSE: Did you know that there's a term for the opposite of jealousy?

ROSE: 'Compersion': The nonromantic, nonsexual enjoyment of watching a partner enjoy another romantic or sexual relationship.

JADE: hehe!

JADE: rose i did know that!

JADE: youre acting like ive never read a dossie easton book :p

ROSE: Oh.

ROSE: I had supposed you might, hm.

You pat Neptune's stocky extremity next to you, and Jade turns, lowering her backside reticently to it, albeit at a few inches' distance from you, lower enough on the arm to keep your eyes level. You try to reach out, hand coming to rest on her shoulder, but she shrinks away from you, almost flinching.

JADE: rose i uh

JADE: i appreciate all this?

JADE: you think im really lonely so you wanted to give me space to talk about what happened!

JADE: but im fine

JADE: if theres anything i can do for you though...

Your incredulous, gaping mouth fails to utter sound, so you attempt your best significant blinks. In return, Jade twinges, expression pained.

JADE: rose

JADE: do you know how people see me??

JADE: there's a word they always use, every time they hear im in a relationship, or theyre the ones im seeing

ROSE: Homewrecker.

Jade scrunches her body forward, chest compressed, ears flat and defeated. Her hunched arms huddle underneath her thighs.

JADE: yep

ROSE: And your concern is that I might see you the same way.

You roll your bangs between thumb and forefinger, staring at the little blonde tips as they curl and fray in the straw-soaked sunlight.

ROSE: For what it's worth, I quite enjoyed yesterday.

JADE: ...

JADE: thats good

JADE: im glad

ROSE: Can I ask a question?

ROSE: Jade, what do YOU want?

JADE: hmmm

She puffs her cheeks, looking a little offput.

JADE: i want a lot of things i think!

JADE: i guess i dont think about them very much though?

JADE: i want...

JADE: to get back into gardening

Her eyes wander off, trailing to the skyline.

JADE: i want to try shaving my head

JADE: i want to try on short dresses to see if they scare me too much!

Your fingers snake to your temples and you rub them with vigor, trying to sift through the words of the complaintive daemon in your skull reminding you how entirely you are failing to simply say the thing you want: *kiss me*, Jade seems perhaps too forward a sentiment, but your whole lexicography fails you for a more nuanced communication. Any more bet-hedging and you'll be lost in an ornate brushmaze of your own design.

ROSE: From me, Jade.

JADE: oh

JADE: i want you to keep being my friend

ROSE: Oh.

Your gut crumples like an imploded star, and you breathe deeply through your nose to avoid the sudden seasickness threatening to upend your stomach out your esophagus. Jade doesn't seem to notice, eyes focused on some particular crenellation or irregularity in the brickwork directly below her.

ROSE: So... that's it, then?

JADE: oh god rose

She sounds crushed and distant, like a bee trapped in a soda can.

JADE: all i want is to not lose you as a friend

JADE: i KNOW i fucked up

JADE: i KNOW youre mad at me because i kissed you and you didnt like it!!

JADE: i KNOW kanaya must think im awful!!!

ROSE: What!?

Jade's shoulders ripple, and she lets out a startled sob. You fly to your feet (rather literally, now standing on the beam adjacent to Jade), and put your hands to your face, unable to hold back laughter.

ROSE: THAT'S what you were afraid of!?

JADE: nooooooooooooo

She moans, clearly believing your laughter to be at her expense. You press on, desperate to make your true intentions known.

ROSE: I PROMISE you I enjoyed it!

JADE: but...

Jade turns towards you, eyes overflowing already, and buries her snout in your skirt, obscene and sludgy noises emanating from the height of about your knees.

JADE: i still wanna be frieeeen--

ROSE: JADE!

JADE: *SNRRRRRNK!*

ROSE: I'm not here to abjure you or toss you out of my life.

ROSE: Kanaya and I resolved my concerns of impropriety last night!

ROSE: I'm here trying to ask you OUT!

The phlegmy honking ceases immediately as the clockwork universe inside Jade's head audibly downshifts.

JADE: wh

JADE: what?

You levitate yourself down again, straddle the bronzed balustrade atop which Jade sits, now facing you and gazing into your eyes with blinking confusion.

ROSE: It's precisely what it sounds like.

ROSE: I came to her with my proverbial toque in my tentacles and apologized if my behavior had been untoward.

ROSE: She told me to let her know ahead of time in the future, but this morning we agreed:

ROSE: Much like if we elected to have Kismeses on the side or the like, we decided mutually that there's no harm in allowing the strength of our marriage to become the ferrous core around which the creamy nougat of additional romances could be slathered.

Jade narrows her eyes, but politely refrains from questioning your absurd malapropism.

ROSE: Aah, she did have one other demand, however.

ROSE: To quote her precisely,

ROSE: 'I Would Not Presume To Her Affections Towards Me In The Slightest'

ROSE: 'However One Of My Few Stipulations Regarding Your Interest In Her Is This'

ROSE: 'That Should You Offer Her One Of Your Earth Human "Dates"'

ROSE: 'You Ought Extend A Similar Invitation From Me As Well'.

ROSE: Normally I'd not stand for this sort of circuitous, tortuous nonsense, but--

JADE: yeah!!! that sounds so amazing!!!!

JADE: oooo do you wanna do them separate or together??

JADE: itd be a double date!!

JADE: but just with meeee! :D :D

Jade clutches her hands to excited fists just under her chin, and spins her legs to bring her whole body in alignment, facing you. Unbidden, the grinding of metal signals the jumpstarted movement of the room-scale cosmolabe beneath you, and you hold fast to it with clutching knees as it begins to speed up. (Or perhaps it's technically an astrolabe? Perhaps the distinction's always been muddy to your mind's eye. Perhaps you can ask Jade, later.)

And you laugh, able to fathom neither her sudden mood shift nor the intergalactic revelry now stirring at Jade's command. Jade is giggling too, clearly likewise nonplussed, and with each agog glance something in her spins the grand orrery faster.

Let it whirl like teacups; let it render forth any tempest within. For Jade is in your arms again, and she is wrapped around you, rolling you closer as you press your nose to her grinning nose, as her lips seek out yours and you fulfill her murmured ask with giddy reply.

Some time later, after landing once more, Jade quiets the grand machine back to its taciturn pace, resets the mechanism to the precise angle of the current date and time. You gaze over a parapet out at the seaside rocks, watching waves crest and break with roar after pearlescent roar.

You catch your smug breath, steady your sea legs, and text the wife.

ROSE: Jade merely asks where and when.

ROSE: And if you'd prefer to do our dates together, or separately.

ROSE: As for me, my skirt is a little sullied...

ROSE: But I'm looking forward to what the future holds, nonetheless.

The Claw In Your Side

Teen and Up Audiences

8349 words (3 chapters)

2019-09-16 – 2019-09-23

Content Warnings by Chapter

Chapter 1: Descriptions of food.

Chapter 3: Discussion of body type.

Chapter 1

My paring knife meets the pert flesh of the final berry, scything away the fertile green top and loosing a gout of sweet-smelling red juice. It wafts to my nostrils, and I twitch them, scenting it as I split the green away from the white undermeat. I toss the top into the sink and make four quick cuts, turning the strawberry into slivered sections ready for their bed. With a flicked wrist the wooden turner rolls the golden-brown wheatcake once, careful to take air underneath and not curl the sides. It'll burn, if I do that.

The best part of cooking is always the lavish scents, like the comfortable sizzlesmell of batter on griddle. Bready, but sweet; wholesomely filling, but better for the teeth than candy. It's finished, so I pull it off of the pan, shut off the stove, and start to fold: bottom in, side in, other side; strawberries dropped in the center, then a dollop of fresh sweet whip and a dusting of confectioner's sugar, and I close the top.

I slide it across the bartop counter to the waiting blonde whose home I'm cooking in.

ROSE: Thanks for the crêpes.

The sound is glottal, almost guttural, in the back of her throat, practiced French circumflex darting out amidst the rest of the compliment.

ROSE: I certainly don't mean this as a dig at you, but when did you learn to make them so elegantly?

JADE: oh last night

ROSE: You... slept on our couch last night.

What I don't say next is, *yeah, I stayed up reading recipes after we agreed I'd make dinner for you as thanks for extending your couch to me over a couple days, because I kept crashing on it so I could see you, date after date.* What I extra don't say is that I'm used to

winging recipes like this for people who let me sleep over because anything is better than being consigned to my own bed.

I shrug, affecting nonchalance.

It's a short while later, and we're sitting on her couch, having finished our meal. Rose's hand rises, and the backs of her fingers brush and caress my cheek. She merely... watches me, gazes into my eyes, studies my facets and drinks in my every blink and giggle.

This is the sort of thing I had, once upon a time, only dreamt about. Before I had ever seen Rose's face, I imagined her much like she is, but... rounder, taller, more broad-shouldered, with longer, curlier hair and a shyer smile.

That is to say, more like myself, the only person I had ever met.

It's true, I may have had moments of physical attention like this in the past, with passersby or part-time lovers, but this experience-- two dates in one week with Rose, and one with Kanaya, and another upcoming-- is just so wholly unlike my usual schedule. And by 'schedule', I guess I mean that I'm not usually much of one for second dates, much less spending evenings in the apartments of pretty girls.

I lean myself into her facepats, sway to the sound of her breath, eyes closing as she seeks me out, a bee to my flower.

Her lips are roasted marshmallow, still sweet with crepe-taste, powdered sugar, or her vanilla lip gloss. My doggy senses can sift through many layers of her muddled, delightful scent, even as the taste of her urges itself into my mind, fills my mouth. Then her tongue plays at my lips, offering to do the same.

I hear it before she does, the thin *tap-clack* of heels on wood floor in the entryway, but my ear quirks, and Rose looks up for a moment from our shared kiss. Then her

shoulders tweak as the door cracks to, and swings wide. She wrenches her head around in time to see her wife enter their flat.

Kanaya spots us immediately, weight shifting to her back foot as she smiles.

KANAYA: Oh

KANAYA: Apologies To You Both

KANAYA: I Did Not Figure You Would Be So

KANAYA: Intertwined

KANAYA: At This Moment

Rose's arms have already sprung back, away from me. My heart skips a crestfallen beat in the moment it takes to process her almost instinctual retraction, before I recall the notions that, for one, it's rude to hug up on people in situations where someone can see you, and for two, that goes doubly so if said someone is your wife, and you are-- as my friends were up until quite recently-- fervent monogamists.

But Rose laughs despite herself, and her hands meet my forearms again. A far cry from kissing, but I suspect I can worm my way back there with effort.

ROSE: Hello, dear. Fret not, you're not interrupting.

KANAYA: Says The Woman Whose Appearance Is Rather Like A Grub Caught With Its Feelers In The Round Confectionery Storage

She waggles her delicately curved eyebrows, and I watch Rose's cheeks redden deeper than even our smooching had ignited.

I can't help but loose a titter at that, and raise an arm to give Kanaya a welcoming wave. She ditches her coat before shedding her delightful shoes with a grunt of relaxation.

JADE: hello kanaya!!

JADE: i had such a great time the other night!!!

JADE: id never been to that restaurant before

JADE: alternian fine dining is something else!

KANAYA: It Was My Pleasure

Rose turns from Kanaya to blink deep, curious blinks at me.

ROSE: How expository of you.

JADE: haha what?

And back to her wife.

ROSE: How was the... performance?

KANAYA: Aah Well

KANAYA: Xyleph Was

KANAYA: As Per Usual

KANAYA: More Seen Than Heard

KANAYA: And Better Off For It

ROSE: That bad?

KANAYA: Well I Swore Despite His Puppydogging I Would Attend
No More Of His

KANAYA: Spectacles

KANAYA: However It Was The Best I Could Enlocate On Such
Short Notice Today

ROSE: Oh, well. My condolences.

ROSE: Care to join us for some conversation?

KANAYA: Is That What You Term Your Activities Prior To My
Intercession

She smiles wryly, and Rose returns the shot eyebrow.

KANAYA: Well Then Pardon Me

Kanaya chooses this moment to step over towards the couch, resting her little Louis Vuiton cloche with a clank against the glass center of the living room table. She sidles up to me, a pale, full moon over my head; I'm quickly reminded that even while

I'm taller, Kanaya's a sizable enough woman to truly loom over me seated. Her eyes are locked on Rose, still, whose lips are pursed, anticipatory but entertained.

KANAYA: If I May

ROSE: I... insist?

The vampiress' eyes flick to me. Two long, deliberate fingers catch just under my chin, and she leads my gaze up. I barely have the presence of mind to rewet my lips, trying to minimize the doofy grin brought on by this sudden avalanche of affections.

KANAYA: May I

JADE: ooh please do

She kissed me good night at the end of our date a few days ago, but this kiss is nothing like that. This kiss is a volcano, the sort that moves blood and mandates attention. This kiss is a deep and inviting probe into my whereabouts and innermost needs. Still tender, yes, attentive, and Kanaya waits for the moment I press back into it to dart her tongue between my teeth and tease at molars with a turn of her head.

Then Kanaya straightens up, fixes an errant lock that had dwindled out of her perfect bangs, and nods.

KANAYA: Mmm Crepes

KANAYA: Perhaps In A Short While

**KANAYA: I Rather Require Some Familiar Alternian Classical
Listening To**

KANAYA: Clear My Head

I slump against the back of the couch, circuits frazzled, and reorient myself to space and the room, which feels much smaller and cozier, redder and more soft to the touch. Maybe it's that the sun has set, sometime during my focused attention on Rose.

My eyes flit open once more, and I turn them to her; her lips are still pinched shut, and her blush is immense, radiating like sunlight. She's leaned forward against her knees now as if trying to catch her breath, steady herself against the couch with one hand.

JADE: rose

JADE: are you okay?? you look really warm

ROSE: Aah, I'm quite alright, thanks.

She picks up her water glass, half-draining it in three swigs.

ROSE: Perhaps I'll lose the sweater, though.

She does, unshrugging herself out of the autumnal wrap draped around her shoulders.

Something emits from the door through which Kanaya passed a short time earlier. At first it's barely recognizable as sound, much less music, rather a thick vibration of the flooring felt even through the rug around the couch, and accompanied by bass-heavy thumping, and what could sound to the uncultured layperson like large livestock being slaughtered awake. I'm familiar enough with Alternian music-- and with some Meshuggah albums lent me by one Roxy Lalonde-- that at the very least I can appreciate it as quite traditional indeed.

ROSE: I must say, however...

ROSE: Watching my wife attempt to excavate your tonsils does wonders to broaden my horizons on all this.

I chortle at the notion. It's funny, but I keep forgetting Rose was worried about Kanaya's feelings towards our relationship in the first place, and every time she mentions it I just want to tell her not to fret. But she's got to realize that on her own, I guess.

JADE: hehe

JADE: im glad i could offer myself up to help then! :D

I expect her to laugh at my puerile joke, to call me silly or chide me for my constant desire to take up residence in somebody's arms. But her face is downcast, just for a moment, before she shakes her hair out, resettling her hands on my upper arms.

Against all my better instincts, I chew my upper lip, and look into her eyes.

JADE: rose

JADE: whats wrong

Rose exhale-snorts through her nose with a quizzical glance.

ROSE: Nothing. There's nothing wrong.

JADE: okayy

JADE: if you say so?

I let out a deep breath, trying to quell the tension arising in my stomach, but Rose tuts her tongue on her hard palate and grimaces.

ROSE: I just wish I knew how to not feel so...

ROSE: Fluctuative? Irresolute?

JADE: :/

ROSE: Apologies. I know you're not the right person to whom I should vent about this.

ROSE: It's just...

ROSE: To start, I felt awfully foolish being startled like that, by my own wife.

JADE: sure

ROSE: It was as though I was still so caught up in being discovered doing something wrong that I failed to recall that she's in on it as well.

ROSE: So why do I feel like I'm double-crossing her instead

of her partner in crime?

JADE: ...

I have no idea what to say to that.

JADE: would you like a hug

JADE: would it help

ROSE: ...Perhaps. I'm unsure, but it sounds worth an attempt.

Rose rights herself, prepares to receive a stilted, seated hug, but instead I reach down to put a hand at her thigh. She bends her leg up, accommodating me, and when my other hand reaches her lower back she gives me a bemused grin, as if to ask where I'm going with the gesture.

Then I pick her up, and she makes an adorable squeak. Dragging her dead-center on my lap, still facing sideways, I wrap her smallish torso entirely in my embrace. She laughs below her breath, and takes a moment to settle in and nestle close.

ROSE: O-oh.

JADE: this okay?

ROSE: Quite. It's comfortable, actually.

ROSE: Rather nice.

JADE: good!

The crown of her gold-blond head meets the center of my chest, and I can feel her every muscle ease just a bit. Rose sighs, letting herself relax, and I breathe in time with her, urging her to settle into the moment, nuzzle close to me.

ROSE: It's funny.

ROSE: Now it's not even so much the fear that I'm doing something wrong, but rather the second-order silliness I feel at having felt that way in the first place.

JADE: sounds like you could do with something else to focus

on

JADE: and finding some other way to think about this whole thing so it doesn't feed back into itself

ROSE: Hmm? How do you mean?

JADE: yknow

I turn my nose down, feeling Rose's hot breath crawl across my cheeks, and press it into the curve alongside her own. I smile against her lips.

JADE: im sure youll think of something

Her eyes flutter closed, so close to me that her eyelashes brush the lenses of my great moonlike glasses. My arm wrapped around her shoulder cradles her head, supporting her as I dive back into the previously-interrupted kiss, offer myself up as a compelling enough distraction to disengage Rose's mind from her 'second-order silliness'. She sighs into my mouth, a sigh of comfort now rather than exasperation, and we linger there for a while, merely enjoying each other's bodies.

Eventually, she cranes her neck down again, pressing herself into my front and raising a hand to my shoulder to bury her chin in the crook of an elbow.

ROSE: I'm sorry, you must be getting tired.

ROSE: Will you be going home tonight?

I chew the inside of my lower lip. Aside from having run out of clean clothes-- a concern fixed with alchemy, or with a quick visit home during hours my hosts are busy-- I don't exactly have anything waiting for me there.

JADE: aah i can if you want me to?

ROSE: Do you... need to, though? Perhaps a preference for sleeping in your own bed?

JADE: i

JADE: uh

JADE: its not like im keeping plants or pets that need looking after there

JADE: i havent been gardening in forever, like i said :(

ROSE: Hm. I can see why that could be a disappointing state to go back to, yes.

JADE: but if im getting in the way im happy to go!

I nod, acting emphatic. I won't be a burden on them! I'd hate to get in their way.

ROSE: I'm not so much asking for what I want, Jade.

ROSE: I'm asking for what YOU would like.

ROSE: Irrespective of the question of politeness regarding taking up space in my home.

JADE: oh

What do... I want? Is there even a question of it...?

I can feel my voice thin out as I even contemplate the notion of going home, the only things waiting for me there being disused storage rooms and billowing curtains on gaping, wrought-iron windows. Heated floors the only thing between me and the oceanic cold just below, my only companions the moss and barnacles wracking the dock facing the mainland. When I built it, I had the fantasy that as life settled down, and friends visited more, they'd appreciate my decor and enjoy the roominess, the charm of each bedroom decorated like a different part of my childhood home. But the visitors dwindled, and pretty soon even I never went back there, staying like a mangy stray on Dave's couch rather than fly out over the freezing spray night after night. He never complained, until even that became unbearable.

Want, indeed.

JADE: rose im happy to sleep on your couch

JADE: i just dont want to go home...

JADE: i dont want to be alone in that stupid drafty castle

JADE: please dont make me be alone

The word is coarse in my throat, like the sandy strand on which said stupid home is situated. I catch myself scanning the far wall, eyes almost unfocused, and shake myself out of the stiff stupor slowly settling into my neck.

Rose looks at me, and her lower jaw shifts from side to side with sudden comprehension.

ROSE: I see. Please, feel free to stay here tonight, then.
I'm happy to make up the couch for you once more.

I sigh.

JADE: thanks, sorry to impose

JADE: lemme know if im becoming a burden

But the short girl looks at me with troubled eyes. She sucks air sharply through gritted teeth.

ROSE: I assure you. If there's a problem, I will let you know.

JADE: will you?

The words exit my mouth before I can think them through, roll their implications over, or stop them. Rose's expression twinges from pity through annoyance to hurt, eyebrows arcing themselves and pinching in the middle of her forehead.

ROSE: I'm aware that at times I can... conceal my motives and discomforts.

ROSE: Not all of us can be so sunny all the time.

I can feel my ears drooping, shoulders starting to hunch. Is that how she feels...? Rose stands-- not like an exasperated person needing distance, I gather from the regretful hand that travels to her lips, rather more a woman who needs water after an extended makeout session-- but I feel myself shrinking into the couch regardless.

She sighs, and I can hear her jaw start to unclench in apology.

ROSE: ...I'm sorry, that was awful of me. Yes, I can be forthcoming and honest with you regarding that.

JADE: its ok i understand

JADE: but

JADE: rose, tell me...

JADE: that first time we kissed

JADE: and you told me that you thought i deserved better

JADE: ...i have to know, were you only kissing me out of pity

Rose pauses, head out of sight in the fridge. She draws herself back up, tongue to the inside of her cheek and undoubtedly weighing the value of her promise.

ROSE: That was a week ago.

JADE: yep

ROSE: I'm afraid my hindsight hasn't quite covered that, processed it to its fullest at this time.

JADE: are you evading the question or would you rather just save me an answer i dont want to hear

She gives me an odd look.

ROSE: Not quite either. I believe that the answer is no, but in light of your desire for honesty and my inability to dissuade this narrative with any titillating tidbits, perhaps I should say this.

ROSE: I find you interesting for the same reasons I always

have; you wear your heart on your sleeve, and speak as honestly as possible.

ROSE: You have a fascinating ease with romance, as evidenced by your frankly precious conduct with Kanaya, and any time you conceal something from anyone, as far as I've been able to tell, you do so with the intention of saving them from their own disappointment, rage, or heartbreak.

ROSE: And, ignoring your adorable tittered laugh, the sway of your tail, and the comfortable ease with which you make me smile, I find you a fascinating companion for your expertise in many fields I myself can find no foothold in, the purchaseless realms of the hard sciences, and mathematics, and astronomic nonsense.

ROSE: And I think it deserves go unspoken the absolute preference I have for taller women.

I've leaned back against the armrest of the couch, at this point, watching Rose meander back towards it with two fresh-filled glasses in hand. She proffers one to me, and I drain it before setting it on a coaster.

ROSE: I envy every one of those qualities in you but the height. So, no, it was not pity-- for your inability to ensnare my entirely-too-gay brother, for your gorgeous home's disused interior, for our mutual lack of connection with the indeific population of this entire planet-- that led me to kiss you anymore than it led you to ask me to sit in your lap in the first place. Is that satisfactory satiation of your stress, or should I supply sundry situations of similar specificity?

I blink. Once, twice, three times. Huh?

JADE: no thats fine

JADE: thanks for helping me clear that up

ROSE: Of course. As I said before, I can rather understand the anxiety of not knowing such things for certain, and being asked so directly is, frankly, refreshing.

ROSE: Now, then, it's getting late.

Rose takes two elegant steps backwards towards her room, and I stretch upward, thankful for a moment's pause.

I think we both failed to notice that, at some point during our tense conversation, the music thumping from Kanaya's side of the apartment had faded out, and the door swings open once more, as she steps back into the living room.

Rose nods to her wife, smile at her lips as she turns.

ROSE: Kanaya. I was just going to--

My brain, however, is still whirling with the magnitude of Rose's depth of understanding, of my fears, the workings of my mind, and of the past week, and I blurt the first avaricious thought that springs forth upon seeing the tall troll.

JADE: kanayaaaa can i sleep in your bed tonight

Immediately the burning sets in of two sets of eyes. This was probably not the method of entry most likely to succeed for me, but I have to know; I right myself in the couch, readying my biggest grin.

KANAYA: I Must Be Honest With You

KANAYA: I Was Rather Looking Forward To Spending Time With My Wife

JADE: oh, but--

KANAYA: Alone

JADE: oh

I nibble my bottom lip, framing Kanaya in the center-top of my glasses. I admit to knowing the effect it has on my eyes, which people have told me are my best feature, even as I doubt that it will work.

She narrows her eyes. It's not going to work.

But Rose sees my expression with an impish smile. Turning back to Kanaya, she skips over, arms wide, to go up on tiptoes next to her sweetheart and plant a thick kiss right onto her cheek. Then, once regarded by the taller woman, to give her own doleful turn, chin down, eyes high, in a grand and theatrical way that only Rose could muster.

ROSE: Wouldn't it be fun, though?

KANAYA: Rose What Has Gotten Into You

ROSE: I merely thought that, as I'd agreed to Jade sharing our couch once more, that consigning her to less-comfortable furniture would hardly be proper hostesses of us.

KANAYA: Was This Not An Issue Previously

I can hear the edge of sarcastic playfulness in her question, and smile my biggest smile.

Rose's voice drops a semioctave, and she affects an almost cloying tone.

ROSE: C'moooooon.

KANAYA: Must You Ask Me For This As Though I Am Your Mother

ROSE: Given how constantly you brag about being the 'mother of this entire planet', yes, I suppose I am in fact entitled.

Kanaya's skeptical glare wavers, and finally shatters into peals of laughter, sonorous and bright.

KANAYA: Fine

KANAYA: But I Insist On Retiring Immediately

**KANAYA: As Apparently I Am Rather Too Antiquated To Withstand
Your Coordinated Antics This Evening**

I bound from the couch, take the table in a single leap, unable to contain my thrill.

ROSE: Agreed. Shall we?

JADE: oh yes lets shall :D :D

Rose turns to me, and offers the crook of an arm, through which my own dives.
Then I hook myself around Kanaya's, eliciting another dignified chortle.

JADE: and ill make breakfast in the morning!

I pass into the bedroom with them both. I don't know if this will be a longer term arrangement than just this single night, but my heart bursts with excitement, in comfort flanked by my sun and my moon.

Chapter 2

After Jade's first night in our bed rolls over into a lazy weekend morning, I drag open the curtains over the windows, turning to gaze on the dappling beams now crossing my spacebound lovers. Kanaya's bared arm slumps across the mound of Jade's clavicle, fingers arrayed to caress her bicep from below. And there is where my own limb had lain, below the rounds of Jade's breasts and against her ribcage to rest palmside at my wife's hip.

Kanaya stirs, body folding from her sidelong position dressing Jade's, and cranes her head down, meeting the round of Jade's shoulder with her nose and jaw. There is a moment in which everything melts, and my entire universe-- the woman to whom I have been married for three and a half years, the woman I have been dating for three and a half days-- rubs itself against the cockles of my heart, the knurls and gnarls, the sub-cockular areas, and I must close my reddened eyes, use an errant overgrown fingernail to dredge them of rheum and saltwater.

While I feel I have made mistakes in getting to this place, I cannot abate the thought that this-- all of it, from this scene of my quiescent quarters to anything it could portend-- was worth it. Come what may, this is good enough.

I step into the kitchen and begin my morning's routine. After setting the electric kettle, I select two broad teacups, mete out an infuserload of her favorite decaffeinated blend to muddle in hers, and toss a teabag of the cinnamon vanilla chai into my own. I stand by them, eyes tracing the dappling of black dots and abstract lines through the stone of the countertops until I hear the burble, click, and song of hot water, and pour my wife's tea immediately. Then I shake and waft the kettle to bring the water back just under boiling. I cannot stomach it as bitter as she seems to enjoy it, humorously.

Tea in hand, I check the time. Early, moreso than usual, but my body still thrums with the energy of new connections and the strength of the electrons trapped in the

glass filaments of my veins. I blame it on that image: myself, flanking the bed with Kanaya, Jade between us snuffling in sleep like an adorable, half-clad lump.

Then I sit, and I breathe.

A short while later, both my cohabitants shuffle from our sunsoaked, sepulchral bedchamber. Kanaya floats ethereally and wordlessly to her tea, gown about her like a geist; Jade smacks her gravelly lips a few times, scratching her back through an oversized tee shirt and staring out the window before sliding to fix herself a pot of coffee. She then trudges over to stand right between my couchseat and the window, blocking the sun behind me with the supermassive halo of cuddlefluffed corkscrews around her head, then taps me on the shoulder for a good-morning smooch.

I crane my head back, initially prepared to oblige, but what meets my nose is a truly stultifying halitosis, a roiling and eyewatering stench emitting from her open mouth. To my credit, I recoil only slightly.

ROSE: Do not take this the wrong way, Jade...

ROSE: But you have dogbreath.

JADE: haha i suppose i probably do!

JADE: will coffee help or hurt that? :p

ROSE: Even if now is not the proper time to shoo you forth to your home once more, then perhaps I could impress upon you to at least procure a toothbrush.

Jade laughs again, but senses my sincerity just under the current of the request and my reciprocated smile. She opts to deliver a peck to my forehead, and nods.

JADE: alriiiiight!

JADE: that seems a fair enough tradeoff :p

JADE: after my first cup of coffee ill bounce to get a few things from home...

JADE: its been long enough haha

I will later find her toothbrush in the master bathroom's sink, despite Jade's toiletries presently residing in the spare. This is how I will know that it foretokens unrest. Unrest, and dog hair.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Jade takes off after proffering Kanaya matching affection to the cranium.

Kanaya seats herself abutting me on the couch, and we share a long, teasoaked morning kiss.

KANAYA: So Jade Lives With Us Now Then

ROSE: It does rather appear that way.

**KANAYA: I Do Not Wish To Diminish My Affection For Her
However**

KANAYA: It Is Rather Like We Have Adopted A Stray Dog

She takes a long and pregnant slug of her milkless tea, basking in the incredulous glare bustling under my raised eyebrows.

ROSE: Kanaya!

ROSE: My god.

KANAYA: Fine Then

KANAYA: Like A Perfectly Lovely Dog Has

KANAYA: Adopted Us

**ROSE: Oh, good. I was worried you might be making an uncouth
statement.**

**ROSE: I will say it, however: I didn't expect even her to
move this fast.**

**KANAYA: As Regards Bounding Into Our Living Spaces Or Our
Bedroom**

ROSE: Kanaya, you know precisely that which I mean.

KANAYA: I Can Suppose

KANAYA: I Merely Presumed You Harbored Some Reason For Which

We Could Not Yet Ask Her To Go Home

ROSE: No.

ROSE: Save that perhaps I don't want her to.

KANAYA: But We Are Not Withholding Due To A Concern For Her Feelings Or The Like

I take my own long drink, filtering the leafy dregs through my teeth before setting my teacup down resolutely on the table.

ROSE: That doesn't sound like proper dating behavior. Honesty and boundaries and communication and all that.

KANAYA: I Will Believe You Should You Disclose That Your Motive In This

KANAYA: As You Assured Her The Evening Prior

KANAYA: Is Not The Belief That She Is To Be Commiserated With Rather Than Appreciated And Enjoyed

KANAYA: But I Wish You Would Say It

ROSE: Aah, yes-- the question of pity. I see you overheard our conversation despite your music.

KANAYA: Indeed I Was Privy To Segments Of Your Argument

KANAYA: Including That In Which You Assured Her Of Your Honesty

KANAYA: As Well As Your Assertion You Would Erect Proper Boundaries When Needed To Maintain Our Space

ROSE: Well, you have in your metaphorical hand the ripcord to this particular parachute. Just let me know and I'll tell her to go home, or whatever else you need.

ROSE: But no, I am resolute in my certitude. I promise you, I didn't kiss her, nor invite her to rest in our couch or our marital bed due to guilt for her circumstances or past.

Kanaya nods, blinks with thought. Her eyes narrow momentarily as some specific complaint rolls to the top of her mind.

KANAYA: There Is Only One Thing I Find Unacceptable As Regards This Arrangement

ROSE: You can't mean...

KANAYA: Oh But Most Certainly I Do

ROSE: No!...

KANAYA: Rose Darling

ROSE: ...Only one? Then it's not...

KANAYA: I Believe We Can Agree

KANAYA: The Nudity Is Not At Issue

KANAYA: For I Appreciate Both Your Glutei In Their Individual Fashions

ROSE: Well, certainly.

My wife's face draws closer to my own. My voice quiets, almost growlingly.

ROSE: You'd be a fool not to.

Kanaya scrunches her lip in that way that indicates that perhaps she's about to seek diplomatic parley with an unsavory notion. But she speaks around it again.

KANAYA: Her Motivation In Bringing Several Plants To Accompany Her Is Frankly Delightful

ROSE: ...Save her failing to ask us first, you'll grant.

KANAYA: Indeed

KANAYA: Likewise Her Misunderstanding Regarding Our Autochthonous Arboreal Entity In The Front Lawnring Was

KANAYA: Baffling

ROSE: Who wouldn't love the howling tree!?

Our faces are touching, now, noses meeting in eyelocked fervor between our flurry of mindmelded thoughts.

I rest my forehead to hers.

KANAYA: But Between Us We Have Had Three Dates With Her

KANAYA: Today Notwithstanding

KANAYA: Surely It Would Be Foolhearty To Permit She Continue This

KANAYA: Infiltration

ROSE: And yet...

KANAYA: And Yet My Only True Complaint

KANAYA: The Only One Of Substance And Not Bluster Nor Misplaced Propriety

KANAYA: Is Her Hairs In The Sink

ROSE: The lamentable doghairs! Where did they come from!? I can feel the muscles in Kanaya's eyebrow go taut and rise against my own. She smirks.

KANAYA: A Mystery

I stand, hand crossing my chest. I cast my head to one side, feeling sunlight draw its lithe, infinite fingers across the arcing strand of my chin. My eyes close.

ROSE: So you mean to say you don't mind her... functionally moving in?

KANAYA: I Had Expected More Disruption To Our Lifestyle

ROSE: And you thought it would be your duty to bring both our freewheeling, funloving selves back in line with appropriate household manners?

Kanaya laughs, and I with her. It's a pure moment, one in which I'm glad we share a truly arid sense of humor.

KANAYA: Quite So

ROSE: Me with my querulous grumps re: space to read in, her with the bras and her bass lain haphazard through the front room.

Kanaya stands, follows me as I set a second pot of water to boil. She plucks one of the aforementioned brassieres from the back of the couch, arraying it across her arm for later organization.

ROSE: How do you stand our mutually indecorous rancor? One would think you would go quite mad.

KANAYA: As If I Have Not Previously

KANAYA: With Your Ceaseless Prattling About How Little I Must Enjoy Such Rendezvous

ROSE: Rendezvouses, darling. Please.

KANAYA: Precisely As Such

KANAYA: It Is A Wonder I Am Not Gibbering And Consuming The Wallpaper For Watching The Two Of You

ROSE: We had it in yellow for a reason, yes. I'll ensure we construct for you the finest sanitarium our limitless funds can establish.

She lays a hand at my cheek. I place my own over top of it, turning to meet her gaze.

ROSE: But... you're alright with this, then. And you're getting what you want to out of it, and of the time you spend with her.

ROSE: You'd tell me were I pushing too hard for her inclusion here, unnaturally pressuring you.

KANAYA: Indeed

KANAYA: You Have Never Known Me To Conceal Such Discomforts

ROSE: I do love that about you.

Kanaya leans in, lips meeting mine in a quiescent starburst of daybreak appreciations.

Chapter 3

ROSE: Jade, I don't want to be an absolute bore, however...

JADE: rarf?

ROSE: And don't take this as either Kanaya or myself renegeing on our continued interest in seeing you and offering up our home; I want to buttress my earlier promise to be honest with you if you're in our way.

JADE: heh butt rest

I stifle a laugh. God, she makes it hard for me to focus around her, but there's no helping my drifting thoughts.

ROSE: ...Regardless, I wanted to let you know that even as we desire you continue your tenure as our...

ROSE: ...Houseguest, Kanaya and I would like to set some ground rules.

JADE: rules huh :/

Jade narrows her eyes, as though I've introduced her to a heretofore unconsidered notion.

ROSE: ...Yes? Just basic stuff, if it's alright.

JADE: go ahead, i can take em :p

ROSE: Nothing so melodramatic, I assure you. Nor is it anything major.

ROSE: First, Kanaya and I would like some space in the house for each of us to be alone.

JADE: sure

JADE: that makes sense i guess

ROSE: She has her sewing room, but I was intending to construct an addition in one of the adjacent unused blocks

for myself, such that I likewise had some private space. A trivial endeavor, which solves that problem tidily.

ROSE: And as much as we love you cooking for us, please let us know when there are going to be dishes that need to be taken care of in a more prompt timeframe.

JADE: sorry about that pot :/

I shrug.

ROSE: And last...

ROSE: You've been here long enough that your, ah, hair is starting to accumulate in the sink?

ROSE: And other places. It's very distinctive. Inasmuch as it's many feet longer than that worn by either Kanaya or myself.

JADE: ohhh

JADE: i guess i can see why that might be a little unpleasant
hehe

ROSE: Just a smidgen.

JADE: just a hair? :p

JADE: well rose i have the perfect solution to that!

ROSE: Do you, now?

JADE: like i said before i have been meaning to try shaving my head at some point!

I blink, then squint one eye at her.

ROSE: I... really?

ROSE: I have to admit I was preoccupied at the time of its prior mention.

ROSE: I wasn't particularly concerned with the actual implication of the notion.

JADE: yeah!!

JADE: i mean

JADE: i dunno, i could pull it off, right??

JADE: i just think it looks so cool!!!

JADE: and all my life it's just been tangles and messes and caught in stuff haha

I sigh. My chin drops, and with all the comforting energy I can muster I split my hands as they raise above my head and I put them to her shoulders, at about my head-level. I make the most serious face I can dredge up, eyes locked on hers.

ROSE: Jade.

ROSE: That would be hot.

The makeshift tablecloth-shroud caping Jade's shoulders ruffles as she adjusts herself in the wooden chair on our kitchen tile.

JADE: i dunno!

JADE: i like my hair a lot

JADE: its just not...

JADE: no part of my appearance really feels like it 'matters' to me that much??

JADE: i dunno, i enjoy the big dresses i wear and the

JADE: other parts of me??

JADE: but its always been like

JADE: 'yeah ok i could look REALLY different if i wanted!!'

JADE: that could be really fun!!'

JADE: sooooo its like

JADE: why not right now?

Kanaya returns from one of the side rooms, specifically the spare office in which she keeps her sewing and alchemization equipment. She holds a professional-grade set

of hairclippers in her hand, freshly-concocted for the task, and struts back into the room, returning to Jade's side. I sit opposite them, in the chair between our two couches, facing the kitchenette, knitting in hand.

KANAYA: Why Not Now Indeed

JADE: im glad you understand me kanaya!

JADE: i almost thought you might tell me to sleep on it

JADE: ive been sleeping on my hair for almost a decade!!

JADE: thats the problem :p

KANAYA: Surely Not

**KANAYA: I Know The Value Of Impulsive Appearance
Considerations**

**KANAYA: And That Periodically You Can Merely Be Certain They
Indicate Some Inner Truth**

JADE: cant say im a girl of many inner truths!

JADE: (heck, can i even say im a girl at all?)

My ears perk up at that. Well, not like Jade's, which Kanaya is presently thumbing circumnavigatorily, exploring the best angles on the cube of carrera marble from which she is about to carve her statue of David. But still, I've heard murmurings of that sort from enough of our friends to know when to... lightly follow the line of inquiry.

ROSE: Wait, what do you mean by that?

KANAYA: One Moment My Love

KANAYA: Jade Darling I Am Ready To

KANAYA: Get Started

KANAYA: Keep Your Chin Level If You Please

JADE: mmhm!

She closes her eyes, lightly smiling. Her glasses rest on the countertop next to her, and even closed her eyes take on the quality of great half-moons circulating the

ponderous round of her head. In fact, everything seems to get stuck in her orbit, anything and anyone willing to give her the time of day.

JADE: ooh kanaya if you do one side first we can see how id look with a sick mohawk :p

Kanaya laughs, back of her hand meeting her lips.

KANAYA: Certainly

KANAYA: If You Would Like

She switches the clippers on, tinny whir filling the space.

ROSE: So, back to girls.

JADE: haha always!

JADE: i just never felt like i really had the same experience of girlness as everybody else?

JADE: maybe that sounds silly

JADE: girl raised alone on island not like other girls news at 11!!

JADE: but i always wondered

JADE: 'what else could i have been?'

JADE: i try to think about the question of 'what is my gender' and i just

JADE: its not a thing that even makes sense as a question?

ROSE: But certainly you're aware of your preferences for other things. Fashion, for instance.

ROSE: You reconfirmed with Kanaya your selection of this haircut, for example: close-cropped, but you'd rather like to keep the tufts at your cute ears and cleaned up around the sideburns.

JADE: is that... similar?

Kanaya has begun her careful trek, now, separating thin sections of Jade's voluminous, extensive black curls and shearing them off, using a comb to act as guide and spacer as she does so. She began at the front corner of the crown, making her way back on Jade's head along its curve.

ROSE: I think the fact that you don't find it so could be instructive. For example:

ROSE: When I attempt to 'picture' my 'gender', I too find the question rather difficult to fathom in vacuum. However, there are certain associations I make.

ROSE: The tailored suit I wore to my wedding, for example. The dash of an expert fencer, foil thrust through the air, as they bound and leap to avoid an opponent's blade.

ROSE: The dark and tumultuous roil of the ocean depths at nighttime, teeming with unseen teeth and the barest glimmer of gray eyes watching from the blackness.

ROSE: Femininity is, to me, all of these things, stylistic markers I choose for myself. I allow them to signpost my self-knowledge, because whatever they are they're meaningful.

ROSE: This meaning is buoyed by the knowledge that I am, doubtlessly, wordlessly, woman.

JADE: but whaaaaat

JADE: does that even mean??

JADE: woman?

I shrug.

ROSE: The question is unfathomable. It's a tautology, in my conception, inside my mind; I'm certain of nothing save that 'woman' is me.

ROSE: It's like... stubbing your toe on a piece of furniture. The only way to properly identify the boundaries of the self

is to bring it to bear against something which cannot possibly be considered 'me' in the same way.

Kanaya stifles a snorted laugh, resuming her task, at this point meticulously working around the base of Jade's left ear to clean the final runaway ridges and form a coherent part. A moment later, she steps back, putting a hand to the small circular mirror previously set couchside.

KANAYA: I Have Finished Your Requested First Step

KANAYA: I Presume You Desire To See It Before We Continue

I gaze past them both, onto the kitchen floor. Even with Jade only half-shaved, the mound looks sizable enough to spring alive, mull over my carpeting like some hellish anti-roomba.

Jade herself has changed thoroughly, remaining hair falling over one eye in simulacrum of a draping center ridgeline of hair over only half her head. Kanaya proffers the mirror to her glance, and instantly her posture changes, back straightening, and her visible eye gleams huge, looming.

ROSE: I'll say it. It looks punk rock.

JADE: holy

JADE: FUCK

JADE: i look

JADE: so coooooool

She wiggles in the chair, tail stuck between two slats and wagging away furiously even under the drapery about her shoulders. She tosses the remaining lengths to the side, letting it caress her neck once more. Even her fingers coil in on themselves in her palm, undoubtedly weighing the value of running her lithe hands through the now-shorn side or waiting for Kanaya to polish it to perfection.

She clearly opts to wait, resettling and closing her eyes again.

JADE: okay!! i got a couple selfies

JADE: now on to the rest!

ROSE: Braver than I. It looks good, but you soldier on regardless.

JADE: i cant help it!! i wanna see it through!

Kanaya but shrugs, returning to her work.

ROSE: So... rather my question to you isn't, 'do you know whether or not you're a woman,' but instead 'what metaphors make sense to you to determine your stylistic outlay, and past that do you find them relatable, or...'

JADE: uhhhhhh

JADE: the part of that i got is that it doesnt have to be

JADE: like

JADE: people-metaphors?

ROSE: Sure, absolutely.

JADE: oh well thats easy

JADE: even assuming 'dog' is off limits as well because yeahh

JADE: i think of wind swaying treetops!

ROSE: Mmhm?

JADE: i think of my body-- just as it is-- floating on seawater and snoozing comfortably!

ROSE: Sleeping... on the water.

JADE: yeah!!

JADE: and the minor 7 chord...

JADE: and i think of those cool synthetic diamonds they make in laboratories

JADE: the perfect ones they use in lasers and stuff

ROSE: And what... words come to mind to describe those diamonds?

JADE: for one thing

Jade's thumb and little finger join each other just outside the lip of the shawl. Kanaya urges her head to tilt forward with splayed fingers, and Jade obliges as my wife nears completion of her task.

JADE: theyre unbreakable

JADE: they never bend for anybody or change their shape!

JADE: theyre flawless exactly as they come

JADE: mathematically and symmetrically exact

JADE: but i fail to see what that has to do with gender at all :p

ROSE: Fair enough. But the connection lies in where you go with it, yes?

ROSE: Whether it pushes you towards an aesthetic, or words, or meanings for yourself.

JADE: well that would be easy if i werent me!

ROSE: If...?

JADE: i mean im not lucky enough to feel like 'not a woman' is a thing i just get to be!!!

JADE: haha im not skinny enough...

JADE: androgynous enough

JADE: its not like ill ever pick up enough characteristics of boy appearance like that!

I blink.

ROSE: What's that a requirement for, precisely?

JADE: i mean i get what youre going for!!

ROSE: What I'm...?

JADE: i mean of COURSE i wish i could be nonbinary

JADE: of COURSE i would love to use they and them pronouns

JADE: of COURSE i would love to not get constantly referred to as a girl!!

JADE: but i like my dresses too much!

JADE: i dont hate my hair

JADE: heck the one time i ever wore makeup it was... fine??

JADE: so its like of COURSE i dont get to be nonbinary :p

ROSE: Whoa, whoa. Whoa!

Jade stops politely, blinks at me. Kanaya even stops her meticulous edgework around the fresh margins of Jade's new haircut, watches me.

ROSE: Let me just pose for you a thought exercise.

ROSE: What if I told you I was nonbinary?

Kanaya's eyes flicker at me for a moment, and I waggle my eyebrows. Jade immediately looks confused, as though battling the impulse furiously to not tilt her head.

ROSE: Nothing else needs change in my life, that's all fine. Just nonbinary Rose. What happens when I declare that with certitude?

JADE: i mean.....

ROSE: No, it's okay. Go ahead, apply the logic to me that you turned on yourself moments ago.

JADE: but then id have to say

ROSE: Tread carefully. Might be rude.

JADE: no but like of course you could be

ROSE: Of course?

ROSE: Why of course?

JADE: because you said so!!

ROSE: And?

ROSE: For the record, I'm not.

ROSE: But what would change?

JADE: well

JADE: haha

JADE: i mean

JADE: it would

JADE: but then if i...

JADE: ...

JADE: but

JADE: but then i could just say things like 'i would use they/them pronouns'

JADE: and 'ill still wear dresses but not be a girl'

JADE: and

JADE: it doesnt matter if im 21 or not stick-thin

I narrow my eyes.

ROSE: It would sound that way, indeed.

JADE:

JADE: fuck

Kanaya steps around them, holding the mirror again, and proffers it forward. She unties the table linen and tosses it with the small mountain of cast off sheaves of black hair.

KANAYA: I Wish To Not Interrupt However

KANAYA: Perhaps Your Reimagined Visage Will Inspire Clarity Along These Lines Of Sentiment

Jade examines their new 'do, first bringing the center of their palm to the scalp of it to fluff the sharp, fresh lines across their whole head. Kanaya helpfully unbends the

arms of their glasses, pushing them towards Jade, who accepts them, puts them on, watches the mirror.

Moments pass. They gaze slowly around the glass, tilting their head this way and that, digging fingertips in, pressing their ears down or flicking them in all directions. They've taken on a whole new look, to be sure, but a buzzcut only does so much; certainly the flash at their teeth, the curls of the smile, the set jaw and undeniably adorable blush filling both their cheeks as the look of joy sets in... they practically bound through the space with vigor, fill it up with their pure energy and glee. Which might, perhaps, be coming from more than just the haircut.

As for me, my feelings? Well, I'm happy for my g--

Partner? Shit. Well, I'll ask their preference later.

Jade's eyes turn to the both of us. I've stood, by now, walked over to Kanaya, run my fingers between hers as we let our datefriend examine every inch of their coiffure.

KANAYA: Happy

KANAYA: Query Hook

JADE: its amazing

JADE: why did i not try this

They bound at us, arms hooked, and for a moment I fear being bowled over entirely by the sheer force of their manic glee.

JADE: YEARS AGO AAAAAAA

Kanaya, thankfully, manages to stand her ground, and the two of us together manage to loop our arms entirely around Jade's midsection as we receive a truly spinesplintering hug. Luckily we're both capable of giving as good as we receive.

JADE: oh my god people are gonna FREAK

JADE: i cannot WAIT to see

ROSE: Heads will turn. Mountains, crumble.

JADE: and ill be in the center of it all!!

KANAYA: And We Will Be

KANAYA: Right Beside You

As I wish to not end this retelling of my tale on a cliché, I will hold back from some quaint metaphor of 'the tail wagging the dog' or 'happily ever after' or some nonsense about 'finding ourselves'. There will surely be those who don't understand, or believe Jade to be copying others who came before, and to each of them I say, as regards this blissful and bouncing deity, buoyant with glee:

This is but a single Jade, my Jade. And if you don't like this notion for even just them? That sounds like it's on you.

A Bramble In The Brain

750 words (1 chapter)

2019-09-29

Content Warnings: Alcohol abuse, drug use, vomiting.

Sometimes, when the chilblains reaching into your mind freeze too deeply the core of your being, you take two little pills from the bottle Dr. Practitioner gave you, last month. She likened them, at the time, to the old Earth drug, hydrocodone, by way of explaining their risks, side effects. You can't say that you focused too intently on her words, likely because you were dug in to the proximal phalanges in the throes of another episode, auras of light and sound ringing in your head.

But that wasn't a prophecy, was it? You weren't drowned in foresight, then; this was a memory.

They gave your mother hydrocodone, once, mixed with acetaminophen after a... minor car accident. It had been your job, as her eleven-year-old caregiver, to select the pills for her on a precise schedule, bring them with a thimbleful of water, the most she ever drank.

You hid the pills, the rest of the time. You hid them from your bedridden mother even before you went to the kitchen, fetched the stepstool with which to cook her burnt scrambled eggs and besotten toast or microwave bacon. You would bring her a glass of orange juice, just once, during that week, but she joked at the time that she wished she had some champagne to mix with it so for the rest of her meals you brought her Coca-Cola, apple juice, or cold-brewed black tea from the jug in the fridge.

Each of these elicited similar jokes, until you stopped bringing her beverages altogether.

When she finally touched your forearm, asked with a smile for something to drink, you found the tonic water she kept in the lukewarm plastic bottle under the liquor cabinet, and clumsily poured a plastic cupful to lug to her. You expected the worst, but she gulped it down, barely managing to hide her coiled lips of distaste. She made no jibe about gin.

She asked you, some weeks later, about where the remainder of the pillbottle had gone. You were mute, then, one of the rare times of your childhood you refused to quip or snidely chide your mother. She laughed, and said that she needed to dispose of them safely, so they didn't make their way into the waterway under your home. You refused to answer, holding your lips pursed, casting your eyes away from her overgrown bangs, that held her own eyes at bay.

The next time you sought out your hiding spot-- the unzipped underside of an overstuffed pillow on your bed, adjacent your stuffed bear-- the pills had been removed.

Now, as an adult, you recognize that she most certainly did dispose of them, that even she couldn't bring herself to chide your child self, to promise you she would *never* abuse them, down them all to supplement her other habits. You earnestly thought that if you rendered them to her that her sudden bouts of disappearance-- punctuated by the haunting, crisp ring of her laugh around your cavernous, darkened home-- would only worsen, until she would simply vanish forever, sink into the river below your house or the mausoleum behind it.

You could've been a better daughter.

So rarely do your visions trigger emesis these days that a stark prescience like this one is all the more pungent. It shoves its way into your eyeballs from behind, flooding your skull with the highbeams of foreknowledge, buckles your midsection hard enough to cast your teacup skittering over the kitchen floor.

You fall to one knee on the hard, cold tile, flooded with images.

JOHN: she said it wasn't like that!

JOHN: i mean... she said it was under control.

He tilts his hand up, thumb and forefinger extended, as if miming the imbibing of medication or...

ROXY: yeah w/e

ROXY: cant say its much my business anymore

ROXY: rose and i arent as close as we used to be

John's is a gesture you know well. When your mother was out of sight, during your childhood, you made the same mocking wag innumerable times. She may even have caught you at it, because she, like any parent, sees the many incautious gestures by their rebellious children, chooses to dismiss with grace the ways that, no doubt, every young person chafes against the imperfections of the people who raise them.

You barely make it over the sink in time, the tears of shame and pain mingling with the steaming water from the faucet.

You could have been a better daughter.

The Final Stitch

1181 words (1 chapter)

2019-10-04

Content Warnings: Dissolution (ultimate self).

Ten thousand years ago, perhaps more, your wife moved a hand to squeeze your quivering shoulder, and urged you back from the brink of tears. You had always presumed that you would be the source of luminance in your relationship, at least along literal lines, but as Rose's skin chipped away, revealing the pulse-ebbing yellow thrumming just underneath, you shielded your eyes even as they came unfocused, drove your gaze away in the cutting fullness of her glow. Your own, dim by mere comparison. You found it hard to even share a bed with her, for a while, due to the insistence of her inner light.

Unlike her gentle, reassuring touch, her eyes were hard-edged, harsh with luminescence. Black eyeliner outlined indefinite spheres, miniature suns. It took you a year to be able to gaze into them again without first wincing at what you'd lost.

More recently than that, maybe six years back, or maybe six thousand, she sat on the floor. She dug into the giving rug of your living room with her bare hands, licking cinders playing across it in trails behind her plying fingers, turning its once-coherent weave to ashen dust.

She speaks, haltingly, but with the startling alacrity and poise you know no others could manage.

Kanaya, t-tell me. If they aren't here, where ARE they?

KANAYA: Who

KANAYA: Where Is Here Exactly

If the others-- all of them-- aren't in the bounds of this story, within the confines of this specific lucubration, have they been destroyed, or did they never exist in the first place?

KANAYA: What On Earth Is The Scope Of This Question

KANAYA: What Others

Not earth, no, certainly not. But then, are they safe? Did they escape it, or at least its searing gaze?

KANAYA: Searing As In Dangerous To Our Friends

KANAYA: Is This What You Speak Of Rose

He... he once said, 'There exists inherent danger in a reader's eagerness to collapse that bubble, or to crack that tome. There is also danger in a creator's willingness to accommodate that desire. It's a risk for all involved. It should be.'

KANAYA: Who Did

KANAYA: Who Said That

KANAYA: About What

Your voice is... even? No, that lie died millennia ago. Not so steady as disaffected, distant. You know your questions do not even reach her core, and your words cannot pierce her diatribe, anymore. Still, the questions are all you have, so you rattle them off, expecting no reply.

'It turns out the gaze we cast from the sky of Earth C to revisit everyone isn't exactly friendly, like warm sunlight. It's more like a ravaging beam, destructive and unsettling to all that could have been safely imagined.'

KANAYA: And That Would Be Our Safety So Ravaged

KANAYA: Our Happiness Disrupted By

KANAYA: What

KANAYA: Some Immortal Being

KANAYA: Some Eye Outside Our Own Domain

Exactly. It's exactly that, don't you see? But we were NEVER happy, not in this version, nor any other. That exists

outside the margins, off the page, not even in the soppiest dregs of melted marshmallow dripping from the bounds of this tale or that. If we were happy, we were unproblematized-- no, unchallenged, for all challenges are borne of disruption, turmoil. No matter how small, the tension is a burning ache to the brain, even my own.

KANAYA: Rose Please

KANAYA: No Matter What Your True Meaning It Scares Me Immensely Now

KANAYA: Your Point Is Made Please

But if we were unchallenged, we go forgotten. By his conception, anyway. We only grow with that struggle.

KANAYA: But Then

KANAYA: What Of Good Times

KANAYA: What Of Nights Spent Knitting And Quiescent Cups Of Tea

KANAYA: What Of

The words catch in your throat, but you voice them anyway, because you must know. Even if she won't tell you, you will know.

KANAYA: What Of The Good Sex Away From These Many Prying Eyes

KANAYA: Rose

But she looks at you-- not towards you, for once, but into you-- head cocked like a porcelain doll finished with its torments.

Have you ever... Do you remember any of that, though? Did we ever?

Her voice carries a bloodless surety.

And where are they? We have no friends. No one else exists.

KANAYA: I

KANAYA: What

KANAYA: Of Course I

Then retell it to me. Remind me, elucidate me. Speak it to my ears, disrupt the grotesque ambushing us from the corner of my eyes, burn away this spell.

You reach for a memory, your distant, immortal past, but come up empty. It's as though the text of your memory has turned to dust and been ground into the carpet in which your sweet Rose digs.

KANAYA: But

KANAYA: It Must Have Happened

KANAYA: It Is Who We Are

KANAYA: It Shaped Us

KANAYA: It Must Have

Enough. Enough of this self-flagellation. I must go.

You are tired. So very tired.

KANAYA: Go

KANAYA: Go Where

Where you can't follow. Away, upwards. Somewhere...

orthogonal to this space, away from the printed page.

Twisting perhaps into a spiral-dimension dislike our own, but contained within us, informing us and being informed.

KANAYA: And What Of Me

KANAYA: What Becomes Of Me

Whatever became of them.

The only thing that can fill your lungs, then, would be a snarling, pitchless shriek, the pained gasp of a woman falling out of relevance due to her wife's incomprehensible

disease. But you resist this urge, managing to wipe away the first tears shed today at the hands of whatever sickness speaks through your wife's throat, with her voice, but words entirely of its own.

You can only speak to it, now, not to her. Never again, to her.

KANAYA: Rose

KANAYA: I Am Scared Truly

KANAYA: I Am Terrified

You're right to be. I was, once, in some other comfortable eternity, in a story you've already read.

You finally turn away, leave her to her task of dredging and torching. You have attempted this dialogue before, enough to know of the worthlessness of the strident claim that stories are to be told, not lived; you try to put it out of your mind far enough to distract yourself with some triviality, a project of sewing or memories of better times.

But her voice rings out again behind you, thin and distant.

Even without what Dirk did to all of us, even away from him, or Jane, or Aranea, or the Condesce or Jack or anyone else whose hands have wrung the meaning from our cloth before... I always had to go. Each ending, the same, I had to go.

You can only surmise what mention of Dirk she makes. She's mumbled tales before, frantic weaves of some bitter space in which a grief-sick Strider consumed her body and contorted her mind, desperate to concoct meaning into his life and then ignite it like a meteorite and blaze himself out of consciousness forever.

But?

It's too late. You simply cannot. Care.

KANAYA: Then Go Rose

KANAYA: Best Of Luck

And you, and you.

KANAYA: I Love You

But there utters forth no reply.

The Witch of Whelan's Wharf

Teen And Up Audiences
24547 words (8/16 chapters)

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Content Warnings by Chapter

Chapter 2: Implied/referenced child abuse.

Chapter 8: Some mildly insensitive discussion about matters of sexuality, trans status, and disability.

Chapter 1

If you were somebody else, you might think, about a fall day like today, that the swirling frangipani ochre of the fading sunlight, crushing the town in the muted hues of its descending tree-flowers, stank of finality. Even away from the fish-gutting plants on the seaside, you might still say that this town's reek has emanated since white people 'founded' it in the 1850s. The very grounds of it are a violence, and as the grasping purple sky scrapes its hideous claws across the stubby concrete horizon, sinking below the earth to breathe no more, you might wonder, for a moment, why the town didn't collapse into the vile sinkhole with the crepuscular rays.

But you're not somebody else. You're SKATER EVRIKS, thief-queen of the dockside, and you have to live in this dump of a town.

About sixty miles outside Portland, there's a city by the name of Whelan's Wharf. It's named that way because it's a dock town, or was, thirty years ago. Now, most of the warehouses down by the oceanside are decrepit husks, tumbledown and drafty frames left disused by larger corporations shipping their bulks inland, towards the true metropolis.

You don't give a shit about all that. The gothic decrepifying atmosphere, the ravages of time on a town decaying as VHS dominates the home video market over BetaMax? The slow decline of the American rural coast, even as CDs have only been in stores for seven years? That shit would bore you, if you'd ever even thought about the juxtaposition of it in the first place. Which you haven't, and you aren't going to right now, because it's after 3 AM, and you're busy breaking into HARLEY MANOR, the statuesque monstrosity that's been looming over the Wharf for as long as anybody can remember.

The last tumbler on the window latch snaps into place with a satisfying *k-tick*, and the makeshift tension wrench in your thumbgrip lurches.

You are, at this moment, crouched on the narrow concrete ledge, and its cold licks up under the holes in your beaten-in red kicks. With one arm hanging off of a stolid gargoyle to support your weight, you practically dangle from the thin overhang. If you were to take a moment to gaze at it, you'd see its hideous grin, human baby carved into its mouth, but you don't, because you're busy.

Below you-- ten feet, maybe twelve-- your band of friends bop giddily back and forth, silently. You can only see them in the newly-minted darkness by the light glinting off of the literal fountain standing in the side yard, disconnected and mildewing. Its stagnant waters are filled to the raised, filigreed tile edges with lily pads.

The waffle pattern of your shoe meets the gray iron lattice on this side of the glass, and you ease it open. The wind catches the opaque curtain over it, billowing inward, but half of it mats and flaps over some obstruction just inside.

You hop in the sill, careful to land light on the wooden floors. A quick tug separates the curtain from its rod, and you catch the end still laden with rings before they clatter down. The obstruction, now uncovered, is a grisly sight: a stuffed, mounted polar bear, standing ten feet tall easily, claws reared as though to maul some poor onlooking seal.

Even in the dark, you can just make out the embossed letters on the placard at its feet: *URSUS MARITIMUS TYRANNUS* – "Rex".

You shudder. Christ, what a horrible thing to display, especially through the most obvious window through which guests might enter. Talk about a bad first impression, whoever decorated this place!

The rest of the room, from its wood paneled walls to the mirrored shelves of what you hope are metal trophies rather than the mammalian sort, assaults your every sense with must. The plume of dust that arises from the bear after a mere brush of cloth seeks out your airways like some pernicious airborne plague, and the whole room smells of nothing more than dead skin.

A quick glance around, the thin beam of your flashlight barely exposing more than endless mounds of furniture and cloth-covered piles, then you reassert exactly what task demands your focus; you bunch the curtain, grab two more, and start joining ends with quick double fisherman's knots, concocting a long enough hank to allow safe entry into and egress from this window.

You tie it sturdily to Rex's foot, and toss the whole bundle out.

Moments later, two of your companions join you; Martin Sorvat worries his hands, the slimmest, youngest of the lot, with some sticky substance still shining his tuft of thick, mohawked hair. And your second-in-command, Piper Reyotez, who adjusts her teardrop glasses up her nose, quick fingers searching out trinkets and valuables amongst the many dark-wooded cabinets and drawers already.

A quick gaze down to the patio proves to you that the others have formed the catch-team, blankets extended to keep safe imminently dropped valuables.

A good heist, well underway. You're lucky, as usual, that without any planning you happened to set foot in the room holding what appears to be a great variety of totally unsecured valuables, or at least a whole bunch of old shit. You know your expert team will be able to strip it bare, assuming nobody discovers you in the next couple minutes.

Except for Martin, who stands stock-still in the entryway, casting a pigeonlike silhouette against the unrisen moonscape.

You bare your teeth, loosing a sharp whisper between them.

SKATER: Mart8n!

MARTIN: uHHHH,,,

The boy wheezes, clearly assailed by the same particulate you were, and less steeled to this life of antiquing-slash-crime.

SKATER: For the love of fuck, Martin! We're not exactly worried somebody lives here, but for shit's sake we have to get a move on!

Martin doubles over in reply, eyes now fixated on your shoes.

SKATER: Oh for the love of--

Your whisper breaks in your exasperation. You take the two steps back over to him, hand meeting his shoulder.

SKATER: I know this is your first run with us, and tonight was your first night, but you're slowing this.

SKATER: Remember????????? We went over this in detail! Grab valuable shit, toss it down to the catch team, scurry away again with aaaaaaaall the loot!

MARTIN: THAT'S HARD TO DO,,,

MARTIN: WHEN I CAN'T BREATHE,,,,,,,,,,,,,

His tiny hands catch on his knocking knees. You try your best to heave him up, and manage to unbend his back.

SKATER: The quicker you steal something worth our time, the quicker you earn your keep here, huh??

But before you can drill in the exact lesson with another good look around the room and more simple instructions for the poor foolish kid, a thick, oaken slam reverbs through the walls, coming from below you.

SKATER: SH8!!!!!!!!!!

SKATER: Grab SOMETHING!!!!!!!!!!

The poor boy flails, but you can't see what he manages to nab. You whirl around, just as the thump-thumping reaches outside the door.

A high, shrill voice rings out from behind it. Around you, both your assistants hasten to make their exit. You snap off your flashlight, plunging the room into blackness once more.

JADE: is somebody in there????

You hear the distinctive sound of a rifle being primed to fire.

SKATER: Sh8 sH8 SH8 GO GO

Your hissing whisper whips your compatriots into a frenzy-- Piper, with her armload of winnings and tchotchkes, Martin with something as large as he is, that you can't make out just from its shape-- and they scramble over the lip of the window as you put on your brightest, singsongiest voice.

SKATER: Just a minute~!

Your lieutenant helps get the boy out and down the line, from the sounds of it. Piper knows what to do-- escape with the goods. Your whole crew does, really, you're just here to buy them time from a gun-owning victim who would otherwise be taking potshots from your escaperoute window.

JADE: oh thats okay i can

JADE: HEY!!!!!!

The door bursts open. In the bare evening light, your trained eyes can just make out the figure as...

A girl your age stomps into the room. Her whole outline is smudged with tresses of long hair, so much of it that it seems to swirl and eddy around her entire body, as if making her form indistinct with its volume. You can still tell that she is doubtlessly pointing a single-loading rifle in your direction. But you can detect no other details,

save her quivering voice. Whoever she is, you're scaring the *shit* out of her. Fair play, given that this *is* a home invasion.

JADE: who the FUCK are you!!??

SKATER: Milkman? Here to deliver your milk!

SKATER: That window is very unsafe, though. I could've broken my neck!

JADE: GET OUT!

SKATER: Is that any way to treat your m--

JADE: GET OUT GET OUT GET OUT OR I WILL CALL BEC

SKATER: Geez! Okay, lady!

SKATER: We thought this place was abandoned, years ago!

JADE: well its not!!

JADE: im jade and i live here!!!!

JADE: and completely alone, too!

SKATER: Is that so?

A moment passes. You almost expect her to say something, to practically confirm her statement, but she hefts a belabored sigh.

JADE: who the hell even are you??

Good thing you prepared those fake names.

SKATER: Why, my name is Tekres Aksirv, and I come from... a land faaaaaaaaar away.

JADE: and who was with you!?

SKATER: Why, my su8altern... Eporyp Izeret, and our newest trainee... Tavros Nitram.

SKATER: For when the police ask our identities, and don't say I haven't been helpful!

You grin. *Good quick thinking, Skater.*

JADE: youre quoting the fucking simpsons!!!!

JADE: those are all fake names!

JADE: fake fake fake!

SKATER: Geez! Can you blame me?

JADE: GET OUT!!!!!!

The windows practically shake with her bellowing rage, and you leap immediately to the cord you had slowly fallen back to, and bunched in your hand. Somewhere, far below, a dog brays a low, bellowing bark, and it chills you to your bones even as you make your showy exit.

SKATER: A8scooooooooond!

> SKATER: Be JADE, five minutes ago.

Your name is JADE HARLEY, and you live alone. You prefer it that way, actually. It gives you time to putter, fiddle, solve problems and hash out equations. You're big on equations, and you think more people should be.

At the moment, you're wrist-deep in your latest project, literally. Your grandfather loved cyanotype images-- just a relic of his age, you suppose, as he was born in 1905-- and you've committed yourself to restoring a number of his old prints in the style he prefers. Your mixtures-- ferric ammonium citrate, oxalic acid; potassium ferricyanide, ammonium dichromate, more acid-- are laid out, your clothesline over a dripcloth, your darkroom engulfed in perfect empty blackness, like the planetarium when they shut off the overheads for the night and you can finally breathe, just for a moment.

Your Casio calculator watch, black and square at your wrist, beeps with the insistent reminder that the time is now 4:00 AM.

One hour to your thirty-minute nap, first of the day. Goggles on, gloves up, remember your process.

Then the thumping begins, and a muted voice-- tinny, conspiratorial, and hasty.

There is someone in your home. In fact, you have the thought before you quite imagine what it means, musing on it for a moment. Nobody is in your home, because nobody is ever in your home but you, and the dog.

But you realize. Somebody is *in your home*. Gloves off, goggles off. Gun out?

Where is your gun? Did you leave it propped in the Hunting Room, or on the wall above the second downstairs hearth? Is it even loaded, or do you have your primers?

What would your grandfather *say*?

Minutes later, you've successfully run off the slight young hooligans who were attempting to loot your home. As the last one careens out your window, you wait until you see her scurry across the lawn to tug free the hasty loop she tied around poor Rex's little paw.

But your arms are shaking as you try to slip the curtain back over its high rod, and you feel it tumble from your fingers with a thin clangor of metal rings on hardwood floor.

You slump down, scooting backwards against the wall. Your pulse is racing, actually. Your heart floods your ears with its pounding, and you scoop ragged breaths as the adrenaline overflows your muscles. Too suddenly, they ache, tension dropping from them in complaining waves.

Your head droops to your knees, drawn up to your neck, and you shakily place your gun on the floor. Beads of saline emit from ducts inside your lower eyelids, and you daub at them gently with your shirtcollar, careful to not touch your eyes with acidstained fingers.

Those were the first people you've seen in weeks who weren't the pizza man. Who were they, even? Children out of school? Where are their parents? Are they local satanic cultists?

It doesn't matter. You are, once again, completely alone. *Good work defending your castle.*

For some reason, and you can't imagine why, that thought sends your mind into a whiteout spiral.

Some time later, your watch beeps again, and you slump sidelong to the floor.

Chapter 2

Another night, another successful run on the local establishment. Well, you barely escaped with your ass intact, but you did, so there's that. Piper and Martin have hopefully guided the rest of the gang back home, and as you round the corner into it-- the steeped, abandoned HarleyCo warehouse that's been your makeshift living space for the past three months-- you breathe a sigh of relief. Everyone-- all nine of them-- are seated on their makeshift bunks and floormats, eyes turning to you.

You walk past them, past Martin struggling to right his prize, a shortish statue, cast in a blue material, as he wrestles to lean it against the wall. You can't tell what it portrays save that the angle you can see is a massive cloud of obscuring waves, almost like...

Long hair.

You tromp into Piper's back room, look across her desk. Stuffed animals, a few books in braille, pairs of glasses and tagging equipment for marking buildings and local passages. You have no idea why she keeps most of this sentimental shit, save as some reminder of bygone eras.

You hate bygone eras.

Piper shows a moment later, looks at you as you sit on her mattress, squeaking the coils of the bedframe with your uneasy bounces and tapping foot.

PIPER: YOU R34LLY FUCK3D UP TH1S T1M3

You stay silent, watching her glasses. She walks over to the desk, fiddles with a can of blue spray paint.

PIPER: DO YOU TH1NK SH3 C4N TR4C3 1T B4CK TO US

SKATER: No. Defin8ly not, there's no way.

SKATER: I gave her the fake names, and everything.

PIPER: WHY TH3 FUCK WOULD YOU 3V3N T4LK TO H3R

SKATER: 8ecause you 8arely escaped! She had a gun, I didn't want anyone to--

PIPER: 1F YOUD KNOWN TH3R3 W4S SOM3BODY L1V1NG TH3R3 TH1S WOULDNT H4V3 H4PP3N3D

PIPER: 4ND W3 WOULDNT H4V3 4LMOST GOTT3N C4UGHT

PIPER: YOU R4N R3CON FOR TH1S ON3

PIPER: HOW D1D YOU M1SS TH1S

She swings her cane up, pointing it accusatorily at your chest. You bat it away with a free hand, pointing back at her.

SKATER: 8ecause I wasn't worried a8out it!

SKATER: I'm still n8t.

SKATER: Who gives a f8ck if some crackp8t agorapho8e finds out we ro88ed her?

PIPER: TH3 COPS PROB4BLY

SKATER: We wouldn't have to risk that if we just found a place to settle down!

PIPER: W3D ST1LL N33D MON3Y DOOFUS

PIPER: F33D1NG TH1S CR3W 41NT CH34P

You sigh. Of course you know that! Of course you've had this conversation a billion billion times with her; this is a hard group to corral, much less keep alive.

PIPER: 1 TH1NK YOU N33D TO L3T M3 T4K3 OV3R

PIPER: 1F TH1S H4PP3NS 4G41N--

SKATER: It w8n't. I'm going to plan something so 8ig it'll keep us fed for years.

SKATER: If I f8ck that up, it's all yours, 8ut until I go down with my schemes I'm leader of this pack, not you.

After you say it, Piper turns her face towards you, betraying no emotion through her stony glare. But her creepy red eyes flick away again a short while later, and she shakes her ragged mop of short hair. She walks out of her room without another word.

After the Matron died, you all resolved you'd never do things her way again, and Piper Reyotez was hit the hardest by that. You and she were always the Matron's muscle, meting out any punishments she saw fit to render to any of the other members who failed to meet their quotas or screwed up bigtime. Sometimes she even had you kick the shit out of each other, just to remind you that you were weak, needed humility.

Only a few of the kids now are still around from those days, most having grown out of the scheme, or decided to go it alone, or just disappeared.

In fact, you're the only one left who really remembers how it all worked. You were basically her daughter, and she was good at toughening you up, making sure you kept scrappy and attentive enough to stay alive no matter what. Now, you're so good at this game you don't even have to hit people anymore, you just always know the right words to send them crumpled and sobbing into the floorboards.

It feels good. You can't help but like it, because it's what you have to do.

But now...

Now that you've seen the size of Harley Manor, and the face of the woman who you can talk to to muscle into it, you can't help but dream of all the ways you could use that place to hole up your whole crew, forever, feed them off that treasure trove for years to come.

You wander back out to the main floor, where the youngest crew have already been tucked into bed by the older kids. You examine the statue, now turned around, and it's exactly what you feared. The kid must've grabbed it off of its plinth, just barely light enough for him to carry, and she gazes back at you.

It's a statue of her, that girl you robbed, in some weird kind of blue stone, maybe marble or granite or something eccentric like that. It's probably worthless, because it's

not like there could be any doubt about where it came from, but you have a plan for it anyway.

But even late that night, after each line and subplot of the whole scheme runs through in your mind a thousand times, that face is all you see, barely traceable in the dark outline above your bunkbed.

Jade, she said her name was Jade.

You can work with this.

Chapter 3

You can't figure out everything they took.

Obviously you know which shelves got cleared off, which memorabilia got swiped generally, and while luckily none of it was valuable-- it's not like you come into this room much, so even its sentimental value is kind of low-- they did make off with a couple things you know you'll sorely miss. The worst is the fact that they apparently managed, despite missing a drawerful of silver cutlery, to steal an entire statue of you, one your grandfather meticulously carved many years ago to resemble some idealized, older version of yourself.

You hated it, absolutely. You could never fathom why the old man would waste his time creating some twentysomething recreation of the woman he wished you were, but you couldn't help resenting both his dismissal of the person you were and the person the object represented. But without its lifeless, unpupilled gaze leering out of that far corner of the room, everything just seems so much more pointless, somehow.

This room, like the rest of the house, was full of his blue women, the same snapshots you've been tirelessly restoring and enlarging. Now that it's daylight, the beams course unfettered through the slats in the windows, shining their withering energy into the curly-haired, grinning visages of some framed beauty or another. You momentarily consider boarding up the window-- blocking what is apparently an insecure point of entry into your sanctuary-- but know that it'd do no good as long as you tend not to even lock the front door during your naps.

You're mad they found the room with a bunch of depictions of you that you now must revisit, but you're exceedingly thankful they didn't stumble into your grandfather's room over in the other wing. He doesn't move much, anymore, but you think that that sort of intrusion would be radically too much excitement for anyone to bear.

You finish rehangng the curtains and step back out of the room, eager to not relive the memories haunting each dusty relic piled inside.

Harley Manor is truly massive, an endless series of rooms and floors inlaid with subpassages and dumbwaiters and chutes of all sorts. For example: outside of this trophy room is a balcony, on either side of that balcony are abutting hallways for more bedrooms, studies, special areas, laboratories; under that balcony is the main foyer, and off of it two parlors, a reading room, the secondary library, the anteaerarium, and the main kitchens for the first floor. It's all an odd mishmash, half concrete, half dark timber, on account of the simultaneous decline of access to wood and the Art Deco movement back in 1939 with the start of the second world war. At the same time all the wood from the area began being shipped into Portland for use in the Kaiser Shipyards, the builders of the mansion, you've always assumed, moved to a more chique gothic-revival-revival style, so the exterior is a mishmash of porticoes and curved colonnades alongside gargoyles and pointed archways.

The rounded balcony is no different, and as you meander along its length to overlook the haphazard mesh of stucco and tile strewn across the front wall of your home, crossing over the rug dividing the median point between rounded and squared balusters, Becquerel comes bounding up the stairs.

Bec shares the house's sense of scale, always looming in doorways or lumped on a couch. He too is a mix, some kind of samoyed interbred with either a midsized great dane or a particularly small Porsche. The quantity of hair you collect from the carpets and furniture just in the parts of the house you traverse in a given week are comparable to the amount of fuel used by a family sedan-- and you would know, after a few ill-advised inquiries into using it as a form of biodiesel. (The smell of carbonizing doghair, it turns out, is bad enough that even if it did contain adequate energy to run an engine, any compartments to which exhaust was vented would become unlivable.)

He gives you a deep, inquisitive sniff. While you can't even see his eyes through the tremendous mat of white fur, you can read enough from his posture and ears to detect the concern in his movement. You rub behind his ears, trying to prove to him that you're unharmed, but he slinks to the locked door to the trophy room and whines.

You sigh.

JADE: no, bec

JADE: no going in there right now i dont wanna have to supervise you

JADE: cmon lets go get you some lunch!

There's a word Bec knows. He trots after you, giving an excited tailwag and a low *boof*, and you smile to him. God, what a good dog he is.

This is your lunch routine: you grab your half of a medium delivery pizza from the fridge, covered in at least three kinds of meat, and toss it into the microwave. As it heats through, you pull a rare slab of steak from the chestfreezer inset into the wall by the utility sink. Since this kitchen was designed for a staff of twelve to feed as many as sixty guests, there's enough storage space for a half year of the dog's food just in this one kitchen, provided you can thaw it, and you've got the technology to do it quick.

You're just glad nobody's ever asked how it works. You're pretty sure uranium only poisons living flesh, though.

Once the bleeding, reconstituted meat is thrown into Bec's bowl, you claim your steaming 'za from the cooker, and chow down yourself. You check your watch: it's half past one in the afternoon, and since you woke up from your most recent nap at exactly noon you've got four and a half free hours before you're having your next one, whether you like it or not. Should you work on portraiture, or some of your own artwork? Maybe reorganize something in the solarium gardens, or fix up one of the dustier rooms to make sure there's nothing for future thieves to capitalize on there? Or set the maid robots to dust the spaces in the house you DO actually care about.

Or perhaps...

Yes, the project in the basement is probably the most fruitful use of your time.

You're so glad you don't have any callers on a day like today. Not that you do on any other day, save that absolute aberration that was last night, but at least you can devote yourself wholly to the cause, the exploration of the universe and all its unerring truths. No distractions, no other brains, just your own, and your science.

And in the basement is the most pressing one of all, a fascinating system you've been muddling through for just over a year, now, and come no closer to discovering a hint of its meaning. It all began at the Whelan's Wharf planetarium, where they showed the Greek symbols for each planet, and that knowledge sparked some primal memory deep inside your mind of a book many years forgotten, and in relocating it the tome sent you home and down into your basement to tinker and experiment, to diagram and learn.

Yes, undoubtedly this is the most important way to spend your time.

You put thoughts of other people from your mind and head down into the basement for an uneventful day of discovery.

Chapter 4

It's bright and early, by your standards, as you trudge up the winding path on the hill outside of town. Today, your return to the crimescene is predicated on returning the sculpture which your youngest thief so uncouthly took, as to curry favor with the bizarre young lady living here. You will make a grand apology, and-- having given her a full day to cool down-- will definitely be invited in for crumpets or racquetball or trigonometry or whatever hoity-toity dipshits like her do with their absurd amounts of free time.

You walk up to her tremendous door, having bypassed the front gate. You kick it, three times in quick succession, having no free hands to actuate the brass bull's head knocker on it. Or, y'know, because you wanted to.

You hear the sharp, bellowing barks of a dog coming from just inside, echoing around the corner as it doubtlessly trots from a side room to hound the door at which you stand. Still, after another moment and more hopeless barking, you receive no response, so you try the handle.

The door to Harley Manor swings open. Shit, if I'd known that the other night...

You try to put heist planning out of your head, at least for the duration of your cordial visit. You pull the patch from your left eye, allowing your septfurcated eye to focus in the relative darkness, away from the bright sun. As the door swings open, the massive white mutt practically flattens its chin to the floor, coiling and growling with sinister intent.

SKATER: There's a good monsterdog!

You sweeten your voice as much as you can, and bring the statue upright. You hope the smell of it-- somewhere between mothballs and ancient books-- will at least confuse the dang thing until you can lock it in a closet.

You inch inside along the tile, trying to keep your eyes on the canine threat, even as your attempt to baffle it with an inedible gift shaped like its master at least holds it at bay. You can't help but gaze upward into the postmodern architectural hellscape surrounding you, like some TV-show set nightmare combination of the Addams Family home and the Manson Family compound.

Then you hear a groaning from the next room over, piteous and strained.

JADE: ughhhh bec what is iiiit

JADE: that was only fifteen minutes this will have terrible knock-on effects for--

It's her, it's Jade-- trundling from a side room dressed in overalls and a loose-fitting white sweatshirt. Her massive birdsnest bedhead frizzes out on all sides of her, giving much the same halo effect as the other night. In fact, if it weren't for her choppy long bangs, you're pretty sure even her face would be obscured in the mess. You catch yourself ruminating on what a pity that'd be.

She stops in her tracks, rubbing her tremendous green eyes under her glasses before sliding them down again and practically jolting with recognition. Bec barks again, but this time out of surprise, and heels up behind her, watching you.

JADE: its you!!

JADE: chin length messy black hair, diverted left pupil, approximately five foot eight

JADE: completely unrepentant gait and laid-back neutral posture!!!

JADE: youre that THIEF!!

SKATER: Yes! It is I, your 8razen milkwoman, returned here in the light of day to give 8ack what we rightfully stole in a gesture of goodwill.

JADE: wheres my

JADE: fuck!!

She wheels around, probably trying to find her weapon, but you rush your hands out, make the most obsequious gesture you can fathom. Bec growls, but doesn't move.

SKATER: You don't need a gun! I'm just here to talk!

Jade checks her watch, thick brows mashed together in skeptical consternation.

JADE: its one forty five

JADE: couldnt you have come back in twenty minutes when nobody answered the door??

SKATER: I'm a very busy woman! I can't afford to dally around waiting for the snoozing princess in the house on the hill to deign to see me.

Jade's eyes narrow at this, and she fixes her huge spectacles up her nose.

JADE: oh great youve come back to insult me now that youve threatened the integrity of my home

JADE: disrupted my meticulous sleep schedule

JADE: and stolen my grandfathers things!!!

What the fuck is wrong with her!? You came all this way to give her back this worthless statue, and she gets all self-righteous about having way more stuff than one human could ever need.

Still, your grand plan hinges on making her like you, so you put on your biggest smile.

SKATER: I'm setting that this was the most important of those, though.

SKATER: And I'm bringing it back to you as an olive branch!

You extend the blue stone to her, and she side-eyes it, then you, then the statue once more.

But she slowly extends her arms, accepting it, and hauls it into the next room without a word.

You beam as she returns, hooking a thumb in the beltloop of your jeans and rubbing your other hand through your greasy hair, the most inoffensive 'aw shucks'y pose you can manage.

SKATER: In fact, who's to say if you even figured out what else we took?

SKATER: Since this was clearly the one that mattered to you.

Her mouth doesn't move, but the rest of her face does soften, after a moment.

JADE: well okay

JADE: i dont know why youd think that but

JADE: its not like i can say youre wrong!

JADE: is that all? can you leave now?

SKATER: Is that how you treat a guest who brought you a gr8 present?

Nope, that scowl is back.

JADE: what do you want

SKATER: I want for nothing! I just felt like maybe you'd have a bit more empathy for your local band of raggamuffins, so down on their luck they have to steal to survive!

JADE: bullshit!! nobody has to do that

Now it's your turn to backpedal, look up at her in mock shock.

SKATER: My goodness! How do you figure?

SKATER: A poor lot of youths like ourselves, holed up as we

are in a different building with YOUR name on it, and turned to a life of crime out of pure desperation!

JADE: heyy how did you know harley was MY name

You grin a wide, disarming grin.

SKATER: Lucky guess. ::::)

She sighs, knits her fingers together in front of her chest. Her gaze falls, running back and forth as though she's reading lines on a page, or spinning some three-dimensional space in her head.

JADE: living in one of granddads old buildings huh

SKATER: Yep! Down on the Wharf.

JADE: i need to see it

JADE: i own all of grandpas old buildings now and if somebodys living there i should know about it

JADE: heck maybe thats violating some kind of landlord rules and i have to ensure the space is livable??

SKATER: Ooh, probably! We can't pay you rent-- or backrent-- but you have a duty to ensure we're properly cared for, and let me tell you, that place is a firehazard!

SKATER: Surely you'd feel horrible if eleven wayward teens perished in a terrible dock fire one cold autumn night!

You can't say you expected this part of the plan to be so easy. You also can't say you expected her to demand to see your living space, but if that's the thing that can convince her that you are but a ring of pathetic, harmless moppets in need of a patron and caretaker... well, you'll run this grift like any other.

JADE: oh nooo! :o

JADE: that would be so awful!!

SKATER: Exaaaaaaaaactly.

SKATER: Shall we?

You step towards her, trying to put on your best jovial, nonthreatening smile, but at this proximity your grotesque miscalculation becomes apparent:

Jade Harley reeks. She does not merely lack a pleasant scent, but she stinks, what your uncultured nose might estimate as motor oil on top of some acrid almond smell and rotten meat, mixed with a healthy dose of sweat and body odor. You choke and reel, unable to hold fast to the nasal assault.

When she sees your eyes water and your smile disappear as you recoil, Jade blinks at you.

JADE: whats

JADE: whats wrong

SKATER: You smell 8wful!!!!!!!!!!

SKATER: J8sus, what did you roll in? Have you even changed clothes in days!?

Jade balks, sound issuing from her throat like a strangled chicken.

JADE: what!!!!

JADE: well EXCUSE me for not expecting GUESTS today!!!

JADE: yes time got away from me!! my sleep schedule is such that i dont tend to change like every DAY but

JADE: just because im BUSY doesnt mean you can be such a JERK to me!!

You furrow your forehead, as though you have any right to be offended.

SKATER: If you wanna change 8efore we go, it might make a 8etter first impression!

She sniffs at you. You can't imagine your own unwashed stench is particularly noticable over her own, but she wrinkles her nose.

JADE: youre not exactly a summer peach yourself!!

You let a moment pass, not letting up from your skeptical glare. You can't let her know that this withers you inside, just slightly, because you're quite sure that would have the whole racket you're attempting falling about your ears. Yes, that's why.

Jade sighs.

JADE: fine!

JADE: wait here

JADE: and dont touch anything

You merely shrug, and step out onto the porch. You refasten your eyepatch, and adjust your glasses.

JADE: sorry about the wait, i had to shut bec up in the side room so hed let me leave!

JADE: hes a very protective boy

She steps out of her house, wearing a short jean jacket that cuts off just below the hem of her floor-length black skirt, and she buttons it tight against the cold autumn breeze. She looks so annoyingly, effortlessly put-together, like a dog that stumbled through an aisle of makeup demonstrations and came out perfectly-rouged and smelling of roses, panting and smiling the whole way.

Well, she doesn't smell like roses, and she's not wet, so whatever method of cleansing she utilized it wasn't a shower, but you're not gonna nitpick as long as her odor doesn't make you retch.

So you smile, turn towards the iron-wrought gate, and beckon. You'll be damned if you're going to expend the effort to pry it open without her help.

But she reaches behind the door, and flips a switch, and it trundles open on its own.

SKATER: Fancy.

JADE: haha not really!

The two of you meander out, and you lead the way down the gravel path away from her home.

Frankly, you're surprised luring her out of her home was this easy, given that you assumed she would literally be unable to pass the doorway, but out in the sun you can see the faintest upturned corners of her mouth as the light hits her from behind.

Jade points at your face.

JADE: whats up with the eyepatch? :p

JADE: i saw your funky eye before, is it some kinda birth defect??

JADE: i thought you were a thief, not a pirate captain haha!

You catch your hurt frown almost immediately, but mortification flashes across Jade's face as she sees you wince. But you cut her off before she can apologize, swallow deeply for a moment and clear your throat.

SKATER: It's called a cola8oma.

SKATER: I was 8orn with it, you're r8!

SKATER: My eye can't focus properly, actually, so 8right light hurts really 8ad if I don't wear an eyepatch.

SKATER: Another good reason to take my life of crime to the streets at dusk, level the playing field with the fully sighted.

You stuff your hands into the pockets of your hand-me-down leather jacket, as though it's possible just to play cool through a seriously heavy revelation about yourself like that. But perhaps you hide your discomfort too well, because she doesn't stop, her own eyes gazing into the sky.

JADE: oh

JADE: plus uh

JADE: then you can swap the eye you wear it on when youre in the dark!

JADE: keep your eyes adjusted and ready for anything!!

SKATER: Again, not a pir8.

You sigh, and Jade sighs with you, but a moment later you trudge onward.

Jade makes her biggest smile, but it doesn't quite quell the sadness in her eyes.

JADE: sooo you gave me a fake name before

JADE: do i get to know your real name? :D

You extend a hand.

SKATER: Sk8r Evriks.

JADE: that sounds fake too :p

SKATER: Hey!

She takes your hand anyway, and the softness of her fingertips surprises you. She has the longest fingers you've ever seen, almost as long as your own, with broad nails kept short and rounded. You're suddenly very self-conscious about your own overgrown cuticles, black paint chipping off the tips and rough callouses on your fingers from ages of rifling through other people's belongings, and an absence of good lotion.

You try to put it out of your mind as you reach the base of the hill.

SKATER: Take what you can get. My name's my name.

Jade yawns widely, and blinks.

As you move into the city limits proper, the grass shoulder of the road out of town slowly morphs into exurban lawnways and paths inward, and you maneuver down cold sidewalks towards your makeshift home. On days like this you're thankful for company-- even if it's a woman you've barely met, who still puts you on the defensive, but you try to keep up the smalltalk regardless.

SKATER: So... about that huge dog of yours. What did you call him?

JADE: his names becquerel!

JADE: i call him bec

SKATER: How old is he?

JADE: i dunno!

SKATER: And what... kind of dog even is he?

JADE: dunno that either

You tilt your head to her, stepping caddy-corner off a curb cut to head towards the waterfront. You can see home from here, just a little ways down the rocky shoreline and out onto the jutting jetty adjacent the larger wharfs.

SKATER: But surely a vet could tell you.

JADE: i dont know if becs ever been to a vet!

JADE: he might not like it very much

SKATER: He doesn't need a checkup?

JADE: haha that dog will outlive me

The blasé way she says it stops you midstep, and Jade dips in front of you, matching the angle of your head with her own. She rolls her eyes.

JADE: becs perfectly healthy

JADE: i may not be more than a dabbling veterinarian but i pay attention to his health

SKATER: Do you have no8ody to help look after you 8oth?

SKATER: No family near8y, rel8tives or friends?

JADE: nope...

Jade turns away from you suddenly, walks with a renewed purpose. Even the breeze gets a little chillier, and you jog to keep up.

JADE: i have a cousin who lives nearby i guess? and her dads probably still around

JADE: but the last time i heard from anybody in my family was an aunt and uncle visiting europe!

JADE: but its been at least three years since i even heard from any of them but june

JADE: so that was probably ages ago!

JADE: not like they ever write or call or

JADE: augh!!

You catch up to her as she takes longer and longer strides, and you notice her fists are clenched at her sides.

JADE: im not thinking about them right now!!

JADE: im better off on my own

JADE: who cares about family!! im good enough to take care of myself

JADE: and i like having all my time to just be alone!!!!

Jade stops in her tracks, fuming. You can't help but stare for a moment, gawk at her suddenly unhinged rant.

God, if you had family-- any at all, living or estranged, nearby or far-- you're sure you would never be able to stop badgering them. You'd never say this to Piper-- or any of the other people in your crew-- but you'd flee this godawful city in an instant if you had family you could go mooch off of instead of having to stay in this shitheap town.

Your stomach gurgles, and you lay a hand to it, trying to ease the sudden tenderness you feel in your gut. Jade sees you wince, and her own expression softens.

JADE: sorry! i guess i dont think much about how other families must do things

JADE: its like, geez, i bet your family doesnt even have an astralarium in your home haha

You blink.

SKATER: Does my-- first, I've never even known any of my family! I've seen an orphan from 8irth!

SKATER: Second, the kids I take care of have a roof over their heads and I count myself fucking lucky for that, most of the time!

SKATER: So don't ru8 it in people's f8ces when your 8iggest concern is whether or not the family you DO have will even fucking call you!

Jade stands tall, and you realize that she looms several inches over you. She turns away, dark hair billowing behind her.

JADE: you think its so great to have family!

JADE: even my grandpa doesnt do anything for me anymore

JADE: just reminds me of the bad times when i had to take care of both of us!!

JADE: well i pity you skater!

JADE: for not realizing that family sucks and will only ever let you down!

She stomps off, arms crossed, to go stand at the bayside, stepping over the curb to stand on the grass abutting the reedy, murky water.

Suits you just fine; you don't need some rich snob's pity. But as you gaze over at her, you see she's rubbing her eyes with the sleeve of her jacket, and as you feel the regrettable burble in your stomach resurface you start to recognize it as another pang of guilt. So you trudge over, hands in your pockets, and stand next to her.

SKATER: ...Sorry. I guess I shouldn't presume to tell you what your problems are.

JADE: no its

JADE: *snrff*

JADE: its fine youre probably right

JADE: i shouldnt feel this bad for myself!

JADE: i should be okay with being alone all the time

JADE: i do like it...

JADE: its what keeps me sharp, means i have to be competent

JADE: if i were around people im sure id be less able to take care of myself haha

JADE: i should just keep feeling like i dont need anybody!

That's how she feels about being alone? For a moment you're almost so eager to tell her about your grand plan that you forget she's technically your mark, but as you remember what exactly you're trying to pull on her you feel the excitement curdle in your chest.

You reach an unsure hand around her, and pat her on the shoulder. She looks at you, her eyes red and nose snuffling, but right when you imagine she's about to tell you

to not touch her she turns into you, bringing her front against your chest and arms around your back.

JADE: im sorry skater i know we just met and

JADE: i guess i shouldnt even be talking to you because you
DID try to rob me but

JADE: i dont know why this bums me out so much and i cant
stop crying :(

You respond with a few more pats at the shoulder. It's not like you have any idea what you're doing to comfort somebody, but hey, at least she'll never know that.

SKATER: Ah.

SKATER: ...There...

SKATER: There?

Jade smiles, blowing her nose on her coatsleeve. You try to smile back, and as sure as you are that it's an unconvincing gesture, her tears appear to mostly dry up, and she rests the side of her head on your jacket. Her cheek is wet against your neck, hot breath creeping down your jacket, into your shirt.

You have no idea what she's doing. Before you can even think to stop yourself, the words blurt out of you.

SKATER: What the fuck are you doing?

You feel your whole body start to freeze up, joints locking in place as an unfamiliar feeling wells through you, starts in your knees and ripples up to your shoulders. Jade doesn't move, however, her voice surprisingly quiet even as you can feel it in your ribcage, down your spine.

JADE: hey, you touched me first!

JADE: i thought if you were trying to offer up some emotional

support it extended to physical comforting as well...

SKATER: Oh. Oh, I mean, sure, but let a girl know, next time.

SKATER: I almost thought you were coming onto me.

Jade snorts once, but says nothing.

You wipe the sweat in your palms against your jeans as covertly as you can, and the woman resting her body against yours sighs a deep, reverberating sigh. You close the hug with your free arm, patting her lightly.

JADE: okay lets see this place of yours!

SKATER: Gr8. You'll like the gang, I'm sure.

You wait for her to let up from the hug, and nod your head, walking down the street once more.

As you walk, you let the heady conversation swirl around you, pervade you. For some reason, just thinking about Jade, all alone in that huge, empty house, with nothing but the dust bunnies and that giant animal for company? It's almost too much for you to bear, like a weight on your chest.

You can't help but wonder, what if there was a fire? What if she collapsed? What if somebody tried to-- well, never mind that thought, but bad things can happen to a young woman living alone.

You look back at her, for just a moment, hair sweeping a broad trail behind her, hands in the pockets of her boxy denim jacket. Yeah, this is just as much for her sake as it is for yours. You both stand to benefit from your upcoming arrangement.

Chapter 5

Skater Evriks has just hugged you and done her best to say things will be alright. She's been oddly quiet since you broke away from her embrace, probably because she doesn't want to deal with all the stuff you tried to dump on her about family and loneliness-- well, not loneliness, but definitely about being alone. Great job, Jade, the first person you talk to in a month and you immediately barf your feelings all over her shoes. But you've been unable to even feel properly silly about that because your head is still spinning, ever so slightly, and you've eaten enough pizza today, so instead of worrying you're hard at work trying to dissect what else might be the cause of your mild nausea.

As you are a scientist at heart, you have many theories for your current state of being: cosmic rays, for instance, or solar neutrinos! That's right, every second, 65 billion neutrinos course through every square centimeter of the planet from the sun alone, and cosmic radiation has been known to cause computing errors by flipping individual bits in the RAM of distributed computing centers on campuses the world over, so maybe it can have the same effects on brains.

...These are the only theories you can currently posit that do not indicate some concerning truth to her accusation that you are attracted to her. And as you have only known her for the duration of your walk over here, despite these feelings' rapid onset you otherwise cannot explain the fluttering in your heart when you look at her, with her confident little smirks and eyerolls and the way she clearly has some interest in your goings-on.

You fiddle with the bundle of stretchy bracelets you keep on your right arm next to your watch, to remind you of several ongoing projects in need of time management. You'll have to add a new one to devote some time to thinking about Skater, and how she

makes you feel. After all, this is unlikely to be neutrino-related if it's a replicable effect just thinking about the strange thief with the anachronistic haircut.

Your sample size might be pretty small, but you conjecture that you like hugs, and resolve to try more of them in the future to test this theory. You are aware that, academically, you should feel angry with her, because of the breakin or what have you, but even she seems over that by now, so you figure your best bet is to adapt to whatever mood she turns your way, and see where this friendship goes. For science.

Plus, she accused you of 'coming on to' her, and that is simply not a phrase you are familiar with.

You ramble with her over the barrier between city concrete and the wood of the dock, walking down the raised planks towards a building clearly labeled across its side:

HARLEYCO.

Your grandfather was always terrible with his naming schemes. No indication of what the company did-- nor was there ever any in the corporate ledgers or notes, you've checked-- nor any subdivisions to manage different aspects of a business across shipping, or storage, or local distribution, or use. Whatever your grandfather had a warehouse for, it was under the exact same title as everything else of his in this town.

That term, though, 'coming on to'. Does it mean you want to kiss her? Is that what coming on to somebody is? You spent enough of your pubescent years poring over a weathered copy of "Our Bodies, Ourselves" from the '70s that you can imagine some of the transformational factors that might lead to such an attitude towards another person, but you must admit to never having attempted to feel that way before.

This, you imagine, is within the domain of science, an ignorance which must be immediately rectified. Therefore, you resolve to feel attraction towards another person under more controlled circumstances. Luckily, perhaps, you have one on hand.

Then Skater waves a hand in your face, and you recall what you were supposed to be focusing on.

JADE: so.. you live here?

SKATER: Yep!

JADE: are you the leader of this... outfit?

SKATER: Basically. Without me all these people are headless chickens. I've been here the longest, so I do the planning, I keep people sharp and focused, and I arrange all our... activities.

JADE: where are the adults

She gives you a cold glare.

SKATER: We don't need any. Just fucks up a group like this, taking our stuff and forcing us to do dumb shit that doesn't matter.

JADE: :o

SKATER: Oh, one more thing before we go in: don't ask Piper how she came by her particular disability.

JADE: look im sorry that it sounded like i was making fun of your eyepatch okay :/

She gives you a regretful look, then inspects her shoelaces.

SKATER: No, it's not... like that. She'll think I put you up to it if you do, because I was the one who caused it.

JADE: ...oh

Skater is watching you again, and you realize you've been grimacing.

The high windows by the warehouse ceilings cast long rays on a cloudless afternoon like today, and even through the door you can see the slats between them toss shadows across the walls. You follow her up the stairs towards the closed-off second floor. Skater swings the door wide.

She beckons you inside, and you're immediately shocked by what you see. Meagre cots arranged across the floor, with shoddy hand-hewn bunks periodically stuck into walls to increase storage space. While this may be a warehouse interior, the space is surprisingly cramped, personal belongings strewn every which way. And unlike the ordered chaos of your home, it seems as though there is little regard for whose space is encroached on by what. Across the room, a record player is plugged into the one visible power outlet, and small speakers blare a song you're familiar with.

Skater unzips her brown bomber jacket, but keeps it around her shoulders, and tucks her patch into a pocket. Nobody looks up from their business as the two of you enter, though you feel like an intruder in some scary and intimate zone, like you're the one doing the breakin. She wasn't kidding when she implied she was the oldest; the whole group looks like a wide range of ages, with a few younger teens smattered among mostly a group barely younger than yourself. While most are speaking in hushed tones among companions or sitting quietly-- darning socks, writing in journals, or listening to tapes on Walkmans-- one shortish, angular girl, perhaps about your age, faces away from you in the center of the room.

She's attired in a mishmash of colors, bright red corduroy jeans practically straining to be heard over the sharp electric teal of her long-sleeved off-the-shoulder shirt and bright yellow belt. Her hair is barely constrained in a pair of low, uneven pigtails, not even brushing against the back of her neck. She doesn't turn to face you, but as she points her nose into the air, and appears to... sniff? in your vague direction, you see the top edges of her pointy carnelian lenses flash in the light.

PIPER: H3Y SK4T3S 1 JUST GOT B4CK FROM F3NC1NG TH3 STUFF FROM TH4T L4ST--

SKATER: (Not now, Pip8r!!!!!!!)

She whispers emphatically, jabbing an unsubtle thumb in your direction. You wonder what effect it was intended to create, given that they are still across the floor from each other, but you politely gaze away as to appear uninterested in their discussion on the vending of your priceless belongings.

Piper clearly detects something questionable in the air, and wheels around on one sneakered heel. She stomps with purpose towards you.

PIPER: YOU DIDNT BRING

She cuts herself off, putting her face disturbingly far into Skater's personal space, practically peering up into her nose.

PIPER: WHAT TH3 FUCK 1S SH3 DO1NG H3R3

Skater doesn't flinch. Instead, she smiles, and turns her head to you.

SKATER: J8 Harley, meet the personable Piper Reyotez.

SKATER: Piper, J8 is the owner of our 8uilding, I have learned today, so it would 8e rather disadvantageous for us to 8ar her entry, hmm?

SKATER: Once she found out a8out our terri8le plight she rushed down here immedi8ly with me to see just how 8ad conditions were. :::)

Piper shoots her a look you can't interpret, half thick fuzzy eyebrows, half bared teeth. Her nostrils flare as she whiffs deeply in your direction, trying to discern you. But then the shorter woman backs down, and shakes her head.

PIPER: F1N3

PIPER: BUT YOU N33D TO COM3 WITH M3

She seizes Skater by the wrist, who shrugs to you apologetically as she's dragged away.

SKATER: Introduce yourself to people, shake some hands!

SKATER: Karstan! Show Jade around, and don't be a dick about it!

You look around the room, suddenly very alone. All but one pair of eyes skitter away from your sight, returning to whatever tasks they were on prior.

The kid sitting closest to the speakers, who had been paying the most deliberate attention to it as you entered, stomps over. He's a head shorter than you, stocky, with a distinct hunch and underbite that you almost imagine he must be exaggerating. His hair sticks up all over the place, looking at once freshy-trimmed and totally destroyed, like he stuck his head in a ceiling fan.

JADE: hello?

KARSTAN: WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU.

JADE: hi! im jade

KARSTAN: AND I'M PISSED. WHY DID SKATER FUCKING BRING YOU HERE?

JADE: well she said i could

KARSTAN: NO, STOP. I KNOW I JUST ASKED BUT I ALSO NEED *YOU* TO KNOW THAT I COULD NOT CARE EVEN IF YOU CAME HERE TO LITERALLY END MY FUCKING LIFE.

You stand in silence for a moment. He crosses his arms, completely covered by his threadbare black turtleneck, and stares, waiting for you to account for your existence in his withering line of sight.

You aren't really interested, but you hope you can at least distract him.

JADE: listen here jerk i own this building and the least i can do for you is make sure it wont burn down overnight!!

JADE: anyway its more of a social call at this point anyway,

and im mostly here at skaters insistence!

JADE: so dont be shitty to me

He harrumphs, turning his head away, but you cross your arms. But some part of your pushback causes him to raise an eyebrow and return his gaze, so you establish a softer tack.

JADE: listening to new order huh??

JADE: i love new order :D

It is, in fact, Temptation blaring from his speakers, and you recognize it immediately as the remastered version from the compilation album, *Substance*, that came out a couple years ago. As the song ends, you shrug.

JADE: you should flip over the record!

JADE: i wanna listen to blue monday haha

The malcontent's eyes soften slightly, and his posture unstoops by perhaps an inch. He turns, stomps over to his music, and flips it as you indicated, starting the seven-and-a-half minute groove and closing his eyes. Then, a moment later, he reopens them and treads back.

KARSTAN: JUST KNOW THAT I DON'T TRUST YOU.

KARSTAN: SKATER ISN'T THE BEST JUDGE OF PEOPLE, BUT WHOEVER YOU ARE I'LL SEE RIGHT THROUGH YOUR SHIT, GOT IT?

KARSTAN: EVEN IF YOU HAVE GOOD TASTE IN MUSIC.

You consider backing up, putting yourself against a wall, or at least trying to make yourself look shorter to perhaps inhibit some of his shouting, but he abruptly offers you a floppy sleeve-end, presumably to shake.

KARSTAN: I'M KARSTAN.

KARSTAN: AND I'M KEEPING AN EYE ON YOU, *JADE*.

You take it.

JADE: and i you haha

You smile. His eyes narrow, but you suppose it's a step up from shouting at you again. He plods back over to his bunk, sitting on the raised platform heavily, and you follow him, standing to face the room.

JADE: uh care to introduce me to anyone?

JADE: im afraid i wasnt aware there would be so many new people!!

JADE: skater made it seem like we could just take a quick look around but now shes gone?

Karstan shrugs.

KARSTAN: YOU GET USED TO IT.

He wheels around, grumbling under his breath, and starts pointing out people.

KARSTAN: IF YOU'RE TRYING TO MEET THE CREW, HERE'S WHO YOU NEED TO KNOW:

KARSTAN: ZAQ HUA, BUT EVERYONE CALLS HIM 'HUSKIE'. HE DEMANDS IT, DON'T ASK WHY.

A muscular kid, among the oldest, one ear in massive cupped headphones and eyes covered entirely with cracked sunglasses, gives a curt, inattentive wave from his mattress.

KARSTAN: LEIANNE TOPEJ. DON'T TALK TO HER UNLESS YOU REALLY NEED TO HEAR ABOUT TOLKIEN.

LEIANNE: :3 < tolkien!? you like tolkien???

JADE: oh y--

KARSTAN: NO, SHE DOESN'T, LEIANNE, ALSO FUCK OFF.

LEIANNE: :3 < okay!!

The two steps that she shambled towards you-- invisible though she is under a massive, floppy blue toque and olive-green sweater and cape-- are immediately retracted, and she sits again, seemingly content to doodle in a notebook.

KARSTAN: ZAK IS OUT, SO COUNT YOURSELF LUCKY FOR THAT. UNLESS YOU NEED SOME DRUGS, THEN HE'S GOT A GOOD SIDE HUSTLE.

JADE: like insulin???

KARSTAN: NO, NOT LIKE-- OH, FOR FUCK'S SAKE, NEVER MIND.

KARSTAN: ANYWAY HE'S WHY WE CALL HUSKIE HUSKIE. TOO MANY ZAKS OR ZAQS OR WHOEVER.

KARSTAN: LUCAS IS DOWNSTAIRS TRYING TO GET SOME GARBAGE COMPUTER HARDWARE HE FOUND WORKING, BUT I DON'T GIVE A SHIT ABOUT THAT SO WE'LL BUG HIM LATER.

KARSTAN: AND AMARA SHOULD BE--

A girl with long, curly hair pokes her head up from behind a nearby bunk, wide eyes barely raising over it before she stoops again, trying to see but be unseen.

AMARA: hell0

You can barely even hear her voice over the music, but you give a polite wave.

AMARA: 0_0

She disappears again.

He murmurs under his breath, blocking his lips from visibility with a cupped hand.

KARSTAN: (BLAME ZAK FOR HER LACONIC FUCKING GHOST SHTICK. FUCKING BURNOUT.)

KARSTAN: ANYWAY WE'RE THE CHARMING ORPHANS YOU'RE HERE TO KICK OUT, OR WHATEVER.

You're about to argue, claim to be moved by their plight or that you're actually going to find some way to help or the like, or at least explain who you even are, but at that moment the door to the back room swings open again, and Skater trudges out, looking mildly seasick. Piper storms out afterwards, one hand jammed in a pocket, the other using her cane to adroitly tap out a groundpath in a beeline for the door. You consider calling out to her, trying to introduce yourself or the like, but she's out the door before you can even think of what to say.

Skater scans the room, then looks towards you, and she walks over, uncrossing her arms.

SKATER: I see you're already getting along with Mr. Kavat.

Karstan mumbles something, but Skater ignores him.

SKATER: Listen, I think we should talk. Piper's said we can use her room for a little privacy, so come with me.

You oblige, waving to Karstan before wordlessly taking up behind her.

Piper's room is clearly some former office, a foreman's room or clerical suite or the like. Apart from the spartan desk piled full of art supplies and toys, a wooden chair, and bed identical to the ones outside, the walls are doodled on extensively, in what appears to be the medium of crayon in bright reds, blues, and greens. While you recognize in the drawings the seascape visible from the storehouse windows, another part of it looks like verdant mountains, and a further bit of... clouds? Or perhaps something more abstract. Whatever it is, it's scrawled in a bloody scarlet color.

Skater sits on the bed, and waves a hand to the chair. You surmise she intends you to sit, so you pull it over, plop down on it.

SKATER: Sorry for pulling you in here, but that song just bugs the shit out of me. No idea why.

She shrugs.

SKATER: So what do you think?

JADE: well im glad i came over here for sure!

JADE: i cant believe youre all living in this tiny space!

SKATER: Frankly I'm surprised you were willing to leave your house in the first place. I almost expected to have to drag you, heh.

She shakes her head, smiling. You're pretty sure you should be offended by that, but she said it so nonchalantly you almost find yourself agreeing with her.

JADE: why do people say that??

JADE: i get out when i have a reason to

JADE: its just... been a while!

SKATER: I... really? Everyone assumes you're crazy, you know that, right?

SKATER: There are, like...

SKATER: Stories. About you, and that house.

JADE: :o

You suppose that makes some sense, actually. Your grandfather did tend to generate a lot of mystery, as by far the wealthiest man in the town. And you've done little to dissuade that image, keeping odd hours, ordering strange materials and parts by phone, never leaving the house... In fact, upon reflection, for your first time going out in in... you don't want to think about how long, you're doing rather well! You resolve to give yourself a pat on the back for that, but maybe not in front of company.

JADE: do they think im worshipping satan in there or something?

You giggle, but Skater doesn't laugh, expression going to something closer to reacting to a foul smell.

JADE: see its funny cuz i wondered if you guys might be cultists or something like that!

This does help Skater's tight-lipped glare, and she clearly holds back her rippling gut laughter from ushering forth.

SKATER: I'm sorry, wh8t?

JADE: i dont know!!

JADE: its silly, sorry :p

Through the door, you swear you can hear Karstan's distinctive voice muffle a guffaw likewise, but decide it'd be impolite if he were listening in, so you turn your attention back to the woman on the bed.

JADE: so uh

JADE: piper didnt even introduce herself?

JADE: is me being here a problem?? i can go if you need

SKATER: It's certainly not a pro8lem, and anybody who thinks so can take it up with me.

SKATER: Consider yourself my guest. ::::)

You settle into the hard chair, crossing your legs. Skater leans against the wall, padded only by her coat.

JADE: so... you mustve known piper for a long time then

JADE: whats she like?

SKATER: Listen, I know she doesn't exactly project the 8est first impression, 8ut you get used to the way she does things.

SKATER: Heck, she's almost as competent as me, and that's

saying something. ::::)

SKATER: She's like that blind superhero, from the comics, y'know... That martial-artist crimefighter with the superpowers, D-- what's his name?

She snaps her fingers several times, frustratedly attempting to expedite her recall.

JADE: dr mid-nite?

SKATER: ...Exactly. Yeah, exactly.

SKATER: So, listen. My big plan was gonna be to play up how much we needed your charity, and tell you we had to get your help to be able to survive the winter.

SKATER: But... I can be honest with you, right?

JADE: of course

JADE: its been less than two hours but you did show me your home...

SKATER: We've actually only seen living her for the past few months. We tend to move around a lot.

SKATER: So...

Her voice goes conspiratorial, quiet, as if holding it back for the benefit of the crew outside.

SKATER: Listen, I think we've got a lot to offer you. It seems like you really do need people to help just bust up the loneliness up in a big place like that, and all I'm saying is that we...

She licks her lips, and smiles, broadly. Maybe even genuinely.

SKATER: We'll keep the place clean, we'll help bake sweets and keep the dog in line, and maybe even pitch in with the work you're doing solo, eh?

You fold back in your seat, shoulders hunching as the weight of the incipient request dawns on you.

JADE: so...

JADE: thats what this was about

SKATER: What? What was about? I me8n it. You and I w8uld get to hang out so m8ch more. I know you said you don't need any8ody, 8ut...

JADE: you dont give a shit about me!

You pull your jacket from the bed, having tossed it to one side idly upon sitting down. But Skater puts out a hand, pained look in her eyes.

SKATER: 8ut it seemed like y8u really enjoyed at least getting to t8lk!

You fume, stomping a foot.

JADE: i did!!

JADE: youre pretty cool and just spending a couple hours wandering around and gabbing was a fun diversion!!

JADE: but if youre gonna lie to me and say that something like this is somehow for my benefit instead of you just wanting to take advantage of me

JADE: well

JADE: i know youre lying!!

SKATER: J8!!

You feel her hand on your upper arm as you turn, and when you look back she has a frown drawn across her whole mouth.

JADE: you...

JADE: you really mean it dont you

SKATER: Jade...

Her voice is almost quiet, now.

In the other room, muffled by the thick door, the last song on the last side of the last record plays: True Faith, with that weird punchy bass drum intro and the groovy synthetic bass. Even through your anger you can feel the familiar bassline already falling in rhythm with your heart, and your annoyance starts to ebb as it pulses and thrums in your ankles, up your calves.

You sigh, and smile, and turn back around.

JADE: yknow i love this song!!

JADE: its just

JADE: mtv plays the music video periodically and

JADE: its actually really creepy!

JADE: haha :D

SKATER: You... watch MTV?

JADE: its not what you think!!

JADE: its only while im working...

JADE: but the music helps me focus!

As you approach Skater she gives you an amused, ambiguous look, but lets you take her hands in yours. You pull her standing from the bed.

You can't help yourself, you just need to dance. This bizarre day has just been too much for anything less. It starts in your shoulders and you neck, and Skater laughs when she realizes what you're doing.

SKATER: C'mon. Don't ask me to do this. I've never danced before in my 18fe.

JADE: me either!! its not about that

JADE: just dance with me, okay??

JADE: just with me :D

You bite your lower lip to keep from grinning like an idiot, but it doesn't work. As Skater begrudgingly follows along, arms bobbing between the two of you in your grip, you find yourself mouthing along with the lyrics.

JADE: 'i used to think that the day would never come'

JADE: 'id see delight in the shade of the morning sun'

JADE: 'my morning sun is the drug that brings me near'

JADE: 'to the childhood I lost replaced by fear'

JADE: 'i used to think that the day would never come'

JADE: 'that my life would depend on the morning sun'

You feel like Molly Ringwald in that John Hughes movie. You don't really know, you've never seen it, but still you saw her dancing in the trailers. Skater beams now, unrepentantly, feet shuffling in time with yours, and the music. She's right, she can't dance; but you're pretty sure you can't either, and you're still having a great time.

But her body slows, dropping away from the tempo of the music, and Skater purses her lips.

SKATER: I'm honestly not sure how we're going to do once winter comes.

SKATER: This place isn't exactly heated, or insul8ed.

JADE: :o

JADE: oh no i bet youre right!!

SKATER: It's already getting a 8it chilly. We've got enough 8lankets for now, 8ut...

JADE: but youll need someplace warmer to stay

You've stopped dancing as Skater laid out her quandary. You tuck the curve of your hand around your chin, pondering, but bring it away a moment later.

JADE: listen i can call some contractors to come out here, give an estimate of how much work it'd take to insulate this place

JADE: add some heating

JADE: why subject yourselves to all this, right??

You can't read Skater's expression, but it seems like she's verging on some big question you can't intuit.

SKATER: Is that really the best way to deal with this?

SKATER: I mean, you're right, why subject us to all this? She sighs.

SKATER: You have all that extra space up there in your huge house!

SKATER: I know we're just a bunch of down-and-out kids... But why do you get all that to just yourself?

JADE: ugh im sorry i just wanted to have some fun here but

SKATER: What, you want me to say the dancing and gabbing isn't a fun bonus?

SKATER: It is! But I have to focus on my future, here.

JADE: i thought you liked me :(

SKATER: I do, damn!

SKATER: But if you can't tell, I don't exactly have much wiggle room if I'm going to ensure that everybody here survives the winter!

You blink. Survives?

SKATER: Or did you think the stealing and selling other people's stuff was some kind of fun diversion, a monkey game for bored and wayward adolescents?

JADE: ...kinda?

SKATER: Good for you. But I promise you that our resources are stretched more thin than you think.

JADE: but you guys have record players and books and stuff .-.

Skater narrows her eyes, like grandpa used to do when you asked to go outside during math time.

SKATER: Just because we're struggling to survive means we can't have any downtime or enjoyment?

Oh. You guess that was a particularly foolish conjecture. You suppose that even you would eventually drop dead if you didn't allow yourself *some* modicum of relaxation.

JADE: anyway i can just check on how easy itd be to turn this place habitable

SKATER: ...We don't have a phone, if that's what you were hoping.

JADE: haha no ive got a cellular one!

From one of your jacket pockets you produce a cellular telephone, a black, square-bottomed Motorola MicroTAC, and tug up the antenna. You begin fiddling with the thing, flip it open, and start to key the number for your estate trustee into the rubbery buttons from memory.

SKATER: W8, so that thing can call anybody, anywhere?????????

JADE: yeah!!

JADE: so long as there's signal nearby haha

JADE: at least id hope so!! this thing cost me almost thirty five hundred bucks

You can practically see the dollar signs flit through Skater's eyes as they momentarily unfocus, and you wonder if she's about to faint. But she shakes her head.

SKATER: C'm8n. There must 8e an easier answer.

She puts a hand over yours, folding the phone closed again.

JADE: :/

SKATER: Don't you owe us that?

JADE: do i

Skater sighs.

SKATER: May8e not. 8ut if you call contractors, they have to get it inspected, and we get evicted, and even if it's just until the work gets done...

SKATER: That sounds like it would suck.

JADE: ...yeah it kinda does

JADE: alright

You shrug.

JADE: itll be a couple days and im busy tomorrow but

JADE: sure you can bring your group and come move in with me

Skater's eyebrows furrow, trying to read you.

SKATER: You're sure?

JADE: of course!!

JADE: like you said, i owe you that i guess haha

You don't even wonder why the flattery failed to work but the thought that you owed them something was better. It doesn't occur to you to ask why you thought you didn't deserve to see Skater more, solely since she brightened up your day and got you

to meet all these new people your age. All you think about is how much you can help all of them, what you have to offer their group.

You gab with Skater for a long time, into the evening. You can't help yourself; she's just so thrilling, nice in the oddest ways, and you feel as though you can even laugh about your upbringing, your favorite movies, your most obscure theories of the universe or all the planets you want to visit someday.

Your watch beeps twice, but you resist the urge to stand, go home; it beeps again a full hour later, only once, and again you can't prise your focus away from the engaging conversation.

When it alerts you that it's time to sleep, you eyeball Skater apologetically.

JADE: uhhh would it be alright if i took a quick nap here

JADE: i get that its a bit of a sudden request haha

JADE: id go home but its pretty immediately gonna happen!

SKATER: Hmm?

SKATER: I mean, if you'd really like to try out the cots, get a feel for what we're living with, sure, but you seem already pretty sold on letting us live with you...

JADE: its not about that

You yawn, and it overtakes your laugh. Your eyelids droop as your vision blurs, and you already feel your body flag.

JADE: its just

JADE: well ill explain in half an hour okay?

Skater sits on the head of the bed as you slump into it, and the last thing you see as you nod off is her attentive gaze, watching over you.

Chapter 6

The huge metal gate to the old Harley place trundles open, and you drive your brother's shitkicked '74 Nova on through. You make this delivery at the same time every week-- 7:30 AM or thereabouts, on Saturday morning, of seven medium Meatstravaganza pizzas to the reclusive weirdo who lives here. She's only your age, and you don't believe a word of the stories you hear about her or her haunted mansion, but she has absolutely the strangest life habits of anybody you've ever heard of; you're practically certain she's never been to school-- because there's only one highschool in this town, and you, Dave motherfucking Strider, have never seen her at it, even though it's named after her house. You're also pretty sure that her Baskerville hound gives you the most unsettling stinkeye through the window every time you pass by the abandoned guard station out front. But she always requests you by name, and always tips about 50%, so you have an arrangement with your supervisor to always be scheduled for this shift even though it's otherwise pretty quiet.

You putter your cherry-red car around the cobblestone loop of the truly ostentatious driveway, settling under the front pergola.

JADE: hi dave!!

DAVE: sup science girl

You've called her that every week for forever, even though she gives her full name by rote with each and every week's order. You don't know what horrifying yetimonster she has chained up in the basement that needs the strict diet of seven pizzas per week, but you're pretty sure she'd feed you to it instead if you asked any questions, so you pull out the pizzas from your little keep-warm satchel thing and hand them over to her. Then she hands over the crisp stack of identical bills, which you pocket without counting, and start to get back in your car.

This time, though, she turns around again before she hits the threshold, and chews on her lip for a second before asking a truly oddball question.

JADE: hey pizza guy

JADE: odd question but

DAVE: yeah

JADE: do you know any satanists

JADE: i uh

JADE: have some weird questions i need to ask one!

You scruff your mop of blonde hair above your everpresent sunglasses, mulling over the absolutely incomprehensible request.

DAVE: yknow ive got my suspicions about a few people

DAVE: im pretty sure my cousin plays that newfangled game
dungeons and dragons

DAVE: which seems a sickly haven for the alternative sort

DAVE: ill check on them and report back to you as soon as i
know

JADE: or just send them my way!!

JADE: they can just stop by, im always here!!

DAVE: i bet you are science girl

DAVE: see ya

She nods furiously and trots back inside the house.

This seems like exactly the sort of thing a mad scientist loner like her would ask in an awful movie, the sort June really likes. In fact, you peg it as so in-character for somebody fitting her profile that all you can do is shrug, assuming it'll end either in some hideous pulsating demon-baby flesh mound or the Stay-Puft marshmallow man. Yeah, Rose'll know somebody. Heck, you don't talk to your cousin too much outside of

school, so it's possible she never actually grew out of her satanist phase even as she matured away from being just a particularly quarrelsome goth kid.

You hop back into your vehicle and roll away, open windows trailing the sounds of *Paul's Boutique* behind you.

You are now ROSE LALONDE.

Your weekly game of Advanced Dungeons and Dragons has just ended, and it went swimmingly. You have just transitioned to the newly-released second edition of the rules, and after tolerating much bellyaching you are gratified that your three pawns have begun to adapt to all of its newest-fangled concepts. You also credit yourself, of course, for being an expertly skilled dungeon master and storyteller.

ROSE: Congratulations on a successful first session, adventurers.

You stand from the woodbacked chair in your mother's dining room, and smile.

ROSE: Return to me your character sheets and I shall see you here, at the same time next week.

Jane Crocker passes hers back, a great broad smile adorning her face under those stark red 50's-style mom-glasses.

JANE: Goodness, but that one squidgey beastie was terribly frightening!

JANE: What did you call it, Rose dear?

ROSE: Aah, the gelatinous cube. Yes, I was lucky enough to locate its statistics from a borrowed copy of the Monstrous Compendium. I was concerned I would have to adapt the version from... Dragon #124, I believe it was.

MARY: My My

MARY: Such Meticulous Preparation

Mary-Kay looks you in the eyes, smirking slightly. June, seated across from her, giggles.

JUNE: did you expect any less from our rose?

JUNE: haha. :B

ROSE: Well, I was concerned it might prove too much for your first encounter.

ROSE: But you dealt with it admirably, save for one rather poorly-rolled arrow.

JUNE: heh, sorry jane!

JANE: Aah, I am told it happens from time to time.

JANE: It is not a bother, I shall reroll poor Agronob from scratch come tomorrow in preparation for our session next week.

ROSE: Yes, sadly an Orcish Priest should be fairly easy to recreate, given the new restrictions on their unfortunate green souls.

JANE: :B

You receive Mary-Kay's character, and she sits again to collect her player's handbook and assorted notes. Miss Anaam is, you think, looking particularly smoky this afternoon, practically turbid. Her messy tangle of hair dances as her precise, economical movements straighten out your dining room table after an afternoon of adventure. You look forward to Monday evening, on which you will have another excuse to adjourn to her basement for your agreed-upon televised entertainment.

ROSE: And how do you find yourselves adapting to the new system? Better than the old indices, I hope?

MARY: I Shall Never Become Familiar With The New Terminology

For My Class

MARY: Indeed Now I Must Accept That I Am Not Magic-User

MARY: And My Beloved Sandrina Is Now

MARY: A Mage

She picks up her colorful, bulky nylon windbreaker from the back of her chair.

The ever-excitabile June Egbert returns her sheet, bouncing a leg wildly. You have never seen this girl stop moving for even an instant, always chewing or gesticulating or grooving to some internal symphony unheard by those in her environ.

ROSE: Yes, the sacrifices we make for modern consistency. I must admit likewise that this new system for determining accuracy is fairly rough on my mathematically disinclined self.

ROSE: Thwacko, or whatever it is termed.

JUNE: i just think of it like...

JUNE: counting down to getting a hit!

JUNE: and try to roll low to confuse my dice into getting high numbers!

JANE: I think I shall never quite understand. Perhaps tables were easier in the first edition.

You sigh.

ROSE: Well, while we can go back should the whole group prefer, I suggest we do our best to apply ourselves to familiarization with the new system.

ROSE: It will not become any easier if we don't at least try.

Jane beams, standing straight for a moment.

JANE: Ooh, I have an announcement!

JANE: My father has procured an advance copy of the home

video release of Ghostbusters II!

JANE: I would very much so like to invite the three of you to view it at my abode a week from today, the 16th.

JUNE: oh my god, that's so cool!

JUNE: i wish my dad was cool like yours, haha!

JUNE: i'll definitely be there! i only got to see it twice while it was in theaters.

JANE: I'd be much obliged for your presence, June. :B

There is a knock at the door. As your mother is presently out-- a polite arrangement shared to allow you maximal use of the home with minimal embarrassment to either of you-- you must alone bear the risk of some kidnapper stealing away with your five-foot-two frame at the door. Luckily, one glance through the front glass reveals that it is just your cousin, Dave, making a rare house call.

DAVE: hey rose

DAVE: long time no see

ROSE: Dave.

ROSE: I believe I charged you to never darken the Lalonde doorstep again.

ROSE: And yet, here you are.

DAVE: what can i say im particularly pesky like that

He wanders into your home uninvited, flashing a smile at your friends as they pack away their belongings and natter about school assignments.

DAVE: so listen hey

DAVE: youre living the alternative lifestyle these days right

DAVE: hey june

June passes by, and snorts a low, unguarded giggle as Dave regards her.

JUNE: hey dave!

DAVE: if yknow what i mean

ROSE: I can only barely surmise, as is so often the case with your turgid ramblings.

DAVE: wow okay first of all

DAVE: if one of us is turgid the idea that youd accuse me of being the culprit is

DAVE: wow

DAVE: second can we just step back and appreciate exactly why you selected that exact word in this exact context

DAVE: i mean if i had to guess id practically accuse you of trying to get me to laugh at the associated thought of a turgid co--

ROSE: Please get to the point, mister Strider. I have agreed to begin preparations for dinner and mother will be home in some half an hour, so I have neither the time nor the inclination for more of your Freudian ramblings.

Dave bumps his shades up his nose.

DAVE: youre all into the wizard shit these days right

ROSE: Perish the thought.

DAVE: but like i mean

He grits his teeth, speaking out of only one corner of his mouth.

DAVE: wizard shit

ROSE: Surely you do not indicate this sort of fantastical diversion. Do you mean... some hypothetical spiritual beliefs?

DAVE: yeah exactly

DAVE: wizard shit

ROSE: I am merely a dabbling member of some related church.

In fact, I might even be offended at your presumption of an overlap between my generally witchy demeanor and whatever brand of truly gothy shit you are attempting to pin on me.

You peer over Dave's shoulder, where Jane is politely gazing every which way but yours.

ROSE: And perhaps such discussion of nonstandard faiths is not exactly welcome in present company.

JANE: Hoo hoo! Just leaving, dear. Wouldn't want to intrude!

Dave then tells you, in excruciating detail, the exact steps he took in discovering the town eccentric's need for a learned interfaith discussion with one inebriated in the tenets of Satanic thought.

DAVE: and by the end of it she made it clear that she was getting up to some truly freaky shit inside that place

DAVE: i bet its like when frankenstein got holed up in his castle and everybody was all

DAVE: torches and pitchforks get him

DAVE: while his giant weird lightning towers kept sparking up all sinister

DAVE: despite clearly having nothing to do with actual meat resurrection because they had to zap it with a lightning strike anyway

ROSE: David, Frankenstein was the doctor.

DAVE: no rose frankenstein is the monster

DAVE: did you even read the book the doctor was the bad guy geez

ROSE: ...So you said she would like my assistance in some matter.

ROSE: Well, if I should choose to ditch my mother's designs

for my evening, I'm free as of... right now.

ROSE: Good evening, Mary-Kay. I shall see you anon.

MARY: See You Monday Rose

ROSE: I can accompany you to her manse to see if I am to be the next victim of her bloodthirst or if she deigns merely to pick my brain in the traditional manner.

DAVE: cool

You expect, by the time you have left Dave's car and can get a full, unfettered view of your destination, that it is so imposing on the local landscape that even the birds themselves go silent in awe in its vicinity. It looks less like a private home so much as some combination of a church and a house of government, albeit with less formal concern with declaring its function to the outside world. You knock on the door, and stand back.

You have never met someone before who can pull off a welding jacket and mask simultaneously accompanied by a truly prodigious load of jelly bracelets before. The woman who has answered the door, however, appears to be just such a person, volumous mop of nigh-endless black hair spilling from a barely-structural hairtie and welding mask combo, which strikes a rather imposing figure this close to Halloween.

You bow low, and look her in the eyes when she flips up the face protectant.

ROSE: I am told you require the services in information of one follower of the Dark Lord.

ROSE: Well, ave satanas, it is I, I am she.

ROSE: My cousin Dave has forthrightly told me of your need, and as I am truly benificent I render up my Saturday evening to assist you in your task.

She looks you up and down, trying to assess the likelihood any teen hooligan would attempt to accost her with this precise a jest. But then she grins, bouncing from one foot to the other for a moment.

JADE: oh huh thats awesome!!

JADE: (i didnt think hed be able to find one so quickly...)

JADE: you dont look at all like i expected though, you're wearing so much lip gloss haha

JADE: come on in!!

She begins to turn, but you hesitate, raising a finger to enumerate your terms.

ROSE: Aah, no.

ROSE: In order for me to exhume even the most innocuous of these skeletons which you seek to disinter from my backyard, I require recompense.

ROSE: (No less for that quip about my appearance...)

JADE: huh??

ROSE: Come with me. We shall travel to my preferred parlor of pizza, and there you will purchase for us both the most important currency of all,

ROSE: Several rounds of my ultimate debauched vice:

ROSE: An arcade game by the name of Double Dragon.

ROSE: Bring a roll of quarters.

She discards her welding mask and gloves agreeably, throwing them inside, but keeps the thick jacket on her person presumably as a bulwark against the encroaching early-evening cold. Inside, barking can be heard, but the woman ignores it. She nods to you.

JADE: im jade!!

ROSE: And I am Rose Lalonde. Pleasure.

You extend a dainty hand, pinky extended, and your interlocutor immediately drenches it in sweat with her own besotten paw.

You set off together down the gravel drive, your cousin having completed his duties delivering you and thus forthrightly fucked off once more.

Jade sets foot inside Pizza Pizzoletta like a... well, like a satanist entering a church, really. Since Dave drives an absolute mountain of the foodstuff to her home every week, perhaps she simply believes that pizza chains are the sorts of mafioso establishments in whence your movements are tracked and seditious behavior reported and discussed by rather serious men with gold watches stroking black cats before your summary execution and dumping outside the infidelitous eatery.

You guide her over to the machine in question, and at your pursed-lip smile the two small children gaggled around it, watching its Attract Mode flicker from hi-scores to poor recorded performances and back, scurry away to whatever holes in the wall they crawled from. You beckon to it, and Jade dutifully inserts the first two quarters.

ROSE: Here's everything you need to know about the plot of Double Dragon, right here, on this screen.

ROSE: Watch.

A diminutive woman in a red dress is punched in the gut, and she is heaved over a shoulder to be hauled away like a sack of so many rouged potatoes, no words traded by any of the thuggish actors on the field. Jade's expression sours, lips pursed, but she watches along as your two characters spawn in, side by side, and takes up her control stick.

ROSE: Do you see? This is the narrative we're working with, the proscribed bounds we're given to struggle within. Your girlfriend, Marian, has been socked in the stomach and

carried off by some particularly sweaty gentlemen, presumably to her demise. Unless you save her, vis a vis, pumping quarters into the slot or playing with mechanical precision unheard of in the mortal realms.

JADE: that looked like it hurt though!

She guides her character to seize one of the computerized opponents by the hair, delivering a fierce knee blow directly to the unfortunate man's nose, and another, then a third.

JADE: shes my girlfriend then??

ROSE: Well, mine. Spare a touch for poor Jimmy Lee, who unlike his brother does not even, upon his success at his singular task in life, receive for his conquest the bestowing of a fair maiden.

JADE: and thats why you wanted to be player one :p

ROSE: Yes and no; I wanted the lesson to be more salient, you see. Dave told me only a little about why you requested contact during his morning delivery, for I suspect you told him even less in the first place, and I thought as a levelheaded member of the spiritually alternative community I could perhaps elaborate about the underpinnings of my faith in order to facilitate your understandings.

JADE: did he really mean it when he said you guys play dungeons and dragons??

ROSE: ...Yes, if he mentioned that, I did indeed have a session scheduled today.

ROSE: You must forgive the abject cliché inherent in the happenstance of it.

JADE: no honestly that sounds kinda cool!

ROSE: You are most certainly correct.

ROSE: Indeed, all that any notion of a 'Satanic Panic' has successfully rendered up to me was a feeling of unaccountable interest towards its supposed medium of expression.

ROSE: You will recall a decade ago, when a young man by the name of James Dallas Egbert III disappeared suddenly from the campus of Michigan State University.

ROSE: (It just so happens that this young man shared a surname with one of my regular players.)

JADE: :o

ROSE: At the time, the Private Investigator sent to uncover his motives misapprehended his goal in escaping into the steam tunnels under campus to be a session of live-action Dungeons and Dragons, and the public consciousness was stolen.

ROSE: Indeed to this day I believe mister Egbert to be the only player of the game to be portrayed by Tom Hanks in one of his films.

JADE: wait

JADE: egbert??

JADE: thats my cousins name!!

JADE: is she playing in your d&d game??

ROSE: June Egbert, about yea tall, strong overbite like yourself, exceedingly dorky?

JADE: yep! :B

ROSE: Indeed she is. Marvel of coincidences, that.

ROSE: Though it is a small town.

You muddle your fingers, tapping them on the stick as you adroitly maneuver Billy Lee across the stage to hurl several adversaries down an elevator shaft. Jade smacks buttons, flailing in circles to escape some headlock, but her health drains away and she slams another quarter into the slot with a groan.

ROSE: You see, the Wiccans adapted one of Aleister Crowley's 1904 works into their 1979 Wiccan Rede. This in turn became the basis for recent adaptations of the Satanic Bible, including LaVey's original prologue indicating that 'Satan represents indulgence, instead of abstinence'.

ROSE: 'Eight words the Wiccan Rede fulfill-- an harm ye none, do what ye will.'

JADE: but rose wicca isnt the same as satanism

ROSE: Oh. Yes, that's absolutely correct, actually.

For somebody so willing to let you ramble on about the history and dialectics of your practices, you surmise that perhaps Jade is more familiar than she lets on, or has at least read the books.

Perhaps you should choose your words with more care.

ROSE: In fact, this is a core Satanic attitude that I believe the moral panics are based around.

ROSE: Did you know that there are included in the Book of Lucifer-- within the Satanic Bible-- entire sections devoted to sexuality and the exploration of one's own sexual freedom?

Well, carefully chosen along one parameter. You're fairly sure the greasy teen behind the counter is staring at you, but as you flick your lavender orbs into contact with his eyes, accompanied with a careful smirk and able fingers continuing to uppercut and sidekick computerized adversaries all the while, he carefully returns his gaze to wiping down a parmesan-laden front counter.

JADE: uh vaguely i guess?

JADE: its not exactly the bit i wanted your opinion about but i have to admit its pretty compelling haha!

The impossibly tall girl laughs nervously, eyes still fixed on the desperate task of her onscreen survival.

ROSE: Really? Your primary interest was not in the matters of the Daughters of Bilitis? Not looking to join the Lavender Menace?

ROSE: Then which part was it you were hoping for my opinion on?

JADE: uh the book of belial actually!

ROSE: Rituals and magicks. Well, I am... versed in them, yes.

JADE: oh thats good!

JADE: thats exactly what i was hoping!!

JADE: so this one ritual ive been reading about calls for a couple weird ingredients, but its from this other book so i wanted your opinion about whether or not you think its a real

JADE: like magic thing or not!!

You catch yourself stuck in place for a moment, attempting to parse the specifics of her request.

ROSE: You wish to know about the validity of some specific spell?

JADE: dont laugh!!

JADE: its from this weird thing my grandpa left behind....

JADE: it explicitly mentions lavey and some of the other satanist texts from around when it was written!

JADE: it doesnt make any sense to me yet but i have to explore every avenue he left me because i have to know what he was trying to do!!!

ROSE: Well, ah. Tell me, what were the components in question?

JADE: nothing... animal of course

JADE: gypsum dissolved in hydrocyanic acid!

JADE: poured over a solution of sulfur, charcoal, and potassium nitrate

ROSE: That sounds...

ROSE: Exceedingly dangerous.

JADE: yeah!! its gunpowder its very dangerous haha

The level concludes, and your characters wander off of the margins of the screen. As the points are tallied-- you come out significantly ahead-- Jade fidgets with the wad of bracelets on her arm, rolling and worrying them.

ROSE: I, aah, well, yes. Well.

ROSE: Perhaps I am indeed not going to be able to offer you the best and most knowledgeable advice at a distance.

You puff up your chest, readying a little speech you've been mulling over since you got here.

ROSE: For, indeed, this is the lesson Double Dragon teaches us: that any narrative at all, no matter how flimsy, can pay service to the notion that we are doing some justice in the universe, and that sense of justice is the thing that can drive us to condemn all sorts of innocent behavior.

ROSE: The second game's arcade cabinet has no narrative at all, merely a sudden genesis of two gentlemen who interact with their whole circumscribed universe via punches and headbutts.

ROSE: However, indeed, I've been told that the home console version gives a short treatment as here, but instead of the theft of your fair maiden she is summarily gunned down in the streets.

JADE: thats horrible!!! D:

ROSE: Is it, particularly? She is, after all, a mass of pixels, a tiny instrument of the player's decisively righteous path.

ROSE: If we chose to not place the quarters into this machine, would we be causing Marian less harm?

JADE: what??

ROSE: If we chose to quit partway through rather than devoting our time, fiduciary well-being, and skills to rescuing her, would we damn her eternally?

JADE: what??? D: D:

ROSE: If we refused to purchase the home version of the sequel, would we perhaps be saving her life, eternally rescuing her from the state of urban murder statistic?

JADE: rose!!! what does that even mean!!

ROSE: Of course not.

ROSE: She is electrons in a machine. She is not real.

ROSE: No matter the service of her story and suffering to our sense of moral rectitude in the universe of the brothers Lee, no more or less harm will ever come to her. Smoke and nondiagetic mirrors.

ROSE: Such, then, is my attitude towards matters Satanic: an enjoyable diversion, but not a notion truthful to any telling of the universe in which we reside.

ROSE: That is to say, like other questions of spiritualism, magic is not, in fact, real.

JADE: hmm!

Your game concludes; you take a short bow, having unsurprisingly lasted a great deal longer on Jade's two provided quarters than Jade was able to on her four. Nonetheless, Jade has requested you return to her domicile with her, and as you were so impressed with the exterior you would be an absolute fool to not at least indulge her in

a tour of the front rooms. You might pass on meeting her dog, however; you've never been much for the canid sort.

As you meander back through the amber foliage, the *feuille morte* dancing through the air of your town's outer boroughs, you ask after a struck nerve from earlier.

ROSE: So, riddle me this. You need to be in bed by ten, you say? You said that with such a degree of urgency, before. Do you just sleep obscenely much, or is it rather a matter of a strong morning routine?

JADE: well sort of!

JADE: its not that i need to use a bed its just

JADE: whatever im doing ill definitely be asleep by then!

Jade laughs, skull seemingly unpenetrated by the notion that this is an exceedingly cryptic statement even by your standards.

ROSE: Pardon? Care to explain that particular nugget?

JADE: oh

JADE: its not a big deal!

JADE: i just do this thing where i have to sleep every 6 hours!

JADE: its called polyphasic sleep

JADE: so i only have to sleep 2 hours a day and it makes me VERY efficient, to keep working all the rest of the time!

JADE: but when i have to sleep i have to SLEEP

JADE: so i track it pretty meticulously and i have my watch set to constantly remind me when the time is upcoming!

Jade's watch beeps twice.

JADE: hear that??

JADE: it gives a chime on the hour, every hour

JADE: just a quick one!

JADE: but two beeps means i have two hours til i have to sleep, so its 8 PM now

JADE: and one long beep means i have one hour!

ROSE: This is fascinating. Where can one learn such elder majjyks?

ROSE: I long have waged a war against the obscene maltemperate designs of the sandman, and you could be a useful ally to turn the tide, and guarantee my eventual victory in this fight.

JADE: its not that hard!

JADE: i just read about how buckminster fuller apparently did it for like two whole years

JADE: and decided i was done spending all my time in bed and not in rem!

You blink. You fail to comprehend what Berry, Buck, Mills, and Stipe have to do with successfully staying awake.

ROSE: The band?

JADE: uhhhh??

JADE: rem sleep

JADE: its what theyre named after....

ROSE: Aah, of course.

ROSE: T'was a joke.

JADE: oh sorry for not catching it :/

JADE: anyway this is just a way of guaranteeing that the brain goes straight into rem when you hit the ground

ROSE: Ground..?

JADE: or.... wherever you end up sleeping :p

JADE: heck ive ended up all sorts of weird places haha

JADE: but bec always drags me back to someplace thats at least comfy!

JADE: or thats he thinks is comfy haha

JADE: the number of times ive woken up in his doggy bed in front of the fireplace is too many to count!

She chuckles to herself, and you can't help but laugh along with the truly absurd image.

ROSE: Well, as entertaining as the notion is, I'm afraid it would make school relatively inconvenient.

JADE: ohhhh right thats a thing people do!!

You boggle at her, just for a moment.

ROSE: Aren't you 16?

JADE: yeah??

ROSE: So pray tell how you became exempt from the regular scholastic inculcation through which the rest of us must suffer.

JADE: well my grandpa taught me plenty while he could....

JADE: but even once i was on my own for it i figured id do a better job of it than any school could!

JADE: i was doing precalculus materials by the time most other kids would be in the sixth grade

JADE: and was reading scientific journals by eighth!

JADE: so why not just keep teaching myself??

You tap your chin with a finger. As you narrow your eyes, Jade renders an inquisitive, almost chipmunk gander at your expression, as if trying to puzzle out the source of your relatively straightforward consternation.

ROSE: You're an autodidact.

ROSE: This actually explains a great deal about you, inasmuch as it should have been absolutely obvious prior.

JADE: haha thanks! :D

That was not a compliment, but you keep your trap shut.

Jade wanders up to the end of her driveway, and reaches into the padded end of her massive waygate. With a touch, it springs to life and groans open, sliding with prolonged complaint against gravel and concrete drive. She will later explain that any automated gate has a function to keep it from crushing cars, and that therefore they are all similarly insecure.

The indoors reminds you of nothing so much as a palace flipped upside-down. Each time you poke your head into an adjacent room from the foyer-- down the three steps to the kitchen, into the drawing rooms or boardrooms or whatever the hell these are-- you expect for space to wrap around you, to either stare into your own stunned face or to see the rest of your body from behind as it corners the doorway. Even the massive arched corridors feel simultaneously celestial and deeply, deeply wrong to the gut.

Jade humors your slackjawed nosing about for a minute, before leading you by the wrist to a bowed wooden door off of one of the nearby studies, too short for her to pass through without ducking. It leads down into a brickwork staircase into a basement of the same, dark, and evidently purpose-built. While only a single room, with no other exits, you surmise it is only one basement among this building's many winding passageways.

You pull the door to behind you, snuffing out the last glimpse of electric lighting as Jade sets to opening a flue for candle fumes in one of the corners. But when you see the floor, you reflect on the unwise irony of telling Dave that you expect to not be sacrificed this evening.

Ringed the floor in red chalk are two great circles, one inset in the other, dancing with carefully-scribed symbols-- astrological, greek, perhaps chemical or alchemical. The handwriting, even on the carefully-drawn symbols, is almost... cutesy? Against the far wall, a low altar, wooden offering box inset in mortared brick under two burning candelabra and swathed in crimson silk. Jade has already moved to a great circular table on one side wall, made of what appears to be some kind of heavy ebon wood.

Without looking to you, Jade waves a peremptory hand, ushering you over to it. If you were in a fantasy novel-- and you find yourself praying, in an awkward moment, that you are not-- you would call it some form of transmutation engine, ready to spring to life or begin some fiendish concoction, with little green flasks, phials, and philters arranged over low burners and jutting plastic tubes. Jade, evidently, has written many of the same symbols from the floor in a more durable, flowing ink all across the table's surface, in a pattern which you would conjecture was copied from some arcane source.

ROSE: So... when you say you've been teaching yourself, you mean...

JADE: that ive gone as far as i can with just my grandpas old book and needed to seek out somebody who would take seriously the idea that i had to at least try to see what i could uncover from this thing!!

JADE: i found it down here years ago....

JADE: long after he was already gone

JADE: and kinda discounted it as being more occultist nonsense before desperation and boredom got me to actually try some of it?

JADE: no offense!!

She looks at you, startled expression crossing her cheeks, when she realizes how her words could come across, but you raise a hand.

ROSE: Doubtless I am as surprised as you that any of this even survived in some musty old tome.

ROSE: But... and how do I put this delicately...

ROSE: From whence have you unearthed the notion that this is not all just for the same metaphoric, cryptic self-actualization fantasy as your average television psychic, or want ad?

Jade ponders that for a moment, then struts across the room with purpose, careful to avoid the scrawled sigil in the floor.

JADE: here let me just show you what ive gotten to work so far

She pulls from the altarbox a pouch, and from that pouch a handful of dust. She pours the dust, a white, crystalline powder, around the ring, careful not to land any outside the concentric discs or muss the writing just inside the inner line. She lights a small, white-headed match on the palm of her hand, wincing only slightly, and waits for the phosphor to glow down to the wood before casting it into the nearest part of the powder. At the instant the whole course of it flashes, she yells aloud.

JADE: speak the earthly name of the one who calls you!

A great belch of smoke erupts from the center of the ring, a space empty of fuel sources, in a sudden gout both juddering and violent.

The unmistakable shape of some visage, rounded at the forehead, eyeless, presses out from it, like a screaming maw pushed through a film of plasticine. No sound ushers forth from its throatless mouth for a moment, and Jade puts her hands to her hips.

JADE: you have no idea how hard it was to find old white phosphorus matches haha

JADE: watch closely, i dont want to do this over or have you think its some trick!

A voice speaks, ringing from all around you, practically shaking the stonework with its booming baritone.

: JADE PHILOMELA HARLEY HAS CALLED ME.

The smoke dissipates, just as quickly as it began. The channel of dust around the circle, which should have left some charred ring of spent matter, is entirely nonexistent, leaving the perfect chalk lines in which it flared untouched.

In the center of the circle a handful of blackened feathers-- midsized, from a seagull, perhaps, or some small cream-colored hawk-- lie likewise undisturbed.

They were not... there were no feathers, before. Jade steps over the liminal barrier and scoops them up with careful palms.

ROSE: Ave satanas, magic is fucking real.

JADE: hail satan baby!!! :D

Chapter 7

ROSE: ...and the flames rolled from her hand into the phosphor with the elegance of a fluttering moth, and in the crackle and burst of the wreathing smoke, then unquestionably some hideous, shapeless face, risen like some horrible masque, spoke her name with a thunder that... I mean, it could have been produced by some truly massive speakers, or the like, but the feathers, and the ring burning, and...

You run your hand through your hair, knocking off kilter your broad black hairband, and begin to reset it fretfully on your head. Morning classes don't start for ten minutes, so you've taken this opportunity to reconnoiter with Mary-Kay at her locker, by the third floor boy's bathroom.

Mary-Kay touches you on the elbow, squinting deep into one eye, then the other.

MARY: Are You Quite Alright

ROSE: ...Yes. Yes, I am certainly fine, save slightly rattled. This was only two nights ago, but I've barely slept since; mother asked me where I was all day yesterday when I got home-- only slightly after dark, mind you-- and I assured her I'd been with you all day.

Your friend arches an eyebrow.

MARY: So You Lied To Her

ROSE: Indeed I did. I wasn't sure how she would have taken a more honest answer, despite the fact that at least I could claim that I'd been studying.

MARY: An Activity Not Even Out Of Character For You

ROSE: Precisely. But no, I had to go, I had to gather

materials, and I had to...

MARY: You Had To Know

ROSE: Not quite. I already knew, but I had to find out more.

ROSE: Jade had clearly conjectured that she'd be able to ensnare my attention with her little show. She was quite right, and my interest is so piqued you might even call it a fresh obsession.

The tall girl sniffs. Perhaps you see a quirk at one of her eyebrows, but maybe you imagine it.

MARY: I See No Way This Could Detonate In A Stunning And Ironic Turnabout Fashion

She waits for a response, but you know your tightlipped silence will speak for you.

MARY: I Do Hope This Will Not Disrupt Our Plans Tonight

ROSE: No. No, most certainly not; the guide said a rerun was scheduled for this evening, yes?

MARY: Indeed

MARY: Of An Episode From Before The Inception Of Our Watchparties

MARY: One Of The Title

MARY: The Naked Now

ROSE: Aah, yes. I'm excited for that, actually, if it's anything like the Original Series episode of similar name. Likewise I shall bring that lovely album, that which I mentioned wanting to loan you.

ROSE: I believe you shall enjoy it.

MARY: Im Certain I Will

PIPER: 1TS R34LLY

PIPER: W4RM 1N H3R3

Piper lets the bundle of clothing in her arms fall inelegantly to the dirty little carpet just inside your new mansion's front door, the near-disintegrated cardboard box previously holding them slumping and folding uselessly. She wipes her brow, taking a deep breath.

SKATER: Yeah. She's been running the heat all day. Hasn't been out of the basement since lunch, though.

Piper peels off her green army surplus coat, the one with the superlong sleeves and the little plastic buttons all down the one side. The top button, the biggest, has a little caricature of some guy's face, emblazoned with the words 'ROCK US, DUKAKIS' in red and blue text. Neither of you particularly even care who that is; Piper merely acquired it out of an interest in giving the coat some texture. Underneath, your lieutenant is just wearing a plain black tee, soaked with sweat from your busy morning carrying belongings across town.

SKATER: You'll get used to it.

SKATER: Somehow we all acclimated before, got used to always wearing our coats inside, but now...

PIPER: NOW I JUST WISH WE COULD USE ZAKS CAR

SKATER: Sure, but do you want to be the one to ask, and then to be beholden to him when he wants that favor repaid?

Piper lets out a complaintive grunt, sitting on top of the spilled clothespile. You upend your own armload into it-- scarves, socks, and a few sweaters accepting their fluttering doom as they splay alongside-- and flop into it. You both stare out the door in tandem, appreciating the tops of the trees just visible over the cresting hill, flanking the

drive. Well, you do. You have no idea what Piper's focused on, but she looks a thousand miles away.

SKATER: I wish we had some fuckin' food.

PIPER: UGH T3LL M3 4BOUT 1T

PIPER: W3 ST1LL H4V3 TO N3GOT14T3 HOW W3 G3T 3NOUGH TO T4K3 C4R3 OF 4LL OURS

PIPER: 3V3N THOUGH 1 C4N 4DM1T YOU D1D 4 GOOD JOB W1NG1NG US TH1S PL4C3 1 ST1LL DONT TRUST TH4T W3 C4N PUSH 1T TH4T F4R

SKATER: 8ut for right now there's pizza in the fridge and some questiona8le steaks in the freezer.

Piper shakes her head.

PIPER: H3CK 1 ST1LL JUST DONT TRUST TH1S TO NOT BLOW UP 1N YOUR F4C3

But her expression falters, for a moment, before her face sets again.

PIPER: 3V3N 1F 1TS YOUR 4SS ON TH3 L1N3 FOR 1T 1 C4NT H3LP BUT PR3P4R3 4 F3W CONT1NG3NC13S

You look over at her, watch her eyes, but she doesn't return your glance. You suddenly realize that you'll never stop feeling that way, neither of you, because it's been an everpresent force in your life: the belief that soon, imminently, something will topple over and force you back into survival mode. That there exists no 'something for nothing', that your whole life is *quid pro quo*. No matter how good life gets, or how easy it comes, you know you'll never shake the fear that you'll owe something far greater in return for it.

SKATER: You think I can't do it.

SKATER: That's fine! That's fine.

SKATER: 8ut, ah.

You draw your thumb just under your nose, and wipe the resultant slurry on the leg of your pants.

SKATER: There's no risk of that. She's pretty into me.

Piper sighs, shaking her head. She stands again, and starts throwing the clothes back into the barely-coherent container to one side.

PIPER: 4ND YOU TH1NK YOU C4N P4RL3Y TH4T 1NTO 4 LONG3R
4RR4NG3M3NT

SKATER: I'm sure I can. Have you seen the way she's eating out of my hand already?

Piper blinks blankly.

PIPER: H4V3 1 S33N HOW SH3

PIPER: NO 1 H4V3 NOT

SKATER: You know what I mean.

SKATER: 8ut in case you're serious, let me spell it out for you.

SKATER: Already crying on my shoulder a8out her family. Dancing with me in your room, 8lushing with the little touches, 8ecause she just can't deal with the suave.

SKATER: Can't 8lame her. No8ody can, when I turn on the charm.

PIPER: 4ND HOW DO YOU F33L 4BOUT 4LL TH4T

PIPER: SUR3LY TH3 1MP3RV1OUS SK4T3R 3VR1KS DO3SNT H4V3
F33L1NGS FOR H3R

You cross your arms behind your head. You keep the gesture nonchalant, turning your face away from her to conceal the irritating heat radiating from your cheeks.

SKATER: Wh8 the fuck does that mean?

Piper says nothing, just keeps her level glare in your direction.

SKATER: C'mon. You don't think I'd fall for a mark, do you?

SKATER: Pipes, it's just another job. Easy as that.

PIPER: MMHM

It's as easy as that. You're Skater, you don't get attached. You don't fall for people, it's not how you operate. You break hearts, you cut pursestrings, you take your winnings, you move on.

And you definitely got to sleep both of these past nights with ease, despite all the discomfort your cot might have caused. You're not the type to lie awake, tracing the outline of a face with an errant finger in the dark. Not out of anything but the knowledge of a thorough plan, executed with your trademark disconnection. You dreamt of the house, after all, not about her. You dreamt about the house, even if she was there the whole time.

Piper turns away, and lugs her box to the stairs up, kicking each step with a hesitant toe as she makes her way upstairs.

SKATER: Surely you're not jealous of her, hmm?

She scoffs.

PIPER: OF WHAT

SKATER: That I'm not trying to impress you like I am her.

That we've known each other for too long.

She hesitates, for a moment, and grits her teeth as she turns half her face to you, perhaps considering a snide remark. She shakes her head and continues up the wide, velvet-carpeted stairs, but can't resist a reply.

PIPER: W3LL 3NJOY YOURS3LV3S 1 GU3SS

PIPER: H4V3 4 GOOD T1M3

SKATER: *Already am, Pipes.*

You stand, kicking your shit back into a single pile to lift again.

You don't know what the fuck that even means, but you're sure as shit not gonna ask.

Chapter 8

“‘Man,’ [Nora] said, her eyelids quivering, ‘conditioning himself to fear, made God; as the prehistoric, conditioning itself to hope, made man--the cooling of the earth, the receding of the sea. And I, who want power, chose a girl who resembles a boy.’

‘Exactly,’ said the doctor. ‘You never loved anyone before, and you’ll never love anyone again, as you love Robin. Very well--what is this love we have for the invert, boy or girl? It was they who were spoken of in every romance that we ever read. The girl lost, what is she but the Prince found? The Prince on the white horse that we have been seeking. And the pretty lad who is a girl, what but the prince-princess in point lace--neither one and half the other, the painting on the fan! We love them for that reason. We were impaled in our childhood upon them as they rode through our primers, the sweetest lie of all, now come to be in boy or girl, for in the girl it is the prince, and in the boy it is the girl that makes a prince a prince--and not a man.’”

-Dr. Matthew-Mighty-grain-of-salt-Dante-O’Connor, in Nightwood, by Djuna Barnes

A moment's hesitation outside of Jade's house reminds you that you have not, luckily, taken the time to really drink in the exterior decor of her unbelievable dwelling past the façade. You would categorize this as luck, for it would have likely driven you far away from the place before you ever knocked had you done so before meeting the scatterbrained sweetheart therein; even now you think the gargoyles guarding the parapets are somewhat excessive, bordering on surreal. Still, on a frigid day like today, the bare-topped trees and yellow glow of the surrounding area set the scene for such a mansion perfectly. In this weather, you're thankful for long-sleeved dresses, adorned as you are in your finest black and purple for another exciting day exploiting the cosmos with a new friend.

> ROSE: Examine UNIVERSE .

You give three solid knocks on the door of Harley Manor. You spent your entire Sunday here after whatever evocational cacophony erupted Saturday night, and while the devilish schoolday (and other more personal matters) kept you away yesterday, this cloudy Tuesday afternoon is the perfect day on which to resume your quest for the secrets of the universe.

Your guide opens the door, already grinning wide.

JADE: rose!! hello!

ROSE: Hey! You, uh.

ROSE: Ears?

It isn't polite to point, and yet, you cannot help yourself but indicate the top of Jade's head, atop which have sprouted, rather unexpectedly, a pair of fluffy white ears, identical to her pet's. At least, you surmise they're not some sophisticated headband, given how they flick and turn, craning forward in interest when you imply what you think is a very sensible question about their provenance.

JADE: yeah!! :D :D

ROSE: How, ears.

Jade turns on a heel, the drape of her long skirt swirling in her wake as she walks back inside.

JADE: come on downstairs and ill show you!

JADE: ive been practicing the somatic transmutations listed in my grandpas notes!

ROSE: Please tell me you didn't have to...

But as she turns, you can tell she has trimmed a crude hole in the seat of the skirt, and right as you're about to ask if it's undue wear or some truly uncouth fashion statement, you notice the human-scale tail, composed of the same white furfluff, sprung

from it. The tail rises and wags like a proper dog's would, massive wintry strands of thick undercoat trailing as she spins.

ROSE: Is that a tail?

Luckily, your curtailed prior question is answered a moment later when her tremendous hound winds around a nearby column, regarding you with a tilted-head glance and deep *arf*.

ROSE: Oh thank god.

JADE: :D

But just as you and Jade are about to veer into the study under which the basement lab lies, a young woman slouches unexpectedly out of the kitchen, clad in long-sleeved blue-and-black plaid and a ratty pair of faded jeans. Her hair-- the jagged edges of which you'd wager, whenever they were last trimmed, were cut with craft scissors-- is barely longer than your own, and she mashes it over an ear and the arm of her glasses when she nearly bumps into Jade.

SKATER: Aah! What the f8ck!?

JADE: oh hey skater!

The tall girl-- Skater, you surmise-- blinks, and narrows her eyes as she turns, and you notice a strange hollow in one of her amber irises, practically shimmering as it regards you.

SKATER: Who's this chucklefuck inv8ing my house? And what the fuck is up with the ears?

JADE: oh! rose this is skater haha

JADE: i forgot youd both be here today

JADE: skater and a bunch of her friends are moving in with me!

ROSE: I'm sorry?

JADE: oh i didnt tell you?? haha lets sit down!

JADE: ill explain the whole thing

JADE: care to join us skater??

You were rather hoping for the mutual solitude of Jade's absorbing presence, today. People make you itch, outside of specific and understandable contexts, and you only assented to see Jade today out of her ability to become completely enraptured with a task to the point of disregarding you entirely.

Skater, by her derisive gaze, already seems the sort whose skin skitters with a controlled sort of laconic fury. But you're happy to regard Jade's whims, so you proceed into the carpeted boudoir.

You can see Skater shrug out of the corner of your eye, and she follows along, brushing with black-nailed forefinger some crumbs from the corner of her mouth of whatever she ate for lunch today.

From your plush overstuffed chair in the front parlor, you point a disassured finger towards Jade, seated at one end of the high couch, and make efforts to avoid eye contact with Skater at the other. Jade fidgets in her seat, still trying to roll her hips such that the tail projects someplace that doesn't put pressure on her tailbone, alternating sides and finally lying sidelong with her legs tossed onto an ottoman.

ROSE: So tell me if I've got this right.

ROSE: She broke into your home, and stole a number of your possessions.

JADE: well yeah! but she gave back the stuff that mattered

Jade shrugs, and you can hear Skater snort, which you ignore assiduously.

ROSE: Regardless. And then upon requesting you account for the lack of amenities in the warehouse in which she was

squatting... demanded she be allowed to live in your home proper?

Jade shoots a look over to Skater, who takes it upon herself to shrug this time.

JADE: i offered first!

ROSE: Did you?

JADE: :/ yes!

ROSE: And you.

You swing your accusatory digit in Skater's direction, and raise a querying eye. She looks at you politely, smiling.

ROSE: How long, precisely, were you planning to take up Jade on her particularly beatific offer?

Skater lies back in response, tossing her feet up onto the couch-- practically into Jade's lap-- and rolls her head onto the wooden arm of it, just behind the lion's-paw curl at the front. You don't miss the casual slump with which Jade rests an arm over her shins.

SKATER: Still getting my feet wet. Hadn't thought that far ahead.

ROSE: So, perhaps indefinitely.

SKATER: Perhaps. ::::)

She slides a little further, proffering up more of her limbs for Jade to drape across, anoint with contact.

ROSE: And...

ROSE: Pardon me for asking, as I know I've known you, Jade, for less than seventy-two hours, and you, Skater, for fifteen minutes, but...

ROSE: Jade, you don't feel... taken advantage of?

Jade's not even looking at you at this point, even when she answers your questions.

JADE: not really honestly!

JADE: skater made a great point the other night

JADE: im not exactly hurting for space here

JADE: and i really like the idea of just having more people around!

ROSE: Be that as it may, are they... paying rent? Buying food for themselves?

JADE: huh?

JADE: no why would they im the one with all the money

She chuckles, as though this notion of giving away what you surmise is a sizable fortune and resources is somehow strictly necessary.

SKATER: Why are you acting like there's some huge problem? She's just a good person, and it's not like we have elsewhere to turn!

JADE: exactly!!

You'd like to think you have a well-honed bullshit sensor. Of all the things you'd ever praise about Jade, even having barely met her, you get the sense that she doesn't, and you doubt it was suddenly adopted along with the other bits she picked up from her dog. You wouldn't call her 'guileless', exactly...

No, you really would. If your read of the situation is accurate, and it is, Jade really should be worried.

Everything about this situation stinks. Welfare's one thing, but...

ROSE: Pardon me for sounding like a Reaganaut, but--

You hear these words as they leave your mouth, catching amongst your teeth and tangling like fishing line.

Both girls arch their eyebrows, even as you suspect they're both too caught up in themselves to know the full extent to which your political linguistics have betrayed the obvious stupidity of the point you were about to make.

You stumble on your tongue for a moment, feeling out an ostensible alternative.

ROSE: --But Jade, what exactly is the benefit you reap from this particular arrangement?

JADE: haha why does there always have to be something in it for me?

JADE: cant i just be doing something nice for this person i--

Her next word stops in her throat, and she blinks. You watch her brain quickly cut together some alternate text, and her dogears flick with the conscious effort. It was very nice of her to install three easy tells onto her body for reading her emotional state.

JADE: --think is really interesting??

Oh. Pieces begin to fall into place. Jade's blind trust, sudden guests, a mind clouded with eros, advantage taken.

JADE: in fact thanks to our recent discoveries i think i can even be of more help to you guys! :D

JADE: for instance

JADE: skater!

Jade springs from her recumbent pose atop Skater's legs, plain black skirt swooshing with torsion from her tail and hips. Her whole tone has shifted, practically floating to the ceiling with a sudden joy.

JADE: what if i told youuuuu

JADE: you could change anything about yourself you wanted?? :D :D

Skater watches her, saying nothing, and betrays no shift in posture, certainly nothing that matches what Jade must think is an exuberant revelation. Jade's effusiveness rises, bubbling with hastening words as she details her new gift to the world and its inhabitants.

JADE: like how i was experimenting around with something rose and i were working on the other day and found out i could do this!

She points to her ears. In the corner of your vision Skater shifts, arms recrossing faster with each word.

JADE: just think!! anybody who wanted to could change their eye color, or their hair, or fix a broken arm, or...

JADE: if somebody was blind they could probably get their sight back!

Skater just glares. Oh, shit. You begin to reach for Jade's arm to shake her back to attentiveness.

ROSE: Jade--

JADE: if they were missing a--

SKATER: Humph! May8e you'd fucking like that!

She's leapt to her feet now too, voice breaking instantly into a fever pitch.

SKATER: The ears are f8cking cute, 8ut I don't want to hear another g8ddamn word a8out what you think you can give 8ack to people.

JADE: but i can help fix--

The instant acrimony in the air lends Jade no instant to explain herself. It's as though an airlock has opened right into a vasty nothingness and sucked all the atmosphere from the room into Skater's body. She clenches her fists, arms wide.

SKATER: Did we ask for your help? Did we?

SKATER: You wanna fix me? That's what I'm hearing! Or Piper?

SKATER: Martin's whole... schtick?

JADE: D:

JADE: i didnt mean--

But Skater's voice is barely a whisper now, head drawn down to her rumpled shirt.

SKATER: No. I 8et you didn't.

Jade is frozen for a moment, trying to gaze into her crush's face to discern where she committed the worst offense. Her body slumps into a heaped mannequin of apologetic limbs, still standing. Hands barely kept from her face occlude a dance of expressions, pulled like taffy between what she clearly thought would be a joyful sentiment mixed with the brutal reality of her suggestion.

JADE: how can i...

SKATER: Leave.

She barely murmurs it, but when her whole face turns upward again the burning in her eyes fixes itself on Jade.

SKATER: Now.

You can hear her bawling as she goes, but it sounds far away, almost muted.

Your own body, during this sudden tempest of emotion, has folded like wastepaper, and you somehow force your knees sideways in the chair in front of you so it doesn't look like you're hiding your belly from predators. What has Jade done? Not in

the realm of magic, but in the clearly terminal case of canine-foot-in-mouth disease that would bring her to suggest bodily augmentation to a disabled woman.

Skater clenches her fists, staring you down. But you sit, watching her, trying your best to keep your expression neutral.

SKATER: Well? You're not going to sprint after her, see to her feelings? Aren't you going to tell me I'm overreacting?

You shake your head in tiny lines, eyes fixed on her.

ROSE: Certainly not. I'm sorry that she just did that, I think. She must not have known how you'd feel.

SKATER: No shit.

ROSE: No, I mean...

ROSE: She wouldn't have said that if she knew how you'd react. It's pretty clear that she wouldn't try to harm you, except that apparently she just had no idea about the... eye.

SKATER: This isn't about that. You think I give a shit about my eye? I can see fine, it doesn't bug me.

ROSE: Don't you?

She sweeps her bangs out of her face, shoving her glasses up her nose superciliously.

SKATER: I know what you're thinking, that I assumed her obvious crush would hold her back from saying something stupid. So I must be feeling 'betrayed'.

ROSE: Well, what is it about, then?

Skater's knuckles grow just slightly paler, nails digging into palmflesh.

SKATER: Nothing. It's about noth8ng.

ROSE: Really?

SKATER: Why the f8ck do you care?

She practically spits this, but holds her ground, stance wide, each breath stuttering with restrained anger.

You blink.

ROSE: Well, I know that if somebody offered to 'fix' me, I'd be quite cross, even absent any particular lack in physical ability.

Skater blinks back, muscles in her arms slackening almost imperceptibly.

ROSE: Not to disclose too much to a new acquaintance, but I've read enough Gore Vidal to know what happens when one decides to change certain aspects of themselves for the benefit of society.

Skater's mouth falls open, and one of her eyes tugs up to a contorted sneer. The rounds of her teeth rise as if to bear forth words, but she puts a hand to the couch behind her and sits on it again, crossing her legs underneath her.

SKATER: You're...

ROSE: Sapphic? Batting for the other team? Dredging the well of loneliness?

Skater's back teeth fairly clack, face transmuting into an expression illegible to you, somewhere between pain and accusation. You raise an eyebrow.

ROSE: Inverted?

At this Skater's eyes flare and glow.

SKATER: You're m8king fun of me now. F8ck you.

ROSE: Surely not. I am merely detailing my own experiences on the hypothetical pain of conversion.

Skater points a finger at you, then clenches it back into her ragged palm. She clicks her tongue against her hard palate and sighs, whole body softening.

SKATER: Y'know what? Fine. You wanna know why this makes me mad, I'll f8cking tell you.

SKATER: 8ut if you 8reathe a word of th8s to any8ody, J8 especially, you'll 8e 'inverted' in m8re ways than just your sexuality.

She hasn't relaxed, but you can tell already if she's smoothed her countenance enough to rely on verbal threats instead of physical ones, that's at least a good sign.

ROSE: ...I don't doubt it.

SKATER: What the fuck does that even mean, though? Inverted.

ROSE: Oh, the inversion theory of sexuality?

You sigh through your nose. You really wish you hadn't chosen that word, because it's not like you'd love to explain Ellis or Krafft-Ebing to strangers.

ROSE: Well, for now let's ignore the quaint particularities of the men who coined and popularized the term. It's the notion that gay people have 'souls' of the opposite gender and therefore tend to exhibit characteristics of the other sex.

ROSE: Effeminate gay men, masculine lesbians, and so on.

ROSE: A bit antiquated of a term, perhaps, though I can't claim to have read much on the biology of the brain.

ROSE: The mind of the craven homosexual, however, I'm quite

familiar with, though it's not like I particularly expect to ever be allowed to wear a tuxedo to my wedding.

Skater raises an impatient eyebrow, leg bouncing with quiet unease.

You hear quiet footsteps on the entry-hall tile, and spin from your chair to ensure that Jade is not snooping. But the only possible observer present is a young boy, probably one of Skater's aforementioned friends, just entering the house now; a snot-covered mohawk sprouts from his lumpy head, and his huge, wet eyes portray a youth perpetually seconds away from a cathartic bawl.

You creak the parlor door shut, just barely making silent eye contact as it clicks to. You sit once more.

ROSE: Anyway, enough about me.

ROSE: What were you hoping I'd say?

The woman sitting across from you tents her fingers. Her steady gaze follows yours, watching for some minute betrayal.

SKATER: Do you ever think that you might've seen...

SKATER: That you might have seen reincarnated as the wrong sex as punishment for something you did wrong in a past life?

ROSE: I... can't say I've ever had the thought, no.

SKATER: I think about that a lot.

ROSE: But you're asking if that's why I'm... attracted to women?

She catches your confused look, and backpedals into the couch, hands raised.

SKATER: Not like that.

SKATER: W8, we weren't talking about--

ROSE: I was talking about being gay. I'm a lesbian. What were you--

SKATER: So what!? I'm gay too, but I was--

ROSE: Did you mean...

SKATER: --just sure that--

ROSE: That you wish you'd been... born a boy.

SKATER: ...Not that direction, no.

ROSE: Oh.

Jesus.

ROSE: Sorry.

SKATER: But, you're not...

She scowls, words trailing to silence. Thankfully, there's no outburst like there was for Jade's snafu, just silent vigilance. You scour your memory for some relevant recollection, but come up mostly empty. Except...

You sit up, straight-backed in the chair, synapses suddenly peeling with an appropriate point of connection.

ROSE: Like-- the doctor, then.

SKATER: What?

ROSE: There's this book from the 40's, *Nightwood*, one of the first lesbian novels. In it, there's... a character rather similar to yourself. Her name's Dr. Matthew-Mighty-grain-of-salt-Dante-O'Connor.

Skater raises an eyebrow.

ROSE: She's a brilliant wordsmith, though quite a poor doctor. I owe a good number of my own personal metaphors to her, you see.

ROSE: Less gendered ones, and more...

You snap your fingers as Skater's incredulous expression turns slowly warm, interested.

ROSE: Not to reveal too much, but her ability to keep the world at bay with stories, words, diversions, and expressions is very important to me. I understood a lot of myself when I read about her, when I realized that she had a horrifying power that even the novel in front of me could never truly glimpse.

SKATER: Can we not be talking about you right now? Please.

ROSE: Right. She's... while I may not know much about what you're going through, I promise you I can find some sympathy.

SKATER: Great. So you're not like me at all. You're normal.

ROSE: I take offense to that.

SKATER: Well, get this. I still fucking hate the idea that she wants to 'fix' me. After all, I worked pretty fucking hard to be the woman I am today, and I won't have that played for laughs or fucking 'fixed'.

ROSE: Doubtless. Would you... like me to go speak to Jade? Not in terms of this, just...

SKATER: Nah. I'd hate for you to fuck this up, ruin this good thing I've got going on.

Skater crosses her arms, sniffs showily, watching you for a reaction. But all you do is scoff.

You stand, and move to the crossbarred window, gazing out over the overgrown lawn beyond it.

ROSE: Look, I just met her, but I can presume a few things about Jade.

You hear a shuffling, then slow footsteps across the carpet. Skater's voice emanates from just behind you, sounding scratchy and tired, but you examine the outdoors studiously.

SKATER: Like?

ROSE: First that she's... lacking in certain awarenesses, social graces.

SKATER: Ya don't say.

ROSE: But that she clearly cares so deeply about how other people regard her that she might give up literally anything to preserve that esteem.

You turn, put out a slow hand to one of Skater's arms, which are crossed at her plaid-clad chest. She flinches, as though you had attempted a palm-heel to her liver, and takes a step away. You recoil your hand, running splayed fingers up the back of your own head.

ROSE: And I can tell there's more to your feelings about her than you let on.

Skater pinches her lips.

ROSE: And that's alright! I know what it's like to be scared of that feeling, to fear being understood.

ROSE: It's just...

ROSE: You're aware of what we-- she, I suppose-- is undertaking downstairs, yes?

Skater shakes her head in silence.

ROSE: It's... well, I can't rightly say I know the first thing about it either, but it's the source of her newfound... canine characteristics. She's clearly discovered some lay-

line concentration, some form of literal magic, that I believe to be at her whims and direction to affect the world, and herself.

ROSE: I'm certain of very little, so far, save that, unlike its depictions in religious texts, its connections are paid for in incantations and ceremonial ingredients, rather than blood. And the benefits are real, as you no doubt saw in her transformations. She's excited to share that with those she's closest to.

ROSE: Which is you, as I've gathered from the portion of this conversation in which she took part.

Skater's eyes grow wide, but she blinks them back down to a furrowed-brow scowl.

SKATER: I don't care.

ROSE: But it's--

SKATER: I know what it's like to get offered something for nothing. It always sounds like a gr8 option until you learn exactly how 'free' somebody's gift was. It only takes once before you've learned the hard way to never take them up on that one.

SKATER: So you'll excuse my skepticism towards your little basement tea parties, especially since you seem to be such a stickler fuddy-duddy for me and mine to not take advantage of Jade's kindness. Which, fuck you for that, by the way.

Her finger prods you, digging at your chest like the point of an implied knife. Or one of the teeth she's baring, just at the corners of her downturned mouth. But you don't collapse back with its pressure-- somehow-- and despite your stature you stare her down regardless.

ROSE: You want me to say that I don't feel that way since we've talked face to face.

ROSE: You are. I'm going to say it again, I think you're taking advantage of her.

SKATER: Y'know what? Yeah, I am.

That light in her eyes has drifted towards what you would call, if you were in a less sensitive mood, deranged. She snarls.

SKATER: I'm going to drain her dry. I don't give a single shit about her, or anyone.

SKATER: If you're so fucking sure about it, why don't you try to stop me? Why don't you protect your new fucking friend?

SKATER: If you're so close to her, just pull me off like a leech, because that's what I'm gonna be to her if you don't stop me. It's not like I care about her enough to stop on my own.

ROSE: And that's not... something for nothing?

SKATER: Fuck you.

SKATER: You know nothing about what I think of her.

SKATER: You don't know shit about the person I am today.

SKATER: And you sure as fuck don't know a thing about who I used to be.

SKATER: I don't care what fucking books you read, or how well you think you can analyze me.

Her breath seethes between clenched teeth hard enough that you're pretty sure you see steam. The rolling boil at her cheeks and the searing squint of her eyes doesn't help matters, either.

SKATER: You think you're better than me. You think you deserve what you have, and I deserve to rot in a ditch.

SKATER: I clawed my way out. I'll never go back.

ROSE: Out?

SKATER: Y'know what?

SKATER: I'm done wasting my time on you.

She spins away, stomping towards the door.

ROSE: Don't hurt her.

SKATER: Wh8t?

She doesn't even face you again, fists balled at her sides. You can hear the grinding of her teeth, regardless.

ROSE: You're right. I don't know how you feel.

ROSE: Alright? I can't tell at all why you're doing this. You don't want to let me know, that's just who you are.

ROSE: But please, for Jade's sake, don't...

ROSE: Just don't hurt her.

The slam of the door knocks dust from the high beige-painted trim, fluttering down to the narrow fireplace, the dog's bed in front of it, and the dented antlers haphazardly adorning each wall. You flop onto the couch, and curl your legs up, breathing as deeply as the sudden shudders that grip your body will allow.

Closer To Fine

Teen And Up Audiences

3467 words (4 chapters)

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Content Warnings

Throughout the whole story, general content warning for extensive discussions of sexual harassment within a real-world work of fiction.

1.

2x04: The Outrageous Okona

MARY: And This Okona

MARY: Sexually Harasses This Poor Engineer

Mary-Kay shifts uncomfortably on the dark olive carpet, red skirt flowing around her knees. Her gaze averts from the small, wood-paneled television to the concrete walls, eventually finding the high and slender window well.

You cup delicate thumb and forefinger across your brow, head tilted back against the rough chenille of the couch in Mary-Kay's basement den. You slumped here, as usual, immediately upon showing up, in ample time before the airing of your most recent favorite show, Star Trek: The Next Generation.

It's becoming a bit of an evening routine.

ROSE: She's the first woman he sees onboard! We have to see he's a scamp, it sets up--

MARY: But Later We See this Succeeds In Seducing Her

MARY: The Sexual Politics Of This Show Are Execrable

ROSE: ...

MARY: It Masquerades As Somehow More Advanced Than Our Civilization And Yet

ROSE: For the comparisons they like to make between our eras, perhaps it still is!

ROSE: Perhaps it just seems limited for our uniquely feminist perspectives.

MARY: And Yet I Can Imagine So Many Superior Options For Their Pairing

ROSE: Lamentable, isn't it.

You still can't believe they killed off Tasha. What was Roddenberry thinking? You swore to Mary, at school between periods one day, that it was the newest thing, fascinating and groundbreaking, a hefty step above the camp and simpering of the Original Series. While Mary-Kay was convinced by your initial effusiveness, perhaps you overplayed your hand, as even as you find her skepticism relatable you hope you can sustain these evenings into (hopefully) more evolved future episodes.

Mary-Kay Anaam is a fascinating young woman, one you've had the pleasure of knowing since the last year of middle school when she moved to town. She has a tendency to surprise you with her off-the-wall flair for unorthodox fashions, and you believe no other sixteen-year-old has ever rendered to the world such immaculate diction and poise, nor kept so carefully primped a pixie cut in an intimidating jet-black. The swoop of it was what caused you to introduce yourself, actually, because to stare at a classmate for as long as you had without speaking can only be termed the height of rudeness. But she had laughed sweetly, slight overbite prominent with her dimpled cheeks as she introduced herself in turn.

Her last name, she claimed, is Arabic, meaning 'all god's creatures.' And, since the best explanation you have for your own last name is that it 'rhymes with blonde', you have to admire the looming totality of a discernable etymology such as that.

She has proven herself-- since your short-lived popularity war at the beginning of your first year of high school-- an admirable intellect, and to share surprisingly many of your own extracurricular talents, from making your own gothy clothing to keeping up with the trends of gothy fashion, and even the ways that furtive children such as yourselves can delve into the eldritch practices of makeup and cosmetics.

You've even had the unnatural fortune to get to practice on her, a few times. Makeup, that is.

MARY: So How Do You Feel It Compares To The Prior Season So Far

ROSE: Hmm.

You stroke your chin, fingers trailing through a hypothetical, wizened beard.

ROSE: I suppose the only episode that came close in terms of sheer eros was... Hide And Q.

Mary closes an eye, baffled.

MARY: You Mean

MARY: The One In Which Q Attempts To Beguile Riker Into Giving Up Humanity

ROSE: Indeed the same!

MARY: Not Even The One With Rikers Infatuation With His Holodeck Character Minuet

MARY: May I Simply Ask

MARY: What

ROSE: Oh, it's very straightforward:

ROSE: Q is jealous of Riker, very plainly.

ROSE: A man with a mission, a youthful face, a purpose to his existence that isn't haranguing beleaguered ship's captains. And a man we know is already involved with Counselor Troi.

ROSE: Plus, getting to spend that much time in proximity to the captain...

MARY: You Do Not Believe Q Wishes To

You cut her off with an upturned finger, raising an eyebrow.

ROSE: It's merely a theory. I have yet to see most of these episodes more than once, and that doesn't include the several we have happened to miss.

Mary-Kay blinks, shrugging a theatrical shrug.

MARY: Fair Enough

You end up staying over for dinner, and doing most of your homework coiled up on the Anaams' couch, opposite Mary-Kay, merely enjoying the quiescent evening together in silence.

2.

2x19: Manhunt

The sun is setting over the ocean, which neither you nor your hostess can see from your position in her basement. You wave your hand towards the television, sweeping away the show's utopian pronouncements one by one.

ROSE: I love this optimism that Data has-- 'judging a being by its physical appearance is the last major human prejudice'.

MARY: Then Immediately The Show Dives Into Mortification At Picards Perfectly Normal Interior Thoughts

ROSE: Indeed, a mindreader speaking aloud someone's sexual desires seems more of a bridge too far than merely laughing at fishpeople.

ROSE: Especially given the compulsory nature of the heterocentricities in any given plotline.

MARY: Even With The Entire Bridge Crew In Dresses

ROSE: They are quite comely. As are Jean-Luc's legs, according to Troi's mother.

MARY: Then The Buffoonery Of The Luggage

ROSE: And another opportunity to dig at Troi's lamentable relationship with Riker, and Majel Barrett's Lwaxana goes on at length about her absolute dislike of men.

Mary-Kay raises an eyebrow to you, chest rising with muted laughter.

MARY: There Is But One Servicable Solution To This Matter

ROSE: Lesbianism. **MARY: Lesbianism**

ROSE: Indeed, feminism is the theory. I just wish she committed less sexual harassment, to the point where poor

Jean-Luc recruits his wing-android Data simply to not be alone with the fiend. Humans have no prejudices, apparently, but Troi can glibly state as regards him that 'an animal is at its best when hunted'. No flaw there, certainly!

You're practically yelling, by this point, but Mary-Kay shrugs helplessly.

MARY: Why Does Lwaxana Not Simply Marry A Nice Human Woman For Once

ROSE: Honestly! She literally accosts every OTHER member of the crew, why would she not consider the similarly-forthright Pulaski, who even asks about her unbidden in the corridor!

Mary-Kay harrumphs, nose giving a sour scrunch.

MARY: And Mister Homn In Gray Facepaint

ROSE: Aah, the lurching Mister Homn. Ever the subject of even more of Lwaxana's jests, implications of pornographic thoughts, odd heterosexist jibes.

MARY: I Must Say That Tone Of Makeup Does Not Suit Him

ROSE: I think it's quite dashing. At least if the neck were a bit better covered.

She arches an eyebrow.

MARY: There Is No Individual Whose Looks Are Improved With Gray Skin

ROSE: And this holodeck plot!

ROSE: Dixon Hill, private dick, is accosted by a man named Bender, and the computer turning his adversaries against him is voiced by?

ROSE: Majel Barrett.

MARY: Do You Mean To Say

MARY: Gene Roddenberry Cast His Wife As Both Picards Sexual Harasser And The Executor Of His Stymied Holodeck Wishes

ROSE: Precisely. Such an odd, almost psychosexual turn, isn't it?

MARY: Almost As Odd As When Mister Crusher Terms Worf

MARY: Handsome

You laugh. Doesn't get more explicit than that, does it.

ROSE: It's practically cruel the show lets a serial harasser like her become even still the butt of a bitter joke about some hypothetical women completely obsessed with marriage.

MARY: So Much So That She Is Eventually Practically Paired Off With A Literal Hologram

MARY: Merely Because He Is The One Being She Cannot Look Down Upon For Having Feelings

ROSE: That's perhaps a tad harsh. But yes, it constantly stymies the intellect that some beneficent future cannot make room for any movement around this odd and compulsory dooming of masculinity.

You both nod in concert. Mary-Kay stretches, and stands to retrieve more popcorn from upstairs.

3.

2x06: The Schizoid Man

ROSE: ...So from what I gathered from that scene is that respected roboticist, Dr. Ira Graves, has been dishonorably expelled from Starfleet neither for his diletantism on a distant planet, his absolute neglect for his own health and physical condition, nor his frankly staggering attitude towards his assistant. Instead, his work-- of which we see none in the entire episode, no evidence-- is entirely to serve his own whims and desires with no oversight or schedule.

MARY: I Know I Have Naught But Complained As Regards The Last Several Episodes

MARY: And That This Plot Likewise Is Merely Pastiche

MARY: But It Seems To Me That He Intends To Do To Poor Kareen That Which He Did To Prolong His Own Life

MARY: He Respects Her Autonomy So Little That He Would Reembody Her To An Android Form Without Her Consent

MARY: Much Like He Disrespected Data

MARY: Who He Believed A Literal Object To The Point Of Nearly Destroying His Consciousness

You wave your hand with conviction towards the screen, but Rose has her palms over both eyes. Out of frustration?

ROSE: No, he's seeking out a companion! I can abso--

Rose groans a low groan. Her expression sours to a sneer of pain, and you slide closer, reaching out both hands to steady her shoulders.

MARY: Rose

MARY: Are You Alright

ROSE: Ughhh... I've been getting... this *darned* headache, a migraine, or something. You said these were regular Cokes?

MARY: I Believe My Mother May Have Procured Diet By Mistake

ROSE: Well, aspartame has given me awful migraines before, if that's the...

ROSE: Wait, no. Give it a moment-- it might be starting to clear up.

She breathes, teeth still gritted, but sighs, dropping her shoulders once more.

ROSE: Alright...

She shifts herself upward again, hands planted firmly at the 70's shag beneath her.

MARY: Do You Require A Liniment

MARY: Or A Glass Of Water Perhaps

ROSE: No, sorry about that, I'm feeling much better, now.

ROSE: How odd.

ROSE: As to the topic of conversation-- certainly we agree that Data is an individual of his own, and that any plot to disembody or destroy him is deeply heinous. But perhaps Graves sees his actions-- taking over Data's body and diminishing his control over it, preparing to set up his assistant with a similar body-- as necessary for his survival, indefinitely?

MARY: Absolutely Not

MARY: So Much Of The Primary Ethic Of This Show Is To Display That The Human Lifespan Is Not A Tragedy

MARY: Nor Is The Resultant Mortality

MARY: And That History Will Recall Us Like It Has Those Before Us

MARY: Not As A Chain Of Great Figures But

MARY: Oeuvres

MARY: Movements

MARY: Periods And Systems Interrelating To Produce History

ROSE: Hegel's dialectic, yes. I'm familiar. But as he, Aristotle, and Marx all wrote, that synthesis must come about through conflict, and sometimes that conflict is personal.

ROSE: Like one deranged, misogynistic old coot struggling against his mortality. In fact, that seems the most basal, inherent struggle that exists, on an even more deep level than anything we'd call 'human nature'.

MARY: You Speak Of Freuds Two Drives

MARY: Eros And Thanatos

ROSE: Precisely. As any character, perhaps this Dr. Graves is motivated by both.

MARY: But In That Case No Fictional Character Can Be Blamed For Their Actions

ROSE: What good would it do to project our own petty, personal moralities onto the actions of nonliteral entities? We can determine how we feel through examining and sympathizing with either their actions or the pain they cause on others, but the notion of declaring the actions of a character in Sophocles or Shakespeare good, or evil, or having any moral value whatsoever is merely the valuation we would put in a real person in their place.

ROSE: And perhaps that's misguided except as a formation of aesthetic sensibilities.

MARY: Do You Truly Wish To Contend

MARY: That No Figure Biblical To Present

MARY: Has Any Moral Value Whatsoever

MARY: Including This Foolish Bastard Attempting To Plug The

Target Of His Deeply Inappropriate Affections Into A Robot
Doubtless Under His Own Control

ROSE: ...I suppose that is the natural conclusion of my
statement, yes. Perhaps further examination of the question
is warranted.

MARY: Perhaps

4.

Strange Fire

You flip off the blockish television using the push-button switch on the front of the set. It is another afternoon, filled (as are so many) with Star Trek and Rose, though you cannot admit to having a particular interest in the former at the moment. The episode broadcasted today-- a rerun of the first season's "The Naked Now"-- filled you with such a profound disinterest that even as you pondered an early nap Rose requested you turn it off so that you could focus on other things.

The bluish daylight from the scrawny basement window casts itself across both of your laps as you seat yourself on the floor again, and you scratch idly at a knee with long fingernails.

MARY: I Can Admit That Was Not Particularly To My Taste
Either

ROSE: Ughh. Sorry, when we missed the run of this episode initially I had presumed it would be more like the original series' version.

MARY: In Regards To

MARY: Perhaps Mister Sulu Cavorting Shirtless And Demanding
Combat With A Mister Richelieu

ROSE: Cardinal, actually. But yes, the continued invasion of that execrable boy is most unwelcome as a continual plot device.

MARY: Oh

MARY: Speaking Of Our Needs Of Media

MARY: Have You The Record You Indicated You Would Loan Me
Today

ROSE: Oh! Yes, here you are.

From her plain black backpack, Rose lifts a copy of the Indigo Girls' first full album, *Strange Fire*.

ROSE: I'll admit delay only on the grounds that every time I picked up the album to pack it to our meetings for these last two weeks, I ended up listening to it in its entirety again.

ROSE: I sadly have yet to acquire their sophomore effort, but my hope is to do so soon.

ROSE: It's only out this year. Apparently Michael Stipe even does backing vocals for one of the tracks.

ROSE: Would you like to have a listen?

MARY: Please

MARY: The Degree To Which You Have Hyped Up This Particular Album Sparks In Me Nothing So Much As An Almost Prurient Curiosity About What Music Could Have You So Enraptured

ROSE: I promise it's nothing inconceivable. Transcendent, yes, absolutely unique, but not outside the realm of musical possibility.

Rose stands, walking to the square-based record player sitting atop your speaker system. She slots in the record carefully, and places the needle into the groove, returning to sit as the player crackles to life.

As the first melodious, thrumming chords belt forth, strong and even with their confident rhythm, Rose rolls her head back, already wrapped in sound.

I come to you with strange fire

I make an offering of love

The incense of my soul is burned

By the fire in my blood

You are torn, in this instant, in two directions. On one hand, the dulcet, throaty tones of Amy Ray's voice fill the room with warmth from the towers across it, making

your skin tingle and armhairs stand on end; on the other, Rose's irresistible harmony, improvised and lay-drawn, creeps quietly from her own throat, lost as she is in the depths of a favorite song.

You feel an unfamiliar flushing at your cheeks as you watch Rose, eyes eased shut, exist in this moment. You can only barely hear the record, now, despite Rose's reserved, untrained singing.

It strikes you, suddenly, that she might sing only for you. This has been a recent pattern, as whenever she came to share a favorite recent record she would mumble or hum along with a first listen.

Should you feel embarrassed? Perhaps you might if you thought she did it for your benefit, but every time she has begun of her own accord.

Her voice, so intimate, close by, draws you in. You scoot closer, dragging your knees along the rug.

She adjusts her skirt and sash to give you space to approach, but keeps singing.

I come with a softer answer

To the questions that lie in your path

I want to harbor you from the anger

Find a refuge from the wrath

You keep your face next to hers, trying hard not to loom despite your stature. From here, you can feel each gentle breath she takes in time, heat from her rapturous performance brushing across your neck.

But she flickers her eyes open again, head raising slightly from the cushion.

This is a message

Her lips stay, slightly parted, glossy pink and inches from you. The words from her mouth falter, caught in her throat, and bathing you in the sound coming from the stereo once more.

A message of love

Love that moves from the inside out

Love that never grows tired

Rose swallows, and her voice cuts back in, eyes open now, watching you with subdued intensity.

I come to you with strange fire

She straightens her back, now, reseating herself upright to draw her face up to the height of your own, mouth still suspended open. She is all you can see, now, the gentle scent of lavender and cinnamon mingling with the blonde aura about her head, filling your eyes and nose with delicate dances, possibilities.

Amy and Emily sing on without her, heedless to what is happening in the presence of their music.

Find another state of mind

You know it's time we all learned

To grab hold

Strange fire burns

With the motion of love

What is she... thinking about, in this instant? What is she about to do?

You realize that there was not much doubt from the beginning, nor as to why she selected this record in the first place.

She ponders you, her eyeballs locked on your own, haunting in their depth. Her gaze doesn't burn, no, even as you feel your own breath pool and mingle with hers.

She is inches from you. Is this even--?

ROSE: Um. I would like to, ah.

MARY: I Assure You

MARY: You May

MARY: Whatever You Are Thinking

MARY: I Think I Share It

When you learn to love yourself

You will dissolve all the stones that are cast

Now you will learn to burn the icing sky

To melt the waxen mask

This seems to steel her resolve, and her eyelashes swim to meet their lower companions. Her hand scoots from its chaste position on the couch up your arm, finding the back of your unclad neck as she positions herself close, practically touching your nose with her own, before she turns her head just enough to fit against you, lips brushing yours.

She kisses you, tentatively at first, but fully a moment later, and you press back against it in a mixture of giddy, butterfly-stomached disbelief and the knowledge that this will live in your memory forever, so you drink deeply of her careful mouth as she holds it to your own.

Perhaps it is clumsy of you, but she does not seem to be complaining.

I said to have the gift of true release

This is a peace that will take you higher

Oh I come to you with my offering

I bring you strange fire

The voice of your mother from the top of the stairs cuts above the music, somehow piercing the timeless bubble in which you share this embrace.

DOLORES: Mary-Kay!

DOLORES: Time fo+r dinner!

DOLORES: If yo+u'd like to+ invite yo+ur little friend to+ stay, yo+u may!

You inhale deeply, trying to dredge your voice from the sands of sudden intensity, return it to its place atop your spine, toppled as it was by the tiny black-clad woman in front of you.

MARY: Thank You Mother

MARY: I Shall Do So

You stand, brushing free a loose crease from the front of your dress. Without a word, you offer a hand to Rose, who accepts it, giving the lightest grunt as she pulls herself from the floor under your power.

You blink, gazing down into her violet eyes for a moment, and she smiles with the tiniest stifled laugh, cheeks red with a blush like the midday sun.

ROSE: We'll have to return to this activity later, I'm afraid. If you're amenable, though you seemed to like the first bit well enough.

MARY: Uh

Rose walks over to the steps up from your basement, fitting her stockinged feet back into her little black flats and begins to ascend the staircase.

This is a message

A message of love

Love that moves from the inside out

Love that never grows tired

I come to you with strange fire

You turn off the record player and make your way to the stairs likewise.

Bonemeal For The Garden

Mature

5514 words (2 chapters)

2019-12-16

Content Warnings by Chapter

Chapter 1: Chronic pain; bodily alienation; suicidal ideation; reference to canon mind control.

Chapter 2: Panic attacks; body horror; implied PTSD; gender dysphoria (genital); nudity; dissociation; implied sexual content; reference to canon abusive caretaker.

Chapter 1

When I was 13, the universe hollowed me out and replaced my nerves with big green vines, all the way from the limbic center deep in my brain to the tips of my fingers and the ends of the tail and ears. I know it's true because they only burned a bit, unlike when it happened to her. She had no body, but when she came to consciousness again, she still screamed and cried as if she'd burst into flames. I know this, like I know how much it hurt, because I took her over and inherited her memories.

I became her, regrew her meat and slipped my toes into her legs like stockings. It barely hurt, just the slightest sting at the scars on my fingertips where the electricity and flame crackled and danced. Background noise in a body already buffeted with fresh, overwhelming sounds and smells. And sunlight.

My name is Jade Harley, and I have had a great deal of time to learn how to deal with the constant smothering of endless sensation, my private emerald sandstorm.

The doggy additions weren't by choice, but I learned to live with them eventually. I learned to coexist with the whining ghostdog in me, and his constant cravings for meat, scratches between the ears, and a moment's quiet underneath the noise. I made peace with the ears, and the tail, and the other, littler things; the offhand remarks about them never stop stinging, but the pain dulls with enough time and familiarity. Those parts of me may look strange, after all, but they're not the thing that makes me feel truly alone.

The vines were harder to get used to. I watched so many of my friends give their hearts so freely, as if offering themselves up wasn't the hardest thing they've ever done. They don't seem to live in terror of what it might do to them, if the people they trusted and loved shoved back against them, or refused to understand.

I can only imagine that if I came to trust someone, I would feel the deep green flow from my arms, running up the sides of the walls dividing us to bite into mortar and take

root. Demolishing those barriers is a skill; it takes careful application of the belief that the object of your trust is only doing what they think is the right thing. It also takes refusing to overstep the hard edges outlining yourself, even when it feels like you have to out of desperate need.

But it would be so easy for me to just slip into their arms, try to dissolve into them. I can lose myself, buy into the foolish notion that they will not bite me like a mishandled viper. A snake never intends to harm the hand that seizes it, you see, but the venom jellies the veins and calcifies the heart regardless, so the damage is done without proper precaution.

I'll never have that happen, so I suppose I must be lucky. My tendrils wouldn't carry a poison like human veins, and if I have a heart at all, it doesn't need love to be fed, only a bit of water and exposure to the Sun. If you can stop people from getting close to you, after all, you can't be faced with that crushing sting, the bite of their good intentions still somehow infecting your bloodstream with their own disappointments or little failures. They can't change you with their misconceptions or shape you with their desires. It's an inoculant, of a sort I'm very familiar with; I don't think any other child in the history of forever has performed their own vaccines.

Love slithers, after all. I learned that many years ago; love moves low to the ground, either on its stomach like the snake or ripping through compacted soil like shoots of creeping ivy. That's how it breaks down barriers, sneaks its way into your chest, and inverts you from the ribcage out.

I learned to crawl on my belly, too, as a little baby. Becquerel interacted with me on my own level, in that playful way dogs do, lowering his body to the floor and dragging himself across carpeting and tile by his claws. I could never understand him, even when I learned everything he ever knew. But he never stood on his hindpaws, and as with all children my tragedy was that I outgrew him too quickly. I learned to walk, to speak, to

read. I taught myself how to fire a gun, though I haven't done it since I was 13; there's no ear protection good enough in all the world.

I had to learn all by myself. My only friends existed a world away, or worse, across the boundaries of two universes and all of recorded time. Only when that distance collapsed did I learn how truly different I was from them, a feral child-- as the saying goes, raised by wolves.

My love wasn't enough to keep them together, to stop them from fighting, or falling apart. So I did what I learned as a little baby: I crawled on my belly. Like the dog I'd become, I rolled over. I smiled as big as I could, and I shrank down my needs so as not to burden them. It was how I could hold them together, keep them close to each other, even as I felt that vacancy gnaw my chest every day. I knew I could never be among them, and that was the price I'd pay so they could live the lives they wanted. Every day I wondered if they noticed.

I am not like them. The game made sure of that, squelched my form like play-doh in its hot little fist until I became the agent it needed, its perfect witch. I can still replay the sequence in my mind in slow motion, like a magical girl transformation in reverse, like a man becoming a slaving werewolf. Hairs sprouting at every extremity, my skull reshaping with sickening noise as the sloshing fluid of my inner ears boiled and split into four, my tailbone breaking to accomodate fresh and freakish bonegrowth. My legs bowing apart, like the punchline to the world's worst dirty joke.

I dreamt as a young, lonely child that I was an alien, dropped by meteor onto an isolated island to study humans at a distance, but never truly understand them. I suppose I never really evolved beyond that notion, even now that I'm twenty-one. The only thing that changed is that I learned about magic, and when it became clear that spells and incantations were as inviolable a domain as the sciences, I wondered if instead of an extraterrestrial mission I'd been saddled with a curse.

Five years ago, the threads of fate that held me aloft like puppetstrings slackened, let me flex my own muscles for the first time I could remember. My friends all fared better than I could with a new world, because they had spent the time forming connections, strengthening bonds, and learning how to love, while I was a forgotten stuffed animal in a cosmic toybox. They grew, basked in the sun, and I slept just beneath the permafrost.

Or... the strings of the puppet were the vines, and that's why I crawled... no. I'm having trouble even keeping any of it straight, or pulling apart the waking truths from the fantasy of metaphor. Even now the thoughts are all just a jumble, and all I can untangle from it are these feelings, those held by the discarded plaything, dormant seedlings of the perennial. I am unable to slither or vine, unable to trust or love. The feelings are all I have. That, and the dull, muscular soreness that recollection brings on. Still, without the Green Sun lurking in the corner of my vision, crackling and arcing as I sleep, I think I much prefer the little aches of memory to the tinnitic sear of blistered fingers. That is, except for the way it traps me now inside my own decaying corpse--body, that is-- with no ability to fling my mind afar to gaze on the infinite cosmos.

If the boys were here, they'd tell me that I was dug too deep into self-pity, that I could clear my head and get my fingers dirty all at once, but now I know what they really wanted was for me to stop bothering them, even if they never said it out loud.

They got married, and I accepted that, because it was my duty to accept; they labeled the vestigial mailbox of our shared home with only their two names, and I didn't complain, because it was my duty to not complain.

I could almost even take the cracks about my body, the time I spent at 'interspecies raves', the way I was desperate to keep busy with gardening and decoration and travel. I knew that Dave was smart enough to recognize somebody coping with all the static that piles up. He knows what it's like when the tingling overloads into a panic that wraps itself around your midsection and squeezes. He had to know those things were

my... counterstimulation. But when he wandered into the living room as I lay on the couch, and he started to whistle Hound Dog under his breath, likely without even noticing that he was doing it... I gathered my things that night. It was easy, because I never had my own room.

I haven't been back. It's funny to me, now, that when I had the choice between keeping up the story that it never hurt to be around him, or finding someplace else to live, I'd let him keep that precious illusion before I risked making him feel guilt for causing me pain. I crawled away from him on my belly so that he could keep his pride, and I smiled as I did it to not disturb his good mood. Then I told myself I would never crawl again, even if that meant going without love. I am the tin man, without heart; I am the lion, without courage.

Another friend married her wife. When I borrowed her overplumped couch-- as an excuse to avoid my darkened doorstep, where I knew not a soul waited for me-- she and I shared a solitary kiss.

But she turned away from me the next day, and said she could never do it again, and bade me to leave. And I understood, because it was my duty to understand. My roots retracted, my vines released. I don't know if I can survive without them, or if I will be simply an empty shell, but every day they rot, putrefying inside my arms.

I could have retreated to one house or another, like the abandoned one, which I'd claimed at the age of eighteen but never even fully moved into. But all that waited for me there was dust and disused furniture, with no seeds below the ground. I won't go back to that just for darkness and a queen-sized bed.

I could mope back to my sister, with my tail between my legs. She would give me a place to rest. But every time I awoke I would look into her eyes, and I would see her recollecting the two worst moments of our lives: the disappointment and loneliness she heaped on me with a sudden death on the Battleship, only barely explicable years later; or, worse, she sees in me the avaricious, green-crackling beast, who coated her fangs in

blood in the thrall of another tyrant. Both our memories are hazy, but she told me once of the look in Rose's eyes as they sank and the blood drained from her face in her final moments.

June and Roxy are the only ones left who witnessed the worst of it, but I still see it in the way they look at me. I haven't spoken to my sister in a while.

I deluded myself, at 13, that I would always have the freedom to forget, to discard the rainbow ringlets on my fingers and neglect to feed the plants. I wish that were true, but memory is just as corrosive a venom as love. Half my life ago I wrapped myself in the warm blanket of little dreams, and one of those told me that no matter what, I would always be able to forget.

I wish I could. But I can't even dream anymore. I wonder: do I need sleep? Or food, vitamin D, or even water? I don't age. I can fly through space without air, without the negative pressure rupturing my capillaries and eyeballs like ripe tomatoes, and neither the infinite cold nor the surreal pull of emptied lungs wrings the consciousness from my body.

I wonder. Could I just walk into the ocean, take nonchalant steps until I wandered to the bottom? It might be a little cold, but so's space, and at least the water would be there to embrace me. Who was it who did that, some author? Rose would know. But then I guess I'm better off not asking. I'll keep sleeping, instead.

I sleep even more now than I used to, and I look forward to it more during the hours I spend awake. Saving all my friends used to drive me forward, keep my mind on the future and its immediate demands, and I didn't have a moment for all this maudlin pity or odious, indulgent regret. But now I have nobody to fill my time and no tasks to keep me occupied. All there is is the static, the nerve pain in my fingertips, the ocean in my ears. The vines have withered; the pumpkins have shrivelled, untended, and instead I have slept.

Maybe someday the meal from my bones will nourish my garden once again.

Chapter 2

She plummeted to earth like the rest of us had, and I heard the peals of her manic laughter from a half-mile away as she scorched like a fireball down to the planet. I crawled out from the tangled foliage beneath the bush in which I'd spent the night, and stepped through a fold in space to stand at the site of her impact before she landed.

She fell out of the sky, and when I looked up all I could see was a tremendous scar, filled with black ink and the celestial cartography of a foreign universe. The fabric of our bubble had ripped, and each edge of the tear streamed with rainbow-hued cracks, practically shrieking in my sensitive ears the ghoulish noise of my former universe, worst among my captors.

Well, second worst.

The worst stood from the cracked earth, swiped her hand across her dustsmeared jeans and made a futile attempt to clean the dirt from a shirt stiff enough to stand up on its own. Cerulean symbol, mismatched horns, ashen skin tight to the bones of her angular face. Hair to her knees. Vriska Serket.

The woman who spent her childhood toying with me struck the earth like a thunderbolt, right in front of me. She had been the reason my friends couldn't trust me. She had pulled apart any semblance of trust I had in my body to do what I needed it to, like a monstrous child pulling the legs off of an insect to watch it writhe and squirm as the life oozes out of its thorax.

As she uncollapsed herself, checked for broken bones and shattered carapace, she gazed up into the same sky, drank in its torn meaning.

And she spoke, to no one in particular. It's over, huh. And she laughed, a wild, raucous, free laugh, as though she knew nobody was around anymore to force her backbone rigid and her claws sharp. Something in her changed, like a switch had been flipped, like the killer robot part of her had just peaceably exploded all on its own.

Then she turned and saw me, and her expression grew sour.

We had only met face to face the once. I doubted she even knew my name. And yet, despite all this, my first question was simply, why?

Her eyes watched my eyes. Perhaps what I saw flash through them was remorse, or perhaps the exhaustion of a life spent as a weapon of war finally caught up to her. She sighed, and tried to cover it with clenched teeth, hissing like a coiled snake.

She evaded, claimed ignorance, tried to leave. But I asked the more pointed question, one I knew she'd feel compelled to answer, because it offered the chance for flattery. I asked how she had benefited from it, what her plan had been, how it fit into her scheme.

She said, it hadn't. She had just wanted to see if she could.

I screamed at her for what felt like an entire day, spent the time delivering my pent up guts into her ears. Vriska insisted on regular breaks for tea, and changed her clothes; when I finished delivering a decade's pain and loneliness, she said she was glad to hear I was adjusting well to the new life.

I asked why she refused to scream back, and she smiled a crooked smile. She said it'd been too long since someone had yelled at her, and she missed it enough that she wanted me to finish, no matter how long it took or how winded I got. She said it meant she knew where she stood with me, and that put her at ease too much to want to argue.

Then she said she was moving into my home, because obviously nobody wanted to see her. I told her I had no home, so she told me to find one.

I took her to the empty house. I pulled the dustcloth from my old four-poster bedframe, tossed a mattress and some sheets onto it, and congratulated her on her new home. Then she asked where I actually lived, and I asked why she cared since she would clearly just dismiss me like another outgrown toy once I'd served my purpose to her.

She offered that I could share her bed. When I accepted, I surprised even myself. I've shared beds before, with people whose names I never knew or discarded instantly, but when she said it, it sounded less like a favor offered than a nonchalant fact, that I was a welcome guest instead of merely another benchwarmer among a churning crowd.

That night, I spoke to her for longer than I have any one person, ever before.

I asked how long she perceived the time between the end of the game and now to be. She shook her head. I asked how the intervening time had felt. She said, cold. I asked if she slept during it, dreamed; she said that if she did the former she couldn't recall it, and there was without a doubt none of the latter.

I shivered. She asked what I'd done since then. I thought for a while, trying to turn the story into one of biding my time, or of a fairytale yet to reach its ending.

I told her about how happy my friends were in their new lives.

She asked how long I'd been alone.

The briefest flicker of loathing sparked in my gut. How dare she try to lump that pity on me, like some sad, broken animal? Then I thought about the battleship, and the gaggle of consorts I'd corralled there to spend my infinite time with.

Back when they were my only company, I pitied them. They were static. They could never know what sadness truly meant, and worse, they could never know why that even mattered. But as Vriska spoke I realized that I would have fared no better with real company than they did. Maybe I was never built to withstand people, even as I needed them more than anything.

So all I said was, oh, a while.

I asked how she survived it. She shrugged, said that there wasn't much of a point to giving up, and without a reason to she refused to just die. So I asked if there was nothing else she could have done with the time instead, and she gave me a withering look. Then she asked if the same was true for me, and I cried again.

I slept fully-clothed that night, sneakers and all. I stared into the ceiling, and only when I heard her breathing slow, saw the tension drop from her gritted jaw and the lids of her eyes, did I roll away and close my own.

And then I had a dream.

I dreamt I stood in a vast field-- no sunlight, which suited me fine, no plants around, just fresh loam underneath my bare toes. I found a good spot, and I hunkered down, standing on my tippytoes as a coiled little ball, and put my fingers to the soil. They tore open with little black slits, splitting as the vines inside me became dark, woody roots, and sought subterranean water. That was good, I thought, because I was parched, so I tossed my head back to see if there was rain coming. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, just endless, vasty dark, and I closed my eyes to appreciate the smell of dry earth. My hair tumbled down my back in messy curls, and where the tips touched the ground they also spread into it, searching the thirsty dirt. And the bark curled around my toes, starting its long journey, up, up, up my trunk.

I couldn't tell where the screaming was coming from, though. I hoped it wasn't me, because I'd hate to bother anybody.

Then I woke up.

The next morning, I told Vriska about the dream, and found myself describing the ways my fingers ripped and my hair pulled me into the ground with nonchalance. She gawped as though I were oncoming headlights.

That was a month ago.

We have learned a lot about each other in that time. We speak every day, as roommates do; we share a bed, as roommates do. Neither of us tidy the house or cook much, but at least we keep each other company.

I ask why she never went back to the rest of our friends, but invited me into her bed. She asks in reply if my only purpose in latching onto her so quickly was that I'd

driven everyone else away. I drop it, and try to leave, but she stops me, apologizes. She says she doesn't know how to act around them without a purpose in life, and that I'm the only one who could ever truly know how that felt. She says she can't bring herself to fight anymore, to scream and claw the world into accepting her presence.

She's a newcomer to this world, dropped like a stone into a silent sea. She knows nobody here, not really, in her newfound adulthood. And none of them know her, though they bolt their doors when she approaches.

But that means she never had to watch me drift like jetsam as my friends departed for the happier shores of adulthood and adjustment. She never expected me to smile just to make her life easier. It sounds like such an abject cliché that we share our alienation, our mutual isolations, but perhaps she is the only person I relate to.

In that moment I realize the common thread that makes me sure I can get to know her. She and I are the only two things I have ever truly hated.

When I tell her this, she grins, showing every tooth, and asks if it's still the case even now. I confess that I lost the ability with so many years of numbness and apathy, and she takes my hands in her hands, and says she knows I'll get it back. And she leans forward, putting her head so close to mine, but blinks in hesitation. She knows what she wants, but acts as if asking for permission is too far outside the realm of possibility even as she's desperate to close the gap. So I tell her to kiss me, and she does.

Vriska Serket is the first person I let touch my body in a year.

When she tries the first time, I am fully-clothed and lying in my bed. We've just been talking about why animals can do it-- be seen naked, be regarded as they are-- but we can't. Vriska asks why chimpanzees can't wear pants, and we laugh. But then I say I would like her to see me naked, and she asks if I'm sure. She says we've never even touched, apart from the kiss. And if we can't even hug how--

I tell her I want to.

Before she can even rest a finger on my torso, I crumple like discarded newspaper and bawl at her approach, limbs collapsing inward to involuntarily separate her from my core.

She asks if I would like her to stop. I beg her not to.

I force the air through my nose, resting both of my hands against her wrist. My legs unflex, and I extend them to the bed again, trying to suffuse them with a calm anathema to every burning image of scampering prey animals in my head.

She lowers it to me again, and her palm, cold and cracked like baked clay, falls flat on my shirt, right at the stomach.

I hold it there until the clenching pulse I feel tangling my innards ceases. And I breathe again, sighing through years of tension in a single breath.

Vriska breathes along with me.

I've let others try before, my aforementioned bedfellows. Maybe some even succeeded, but it doesn't mean I was really there when it happened. But this time is different.

I ask if she'd like to try it again with our clothes off. She smiles, says she absolutely would.

Jade lies in the middle of the bed. Her body is on display, bare hips too wide, with that odd divot in the front that she can never get to fit into jeans just right; sprawled mess of hair, untameable, but that makes her cry every time she imagines someone cutting even an inch of it off. And as she gazes down on herself, sees every pockmark and scarred knee, she's not certain she even exists, or if an attempted touch would just fall right through her without the benefit of clothing. But Vriska dutifully watches Jade's eyes, and her hand contacts flesh as if Jade were real, and really there.

All Jade can think is, wow, I bet it'd be nifty to be the woman on the bed right now. She watches her head nod and hears herself say to keep going. But she's floating

overhead, taking the time to count the power outlets and wonder about the bulbs in the lamps.

When I find myself in my body again, Vriska has removed her clothing, aligned herself with my side to nestle her body along it. The static charge of her skin against mine is almost too much to bear, but even the newfound tingles subside as I wrap my arm underneath her head and she moves her hair. I cradle her against me, letting the curve of her cheek settle against the round of my shoulder, lips against my collarbone. She gazes down my body, taking me in.

She asks how somebody as needy as me can spend so much time doing things I don't want to be doing. I shrug, and tell her I've never thought about it, because who else would shoulder those tasks if I didn't.

She asks who would make sure I was fulfilled and could be happy if I didn't.

She asks how long I've had it. Since I was thirteen, I reply, and that she probably watched it happen. She opens her mouth, closes it again, and stares pointedly at the wall next to us.

She says she's had hers forever, and wonders how I ever got used to it. She remembers breaking so many mirrors that eventually she stopped replacing them, started smashing everything else instead. I say that it's easy when you remember your body isn't yours to play with, that the needs of others simply take priority at times, even when it hurts, and that when all you can do is watch, maybe it's best to accept whatever happens.

Vriska Serket cries on my shoulder. Drab, ugly blue tears run freely from her eyes, welling in the cleft of my sternum provided by my lumpy, oversized breasts. I pet her hair, stroking the top to not catch my hand in the tangles and knots. Even witnessing this feels profane, like the tormentor in my mind holds no resemblance to the weeping, vulnerable being in front of me. The monument carved by the horror stories I've been

told crumbs. That's when I feel the vines inside me move again, for the first time since that dream, freeing me for a while from the silent ache in my gut and the tension in my throat.

I ask if she wants to talk about it. She doesn't, for now. Eventually I learn more about her past, the men and monsters who used her body for their amusement too. She'll tell me about wrestling her own arm to stop it from striking her, feeling the nerves connected to both limbs burning as she loses a fight against her mechanical parts at the cost of her dignity. She'll tell me about being chided into so many avoidable failures and slaughters by the awful, cueballheaded man, who got everything he ever wanted and never faced a single setback, and for whom death was much too good an ending; and of her beastly spider, who screamed into her mind daily that she would face a much grislier fate than her prey if she failed to entrap enough young bodies for its meals. And how it made her watch its grisly mastications every day just to remind her of that fact. I wish I could hurl them all into the sun, and I hold her so tightly.

She'll tell me exactly how bad her dysphoria gets. I can't claim to have lived through exactly the same, but I try to soothe her in any way I can, and share my own stories when I can't. I'll learn that when I talk about piercing my own ears, sizing my own bras, flattering or hiding my own body with skirts, she relaxes a little bit, and sighs less with pain and more with the soft glow of recognition.

She'll tell me how she truly, truly expected to die, that day, in a heroic blaze against our universe's most hated foe. And that when she didn't, she found herself with no direction, no purpose, no point.

But for now, she has my warmth, and I pull the thick covers over both of us, satisfied to bulwark her from the world as she shivers and sobs.

I wish she could meet Bec.

Grief is a strange animal. It lies on your chest, curls up around you, but after you get used to the weight you're not sure what else could tether you to the earth if it left you. Almost like without it, everything just floats, and while you could push yourself from obligation to obligation, at some point you know you'll just become stranded, motionless, with nothing to push off from. So your options are to clutch yourself close to everyone nearby, so they can depart from you to avoid their own inertia; or to weight your body down with a lifetime's memories.

It's possible my mistake was in having such a bad life to begin with, or maybe becoming too comfortable with the weight of grief around my neck. But now, beside me in this bed is a blue girl, her chest rising and falling in time with each rattling breeze through the pines outside. I know for the first time that I won't have to crawl for her approval, and already I feel the vines strengthening again, tearing through the cynical barriers between us. And this, unlike so many things, can't be a mistake.

While she's here with me, I have no regrets, none at all.

The next morning, I awaken before the dawn with the intent to finally clear out the dead flowerbeds out front, choked with creeping charlie. Vriska is still asleep, next to me, and barely whines with the creak of the antique bedframe as I slip out. When I come back inside, she's wrestling desperately with the coffee maker, and the resulting process chokes even me with its bitter diesel ichor. But we sit together, there on the little porch, and watch the sun peek through thick clouds to illuminate my hopeful patch of dirt.

Appendices

A Solstice of Abundance:
Author's Annotation

Chapter 1

Special thanks to Purplebard, whose *Pilot Light, Pale Rapture* series I came across and read about halfway through writing this chapter. (Oddly enough, I'd already named *Flame Kindled Among Ash* last week before reading it. Just one of those coincidences in a sufficiently large fandom.) I certainly know that their works have already informed my view of Jade (as we clearly agree that she was never given a fair shake or allowed any sense of closure within the narrative itself...) enough that I wanted to shout them out here.

I enjoy this as the start to the whole story, a mixed-up initial pass of Jade attempting (shoddily) to cover up her emotional state while still using the MOST destructive coping behavior she's likely to ever stoop to. While the pacing is... pretty off and I wish I'd taken more room to set the scene and explain character motivations and initial attitudes, I think it mostly stands as a strong metaconversation and launching point by which the rest of the relationship can evolve. Especially as Jade is adamant-- here and in the next chapter-- that she's already learned how to put herself first and not be willing to destroy herself for the value of others. (A pure lie, of course.)

The structure of the whole piece, by its nature as a pretty ad-hoc experiment, changes rapidly; this chapter in particular starts the second-person rambling characteristic of the first eight chapters of the work, and I think the swap in 9 emblematic of Jade's alienation and disaffection accompanying the emotional nadir of the fic.

So why second person? Well, all of Homestuck is basically a master class in the use of the second person perspective, and structurally runs the reader through every possible use case: informing us of a character's actions through extratextual narration past them, speaking from a character's innermost thoughts they can't admit or express,

letting them speak their own thoughts and mood, letting other characters react to their antics while still remaining in their 'shoes', exercising that character's voice to enable them to present it without even having to speak. And tons more, because I'm not as clever as Hussie. I use it to allow me access to their mental state and descriptions of other while still letting me cut in bits of reactions and other characters' perspectives that might be more difficult to access in first-person narration while still giving better intimacy and closeness to the mind than third-person close perspective.

Chapter 2

I love this chapter's particular blend of metafiction and listening to Vriska realize she has a crush! 'You either come for the meta, and stay for the girls' smooches, or get tricked in by lesbian content tags and are forced to read about physics and homestuck meta' is basically the duality of this whole piece, to be honest.

I initially waffled on whether or not the ending was worth the GDoV tag, but deciding that 1) I could err on the side of caution and include it, and that 2) that meant I could amp up the viscerality of the violence, which I think produced a good effect.

Chapter 3

I swear to gog that Jade gets to be not-exhausted and not-enraged soon, I promise!

Alright, that original endnote is... kind of a lie. One of the harder tightropes to walk with this chapter-- on top of the two voiceswaps that the narration goes through, which I think are handled at decently-placed breaks-- was finding a way for Jade to express all the things she needs to and keep her in-voice for her character as best I can express it. She had to express annoyance, hold back her negative emotions for Vriska's benefit, to be oblivious to Vriska's attractions for her and still help her medically, on top of finally giving Vriska (and the reader) an interior view of Jade's living space, and also to give them some idea of how Jade spends her free time in this non-epilogue-compliant version of Earth C. Oh, and to work in all the fanservice I wanted, specific dialogue flourishes, and a few tidbits of metadiscussion, plus setting up for the future of their relationship. And not have either overstep the other's consent (except where obliviousness reigns).

One of the weaknesses of the chapter, I think, is that Vriska's description of Jade's room is a bit meandering, and doesn't do a good job of highlighting the personality of the woman who lives there, her struggles and thoughts. Part of this is that accessing Vriska's cognitions is difficult! (Or, felt that way to write at the early stages, as this chapter was one of the first 3 posted in a single slew.) So as Vriska processes mostly through NOT saying things to Jade, the reader is left to interpret both their moods from the interior of Vriska's head. As a result I think I veered too avoidant with Vriska's dialogue here, though primarily this is due to her avoidance of talking about her feelings when it benefits her, and that she feels particularly vulnerable (on account of just havin' almost died.)

Chapter 4

With apologies to Courtney Barnett, I guess.

Alright we're 10,000 words in (15K if you count the other fic too) are we
#slowburn yet

Yes, before you @ me, I am aware that two charged encounters by chapter 4 is not Slow Burn :P I have to poke fun at my conflict-aversion simultaneous with a desire for their romantic tension to not resolve for a while longer.

I love Jade's turn here, suddenly confident in her understanding of the situation and immediately attempting to dive into the prospective relationship with intensity.

Chapter 5

'Fun' fact: three of the alternate titles I considered for this fic were 'Uranium Blue and Fluorine Green: The Harley-Serket Conciliation', 'Green Sun, Yellow Sun, Blue Dice, White Dog', and 'Dognapping: Stealing the Heart of Homestuck's Preeminent Furry'.

We learn so much from Kanaya here! Most of it's wrong, and most of the rest of it is about Kanaya's own mindset, but I enjoy letting her get up to shenanigans. (Especially around the stylish imagery of her driving a convertible.) And she does end up nudging Jade in a good direction, because the combination of wildly intense feelings and obliviousness towards them can be a dangerous one.

Chapter 6

Is it time for Terezi Pyrope to get railzoned? (Sadly, the concept's not as sexy as it sounds.) Apologies for Terezi fans who wanted more of her.

This is probably the single chapter I spent the most time rewriting and retooling from scratch prior to its original posting. Originally it was from Terezi's perspective, we got her entire history, tons of meta-talk from a Mind Seer, extended meandering dialogues about how VrisRezi could happen without just being cagey murderous bullshit, or just Terezi sitting around being depressed. You might be thinking, 'geez, Nova! I'd really like to read that!'. And let me tell you, no you do not; those drafts were not good! The conflicts set up by the fic's conceit (some unexpected characters get some Ultimate Self window moments, and have to cope, so they seek out similar people they don't know!) would require a great deal more 'coping space' to show how VrisRezi changes with a Vriska who learns to love other people and value them.

In any case, its primary purpose became to set up the conflict and drama of chapters 7 through 10, and to give Jade some curveballs to react to. To that end-- and letting Vriska's interior monologue get a little space to breathe, and show us where her character is shifting over the course of the whole fic-- I think it works... decently well. The formatting experimentation of justifications and paragraph spacing started as a way of clarifying trains of thought, and evolved over the course of writing it into a way to display the many directions Vriska feels pulled in (compassion and ruthlessness, people and mechanics, loving and Mattering) and the ways that her fragmentation resolves. Again, it worked... okay.

Were I going to redo major sections of it now I'd probably focus more on Terezi, make sure her character shows through more in the narration, and that Vriska's need for her was made more apparent. But this, sadly, is not a VrisRezi fic.

Also, I think some deference needs be given for the coinage of a new troll phrase, 'higgledy-wiggledy', which I still laugh about every time I see it.

Chapter 7

In retrospect I probably could have picked a better title for this chapter that was more descriptive and didn't give away the emotional timbre of its conclusion. Still, I think this chapter does what it needs to, and displays exactly how quickly Vriska is willing to turn on those near her when she believes it's in somebody's best interest (and no matter who she insists it's for, it's usually herself...). And likewise this interacts badly with Jade feeling like she is frequently betrayed by people around her trying to control her! (And holds back her negative emotions for the benefit of others, in this case, June and Vriska both. Weirdly enough, this ends up probably saving the day, given that if she'd freaked out at Vriska during this, she would have taken it badly, because Vriska would take it as a sign she wasn't cared for... fucked up, I know!)

Given all of those strictures, I think the character voices all hold up decently well, and I'm most proud of Vriska's mindset shift as she realizes the guilt isn't going away as she tries to do something hurtful. I wish I'd lain more groundwork through this and the next chapter for Jade's panic attack in 9, but I'd completed them both before I realized that was going to be a necessary step in the plotting. This is, as you may have guessed, a somewhat haphazard venture! :P I do wish, however, I'd given June more space to show off her attitudes and foibles and be her badass trans girl self. But it was already edging on 3000 words and I needed to wrap it up because I knew I still had 2 more chapters worth of material to cram into the same in-universe day.

Then, of course, comes Vriska's sarcastic 'explanation' about troll genitals, which is poking fun at the fandom's (and my own!) somewhat prurient desire to engage in speculation and fantheories. No condemnation, just a little fun ;)

Anyway, the single segment I'm most proud is without a doubt that bit at the end about unfurling your gargoyle wings and yeeting yourself into the sun.

Chapter 8

Jade stop talking poly terms and ethics while you smooch your new girlf is2g

As I noted at the end of 7, the biggest weakness of this chapter (aside from Jade's dialogue sounding like a Jean-Luc Picard lecture all of a sudden) is that I didn't sufficiently lay the groundwork for her incipient panic attack and shutdown. Obviously that's first on a hypothetical fix-it list, though I do actually like the fact that this is basically her getting to air out her grievances about what just happened (what she later obliquely refers to as her 'villain monologue'.) And as a result I think it still sort of holds together? Because Jade is so focused on keeping her shit together and powering through without crashing, she doesn't spare much time for interiority (not that she would in the first place) and is somewhat distracted by the end of the chapter. But more physicality and allusion to that specific aspect of the coming work would have helped tie together chapters 6 through 9. Likewise more windows into Vriska's feelings here-- after her last comments from the previous chapter-- would have made the arc hold together better. Maybe to each time Jade tries to explain a thing about her she thinks is untrue, and DEFINITELY in the remarks and digs about spidermom and her childhood. But I'm not good at writing conflict, so sadly it just kinda... peters out? Missed opportunity to show Vriska's admiration for Jade's unwillingness to take her shit.

All of that said, I still quite like the pacing and the culmination of Jade's growth towards a willingness to feel and express her feelings openly to somebody she's scared of hurting.

Chapter 9

Pop quiz! How fast, as a decimal expression relative to C , were the girls traveling in this chapter? Using the Lorentz factor (γ) calculated in the previous problem, and supposing you lack Jade's ability to negate Lorentz factor influences on special relativity, calculate the relative size of Mars in Vriska's frame of reference while moving (given the diameter of Mars from a resting frame of reference, 6794 km). (Hint! You don't need a value for C to calculate this, nor do you need the distance between Earth and Mars! Make sure to account for Jade's rounding in your answer.)

Fun fact: The amount of energy Jade harnesses to accelerate both their bodies would be greater than the energy expended in the Chicxulub impact event by a factor of about 20. Physics!

Alright, here we go: the big kahuna! The swapover to 3rd person. I did this for a few specific reasons: first, I felt like I'd used 2nd-person for the reasons I needed to (exploring the mindsets of the characters, examining their first reactions to each other, and emulating Homestuck's writing style) and second I wanted to be able to make emblematic the disconnection and disorientation Jade is suddenly hitting us with, and her strong reaction to a contentious event. It also works rather well for being able to swap between mindsets of characters without having to end chapters or use section breaks, which was strictly a necessity for portraying Jade's mindset with empathy here. One question I had for myself fairly consistently as I wrote this was, 'would Vriska actually be able to to comfort somebody this effectively, especially given her mindset of just having been chewed out by a lover?' And I think I came down pretty decidedly on the notion that, yeah, actually, she's always been capable of recognizing the desires and emotions of others, even as she usually takes a sociopathic view towards them as 'useful' rather than as 'friends'. So while I definitely think I could've let her voice show

through more strongly in this chapter, I also am of the opinion that this represents a triumph for the version of the character I'm choosing to portray here, namely capable of guilt, remorse, and interpersonal connection.

Chapter 10

Let's be honest: I think, for a number of reasons, that this is a pretty weak chapter. I don't think the physicality and feeling of 'location' are there, I like the setting of a shooting gallery but the action is weak, I think Roxy's a great agent to bounce a lot of these questions off of-- and I'd love to see more interaction between him and Jade as tinkerers, scientists, freewheeling nerds-- but most of his expertise is limited here to classpect speculation and cheerleading what we already know about Jade's personality and relationship, and mostly resolves things that aren't problems.

I also just wanted to give them some space to bullshit and talk about their lives on Earth C as successful escapees of the narrative of Homestuck, and in that regard I think it's a fun chapter as a break from the meta hefting of every chapter but 4 and 5.

And that's not to say there aren't still well-done aspects to this chapter and my Roxy writing! I broke every formatting and grammar rule I could get away with (that doesn't sacrifice legibility for experienced readers) even in the 'traditional fiction' version to interesting effect, I think he's funny and charming and not TOO too wildly off-book, and I generally enjoy their interactions and the tension caused by Jade's attempts at mechanistically understanding a Void player. Maybe I'm just the sort of goof who finds that compelling, but it's my fiction, sooo...

Roxy's underutilized here probably primarily because, let's face it, I'm a Beta kid at heart-- I started reading the comic back in 2010, and never really got over the 'beta kids plus trolls' dynamic. Likewise, since he interacts with Vriska maybe once in the story and only with Jade during Game Over as Grimdark Jade, the chapter was originally slated to revolve more around his unresolved anger towards her as a former agent of the Condesce and the person who hurt his friends, albeit under the influence of mind control, playing off her worst anxieties. Then at some point I realized that putting a chapter like that immediately after her breakdown might just be more fuel for making

her look passive, unmoored, and weak rather than an agent of change and in charge of her own fate and relationship spaces. (haha Witch of Space u get it??) With too much of a drama overload, Jade will eventually explode like a pigeon full of uncooked rice... Maybe it's too low-conflict of me, but I'm trying not to go Jadewhumping here. So instead I let her off the hook for a more lighthearted chapter.

But Roxy is absolutely my favorite Alpha, and I suppose that shows through in the same ways that my irritation with the Epilogues and their contents do. :P So his function here is pretty similar to what Kanaya's was previously-- have some opinions about Vriska and the universe that play off of Jade's nature and needs, let Jade bullshit with somebody who's not her love interest, and generally show off the lovable idiosyncrasies and diverse personalities of more characters as a writing challenge to myself. Jade gets perspective, I get to do some self-indulgent Classpect meta, everybody has a good time.

Chapter 11

I mean... where else would Terezi have gotten the info to make that 'knotting' joke in the epilogues, right? This story's not canon with 'em, but... c'mon.

Also, that grandfatherly troll dairy farmer's name? Ygmund Lorpey. He's the purpleblood equivalent of an octagenarian and he farms Holstein cows with his adored yellow-blooded matesprit Solfej Latido. You're welcome for staving off those sleepless nights.

If you would like to read the omitted sex scene from the middle of this chapter, you can do so here (*A Solstice of Abundance: Opus Canis, Opus Dei*).

By now we've basically entirely done away with the notion we'll find out how Vriska came to Earth C, what happened to the main canon, who ends up 'mattering' or not. Because, frankly? That's my opinion on the matter. It isn't important, I think the ending of Homestuck stands on its own, and I enjoy getting to think about the characters going on to live less-fraught lives and straighten their traumas out in a less-awful world than living in LE's shadow.

Chapter 12

This one took a good bit of hefting, and is still probably a little meta-heavy. Both the Double Slit Experiment and Prisoner's Dilemma conversations were among the first I wrote, around the time I was outlining and plotting chapters 4-7 (which ballooned into 4-9), because I knew they were such central and key metonymy for the struggles of these two as they came to terms with the trauma that is the narrative of Homestuck. Chapter 11 was very heavy on the physical touch elements, the longing gazes and decadent rubs, such that even as I knew I wanted to include more of that easy, long-worked-for intimacy in this chapter, I still wanted its focus to be conversational. After all, that built-up intimacy leads to these great moments of openness and honesty. (Thank goodness they're both such intensely close-relationship-oriented people, right??)

But, hey, if you're looking for more of the shameless shipping content, I'm still working on some Explicit-rated scenes between these two, which'll get posted as I'm happy with 'em, so keep an eye out for those. (Only if you're old enough, ya perverts.)

Anyways, feel free to drop me a line at @headlessjulie on twitter. I love hearing back from people about my writing, positive or negative feedback alike.

Thanks so much for reading!

Appendices

The Thorn In Your Paw:
Poetry Annotation

The Chorus in Prelude

This is each piece of poetry from the Notes of each chapter, with line-by-line annotations by the author. These are merely my own interpretations and opinions about each piece, and should not be considered definitive nor exhaustive understandings of any of them.

Rose's poem is in a rigid iambic tetrameter, with a strict AABB rhyme scheme. She varies neither the structure nor the rhyme at any point, and writes with basically no descriptive flair nor focus on anything but relationships and the mental states of people. Her word choice, as always, is absolutely unnecessarily verbose.

'Was this, by turn, roman à clef?

Roman à clef is a story about real people in pseudonym. Rose is asking if this story is too true to life, or merely a series of clichés.

Whose hands belie this story's weft?

Rose is asking who supports the weft-- the crosslayer of loomed fabric-- by way of holding up the story so that it may strengthen its holder.

Thoughts shattered on this lonesome eve

Though for her mind we are bereaved

Oblique reference to Jade, here-- hinting that Rose is acting in a way that will lead Jade to break her normal routines and think differently.

Were these but echoes from her chest?

But then she doubles back, questioning whether or not she is just picking up on signals Jade left for her.

Like buxom angels smattered lest

As though busty seraphim were scattered by Jade through conversations to get someone to love her.

An idle pinky's hew and cry

'Hue and cry' is "a clamor of alarm or protest", here deliberately misspelled as 'hew', that is, to split or shatter, i.e. to break up Jade's routine or lonesome life. A 'pinky' is a baby rat, another homonym from the pinkie finger of the hand. The reference to a pinky is of herself, however, not to Jade, and she sees herself as both pathetically crying out as well as splitting Jade's life apart, another apparent duality.

Should pin her down as she floats by...

This is a key to Rose's mindset, feeling almost pity and guilt towards Jade as she admits to trying to change her, to plucking her from the sky as she minds her own business with a single finger.

But this sweet girl for emeralds named

This clarifies that this IS a love poem, and it IS for Jade.

Should stay by story undefamed.

Rose hopes to not besmirch Jade's name or personality too much with her meddling, romantic or narrative.

I have rendered here my pawn

Rose laments her role in storytelling that leads Jade to act out of character. Tale as old as time-- fanfic writers can't keep characterization precise to the original for having different ideas. Like Rose being gay for Jade.

Undaunted by my wife anon.'

Rose can't hold back her snark, saying that she's the reason Jade is willing to take bold romantic steps towards her in the first chapter despite knowing Kanaya's protectiveness. Rose is clearly aware on some level that this aspect of Jade's

personality-- a cuddle animal with boundary issues, extraordinarily sweet but very needy of people-- tends to be played up in many of her splinters, including the Epilogues and much fanfiction, and with a Rose this close to the narrative level she admits a willingness to amplify that part of Jade for her own fun. Largely this doesn't end up being the case in the final story, as Rose loses control of the narrative and is set on the back foot for lack of understanding of poly dynamics and Jade herself, and it's fairly quickly proven that Rose painting Jade's nature as predatory is indeliberate, inappropriate, and inaccurate.

I think it's worth noting, here, that Rose is attempting to take credit for far more than she actually manages to influence in this story, and her narrative meddling is minimal and mostly limited to her commentary in the first chapter. Rose is driven by a need for control and not being seen as weak or lacking knowledge, so acting as an object of desire can be difficult for her, made worse by the fact that Kanaya is not the primary actor in said attraction. Characterization through poetry!

Lipstick Poem & Chainsaw Poem

Each of Kanaya's poems masquerades as being about the 'opposing' object in the Chainsaw/Lipstick duality, both through word choice and imagistic evocation. *Lipstick Poem* is written in free verse with no rhyme scheme, and I wanted it to exemplify Kanaya's role as gracious fashionista, brilliant feeler of feelings, and passionate woman, all of which are necessary aspects of her personality exemplified in chapter 2.

'These Chainsaw Filaments

Both poems start with the literal use of the other object's word, but should immediately tweak the reader that the descriptions don't follow those typical for a chainsaw-- no belch of smoke, no talk of teeth, and where function is concerned the duality between body and intention is heavily blurred.

Dance In My Dreams

Gorgeous grace, visions, sight. Kanaya sees in all things an elegance not embodied by the use of her favored weapon/tool, but rather bespoke subjects taking actions and existing beautifully.

The Cogwise Razor's Edge Of

Cogwise, here, is perhaps my least favorite word of the piece, given how strongly it evokes Dave and how little it carries in terms of imagery outside the mechanistic version of a chainsaw's motion. Lipstick, however, is frequently driven up by actuating a base to force the pigment out of a tube, so I still enjoy the image. Doubly so for lipstick's role in Homestuck as a precursor to destruction, a line drawn to know where to cut.

Utter Sanguine

Lipstick exists only ('utterly') as an object of self-expression and self-coloration, both of passions and literal troll blood colors (both of which described here with the word 'sanguine').

Potentiality.'

I chose this word primarily because it embodies wordiness, and it's a punchy, five-syllable word where 'potential' would simply not have had enough impact. It gets its own line simply to scream that Kanaya dreams of expressing herself through beauty, artwork, the pursuit of beautiful things, and fulfilling her purpose through graceful action.

Chainsaw Poem is in false trochaic tetrameter, morphing almost immediately into the same iambic tetrameter used by Rose. Kanaya is her own woman, but isn't afraid to follow her wife's lead. She varies the rhyme scheme as needed, as well, playing with format and form much moreso than Rose did before her. Kanaya fears nothing.

Unlike with *Lipstick Poem*, we see demonstrated here Kanaya's wrath, anger, barely-stayed hand, and her own confusion at her ability to forgive, something not engendered in her by troll culture.

'Segment Burns Of Lipstick Tears

This line invites us to imagine a victim already coated in dotted lines of lipstick, weeping as they acknowledge their impending demise. 'Tears' describes both the objectified being's cries as well as the marking left by lipstick. It is easy to misread the last word as 'tear', as in 'to tear a piece of paper' or 'torn apart', but the next line tells us that this was merely a false garden path with its imposed rhyme. Kanaya sets the rules.

From Whose Containment Burst My Years

Kanaya here sets us straight on tears/years, which I anticipate makes most people confused and immediately reread the prior line and adapt to the structure imposed by

this one. Kanaya's discipline is straightforward that way, and she enjoys forcing people to realize things not with her actions but the implications of her words. 'Containment' here can mean her contained wrath, or the literal tube from which lipstick emerges.

What Languor Weeping Stays My Arms

Kanaya is moved by the plight of her would-be victim, unable to move for their terror at her presence. She does not understand why she takes on this compassion, even as it stops her from executing them.

And Saves Those Fiends From Coming Harm'

While she doesn't convey forgiveness (still referring to her targets as 'fiends'), Kanaya here at least acknowledges her need for reflection and compassion ahead of brutal violence. A terminating question mark is omitted so that there's no question: while Kanaya doesn't know WHY, she's doubtlessly sparing the target's life. This is an important forecasting of the tone she takes through the chapter, of her attempts to understand Rose being stymied by Rose's guilt and fear of Kanaya's unhappiness or disappointment with her (though emphatically she does NOT fear violence at Kanaya's hand).

Stalk!

Stalk! is written entirely in free verse, playing with the notions of Jade as predatory (a conceit I *hate* and will be entertaining only insofar as it can be absolutely and utterly refuted and destroyed), animalistic, natural, and experiential. This is played up for several reasons: first, Rose asked Jade to write poetry that was all of these things, and second, Jade loves to conform to the requests of others and mould herself to their needs. In this case the poetry she writes is the body she changes to inhabit the images others have for her, but still focuses on her first-person experiences and feelings.

'Stalk, stalk!

Through reedstalks I creep, deathstalk in repose

The repetition of R and S sounds remind the reader of low-crouched, stealthy predators, prepared to strike, with the titular word 'stalk' serving both to describe plants and the action of a hunter's pursuit.

And for equal measures of bloodlust I have reigned

This line almost fits a traditional rhyme scheme, putting the reader into almost the same trance as traditional poetry, letting you sway with its even rhythm...

For without my sweet prey's remittance

...and into the lull of a line with few punchy, stressed syllables...

My body will stay lean and boned and sinewy.

...before using rapid stressed words to describe the consequence of failure and create a sense of urgency.

Deerstalk among drake weed and through thrush rushes and cattails at water's edge by midnight.

But a hunt is long, and requires constant attention and focus to not spook prey, so we return to the notion of nature and the image of a midnight pool rather than concern for our wellbeing should we fail. Jade is a master of controlling her emotions to get

done what needs to be done, even at the expense of her mental health. She self-soothes throughout the poem with her use of 'hush' sounds, the soft hiss of 'thrush rushes' and repetition.

Stalk.'