

Midgarstuck

By aeris7dragon

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In which the Homestuck characters are descendents of the Final Fantasy 7 heroes.

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0 - Prologue

Two adolescents, both with buck teeth and black hair, lay in the grass with their bright, bespectacled eyes scouring the night sky, waiting for the predicted meteor shower. The boy pointed up as he saw a star move, and the girl clapped her hands excitedly, reaching to scratch beneath the jaw of the fluffy, white dog beside her.

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A young woman and her younger sister, both with platinum blonde hair, gazed up at the same sky, through the hole in the ceiling of a decrepit church a long distance away. They had come to see the monument to a warrior inside the eroding chapel, and stayed for the light show. Neither made a move for their mobile phones as they alerted the women to someone's contact, instead wishing on as many shooting stars as they each could.

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A young man tinkered with his grandfather's old airplane as his older sister looked on, holding two cups of steaming tea in her hands as she beckoned him toward her. As he obliged, he took a mug from her hands, and both enjoyed the sweet tang of pomegranate as the stars reflected in their eyes. He watched, fascinated, and decided he would have the plane fixed tomorrow so he could be closer to the stars.

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Another young woman with raven hair stood from her leather cot, a gift from the natives she was staying with. She gathered with her two classmates – a girl with bushy auburn, almost purple hair and a small, slight girl with her hair cropped up above her shoulders and styled to look animalistic – to listen to the wisdom taught by the elders regarding the meteors. They spoke of a time, not long before the girls were born, in which one meteor stood to threaten all life on the planet, and they listened intently as the shower blazed above them.

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A man and his brother stayed indoors for the duration of the night, but the younger sat up in his bed and stared out the window, awed despite himself. After a while, his older brother joined him, an arm around his charge's shoulders as they enjoyed the spectacle together.

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Four people with red head wear and light weapons were careful to make no sound as they traversed the woods with little regard for what was going on in the night sky. At least, three of them disregarded it. But the last, a young woman with a grin like a shark, sat where she was and stared up stubbornly. The other young woman, one with an eye covered with a patch, grabbed the other's wrist and they moved on to their target.

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A lone male slumbered restlessly in his bed at the same time, unable to free himself completely from the terrors the night consistently thrust upon him. He woke in a cold sweat and gave up thoughts of sleep, instead going for a walk outside in the deadened city. The light from the sky distracted him, and he looked up. Unable to stop the tears that flowed freely from his two-colored eyes, he wished fervently a single wish on the falling streaks of glitter, disbelieving it would ever come true but giving it a try nonetheless.

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A young man and his best friend - or maybe a little more - thrust their way desperately through the undergrowth, the taller - yet younger - of the two dragging the other along, for he knew that if his friend hesitated they would be lost. Upon crossing the river the older looked up; their pursuers had been left behind long ago, but they had kept up their tiring pace out of fear; and he stopped. The tears had dried on his face long ago, and they were moistened again now, even though the spectacular display in the night sky tried to keep them at bay. His friend, his protector, approached. He put his arms around the trembling shoulders, bringing his terrified friend's face to his waiting lips.

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One more person witnessed the fire of the sky that night. Another young woman, her lush hair auburn in the light but in this darkness indistinguishable from black, ceased her excavating long enough to stare at the sky for a bit, then smiled and put her tools away. The artifacts she might have found in the daylight would stay undiscovered under cover of blackness, anyway, she reasoned. She picked her way carefully toward the camp she had set up earlier that day, but slipped on a half-buried stone in the path, tumbling down the mountain. For a moment, she thought she'd been hurt, but then picked herself up and looked ahead of her. And stared.

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One young man, unfortunately, was unconscious throughout the entire shower, and woke several hours afterward with a dull throb in his head and a lump in his throat. He ached all over, and couldn't remember why he hurt.

In fact, he couldn't really remember anything.

He looked around. Around him were strange trees; rather than growing straight, they had curved over to form arches, rather like monochromatic rainbows, and the branches that curled upwards after they hit the grass were supporting small, unripened fruits. But there were no clues to suggest how he'd ended up here, and nothing his eyes fell on triggered even a small memory.

He clutched his head and sat, only to leap up again, grabbing at an empty holster instinctively, as he spotted glowing eyes – or, well, an eye - staring at him.

“Calm down, child,” said a kindly, deep voice. “I exist to protect.”

The young man squinted into the darkness; besides the eye, he could make out a glimmer of fire, stronger than a candle's but not strong enough to be a campfire. "Who in blazes are you?" he stammered.

He heard a chuckle, and the eyes elevated somewhat. A large, red, cat-like creature emerged from the shadow of a tree into the moonlight and looked up at him. The boy stepped back despite himself. "It depends. Would you prefer to call me by my given name, or by my family name?"

"Erm... What's the difference, in your case?"

"My given name is Red XIII, though I dislike that name for...personal reasons. Nanaki is the name given to me by my grandfather."

"...Then I suppose I shall call you that," the human answered, somewhat confused.

"And what is your name, boy?"

He had to think about that; the dull throb in his head was becoming a bit more than merely bothersome. "Um...Jake."

"Um?" Nanaki questioned, his single eye narrowing slightly.

"I had to think for a moment. Bloody head's killing me." Jake sat again, realizing that he was a little more weary than he should have been, considering the "nap" he'd just woken from. How long had he been out, anyway?

"What are you doing here?" Nanaki asked, lowering his haunches to sit as well.

"I don't really know. Can't remember much, really. Bit of a pickle, this is."

"What the 'pickle' is, is your inability to speak full sentences."

Jake laughed lightly. "Sorry. I'm getting tired." His eyes tried to flutter shut of their own accord, and he nearly had to hold them open with his fingertips.

"I see that." Nanaki approached slowly, pausing when Jake cowered slightly, involuntarily. "I'm not going to harm you, Jake. I just think you need a little more warmth on a night like this." The beast went past Jake, only to turn back and come around his other side and lie behind him, curled slightly.

"I see. You're not going to eat me while I slumber, are you?"

"I exist to protect," Nanaki repeated, putting emphasis on the final word. "Besides, I had plenty of time to 'eat you' while you were asleep."

Jake nodded, exhausted. The pain from however many wounds he had acquired whenever he had acquired them was beginning to numb, and he lay back, using Nanaki as a pillow. The last thing he was

aware of was the creature curling a little more to encase him in a circle of soft, warm fur; and then he drifted to sleep.

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Dirk filled the shot glass with the syrupy fluid and knocked it back, efficiently holding back the slight urge to retch all over the counter. Dave looked up from his phone, glancing at him suspiciously.

“Bro, that's, like, the tenth shot of rum you've had tonight. The frack's wrong with you?”

“Nothing,” Dirk slurred deliberately, coming to sit beside his little brother on the couch and facing the blank TV screen. “I'm just getting ready, that's all.”

“For what, your meeting with the new recruit? Didn't think you had to be drunk for that.”

Dirk grinned. “frack off, little bro, if he doesn't like me drunk he won't like me at all.”

“Not the point.”

Dirk sighed and leaned back against the couch, looking up at the ceiling. “Fine. I'll stop drinking...if you put away your phone.”

“I'm texting Harley.”

“What? That cute little chocobo farmer?” Dirk laughed. “Yup, my little brother, picking up doges wherever he goes.”

“Back off,” Dave growled, looking up; the entrance of emotion into his tone was obvious to the one who'd raised him, though an outsider wouldn't have noticed the underlying, threatening tone. “Jade isn't a dog.”

Dirk grinned. He had an ability to hold his liquor. The same outsider that didn't notice Dave's change in tone would have also thought Dirk was completely sober, but for the smell. “Cool it, Dave, I was messing with you.” Sighing again, he straightened. “I should probably get going. We wouldn't want to keep this Jake guy waiting for me, would we?”

Though Dave's eyes were concealed by his sunglasses, Dirk could see, from his vantage point above his brother, the red irises rolling upwards in exasperation. “Just go, bro. I'm looking forward to having the place to myself.”

“It's not 'to yourself'. Sun hasn't left for the clinic yet,” Dirk pointed out, referring to the old town doctor that they were somehow, distantly related to. “Besides, I'm bringing the guy right back here, remember?”

“Just get out.”

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Jake looked at the slip of paper in his hand, up at the sign above him, and back to the paper, comparing the lettering on the note to the words “7th Heaven” printed on the sign. He didn't know how the paper had ended up in his hand, all he knew was that when he'd awoken the creature called Nanaki had left. “At least he didn't eat me,” he'd thought to himself, as he located the gun nearby that had been in the holster strapped to his thigh.

Now he puzzled over the scribbles on the paper in his hand; they were written in an illegible, childish hand - actually, he wasn't sure if “hand” was the right terminology. It just looked as if Nanaki had found a flyaway piece of scrap paper and some thick charcoal and decided to leave a note or something.

“Gd xo 3dge, f1nd Tt4 H3yeam.” Jake tried to sound it out but failed miserably. “I suppose I can't blame the...cat? Dog? Whatever. It's not like he has very opposable thumbs, I'm just lucky he decided to tell me anything at all.” He'd discerned that “3dge” meant Edge, the city built on the...well, edge of a once majestic metropolis. However, none of the other words made any sense. Except “f1nd”, that obviously meant “find”. But find what? Jake sighed, exasperated. “He couldn't have at least waited for a chap to wake up, could he? Ugh.” He leaned back against the wall, sliding down it to sit on the warm asphalt. He pinched the bridge of his nose beneath his glasses – which were still broken – and closed his eyes.

“Looking for something?” A seemingly bored voice sounded above him.

Jake looked up. Someone had just come out of the building he was now leaning against, and was looking down at him through exaggeratedly pointy sunglasses. The man above him held out his hand, and Jake handed him the scribbled-on paper.

“I can't make out what the devil that note says,” he explained.

The other man laughed as his eyes scoured the paper, a sparkle of recognition coming to his eyes. “Well, I'm pretty sure it's hard to write without opposable thumbs,” he said through a chortle, squatting down. Jake smelled the odor of alcohol and realized the guy had been drinking.

Wait. What had he said?

“How did you know the writer doesn't have thumbs?” Jake asked, astonished.

“Because you came to the right place. You're Jake, right?”

He nodded and took the hand that the man now held out to help himself up. “You must be one hell of a good psychic,” he said.

“Not really, just perceptive. Fancy word for 'I pay attention!'.” He kept hold of Jake's hand, shaking it in introduction. “I'm Dirk. Dirk Strider. Welcome to 7th Heaven, home of the notorious neo-AVALANCHE.”

This last part was said just above a breath, despite the distinct lack of city residents nearby, and Jake felt his eyes widen.

What have I gotten myself into? he wondered, mouth coming slightly open, as Dirk led him into the bar.

1 - Exposition

“Back already?” The apathetically-toned sentence came from upstairs, and Jake turned to see a boy around five years younger than him, wielding a mobile phone and a deadpan expression.

“He was closer than Red said he'd be,” Dirk explained. “In fact, he was right outside. Jake, this's my younger brother, Dave.”

“Yo.”

“Delighted to meet you,” Jake said, and Dave nodded slightly and turned, returning to whatever dark cave he'd come out of.

Dirk pulled out a stool for Jake and delved into a small refrigerator behind the bar, producing two small glasses and a bottle of what appeared to be water. Though, in this environment, Jake doubted water was something they had a surplus of. His suspicions were confirmed as Dirk filled the shot glasses with the liquid and handed one to Jake. “Vodka”

“Thank you,” Jake answered as he took the proffered beverage, too polite to refuse it. Plus, he wasn't entirely sure if alcohol was something he abhorred or not. He clinked his glass against Dirk's and they both downed the shots. Immediately his cheeks began to burn, and he nearly spat the vodka back out; it tasted more like isopropyl than actual alcohol. Dirk was grinning smugly at him as he forced down the alcohol.

“First time drinking” he ventured a guess.

“I'm not entirely sure,” Jake replied.

“Oh, right,” Dirk said. “Red said you'd lost your memory or something, I forgot.”

“Red” He handed the shot glass back to Dirk, who placed both in the sink behind him. “Who is that”

“Oh, you must call him 'Nanaki' or some shoot. I like Red; it's shorter and sounds badass. My kind of name. He told me to apologize for him leaving you there, apparently he was late for a meeting with his friend.” Dirk sat on a stool on the opposite side of the bar from Jake and took off his sunglasses, staring him down.

Jake couldn't look away. He hadn't been expecting this. The irises of Dirk's eyes were a yellow-orange, but that wasn't what kept Jake mesmerized. It was more of the fact that Dirk's eyes seemed to be glowing, like he'd been infused with Mako. No wonder the guy kept them concealed. He barely realized it when Dirk began to speak.

“I have a question for you, Jake.”

“W-what is it” he stammered, deciding that paying attention to Dirk's eyebrows would be less distracting.

“I know you can't remember much. But do you know of an organization called the WRO, or World Regenesi Organization”

He shook his head. “I do know they were founded after Meteorfall by a former ShinRa employee, but I'm unsure as to the details.”

He broke off as unfamiliar footsteps sounded behind him, and a woman who looked to be in her forties leaned over the bar to flick Dirk's forehead audibly. “Busy recruiting, eh' He the one Nanaki told us about, that Jake guy”

“My, I seem to be popular today,” Jake said.

The woman laughed. “I guess that's a yes. Vincent and I're gonna be late tonight, D. He's got that visit with Nanaki, and I've got the clinic to take care of. Don't wait up for us.”

“Like I ever do anyway” Dirk replied. “We'll see you later, Sun.”

She ruffled Jake's hair, leaning over to whisper in his ear. “Don't worry about Strider, he's cool. Just likes to intimidate people 'cause it's fun. He'll grow on ya.” Dirk lifted an eyebrow as she straightened, obviously having heard what she'd said. “You've been in a fight recently, huh” she said louder. Call me later if you need treatment.”

Sun turned to head out the door with a grin on her face that would be considered stupid, but that Jake found seemed to be concealing untold wisdom. He stared after her as he noticed something.

“Does she have a wing” he asked stupidly, even though he'd just seen it.

“No, I didn't see one,” Dirk said sarcastically. “You sure nothing else is wrong with your head besides amnesia' Where was I”

“The WRO.”

“Oh, yeah. Well, you know that Reeve Tuesti – an old friend of Sun's, actually – founded it, to be a replacement for the government and military that ShinRa used to be. What you probably don't know is how it changed after he and the other former leaders returned to the Planet.”

Jake nodded, the real meaning of the last phrase clear to him.

“Well, they got one of the Deepground running it now, though they didn't know he was from Deepground 'til it was too late. It's still under wraps; not many people know, and he's bent on keeping it that way. He's a former, super-enhanced SOLDIER called Noir; Jack Noir. Apparently he'd risen up from being a member of the volunteer army to being Tuesti's right-hand man via a particularly silver tongue, among other things. Sun thinks he's responsible for the death of Barret Wallace and that that's what led him to lead alongside Tuesti.”

“Do you think he killed the founder, too?”

“Nah. Tuesti had a terminal disease, kind of like Geostigma, only that disease eventually got purged from existence. Something about the Cetra, or something. What he had is still incurable. Sun treated him but was only able to stall the inevitable, like all good doctors; in fact, better than most. She still blames herself for it, though.”

“Oh,” Jake said in a small voice. This was beginning to be a little too much information to take at once.

“Anyway. I was getting somewhere with the whole Jack Noir thing. Sun tried to warn Tuesti about him, apparently, but the guy was just too trusting. After he died and Noir took over, she started the whole AVALANCHE thing again to oppose him.”

“How long ago was this?”

“Back when me and Dave weren't even threads in the fabric of existence, dude.”

Jake stared. “There's no way she's that old! She looks like she's in her mid-forties, fifty at the oldest!”

“Nope. I don't know her exact age, but according to my math she'd be about seventy or so. She doesn't give out any details but apparently she was experimented on with Mako energy at a young age. That's why she's got a wing and looks so young,” Dirk added.

Jake was silent for a moment. “So... where do you and your brother come into play, here?”

“Sun's getting on in years, obviously. Starting to feel the wheels of time turning.” Dirk closed his eyes. He rested his elbows on the top of the bar, knotting his fingers together to create a nest for his chin. “So, when I got old enough – about six years ago – she started teaching me things, and then handed leadership over to me. The WRO is trying to find us, and haven't yet; you'd think the fact that AVALANCHE was based at a bar called '7th Heaven' before would make them a little more suspicious of us, but, like I said, it's been years and we haven't been caught. We've been investigated, but we're too good at covering our tracks.” Dirk paused, eying Jake. “You're looking pale. Do you need to lie down?”

Jake started. He'd been listening to Dirk's expository narration, paying attention to him, and yet at the same time unable to stay completely focused. Now he snapped his green eyes back up to Dirk's orange ones, determined to make a better impression than the one he seemed to be giving.

“I'm fine. Where do so-called recruits like I come in?”

Dirk was silent a moment longer, scouring Jake's face for other signs of exhaustion, and sighed. “Well, neo-AVALANCHE is, like the AVALANCHE in days of old, a terrorist group. With one difference; we're not blowing up Mako reactors.

“See, ShinRa when AVALANCHE was formed was a force backed by money; the president back then wanted to use money to control the world. Sun told me that that president's son once remarked that he, when he took over, wanted to rule the world with fear, before he came to his senses a little too late for

redemption. Now, we think Jack Noir wants to use Rufus' old way of thinking. And we're trying to stop that. We haven't been able to scrounge up enough people willing to help us on this, though Red - what with his honesty radar picking out the good choices from the bad - has been able to help a lot, but it's a little hard to expand an army this old and this small. We're short-handed...and low on funds.”

“If you're insinuating that I want to join you primarily based on monetary gain,” Jake said, “then you don't know me very well.”

“You don't seem to know yourself very well, either,” Dirk pointed out.

“Good point. But, in all honesty, money is the least of my desires at the present time.” Jake winced as a remnant of his earlier migraine flashed through his head.

“So, is that an affirmative”

“I still don't know exactly what your organization's aim is,” Jake admitted. “But, do you trust me enough to tell me all this information and just let me go if I refuse to join you”

“I've mentioned Red's honesty radar, haven't I” Dirk answered. “Out of all the prospective recruits he's sent our way that didn't end up joining, not one has ratted us out. Keeps me pretty confident.” His eyes narrowed as a smirk slid onto his face. “Though, that doesn't mean we didn't keep tabs on 'em.”

“I see,” Jake said. He thought for a moment, trying to ignore the small headache that was progressively getting more painful. “Well, I think I'll give you the benefit of the doubt and say I'll join you, though I don't know if this will be a permanent affair.”

Dirk gave a crooked, toothless smile and held out a hand. “That's more than what most people give us. Welcome aboard, Jake.”

They shook hands and stood, Dirk reaching for the shades he'd left on the counter top. “From what I understand, you'll be needing a place to stay, too, is that right”

Jake shook his head. “I really shouldn't be burdening you any longer, Strider. I think I'll go - “

“Where” Dirk interrupted. “There isn't much room at the motels this time of year, what with the festival in Kalm being right around the corner and everyone holing up here until the day of. And we'd usually be renting out a room upstairs for a couple of those fest-goers. You're lucky you came at a time when we've got them all empty except for the ones we live in.” He put a hand on Jake's shoulder. “Besides, you look about ready to keel over. Red said you were in bad shape, and if Sun pointed it out, then you're a little shoot out of luck. You're staying here, and I ain't taking no for an answer.”

Jake sighed as he was shoved up the stairs. “As long as you don't make me drink any more of that blasted vodka.”

2 - Of Broncos and Chocobos

“Are you positive that contraption will be able to fly?”

Karkat rolled his eyes, though he knew she probably wouldn't be able to see from her vantage point on the ground below. “Yes, Kanaya. You've asked me five different times in twenty different ways and I've told you the same answer every time. YES, THIS frackING PLANE WILL FLY.”

Kanaya raised an eyebrow, the beginnings of a smile playing around her lips. “For one thing, I thought it was called a 'bronco'. For another thing, how did I say something twenty different ways in the five times I asked?”

He threw his hands in the air in exasperation. “Oh, for the love of all that is sane, will you go inside and make some god-damned tea like you said you would two hours ago? I'm trying to work here!” He ignored the laugh that came from below him as he examined the innards of the aircraft. A moment later he heard the door close behind his sister as she went inside, finally leaving him in blessed peace.

Karkat closed the paneling over the now-concealed engine, fixing the sheet of metal in place carefully, then got in the cockpit and leaned back in the worn leather seat. He was, to say the least, proud of himself; when he'd found the Tiny Bronco in the back of his great-great-grandfather's hangar, behind the Shera and the Highwind, the thing had been nothing but a pile of scrap metal. Old, rusty scrap metal. There was firearm damage done to the tail, the whole bottom of the thing practically made of rust; when he asked his father about it, he was informed that the Bronco had been used as a boat for several months, back before Meteorfall. Karkat shook his head, still appalled that the great Cid (he called him that sarcastically) could allow such harm to come to what was once a beautiful machine.

That was when Karkat had decided to repair it. The thing had taken several months - if not a year - to fix, but it was finally ready. Some parts were brand-new, some were salvaged from slightly newer models that Karkat had never felt attached enough to fix. There was just something about the Tiny Bronco that made him feel good. Not happy - he was never happy, he liked to tell himself - but a state that was less pissed-off than he was usually. Looking at the Tiny Bronco, Karkat was able to think, yes, I can fly, despite past experiences that would serve to state the opposite of that thought.

And, buckling the seat belt-slash-harness across himself, he realized that that particular thought had never been more true until now.

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“John! You left your phone in the barn again!” Jade hollered from said barn. “The caller ID says it's Karkat calling!”

The wild chocobo John was attempting to “break” was finally able to buck him off in his temporary lapse in concentration, and he dodged from its lashing talons skilfully - albeit clumsily - as he grabbed for its reins. It fought him as he dragged it to its stable, and Jade hurried out of the way with a small,

newly-hatched chocobo in her arms.

Slamming the stable closed, he wrenched his hand back as the chocobo snapped her beak at him. "Ow!"

"You okay?" Jade asked, the fluffy chick in her arms giving its opinion on John's ringing phone in a high-pitched voice.

"Yeah," John answered. "Her beak just clipped me." He examined the small point of blood on his arm with a sigh, and started when he realized his phone had just stopped ringing. "Oh, jeez!" he said, snatching it from the shelf where he'd left it and quickly hitting the "redial" button.

"Way to leave me hanging, Egbert," a snappy voice greeted him after about half a ring.

"Sorry, I was busy with a new arrival," John said. "What's up?"

A sarcastic silence was all the answer he received, and he suddenly realized what it was.

"The Bronco's done?" Jade looked up from the chick she was holding, which was starting to fall asleep. The excited grin on her face matched her half-brother's.

"No, frackass, I need about another decade on it. YES, it's done! Jesus."

John laughed. "That's so great! When are you gonna fly it?"

"I've already flown it; it works great." Karkat's angry voice barely concealed his own excitement. "Though, I don't know how well it deals with longer distances than a couple laps around Rocket Town; I'm probably gonna have to do some tinkering on it before I want to risk crossing the ocean."

"Yeah, don't do that unless you know for sure you're not gonna end up crash-landing in the middle of the sea," John said, mildly disappointed.

"Oh, don't sound like that," Karkat said, sensing his tone. "I'll come visit you as soon as I'm confident with this thing. It won't be much longer, John."

"That's so awesome. I'll be sure to have an extra chocobo for you when you come!"

"I've got a fracking airplane, what would I need a flightless bird for?"

"I was gonna show you the cave, remember? We have to cross the swamp to get to it, and I'm pretty sure your Bronco's too big for that tiny piece of solid ground right in front of it. We wouldn't want all your hard work to end up covered in swamp mud!"

"Good point," Karkat amended. "Well, I'm sure you want me to get there as soon as I can, so I gotta go work on this. I'll see you soon."

"All right, Karkat," he replied. "I love you," he added.

There was a moment's hesitation on the other end of the phone, and John heard a reluctant smile enter his boyfriend's voice. "I love you, too, John."

Jade was wearing a strange, sparkly-eyed expression as he hung up the phone, and he rolled his eyes at her. "Stop doing that every time I tell him, sis."

"But you guys are so cute!" she gushed, quiet enough so as not to disturb the ball of downy fluff still cradled in her arms. Her eyes trailed to the wound left by the wild chocobo's beak. "You should probably go wash that," she added in a more serious tone.

He glanced down; the cut had apparently been deeper than he'd thought, and now his arm was covered in blood. "shoot. I'll be right back, Jade."

She nodded as he left the barn, gently setting the baby chocobo back in the nest of hay beside its mother.

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Now sporting a clean white bandage, John sat on the fence bordering the paddock, staring into the sky with a content smile on his face.

Karkat was coming. John still remembered the day they'd met in Edge; John and Jade had been there to visit their friend Dave and his brother, as well as to pick up some seeds from the market there to grow new greens for the chocobos. Karkat had come into the bar while they were reminiscing, complaining about the crowds outside and muttering something about his sister.

To say the two had hit it off pretty quickly would be an understatement; what had started with John playfully flirting under the cloud of a slight alcoholic buzz had ended up with the two waking up the next morning in the same bed – luckily both with their pants still on, though both with headaches induced by the amount of consumption the night before.

Dave still made fun of him about his constant complaining about "not being a homosexual" for years and then making out with a complete stranger. Apparently it was also categorized under "irony", so John didn't mind as much.

The two had maintained a long-distance relationship for the past year and a half, making plans to visit each other as often as possible, though the fact that they lived on two different continents was a little harrowing. Only a few months later, Karkat had found the small aircraft and saw an opportunity for more frequent visits, and now that the repairs were finally done – or, at least, almost done – John could barely contain his excitement.

I love you, too, John.

Karkat's normally irritated voice always softened when he said those words, and John knew he meant it as passionately as John himself did when he said it.

He couldn't wait.

3 - A Visit

John was in the barn again, this time helping Jade with the chicks, about a week later. A ball of poofy blue down-feathers was blinking up at him with eyes too big for its face, and John was unable to restrain himself from gently stroking beneath its beak.

The wild chocobo was in its own stable, having bitten John again, this time on the bridge of his nose beneath his glasses. Now the boy's face was split by a long gash that ran from beneath one eye to the other, and there were a few layers of gauze and bandage masking him.

"What are we going to do with her?" Jade asked, jerking her head toward the chocobo. "If she never calms down, I mean."

"Probably let her go," John answered. "We can't keep feeding her if she's not - "

The gradual sound of a large engine approaching cut him off and he straightened, a grin spreading across his aching face. He turned to Jade, who looked confused, then set down the baby chocobo and forced himself to walk – not run – outside.

A small dot in the eastern sky was just visible above the small stack of mountains there, and John watched as it progressively got bigger and bigger until at last it was a small, gray-colored aircraft that landed smoothly on the other side of the small house. All restraint was forgotten as his legs carried him in a sprint toward it.

Toward Karkat.

He was just getting out of the Bronco as John came around the side of the house and tackled him, miraculously not throwing him to the ground. The angry expression that Karkat usually wore melted away into a smile as his own arms went around John to return the embrace.

"Hey, frackass," he said gently. "Miss me?"

"No," John mumbled facetiously, his voice muffled as he nuzzled into Karkat's neck, and was horrified to realize his eyes were wet with tears of happiness. He pulled away and scrubbed furiously beneath the glasses, having temporarily forgotten the bandage was there. "Ow!"

Karkat's hand was immediately on his boyfriend's cheek, stroking questioningly at the layers of fabric on his face. "What happened here? Anything I should kick someone's @\$@ for?"

John grinned. "No, just a wild chocobo. It doesn't like me that much."

"I see that." And then their lips were together. The months they'd spent apart felt completely worth it if they got to share moments like this.

"I missed you," John whispered.

"You said you didn't," Karkat chuckled.

John smiled, but before he could say anything a shout came from behind him. "Hi, Karkat!"

The boys looked up to see Jade approaching to hug Karkat, though she didn't tackle him like John had. Bec, her fluffy, blind dog, followed behind, brushing against Karkat's legs in welcome like a cat.

"Come on in," Jade said, yanking on Karkat's sleeve. "Unless you want to see the chocobos first?"

Karkat, though he hated to admit it, was almost as in love with baby chocobos as he was with John; and John didn't mind a little competition in this case. And, because he hated to admit it, John cut in before he could refuse.

"Yeah, we were just feeding them! It'll go much faster if you help."

Karkat's cheeks became dusted with red. "Okay, I can help with that. I'm starving, though." The midday sun peeked from behind a cloud as he spoke, as if reminding them that noon was lunch time.

"Dad should be in the kitchen right now. We'll go in when we're done. Come on," Jade asserted, pulling on Karkat's sleeve again. He let himself be pulled to the barn with little complaint, except when Bec walked in front of him in an attempt to follow Jade.

John caught a sign of movement out of the corner of his glasses, and turned to the kitchen window, where his father was smiling as he chopped up vegetables. Noticing John staring at him, he lifted one hand in a wave. John waved back just before he followed the small parade to the barn.

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"So, you're the frackass who hurt my boyfriend?" Karkat stood in front of the wild chocobo's stable, arms crossed over his chest, as he stared down the enraged bird before him. Once the chocobo tired out from her flailing, he put a hand out to grab the reins that John hadn't taken off yet due to facial injury. John and Jade watched with bated breath.

After a moment of feeding the chocobos, Karkat had noticed the restless bird in the corner, and something had caught his interest; John could see it in his eyes. The other boy had gotten up and planted himself in front of the stable.

"Careful," John breathed now, more to himself, as the chocobo snapped at Karkat's hand. He hesitated, then after a moment's pause reached further and touched the leather straps gently. When the bird did nothing more than huff angrily at him, he gripped the reins more tightly and eased the gate open.

"Easy," he said soothingly, backing up and gesturing for John and Jade to get out of the way. "Easy. It's all right, you dumbass bird." The profanity was said in the same even tone as the rest of his sentence, and though the chocobo was still angry she let him lead her out of the barn and into the corral outside.

Once Jade had closed the gate, Karkat let go of the reins. John was held back by Jade's arm held in front of him as the chocobo dashed around, trying to find an escape out of the wide, fenced area; finding none, she returned to stand in front of Karkat, tail feathers raised and wings splayed out in a show of intimidation.

Karkat was not impressed. His stance was open, steadfast; his arms were crossed over his chest again and his legs were shoulder-length apart. He glared up at the threatening bird through his dark eyebrows, his face resolute, and stayed where he was.

When Karkat remained unfazed, the wild chocobo faltered. She unwound slightly, her tail feathers remaining fanned out while her wings pressed against her body, but retained her furious look. Karkat reached his hand out again, only to have it chomped on by a vicious beak. John cried out at this.

However, rather than retract and hurl profanities at her – as would be expected of him – he grimaced in pain and ground his teeth together as he made no move to withdraw his hand. His other hand came around and carded the feathers on the back of the chocobo's head, stroking gently. The beak tightened on his fingers, and this time he was unable to suppress a gasp, but still he did not pull back.

It seemed an age before the chocobo let Karkat's hand go, and John released a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. The visitor ran his uninjured hand along the long, feathered neck, crooning comforting gibberish to the bird, and slowly lifted his leg to mount the saddle on her back.

As soon as he was on, however, she bucked violently; if not for his balance he would have ended up on the ground. But as it was, the reins wrapped tightly in one hand and his legs digging into her sides were the only things keeping him from letting gravity work its science. He held on tight as the chocobo bucked and kicked furiously, trying to throw him off – once or twice she nearly succeeded, and John and Jade were ready to run toward him if he fell.

Finally, after several minutes that seemed like hours without being able to unburden herself of the human's weight, the chocobo came to a stop, exhausted. Karkat's hand brushed her neck again, softly, and he spoke softly to her again. "Shoosh. It's okay."

He guided her to the corral gate, where John and Jade were waiting. "How did I do?" he said, smirking at their gaping faces. "And you call yourselves ranchers." He slid off the chocobo's back and tickled under her beak. "That's right, you're not such a bad bird, are you?" he joked.

Light applause sounded from the door of the house, and their father approached. "Bravo," he said. "You seem to have a knack for this. Put her away, though, it's time to eat," he added, and reached out to ruffle Karkat's hair. "Welcome back, Highwind."

"Thanks, Mr. Harley," Karkat replied, as John stood beside him and laced their fingers together.

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It was the end of the day, and Karkat was feeling great about everything, as he always did when he and John were together. The two sat on the edge of John's bed and talked about everything that had gone

on since John's last visit to the Highwind residence.

This conversation ended as it always did: with one of them initiating the first kiss. This time it was Karkat who leaned forward first, pulling John toward him with a hand fisted in his blue shirt. They pressed against each other, and Karkat slowly forced John down to lie on the bed beneath him, holding the younger boy down by his wrists.

One of Karkat's hands left John's wrist to cup the back of his head, fingers knotting in his untidy hair. He felt John reach up with his free hand to grip the back of his shirt, pulling the two closer together, and the boy's mouth opened beneath his, nipping lightly at Karkat's lip.

Karkat pulled away then, only slightly; he had missed this, missed John's soft hands on his back. "John," he said softly, his eyes only half-open. "Do you want to...go farther?"

The other shook his head. "I'm fine like this, Karkat. Sex isn't a mandatory thing for relationships. Besides, this is nice." His free hand went to Karkat's cheek to brush it with his knuckles.

Karkat smiled. "Yeah, it is." He went back down, but to nuzzle into John's chest rather than take his mouth again. "It was just getting a little hot in here, that's why I asked." John's hand was on the back of his head now, petting him, and he closed his eyes.

"Mm," John agreed. "Well, we should probably go to sleep now. I want to get all the farm things done before we get to the spelunking thing, and that means getting up early."

John's hand was soft on Karkat's hair. He placed a hand on John's chest to feel his heartbeat, and his head moved in a tiny nod. "Okay. I'll help you tomorrow so it'll go faster."

"Thanks."

There was a rustling as John brought a blanket from the foot of the bed to cover them, surprisingly without shifting Karkat too much, and he reached out to turn off the light beside his bed. Promptly that hand returned to Karkat's head, and the latter breathed deep and slow, tightening his arms slightly so the two of them were pressed even closer together. His ear was against John's chest, and the metronomic thudding of the boy's heart lulled him into subconsciousness.

But not before he heard a breathy whisper of, "I love you, Karkat."