

Baker Baker

By aeris7dragon

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This got good reception on deviantART

(<http://aeris7dragon.deviantart.com/art/Baker-Baker-Chapter-1-274842648>) and Archive of Our Own (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/296942>), so I figured I'd post it up here, too.

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1 - Chapter 1

**baker baker
baking a cake
make me a day, make me whole again
and i wonder, what's in a day?
what's in your cake this time?**

My eyes would have widened in disbelief had I not seen this coming from a mile away. Sollux and his new girl were holding hands as his lips moved, the words mutilated by his speech impediment as he told me what I'd been expecting him to tell me for the past month. The usual "it's not you, it's me" bullshit that no one ever believes.

"Are you done talking?" I said, interrupting in a voice so emotionless it almost scared me.

"Karkat, I'm - "

"Because if you are, I need to go pack my shoot."

His eyes, those two-colored eyes that had first attracted me all those months ago, averted from mine, but not before I saw the guilt deep within them.

And it almost surprised me how little I cared.

Almost.

)O(

I glared at the lit sign through the clouds of breath that exited my nostrils. Perfect, I thought as I read the lettering. A place to get warm and maybe get something to eat. The words "Buns and Brews" showed blue against the bright yellow of the coffee shop's sign. I lugged the single suitcase with all my things stuffed inside it behind me as I reached for the handle and hoped it wasn't -

It was locked.

I left my hand where it was on the door handle, sighing deeply, and rested my head dismally against the glass, which was slightly warmed with the heating inside. This was bullshit. My now-ex boyfriend had kicked me out without a job, without anywhere to go except this tiny shop, and it was closed; my thin jacket barely kept out the bitter cold of mid-December, and my stomach rubbed up against my pancreas painfully. It was going to be a long night, and I didn't even want to think about the next day.

I saw something move through my half-closed eyes. Looking up, I glared half-heartedly through the glass at the guy inside.

He was around my age, with buck teeth, raven hair, and thick, square glasses.

He grinned broadly and gestured for me to move away from the door; when I complied, he held the door open instead of brushing past me on his way home from work.

"Sorry!" he said apologetically. "I shouldn't have closed up so early, but it was a slow day, and - well, just come in!" His tenor voice had the tone of naivety embedded in it that I wished I still had.

I rolled my luggage over the metal strip where the door had been and stepped into the small shop. The smell of roasted coffee beans, chocolate, and fresh-baked biscotti hit my nose so temptingly I nearly dropped the suitcase. A row of Torani syrup bottles stood on the counter by the register, burlap sacks that had once contained coffee beans from places like Hawaii hung from the ceiling, and chalkboards displaying the shop's specialty drinks and their prices hung on the walls. I'd never been in this shop; merely glanced in the windows when I passed it by. Now I wondered in the back of my mind what else I'd been missing.

The cashier that had let me in all but skipped past me on his way back behind the counter to go back to what he was doing before I'd shown up. Dragging my suitcase around to slide it beneath one of the wooden tables, I took my wallet from my back pocket to double-check its contents. Five bucks. Well, it would get me a coffee and some hard-baked confectionery. Not enough, but it'd have to do until I could go job hunting.

Just then, my stomach grumbled audibly, and the cashier guy looked up from the dough he was kneading. He giggled. "Hungry, eh?"

"Yeah," I said, slightly embarrassed that I'd made such a loud noise, and walked to the counter. He pulled his hands free of the dough and washed them off, turning back to me.

"What can I get you?" he asked, that childish smile back in place.

"Can I get a sixteen-ounce Rocky Road and one of those chocolate biscotti?"

"Oh, come on, you're hungrier than that. What else do you want?" His eyes became sly behind those thick glasses.

"I only have five dollars."

"And it's near closing time. I don't want all the food I made today to go to waste."

"Er..." I faltered. I couldn't come up with a legitimate argument, mainly because I was too hungry to pass up free food. "Okay. Just some kind of sandwich or something."

He giggled again. "That'll work. And what name should I put on your order?"

"I'm the only one here."

"Doesn't mean I can't get your name." His expression was sly again. Maybe even flirty. I was too tired to care at the moment.

How does he do that? I thought, again rendered without an excuse. "I'm Karkat."

"Great!" He wrote my order down on a scrap piece of receipt paper. I'll have that out in a bit. Thanks, Karkat!"

"...Thanks," I said, a little too late as he disappeared into the back room.

When he brought out a tray a few minutes later, I was sitting down at the table, glaring out the window. It was snowing outside. frackin' fantastic.

"Hey, Karkat! I have your order," he said, setting it down in front of me. Besides the things I'd actually ordered, the sandwich having turned out to be grilled cheese, there was an extra biscotti and a good-sized bowl of steaming tomato soup. I looked up at him suspiciously.

"What? I'm not charging you extra. You just sou - er, seemed really hungry." His ever-present grin widened.

Did he really have to be so nice?

"My name's John, by the way."

Why?

"Well, eat up. I gotta get back to work."

Why did it always turn out this way?

Why did anyone ever think I was worth the trouble?

Well, never mind. They always found out in the end that I was never worth it.

I was glad this John guy had his back turned, as two drops fell into the bowl of red liquid through my clouded eyes.

2 - Chapter 2

**i guess you heard he's gone to l.a.
he says that behind my eyes i'm hiding
and he tells me i pushed him away
that my heart's been hard to find**

It was summer when I met him. A clear summer night, to be exact. I preferred nighttime, when there weren't many people around. I liked to walk to the park behind the nearby library, just to lie in the grass and look up at the moon and stars through the dark green leaves of the shadowy trees that cluttered the wide, well-kept lawn.

I was happier then, I think.

It was pretty much a night like any other. I walked to the park that night, intending, like always, to relax beneath the trees and think of nothing. On one of the five or so benches, though, was a figure, hunched over. At first I thought nothing of it; there were sometimes people here enjoying the night breeze and virtual lack of life, like I did. But as I got closer, the sounds of sniffing somehow persuaded me not to walk past. Surprising, since I usually didn't care.

I sat beside him on the bench, turning slightly so I was somewhat facing him. He gave no indication that he'd heard me, so I spoke.

"Hey idiot," I said softly. "Who said you could be so fucking adorable when I'm trying to stay single?"

He looked up at me, startled, and I suddenly realized how accurate my retarded, half-sarcastic pick-up line was.

One of his eyes was a different color than the other. Talk about a double take.

"Nice pick-up line, jackass," he replied when he'd recovered, and that lisp was all it took for me to realize I wanted him.

But what he wanted - or needed - at the moment was a friend. And I was all too willing to oblige.

I ended up walking Sollux to his apartment an hour later, after he told me what was wrong. He'd found out his partner of five years wasn't exactly faithful, and was uncomfortable about being in their apartment alone, even though the other was gone. So I stayed with him, only leaving when the moon had fallen beyond the horizon and the sky was turning a lighter blue-green.

Before I'd stepped past the first cement stair outside the door, though, he grabbed my hand, effectively turning me around, and pressed his lips softly against mine.

Only about a week later, my parents found out I didn't swing for the straight team, and kicked me out

with that same suitcase full of my shoot. When Sollux saw that I was dragging it behind me on our nightly visit in the park, he demanded to know what had happened. That led to him practically forcing me to move in with him.

Things progressed from there - and then declined.

Before long, I noticed his mood changed drastically over the smallest things, usually for the worse. It was all right at first, but then we got into the biggest arguments over the most idiotic things. He'd find scraps of food in the sink I'd forgotten to clean away, or I'd come home a few minutes later than I told him I would. Which, I know doesn't sound like much; after a few months, though, it wore me down nearly to the breaking point.

Finally, after Thanksgiving, when he'd gone to a family party the day after Black Friday that I wasn't able to go to, I noticed a change. He was happier. But the happiness was neither caused by, nor directed toward, me.

Without my understanding why, it was making me miserable. And he never noticed.

)O(

"I'm moving."

My eyes were more focused on the woman whose hand was clasped in Sollux's. My mind was more focused on the statement preceding these two seemingly harmless words, but I still heard him.

Without waiting for a reply, he continued. "I got a referral to a school in California. And I have family there I can stay with. I can't stay here anymore, Karkat." The last sentence was spoken in a tone used for pleading.

I remained silent. What should I have done? Gone on a profanity-laced rant about how he should stay rather than take the opportunity to do something with his life?

How he should stay with me instead of the one he was obviously more happy with?

"Are you done talking?"

I'd learned long ago that my life is not a romcom.

)O(

"Hey, are you okay?"

I was still glaring dismally through wet eyes at the bowl of soup in front of me, still hungry but without the heart to pick up the spoon. I looked up at John, who was standing beside my table with a tray of his own. He set it down on the other side of the table, but made no move to pick up his own spoon as he sat down. Instead, he placed his elbows on the table and rested his chin on laced-together hands.

"Tell me what's wrong," he said kindly, his former grin now a small, warm smile.

I dropped my eyes. "Why the frack would I want to tell you that?"

"Because you need someone to talk to," he said, overlooking my barely-concealed sailor's tongue. "And I'm more than willing to listen. You can tell me."

The sharp retort I'd been intending to shoot back turned into a mere sob, as I realized that I was in the same place Sollux was only half a year before me. After a few minutes, wherein I recounted everything that had gone wrong in my life, I realized John was now in the chair beside me, both of our meals left to cool, rubbing my back softly as I tried unsuccessfully to calm down.

"Don't try to hide," he said quietly. "It hurts a lot more in the long run if you bottle it up."

It wasn't exactly the best first impression in the history of mankind, but he didn't seem to mind.

3 - Chapter 3

here
there must be something here
there must be something here
here

The next day was, as I had predicted, terrible. Not as terrible as I'd expected, but it wasn't the best day I'd ever had, either.

I'd found myself waking up warm and comfortable on John's overstuffed couch, which was pretty much the only highlight of the day.

The thing was, I woke up to a bespectacled, bug-eyed girl grinning in my face.

"Oh, you're awake!" she exclaimed excitedly. "Good morning, Karkat!"

"Get out of my face," I muttered.

John's roommate, who had been introduced to me the previous night as Jade, pulled a childish, pouting face. "Well, that's not nice. And here I was just going to tell you that breakfast was ready."

I heard John laugh from another room. "It's okay, Jade, he is probably just really crabby in the morning!"

In the brief moment of silence that followed John's rather accurate statement, I heard the sizzle of grease on a skillet. As I sat up, Jade grabbed my wrist and dragged me off the couch, obviously done with her mini-pity-fest. I resisted the urge to yell, "Let go, you crazy witch!" as she tugged me toward the kitchen, where a steaming plate of bacon and eggs awaited me. I nearly drooled, but caught myself in time as John handed the plate to me.

"Are you ready to go?" John asked a few minutes later. Jade had left after forcing me out of bed, on her way to wherever she worked.

I looked up at him from what remained of my breakfast, my face blank. "Go where?"

He giggled yet again. "Work," he replied simply. "We could use an extra hand, and you could use the extra money. Don't worry about it," he added, as I opened my mouth to speak. "I already called my manager. She's okay with it."

I gaped. Free food, a place to stay, and now he was giving me a job, too? This guy was way too nice. I didn't complain, though; at least I'd be able to pay off what I felt I owed him.

"Sure," I replied. "Let me get my shoes on."

John and Jade's apartment was about two blocks from the coffee shop, the same distance as from Sollux's but in the opposite direction, so we walked. He was talking animatedly about nothing in particular, way too childish for his age, and I mainly tuned him out.

I did notice the concerned glances he shot at me every now and then, though.

"Oh, did you see the news today?" he was saying now. "That car accident on the southbound freeway? Like, five people di - "

"No, I didn't," I interrupted. "I was too busy choking down your burnt bacon."

He laughed. "Oh, come on! That bacon was cooked to perfection, you know nothing of good food!"

"Yeah, if by 'perfection' you mean 'flambe'."

His laughter increased in decibal, and even I couldn't help but crack a small smile in spite of myself.

)O(

"Okay, so that's a twenty-four-ounce triple white mocha, and a twelve-ounce hot chocolate?" I said, writing down the order with one hand and reaching for the paper cups with the other.

"Yes, with extra milk, please," the girl said. "Is that okay, Equius?"

"You know I have absolutely no aversion to you ordering extra milk. Of course it's okay."

I handed the two their respective beverages and thanked them when they handed me their money, and when I had turned around from putting it in the cash register, they were gone, with a couple of extra bills in the tip jar. I sighed.

Working at a coffee shop was a little harder than I would have expected, but it wasn't intolerable. John's manager was a...little strange. She obsessed over the color red and kept picking at the dough whenever the other guy that worked there was making biscotti. I mean, that chick had one hell of a nose; she'd smell the almond extract before Gamzee even put it in the mixing bowl.

And Gamzee was another story entirely. He seemed doped up out of his mind; with a consistent inability to put a curb on his profanities, Terezi had obviously had to keep him busy in the back room, and had someone keep an eye on him constantly to make sure he never put anything into the dough that didn't belong there. Since I was the new guy, she had me do that job more often than John.

Now, however, Gamzee and Terezi were both gone; Gamzee pushing his friend's wheelchair out the door John was holding for them, and Terezi having shouted something about Christmas shopping on her way out the door. Which left John and me with a bit of peace and quiet. I stepped around the counter and walked back to one of the tables, where John was waiting with his index finger poised on top of his king-side rook and a sly smile on his face.

"Your move, rookie," he said, and I facepalmed after that lame pun.

"Rookie'? Really?" I said with a sigh, then slightly changed the subject. "I thought it was your turn?"

"I moved while you were taking that order," he replied. "No use in letting an opportunity like that go to waste."

"So that's why you told me to take their order."

His smile grew. "Your turn," he repeated.

I looked down at the chessboard. He'd checked me; his rook was two spaces away from my king, and there was no move I could make that could take him out. "I give."

"You're terrible at chess, Karkat."

"I know. Don't rub it in."

He giggled. "So, that's...ten to none?"

"Twelve. Twelve to none." I sighed again. "I'm sick of this game."

"Well, anyone would be if they'd lost so many. I'll put this away, then."

He put the board and the pieces back in their box and took it back to its shelf behind the counter, and I sat at the table, looking down at the grain of the wood before putting my hands over it.

"You're doing it again."

I looked up at John, who'd just spoken, and his eyes had that concerned look again. "What are you talking about?" I muttered.

"Feeling sorry for yourself," he answered. He sat back down across from me, and through those thick glasses his eyes fixed pointedly on me. "You need to stop doing that, Karkat."

"I'll stop when I feel like it."

"That is the point! You'll never feel like it if you don't stop!" He was glaring at me now, and the expression was so alien on his face that it almost made me laugh. "Look, I understand how you feel, and I know you can't get over it in a day, but if you don't try you never will. If you keep waiting for him to come back, if you keep looking for something that is not there, you will never get over it."

You don't understand, I thought. You think you do, but you really don't.

Only one person does, and she's with him right now.

The bell at the front and the rush of frigid air informed us that someone had entered the shop, and John gave me one more glance before going to the counter to greet the new customers. I remained at the

table, staring into the space that unintentionally included what was outside the window.

I noticed the two cars through the light snowfall, and realized after a moment that they were headed right for each other before the drivers of either vehicle did; fortunately, one of them did notice, and swerved out of the way before it was too late. That car skidded for a moment on the ice, but half a second later both cars were on the right sides of the road and neither were in danger of crashing within my line of sight.

I eventually realized that my eyes were wide, my mouth slightly open, and my fingers gripping the side of the table so hard I almost felt splinters enter my skin. I blinked and my mouth came closed, but I couldn't relax enough to release my grip on the wood.

"Are you all right?" A voice came from nearby. "You look like you've seen the ghost of something not very nice."

I took two deep breaths before I looked back up at John, but I could feel my eyes were still slightly wider than usual. "I'm fine."

He gave me a disbelieving look, then sighed and went back to the counter. The most recent customers were sitting at the table across the room; two women, one with blonde hair, the other with a single green highlight in the midst of dark black hair, were sitting across from each other. The blonde laughed at something the other said, and then looked at her with a tenderness I hadn't seen in weeks.

I closed my eyes and tried to calm myself down.

)O(

"Look, Karkat, you don't have to work there if you don't want to. I am sorry for pushing it on you, but - "

"It's not that I don't want to work there. It's that I don't want to have to watch that clown all day again," I retorted, a little snappier than I'd intended.

It was a few days later. John and I were walking back from Buns and Brews, the night air freezing but not unbearable. I'd still had to borrow a jacket from John; the light jacket I usually wore was wearing thin. His glasses glinted in the light of a street lamp as he looked at me again. Those looks were becoming less frequent, but not by much.

"You know, you can tell me to take over whenever Gamzee gets to be too much. We don't have to take it in consistent shifts."

I sighed, watching the vapor of my breath dissolve into nothing. "I know."

"Then what's wrong with it?"

"Why doesn't Terezi fire that lout already?" I said at an even higher volume than before. "All he does is bake biscotti and muffins, and terribly. Yours is way better, and you've said yourself that you hate baking!"

"I don't hate it. I just said that to Jade to get her to stop making me do all the cooking when her friends come over. You know that."

"Whatever. All the more reason to fire him and have you take over the baking shoot."

"You're not actually upset over Gamzee."

I closed my mouth, startled by the sudden statement. "What? Of course I am," I said when I'd regained some composure.

"Yes, but that's not the reason you're upset all the time, is it?" he asked.

I stopped. John took a couple of steps before he noticed I'd fallen behind, and turned to face me, eyes questioning.

"I don't know what to do," I murmured.

John took another step toward me. "Did you say something?" he asked. Then watched, confused, as I fell to my knees and started weeping brokenly. I folded in on myself, not feeling the cold, not feeling anything.

"I don't know what to do!" I repeated, louder, more pleading. I hated this. I hated my life, myself, everything.

I hated constantly searching every face that entered the coffee shop, in hopes that it had all been a dream and I could wake up.

I hated waking up and looking for someone there, only to find no one, the only warmth under the blankets mine, the only thought in my head being how I screwed up so badly.

I hated the way John's arms wrapped around me; I hated how I had to be comforted constantly by the only one who listened.

And I hated how unfaithful I now felt as I cried against his shoulder; knowing that what I still felt for Sollux, I somehow also felt for John. Somehow, in the few days since I'd met him, I'd started to have the feelings for him I felt I should have never had again.

"Sh," I heard him say as he tightened his arms around me slightly. "Sh, it's okay, Karkat. You'll be all right."

The only reply I could muster was another sob, and I felt as he gently coaxed me back to my feet and toward the apartment, half a block away. But I didn't open my eyes. I was too scared to see the expression on his face.

I only opened them when he'd left me on the couch, wrapped in blankets, to go to the kitchen. Jade wasn't there; it was the weekend, and she was at a friend's Christmas party. John and I would have

gone if he hadn't insisted on staying until closing every day. Before long, he came back with two steaming mugs in his hands, and passed one to me, which I took gratefully. Most of the tears were gone now, and I wiped the rest away, staring into my cup of hot chocolate before I took a careful sip of it. I set it down on a coaster on the coffee table.

He popped a movie into the DVD player, then sat beside me on the couch, somehow knowing that I wouldn't talk about it until I was ready, and waiting patiently until then. His arm was around my shoulders, and I settled against him as the movie commercials he insisted on not skipping through started playing.

I never found out what movie he'd put in, as I fell asleep before the title screen came on.

4 - Chapter 4

***baker baker, can you explain
if truly his heart was made of icing
and i wonder how mine could taste
maybe we could change his mind***

I woke up with someone else's scent in my nostrils, stronger than the blankets' smell, and opened my eyes to find myself in somewhat the same position I'd fallen asleep in; John's arm was still around my shoulders and my head against his chest. The TV screen was running through the title menu of Fifty First Dates. I was mildly surprised; hadn't John said he preferred action flicks? I looked up at his face. That same childish smile was still plastered on it, even in sleep, and he must have fallen asleep watching the movie, because his thick glasses were still perched on the bridge of his nose.

I closed my eyes and shifted a bit closer to him, and felt his heartbeat against my ear. The steady thrumming lulled me back to sleep in a matter of moments.

)O(

"Karkat, wake up." John's gentle voice sounded close to my ear as his hand shook me to wakefulness. "I need you to get off me so I can make breakfast, okay?"

I drowsily complied, lifting my head from his chest long enough for him to get up, then plopped back onto the cushions, still unwilling to get up. He chuckled, and I felt the covers being pulled over me, past my shoulders.

A couple of minutes later, I heard sizzling coming from the kitchen, and the smell that wafted into my nose finally grew too tempting to resist. I rolled off the couch, taking a blanket with me to cover my head like a cloak, and trudged into the kitchen.

When John turned and saw me, he laughed. "Oh, Karkat, you are just adorable!" Then he stopped, his eyes widened a little, and he turned red, taking his position back in front of the stove as I sat at the table. I was too tired to have comprehended what he'd said.

At least, for a moment.

"Wait, what?" I said, confused. "'Adorable'? What are you on?"

"Did I say something? I don't think I said anything." He flipped a piece of french toast and turned on the small T.V. on the counter. I smiled thinly, knowing he was dodging the question but not in a mood to care, and rested my chin on the table, closing my eyes.

Only to have them fly open again as I heard what was on television.

"...and we've finally been given permission to disclose the names of two of the victims of the car crash that happened on I-15 more than a week ago. Jake?"

"Thank you, Feferi. Four people died on December 6th after a drunk driver ran them down on the southbound interstate. A couple on a road trip, Sollux Captor and Aradia Megido, were on their way to southern California when the highly intoxicated driver of a large SUV, with three passengers, took the exit and began driving as if he was on the northbound freeway, and - "

John switched off the television, having noticed my expression, and turned the dial on the stove to "off", disregarding the food still in the frying pan. He sat at the small table across from me, and smoothed my hair back from my forehead gently.

He didn't say anything, but I could see in his eyes he now knew what was going on.

I said nothing as well. What was there to say? I'd pretty much exploded in on myself last night already. There were still tears to cry - even as we sat there, his hand still on my head, I felt my face begin to dampen in thin lines down my cheek. His hand went to those lines, wiping them away with a thumb. He got up, only to walk around to my side of the table and pull me into his arms.

"So that's what it was. Man, do I feel like an idiot. I thought he was just an asshole who kicked you out on the street; and so close to Christmas, too."

"He never kicked me out," I whispered. "Yeah, he did dump me for that Megido girl, but that doesn't mean he forgot about me. He'd left me with four months left on the contract that he'd paid all the rent for, to give me time to find a job so I could pay for it. I did want to leave at first until he explained that to me. But, after I'd heard, I..I just couldn't stay there any longer. Not a single fucking minute. He was still there, somehow. And it hurt to stay."

"I know," John said. "I was almost the same way when Nanna died. I know how it feels, Karkat." His arms tightened around me again. "Was there a funeral?"

"It's on the twentieth. Next Tuesday. But...I don't know if I can go. I don't know if I want to go. I would have asked you, but...I didn't want anyone worrying about me." I closed my eyes and rested my head against his chest, bringing my own arms up to grip the back of his shirt.

"You wouldn't have had to ask me," he replied. "I'll let Terezi know we can't work that day."

"But...won't she be upset? This close to Christmas, it'll probably be busy as hell."

"This is one of those things where she won't have the right to be upset."

"Yeah, but.." I drifted off, unable to come up with an adequate response.

"Shush," he said, patting my head, then let his arms loosen a bit. "Sit back down while I finish breakfast, okay?"

I nodded and did as I was bid, too drained emotionally to do anything else. He hesitated for a moment,

and a couple of expressions fought for dominance of his face before he strode over to the stove and turned it back on.

)O(

Church music was playing on the piano when John, Jade, and I filed into the room, and I almost turned back. There were a lot of people here, and I didn't know a single one of them, which made me almost more nervous than I was miserable.

Almost.

"It'll be okay, Karkat," I heard him say over the hum of everyone else in the moderately-sized chapel. I walked closer to him as we made our way to the pews.

We sat in the back right, close to the wall, as the babbling masses began to settle into their own seats. John had a paper with a summary of the proceedings, and on it was a picture of Sollux and Aradia at what looked to be the Thanksgiving party they'd met at. I closed my eyes and leaned back. I felt Jade on my left and John on my right, both angled toward me and each with an arm around my shoulders.

I can handle this, I told myself. I have two friends with me that want to help me through this. I can get through this.

I didn't completely believe that, though. I ended up in tears halfway through the song that preceded the prayer. I felt John's hand on my back, rubbing gently in small circles, and chose to concentrate on that.

Jade drove the small, rarely-used sedan to the cemetery where the interment was; and she seemed like a chauffeur, since John sat with me in the back seat. He had his hand on my shoulder, for which I was grateful; I needed the contact. Because whenever his hand wasn't there, even if I knew he was right beside me, I felt alone.

)O(

It was after dark. I'd insisted on staying after everyone else had gone, as I watched the coffins being lowered into the earth. Jade had gone, too; while not within walking distance of the church the funeral was held at, the cemetery was within walking distance of their apartment, so we'd parked there and walked over. But John stayed with me, even after they'd all left and the sun had slipped beyond the slowly dimming horizon.

I sat before the recently shifted lawn sod, and if the tombstones had been put in I would have stared at it, not reading the words but studying how they were engraved. As it was, I examined the blades of grass that hadn't been covered by snow in the few hours since it had been placed carefully back on the ground.

I felt John move; he was standing beside me, and I could tell, despite his valiant efforts to stay with me, that he wanted to go home. I didn't blame him; most people would find a graveyard at night to be creepy under the most normal circumstances.

I didn't. I found it comforting. I didn't even feel the cold.

"You don't have to be here, you know. You can go home. I'll catch up."

"I'm not going to leave you here, Karkat," he replied softly.

I was quiet again, for a long time. He was the next one to break the silence.

"It's getting cold. We should probably go."

I didn't reply at first, and he crouched beside me.

"I loved him."

And his hand was on my shoulder again, rubbing lightly. "I know."

"'Loved'. Past tense." I looked up slightly, meeting his mildly confused gaze. "Well...I guess I still kind of do. But he'd want me to move on. And he did want me to. That's why he was moving, because he didn't want to hurt me; if he'd stayed, I would have had to deal with being a third wheel constantly, and he didn't want that for me."

He was silent. For a moment, nothing happened, and I wondered if he was going to call me out for not believing in my own statement, which I half didn't. But then he embraced me, both arms around my shoulders as I buried my face into his chest, and I felt his warm breath ruffling the top of my hair.

"Come on, let's get home. I'll make some minestrone, and we can watch a movie. Sound good to you?"

Because I couldn't talk through the face full of his shirt, I nodded, and he brought me back to my feet. I stumbled against him, and he supported me. "Are you okay?"

I tried to nod again, but my head swam, and for a moment the world spun around in a kaleidoscope of dark colors and the white of the snow. I felt hot, and clung to the only thing that was keeping me on my feet, which was John. I felt his hand on my forehead.

"Oh, shoot, I should have gotten you home way earlier!" I heard him exclaim from what seemed like an ocean away.

And then I heard nothing, and felt nothing but heat and darkness.

5 - Chapter 5

***i know you're late for your next parade
you came to make sure that i'm not running
well, i ran from him in all kinds of ways
guess it was his turn this time***

The next day and a half passed in a blur of feverish nightmares and waking delirium. I know I called for Sollux a few times, but after the first few hours the only name on my lips was John's.

"How is he doing?" I heard someone ask nearby.

"Not so well. His fever's gotten so bad, I think we should take him to a hospital."

"It will be fine. We know what we're doing, don't we?"

"Yeah, but - "

"John," I called weakly, not noticing that I'd interrupted. There was a rustling of blankets and I felt cool fingers on my cheek.

"I'm here," the first voice said softly. "I'm here, Karkat." I turned my head toward the voice, toward the hand, and fell back asleep. That was the only time I recollected waking up when I recovered.

When I woke on the second day, I felt warm. The afternoon sunlight was streaming brightly through the blinds and casting shadows on the wall in the shape of the house plants set there. I was wrapped in what felt like fifty blankets, but it was comfortable. I turned on my side and noticed John there, his hand still on my cheek, glasses still on his face. I felt bad; this was the second time he'd stayed up with me. I still felt feverish, but it was slowly dissipating, and I reached up to grip his hand, closing my eyes again.

I didn't fall asleep, though, because a moment later I felt the mattress shift and John's hand slipped from under mine. I cracked my eyes open again to see him smiling anxiously down at me.

"How are you feeling?" he asked gently when he saw my eyes open.

"Better," I answered. He felt my forehead and the worried crease in his forehead smoothed a bit.

"That's good. Your temperature's better than it was, too. Do you think you can get up?"

"I don't particularly want to. You put me in your bed?"

"We figured it would be more comfy than the couch. Plus, I kind of didn't want to leave you," he added, a slight pink tinge coming to his face.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

He lowered himself back onto the bed, pulling me close to him, and I relaxed against him. “You're welcome.”

We laid there for a bit, me listening to his steady breath and heartbeat, and I think I fell asleep again, but when I woke up he was still there. Holding me. I felt disgusting and sick and still really tired, but he didn't mind at all.

He was just there for me.

And it scared me how much better he was at this than Sollux was. I don't know how, but it scared me.

)O(

The next morning, John had to go to work. He'd taken the past two days off to take care of me, plus the day before for the funeral, and since I was feeling well enough to take care of myself he didn't have an excuse to put it off any longer. After all, this was the last full business day before Christmas, considering the next day was Christmas Eve.

I was waiting for him to leave.

I couldn't make him do this anymore. He'd taken me in, fed me, gave me a job, and even took time out of his work schedule at the busiest time of the year just to take care of my fever, as well as given his own bed to me. I couldn't be a burden on him anymore. I wouldn't.

As soon as he left, I had the few things I'd unpacked in the last week and a half back in the suitcase where they belonged, and wheeled it out the front door. I didn't know what I was going to do, but I knew I could figure it out on the way.

“Hey,” said a smooth voice as I made my way out the door. I turned around to see a man there, with sunglasses perched on the bridge of his nose and hands casually delved into the pockets of his skinny jeans. It was Dave, Terezi's boyfriend. I'd seen him a few times before at the coffee shop.

“Where do you think you're going? I was under the assumption that you were too sick to go anywhere,” he said in an even tone. “John asks me to check up on you, and here I am, expecting a bedridden little boy with one of those really big thermometers in his mouth and a hot water bottle on his head. And all I got's some kid with a freakin' hoodie on like it's late September wheeling a suitcase out behind him. That don't add up.”

“Mind your own business,” I said, turning to go again, but suddenly he was in front of me, that same deadpan look on his face.

“And if I do, what do I tell poor John? That his cute little boyfriend's dumped him in favor of the parking lot at the grocery store? Nah, man, that ain't cool.”

My cheeks were on fire when the word “boyfriend” registered in my mind. “I'm not going to the fracking

grocery store!" I said vehemently.

"Then where are you going?"

I faltered. "...I don't know."

"Then come with me," he said. "I'd like a talk with you. But put that suitcase back in the apartment."

I glared suspiciously at him, but it fell flat. Those sunglasses were a little unnerving. "Fine," I answered, and did what he told me.

)O(

We ended up going to the park behind the library, where I'd met Sollux, and I didn't exactly want to be there. But I followed the guy without complaint, mainly because I was wearing his jacket.

I didn't want it, and I'd made that perfectly clear. But he insisted, saying, "What kind of friend would I be if I let you walk around with a holey sweater?"

"I didn't know you were my friend."

"By 'what kind of friend', I meant to John."

"Oh."

Luckily, we didn't sit at the bench that Sollux had. Instead, we sat at one of those picnic tables. This one stood at the edge of the lawn ringed with trees. He sat across from me.

"Now that we're alone," he began, "why don't you tell me how you feel."

"...Are you propositioning me?" I said warily.

"About John, man. I'm in a perfectly monogamous relationship."

I glared at him, but there was a small heat rising in my face that didn't have anything to do with a fever. However, I chose to blame it on that instead of admitting the alternative.

"How is that any of your business?" I demanded.

"Just doing a favor for a bro, bro," he answered. "See, John's been a bit... I guess, different, lately, and I'm guessing it's the cute little boy-toy that happened to move into his shooty apartment around the same time. And judging from your face, the feeling's not unrequited."

I said nothing, though my face was still hot. What was with all these guys and being so god-damned perceptive?

A tiny smirk played around the edges of his poker face. "Thought so."

“It's a long story,” I muttered, avoiding his shaded gaze.

“Don't worry, man. I got all the time in the world.”