

## Tennessee Whiskey & You

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/40949958) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/40949958>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Teen And Up Audiences</a>
Archive Warnings:	<a href="#">Graphic Depictions Of Violence</a> , <a href="#">Major Character Death</a>
Category:	<a href="#">M/M</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">Homestuck</a>
Relationships:	<a href="#">Auto-Responder   Lil Hal &amp; Dirk Strider</a> , <a href="#">Auto-Responder   Lil Hal &amp; Jake English</a> , <a href="#">Eventual Hal Strider/Jake English?</a> , <a href="#">Past Jake English/Dirk Strider - Relationship</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">Jake English</a> , <a href="#">Dirk Strider</a> , <a href="#">Auto-Responder   Lil Hal</a> , <a href="#">Roxy Lalonde</a> , <a href="#">Rose Lalonde</a> , <a href="#">Dave Strider</a> , <a href="#">Jade Harley</a> , <a href="#">June Egbert</a> , <a href="#">Jane Crocker</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Death</a> , <a href="#">Alcohol Abuse/Alcoholism</a> , <a href="#">Grief/Mourning</a> , <a href="#">Unhealthy Coping Mechanisms</a> , <a href="#">Drinking to Cope</a> , <a href="#">Guilt</a> , <a href="#">Human Hal</a> , <a href="#">Alternate Universe - No Sburb/Sgrub Sessions</a> , <a href="#">human trolls</a> , <a href="#">Hurt No Comfort</a> , <a href="#">(Maybe eventual comfort)</a> , <a href="#">Breaking and Entering</a> , <a href="#">Hospitals</a> , <a href="#">Coma</a> , <a href="#">Dirk dies</a> , <a href="#">stroke</a> , <a href="#">Aneyursm</a> , <a href="#">Medical Jargon</a> , <a href="#">random doctor oc - Freeform</a> , <a href="#">sighs wearily</a> , <a href="#">adds tag</a> , <a href="#">Whump</a> , <a href="#">Non-Linear Narrative</a>
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2022-08-11 Updated: 2023-11-01 Words: 12,217 Chapters: 5/?

# Tennessee Whiskey & You

by [MistLaFey](#)

## Summary

When Dirk dies after an aneyursm, Hal and Jake have difficulties coping. Jake drinks to forget, and eventually Hal can't handle drunk Jake and his own grief - so he turns that into anger.

“I’m not him, Jake! I can’t fucking- I can’t fix you. Dirk is gone and you don’t get to pretend he isn’t anymore. I can’t be Dirk, and every time you try to tell me I am it fucking hurts. There’s nothing left for you here. If Dirk was the only person that filled a void in you, there is nothing left to make you whole.”

## A Major (Disaster)

The room is too white. It smells like bleach and artificial lemons. The beeping is steady, robotic, and it wouldn't be half as comforting as it is if Dirk's eyes were open. There's a bandage over his left eyebrow, but other than that he seems unharmed. That is, obviously, not the case.

There's a quick double tap at the door and a woman with dark, curly hair tied back in a ponytail pops her head into the room, "Hal Strider?"

Hal stands and shakes the doctor's hand, "Yes, and you're Doctor Montgomery?"

"Yes. I'd like to discuss your brother's case, if you're ready? We could go to the lounge if-"

"I appreciate that, but right here is fine. Dirk would- Dirk hates being left out of conversations, especially if they're about him."

Doctor Montgomery nods with a sympathetic smile, then pushes her glasses up higher on her nose. "I see. Well, from what we've treated, and from what we heard from the investigating officer as well as Dirk's boyfriend - he fell. That fall triggered an aneurysm in his brain to burst and caused what we call a intracerebral hemorrhage."

"A stroke?" Hal clarifies.

"You have a medical background?"

"No, just. Too much free time and the need to be an insufferable know-it-all during *Jeopardy!*" Hal looks over his shoulder at Dirk as he says this, making it very clear to the doctor that he'd been quoting Dirk.

"Well, then. Yes, a stroke. We didn't have any papers on file for him upon his arrival. If he has one, we'd like a copy of his Advance Directive. If not-"

"Then you need me to fill out paperwork. DNR, life support limits, etcetera."

She pauses a moment, "Yes. Does he have an Advance Directive?"

"I'm not sure. I'll text our cousin and find out if they know. In the meantime, can I add some names to his visitation list?"

"Of course. I'll have a nurse come in to take down the names in a few minutes. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"What are his odds, Doc? Be blunt."

The doctor's smile falls, but she tries to hide it. There's a sad sort of look in her eyes when she meets Hal's gaze again. "If he were conscious, or if he wakes up his odds will improve significantly. But there's bleeding on his brain, and we can't operate because we can't see the

location of the bleed. The aneurysm was too deep. If the bleeding slows, or stops we might be able to and that would increase-

“Doctor Montgomery, I understand that your job is to try and keep the family and loved ones calm, and try to help them keep hope but I’d prefer if you gave me the straight facts. When I explain everything to Jake he’ll do enough hoping and positive thought keeping for both of us, and I’ll let him tell everyone else. But personally? I’d rather be pleasantly surprised than severely disappointed.”

There’s a long moment of silence, tense as the doctor tries to decide if tipping her hand is what needs to be done, but finally she breaks, “As Dirk’s condition is now, I’d suggest you get his affairs in order. If he regains consciousness, or the bleeding stops I’d say it would depend on how he heals. A ruptured aneurysm in the brain is fatal about half the time, and Dirk was bleeding for about half an hour before he was found. It doesn’t look good. I’m sorry.”

Hal is clenching his jaw, trying to reconcile this information with his world view. “Thank you, Doctor. I... I appreciate you being candid.”

The doctor nods, then turns and walks out the door. Hal makes his way back over to the chair by Dirk’s bed and lowers himself into it. He sighs and drags his hands through his hair, clasping both hands at the back of his neck. A few minutes or a few hours later a nurse comes in and asks after the names to add to the visitation list. Hal rattles off names without much thought - Jake, obviously. Roxy, Rose, Dave. Jane. He puts Jade and John down even though he’s not sure if they’d want to come, then thinks a moment and has Kanaya and Karkat added to the list too.

He’s not sure how much time passes after that. Hal sits there staring at Dirk. His eyes are closed, and his chest rises and falls in a steady rhythm. If it weren’t for the oxygen tube, or the IV, or the heart monitor it would be easy to think Dirk was just sleeping. As much as the hospital accouterments adds to it, there’s just as much missing to help a peaceful illusion along. Dirk’s eyes aren’t twitching beneath his eyelids. He isn’t doing the fitful twisting thing Hal knows he still does in his sleep. Not to mention Dirk isn’t curled up into the tightest ball he can manage, like an armadillo without the armor.

When a hand comes down on Hal’s shoulder, he jumps. Turning, he sees Jake’s sheepish smile and tear stains on his tanned face. “Sorry, mate,” he mutters before pulling the other chair up next to the bed and taking hold of Dirk’s hand gently. “How long have you been here?”

Hal sits back in his chair, back moving stiffly as he straightens up, and shrugs. “I haven’t left since I got here. Not really... sure how long that’s been?”

Jake nods, then seems to settle into his spot. Hal watches as Jake’s attention shifts, and he feels as though he has been dismissed. Jake is solely focused on Dirk. It must be unconscious, the way his thumb runs across the back of Dirk’s hand. It must be instinct, the way Jake reaches out and brushes hair off Dirk’s forehead.

Hal stands and his spine pops as he does. He makes his way out into the hallway, past the nurses station, and into the lobby. Without much thought Hal pulls out his phone and dials Roxy. They pick up on the second ring.

“Hey, Hal. How’s... everything?”

“Do you want the answer I’m supposed to give you, or the truth?”

“Hal-” Roxy sighs

“Too snippy, I know. Sorry, I’m just-”

“Stressed. We all are. Lay it out for me, babes. What do you need me to do?”

Hal pinches the bridge of his nose and groans, “Do you know if Dirk has an Advance Directive? A Will? Any sort of information about what to do if he’s real fucked up and someone else has to make medical decisions for him?”

Roxy inhales sharply, “It’s that bad?” they ask in a small voice.

“I’m not telling anyone else, but Rox. They can’t operate because of the bleeding, and it’s killing him. The aneurysm was deep, and they can’t see it because of the blood. If it doesn’t-”

“Okay, you can stop,” Roxy whispers over the line, and Hal can hear the start of tears in their voice. “I’ll um. I’ll check around his apartment, and I’ll call Janey. She has a tendency to know about all the legal whatchamacallits and shit. Are you sticking around the hospital?”

“Yeah,” he says without really thinking about the answer, “For a while yet. Jake is here, too. Everyone is on the visitation list, I think. You might wanna call around? Let everyone know they should get over here, but like. Try to do it without letting it slip how bad off he really is, I guess?”

“Ah- I think I’m just gonna call Rosie and let her pass it around. You know between the two of us she got all the tact.”

“And you got all the charm, Rox.”

They cackle, but it’s brittle, surprised and tired sounding. “I’m so tellin her you said that. She’ll kick your ass for it.”

Hal lets out a puff of air, a not-quite laugh. “Thanks for doing this, Roxy.”

“I’m here for you, babes. Call me if shit swings slantwise, okay? I’m gonna go look for those papers and get the phone train going. Love ya.”

“Yeah, you too, Rox.” And Hal hangs up the phone, immediately feeling lost without the grounding Roxy had been unwittingly providing. He looks around the lobby for a minute, but aside from the man at the information desk there is no one there. He lets his shoulders drop, wallowing in the overwhelming loneliness of the situation for a moment before he turns around and walks back to Dirk’s room.

Jake is still there. He's mumbling quietly to Dirk, words that Hal can't hear from the doorway, and he stops as Hal comes into the room. "Sticking around then, chum?"

Hal nods, slumping back into his seat across the bed from Jake. "Yeah. Roxy is poking around for some paperwork the doctor asked after. They're gonna call Rose, see if she'd be okay calling everyone else and letting them know what's going on. Maybe she'll be able to get everyone to come home."

"Is that necessary? Everyone is scattered to the four winds, after all."

It's that moment that Hal is faced with a decision. He can lie to Jake, keep him from leaving that warm hopeful bubble that he prefers to live in; or, he can tell the truth. Tell Jake what he already knows, what he told Roxy and what is going to quickly get passed in whispers through the group with only Roxy and Rose's discretion as a life raft.

Hal does what he told the doctor he would do, of course. "I mean, probably not. But I'd like to have everyone home anyhow. Dirk's looking at a long recovery. It'll be better to have all hands on deck."

Jake looks up and meets Hal's eyes with a nervous smile, "Right, of course. Naive of me to think he'll be peachy keen after such a bad fall."

There's an impulse in Hal that begs him to grab Jake and shake him until he understands, until he drops that stupid hopeful facade and *comprehends*. But he doesn't do that. He plays along like he's supposed to and dismisses Jake's self depreciation, "Don't worry about it, bro. You're not a doctor or anything, right?"

"Right-o," Jake agrees, and then it's silent again. Time slips away alongside the beeping of the monitor, and it's not until after the sun sets that either Hal or Jake move.

Roxy is the inciting stimulus which drags their attention away from Dirk, and even then it's only for a brief moment. Just long enough to hand Hal the paperwork Jane had found in the bottom of a lockbox. Long enough to give Jake a one-armed hug and press a kiss to Dirk's forehead with a sniffle and a mumbled, "Affection. Cope with it, Di-Stri." And then Roxy is making their way back out of the hospital room.

Hal's brain catches up a minute later. The paperwork. He flips through it half-assedly. No DNR, organ donation forms. Everything is sorted already. Of course Dirk would have planned for every inevitability and have the papers to back it up.

It's fine. There's nothing to be done about it now.

Hal takes the papers and drops them off with the Nurse's station before he heads home for the night, without saying a word to Jake.

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When Hal walks into Dirk's hospital room and finds Jake already there for the fifth day in a row he considers the probability that Jake hasn't left. When he asks Jake as much, he finds he

isn't surprised by the answer.

"No, I suppose I haven't. Not for very long at least. Someone has to keep vigil, right friend?"

Without response Hal pulls the unoccupied chair in the corner up to Dirk's bed, snagging the hospital chart as he does so. As he flips through the information in silence he is confronted once again by the fact that Jake likely doesn't comprehend the severity of Dirk's condition. He compounds that with the fact that the longer Dirk lays unconscious the slimmer his chances of recovery become, and he can't help but start to spiral. *34.6% mortality rate. 22% survive with impairment. 38.6% have a so-called good outcome, and who's to say what that really means? If he does somehow manage to come out of this- would Dirk even want to go through his recovery? Physical Therapy is expensive, and painful-*

A knock at the doorway draws Hal's attention away from himself, and he turns over his shoulder to see Doctor Montgomery standing there. "I know you're in visitation right now, Mr. Strider, but I'm going off shift in an hour so I was wondering if right now would be a good time to go over Dirk's CT scans?"

Hal stands, looks back at Dirk, then focuses in on Jake, "Hey, you gonna stick around a little longer, Jake?"

"Hm?" Jake's eyes are drawn slowly away from Dirk, but he seems to process the question as he meets Hal's eyes through the shades. "Oh, yes. I'm not going anywhere until Janey's flight gets in. That won't be until near 10 tonight."

"Alright. I'm- I'm going to step out and talk to the Doc for a minute, then."

Jake nods, focus drifting back to Dirk, "Let me know if there's anything new, hm?"

Hal walks out after the doctor without answering that one way or the other, uncertain if the information he's about to learn would threaten that little bubble of innocent ignorance Jake is living in; the bubble Hal can't help but feel he's had a hand in crafting.

"So, the scans- well they aren't great," the doctor says after leading Hal into a smallish room he assumes might be an office or something, judging by the shelves of medical texts and the x-ray reading board she clips photos onto a backlit white board. "Do you see here, the big white area? That's the hemorrhage, and it's growing. We can't see where Dirk is bleeding from, and because it's covering the Medulla-"

"You can't operate because damage to the Medulla would kill him faster than the bleed will. I got that. This isn't news, Doctor. Why did you want to talk?"

She sighs, then reaches over and pulls open the desk drawer and pulls out a stack of pamphlets, "These cover everything from grief counseling to funeral homes in the area to financial assistance for hospital bills and everything after."

Silently, Hal takes them.

"I'm not a fortune teller, and I can't see the future. But, medically, there isn't anything else we can do for Dirk at this-"

Doctor Montgomery is interrupted by the overhead speaker crackling to life, “Rapid response to room 2409. Doctor Montgomery and Rapid Response team to room 2409.”

Quickly, the doctor flees the office and darts down the hall to Dirk’s hospital room. Hal chases after and gets there just in time to see Jake being shoved out of the door. He’s pale, and shaking slightly, and there’s a scared look on his face.

“Jake.”

He turns to look at Hal, and Hal can tell. The bubble has burst. “H-Hal, he- Dirk...”

“Jake, hey, come on. Tell me what happened,” Hal prods, pulling Jake gently down the hallway back to the office which Doctor Montgomery had left him in. When he gets Jake into one of the chairs it takes some time, but he manages to get Jake to explain that Dirk had seized. At first it had seemed to Jake like perhaps he was coming to, when his eyes had snapped open. He’d already been leaning out of the door to fetch a nurse when the convulsions started.

There would be nothing left to do but wait for Doctor Montgomery to come back.

At this point, Hal is no longer aware of time passing outside his own head. He’s thinking, overthinking, reconsidering, reevaluating and all coming up to the certainty that it’s nearly over. Dirk isn’t going to wake up, and now he’s started having seizures. If there were a machine to unplug maybe Hal would even do it- but Dirk had been breathing on his own. Doctor Montgomery is certainly taking a long time, that can’t be-

Jake’s hand closes around Hal’s and presses a keychain into palm. It’s small, rubbery, and designed to look like an old Nintendo controller. When he pushes a button, Hal feels it click under his thumb but it makes no noise. “What is this, Jake?”

“It’s a little thing I bought for Dirk. Keep it on my keys so when- well when he starts picking at his nails like you were just a second ago. Gives him an alternative to tearing his cuticles off,” Jake shrugs, then sits back in his chair and picks a spot on the floor to stare blankly at while he nibbles his thumbnail.

The miniature controller clicks silently in Hal’s hand until Doctor Montgomery trudges back into the room. She lowers herself into the chair behind the desk, “Dirk is stable, but this does mean his condition has significantly worsened. Are you comfortable discussing the details of his condition with Jake present?”

Hal’s fingers continue to mindlessly click away on the fidget toy, “You might as well, Doc. I’d just have to tell him after, and I’d frankly prefer not to.”

As the doctor explains Jake is made to understand how hurt Dirk really is. He’d been thinking ahead- to Dirk’s recovery, to the time they’d still have to spend together, to the next date, the next milestone. To the future. And now Doctor Montgomery is talking about the remainder of Dirk’s life not in years, but in days. The tears start silently, and Jake isn’t fully aware of them until he tries to take in a deep breath and it arrives in shudders. Hal’s hand



comes down on his wrist with a light squeeze. Doctor Montgomery is offering condolences and then leaving them the room.

Hal's posture collapses, and he drags a hand along his hair with a groan. Jake watches numbly as he pulls out his cellphone, taps away at it for a few minutes, then slides it back into his pocket.

"I don't know about you, but I think I need a drink," Hal says, and Jake barely pauses before agreeing.

## B Minor (Unlike our Grief)

The funeral is... bland, Hal thinks to himself. It's quiet in that awful way that doesn't mean peaceful. It's the kind of atmosphere that would make Dirk's skin crawl. Would have. Would have *made* Dirk's skin crawl.

Hal is standing in a line by the door, positioned between Jake and Roxy. He's spent the better part of thirty minutes shaking hands and thanking people he barely know for their condolences. He's not really... present? It all feels like a bad dream, like everything is fuzzy around the edges and if he tried to read the names in the guest book they'd all blur together and twist apart before the meaning of the letters took root in his brain.

Jake keeps sniffing. Hal can hear it, no matter how discreet he's trying to be.

There's a row of chairs at the front of the room, reserved for family. When he and Roxy had been arranging things with the funeral director, one of them must have miscounted - there's an extra chair in the row. Six chairs for five people.

No one wants to address it, until Rose does. Carefully, she folds it and walks up next to Dirk's casket. She leans it against the foot of the casket before turning and looking back out to the crowd of people. She looks like she wants to say something, but takes a shaky breath before turning around and facing Dirk. Hal watches as she leans down over the casket, whispering something for only Dirk's deaf ears to hear.

When Rose straightens up, it takes her a minute to turn back around to face the crowd. Anyone unfamiliar with her would think that her expression was calmly neutral, but Hal can see the tears threatening her eyes in the way she's inclined her head just a bit further than normal. "Please," she says to the room, "Take your seats."

Silently, Rose makes her way over to their row, sniffing only once as she sits primly in her seat. Dave takes her hand, squeezing it hard. Hal can already tell Dave won't be able to bring himself to walk up to the casket and have a final moment with Dirk. Not with all the people in the funeral home watching.

After everyone is seated, and the funeral director opens the floor to the room, Roxy stands. They walk up to the front of the room where Dirk's casket lays, an organic centerpiece for an inorganic gathering. Roxy turns and faces the room.

"So, uh," they start awkwardly, "I'm - I'm Roxy, Dirk is- Dirk was my cousin. Maybe you guys knew, or maybe you didn't, but our family is kind of jacked up so really, Dirk was more like my brother. He was my best friend, and some days he was a living nightmare of a person." Muffled laughter follows, and Roxy grins with tears in their eyes, "Dirk Strider was a lot of things," they sigh heavily, "To pretend that he wasn't one of the most infuriating people on this planet would be a lie, and a disservice to his pride. I already miss him. A lot," they chuckle, self-deprecating. "Thank you all for being here today, to join us in mourning and join us in celebrating Dirk's life. After the funeral and internment we'll be holding a

wake at Jane's, and you're welcome to join us. There will be food, and drinks, and hopefully some laughter," Roxy's voice breaks and they start to cry.

Jane walks over to Roxy and wraps an arm around their waist, "Sorry, sorry," Roxy mutters through their tears, "I'm okay, I just," they laugh without mirth, "Well, you all know."

Jane runs her hand up and down Roxy's back while Roxy regains their composure and then the two of them turn to face Dirk's casket together. Hal watches emotionlessly as Jane tuts and brushes imaginary wrinkles out of Dirk's suit. Roxy stands there, staring sadly down at Dirk's resting face, before finally reaching into the pocket of their suit and pulling out Dirk's stupid pointy shades. They have enough grace and mindfulness to simply tuck them into his breast pocket instead of sliding them onto his face, at least.

Roxy and Jane step away from the casket, and Jane deposits Roxy back into their spot in the family row before going back to her seat. Roxy takes Rose's other hand and sits quietly sniffing and picking at their sister's nail polish. Dave is doing the same on Rose's other side.

*Rose's manicure will be ruined before the end of the night,* Hal thinks.

A handful of people Hal doesn't recognize approach Dirk's casket and say their final goodbyes. It could be ten minutes or an hour, Hal doesn't really know, and then Jake is getting up from his spot in the family row - and it finally clicks in Hal's head that he's the one that miscounted. Roxy had said five, and Hal was so used to Dirk insisting that Jake be invited that he upped the number. He gets lost in that, following that train of thought to its inevitable crash that he doesn't watch Jake. Doesn't pay attention until Jake is sitting back down next to him, puffy-eyed and congested, elbowing him and indicating that Hal should be the next person in the room to advance on the casket.

Breathing deep, Hal stands and approaches his twin. Dirk's face looks waxy, and his hair isn't quite right. If he looks closely, Hal thinks he could find traces of the glue keeping Dirk's eyes and lips shut. Morbidly, he wonders if they had to wire Dirk's mouth closed for the viewing.

Hal sighs deeply. He digs into his pocket and pulls out a silver dollar. This coin he turns over in his hands, over and over, until he mumbles softly - to himself, or to Dirk, or to the silence in the room he doesn't know - "We never did figure it out, but uh. In case you need it, bro. Worst comes to worst I lost a buck, right?" He reaches into the casket and takes Dirk's cool hand, turns it over and slides the coin into his palm. It's then he notices that the coin chimes softly against a gold ring. It hadn't been in Dirk's hand when the service began, he doesn't think.

Hal looks over his shoulder, back at Jake who is sitting with his elbows on his knees and holding his head. He thinks that Dirk would have liked that Jake didn't try to put the ring on his finger, would have liked that he left it in his hand as though it were still a choice Dirk could make.

With ring and coin in hand, Hal settles Dirk's arms back into their resting position before he finds his seat next to Jake again. When Jake holds out his hand, Hal even takes it as a few more people stand to tell stories about Dirk.

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Late that evening, after all but the closest of Dirk's friends and family have left Jane's and there's only a small group of people still sitting closely, drunkenly grieving together Hal begins to wander Jane's estate.

He finds their hostess sober, crying to herself as she washes dishes in her big kitchen.

"Jane," he mutters, stepping up beside her.

She jumps a little, a tittering laugh escaping her as the plate she'd been washing slips from her fingers and lands back in the soapy water, "Oh, Hal. I wasn't expecting- You startled me."

"Sorry," Hal says without emotion. He's quiet for a moment, then, "Don't you have staff to do the dishes?"

Jane nods, but continues washing the dishes, "Oh, yes. But I've found that when I can't seem to organize my thoughts or get my mind to peace, cleaning helps. Something about removing the mess, perhaps? Dirk would-" she inhales sharply, before raising a damp hand to her quivering lip. She gives Hal a watery smile, "Dirk would have had a whole spiel about the psychological and metaphorical implications of that, I suppose."

Hal snorts, rolling his eyes, "Yeah, Rose too."

There's silence between them. Not the awkward, grating kind from the viewing, but the peaceful sort that two people can share when wallowing in each other's sadness. With a sigh, Jane hands Hal a dishrag, "Will you dry? My staff will be grateful for less work in the kitchen, I think."

Hal nods, taking the towel. In silence, Jane swishes the dishes through the water, taking care to scrub them to spotless before she hands them to Hal who dries them thoroughly and stacks them in neat piles of ten.

Twenty.

Thirty.

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In the family room, Dave lays on the floor with his head in Karkat's lap. He's pleasantly drunk and unpleasantly sad, and the vibe of the room is warm and comfortable but everyone can sense what's missing. Karkat's dark hand brushes Dave's hair off his forehead softly, and Dave's eyes flicker across the ceiling. For once, he's silent. His mind is silent. The feeling of wrongness has settled so far into everyone's bones that no one dares disturb anyone. No one said anything when Roxy poured herself a vodka and coke, no one said anything when Rose opened a second bottle of wine. Tonight, it seemed, they were allowed to fall off the wagon.

Dave watched, blinking slowly as Jake threw back another shot of something dark by the wet bar. And another. And another.

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Rose is drunk and she knows it. She had warned Kanaya that it wasn't going to be a good night for her, alcohol wise, before they had even left for the viewing.

"Rose, love," Kanaya had sighed, taking her hands, "Tonight will be difficult regardless of if you drink or not. I would greatly prefer it if you did not drink, but I will not be surprised if tonight you break your sobriety."

At that moment, Rose was quite glad she hadn't done her makeup yet.

And now, she was sitting on the couch in Jane's family room tucked under Kanaya's arm, with a clear line of sight to the kitchen, where Jane had busied herself for the better part of an hour. If Rose were sober, or perhaps if she weren't trying to listen to her therapist and feel her feelings, maybe she'd be knitting. Doing something to keep her hands busy instead of focusing on the hole in her chest.

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Tonight, Roxy had broken six years of sobriety. Today, they buried their cousin. Tomorrow, Roxy would call their sponsor who would likely tell Roxy to come back to AA. Instead, Roxy would go to their therapist and explain that it wasn't that they had been trying to forget the pain of losing Dirk, but that they had- what? What had they been trying to do, aside from numb themselves to the grief and agony of losing the first person that had ever made them feel seen?

Whatevs. That was a problem for tomorrow Roxy. Tonight Roxy was going to lay on Jane's floor, a little buzzed, and stare at the sky through the skylight. The night sky was remarkably clear, given how shitty the day was - not in terms of weather, just in terms of stress.

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June sat in her cousin's family room awkwardly. She'd never really known Dirk that well, but everyone else in the room - they were her family and her friends. If they were hurting she wanted to be there for them, but she didn't really know how to say that without sounding like a broken record or a total dork.

She kept shooting glances at Jake, still standing by the bar, and not knowing what to say. What do you say to someone who lost their partner?

Bluh. Grief and pain were definitely not June's forte.

Finally, Jade elbowed her in the ribs and motioned for her to follow up the stairs to the next floor of Jane's estate. Shrugging, she followed. At least it seemed like Jade had a plan.

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Jade sat in the corner of Jane's couch, biting her nails as she watched Jake get drunk and everyone else wallow in their own pain. There wasn't much she could do to make her friends feel better, but she'd do what she could.

Dirk's death hurt, but there wasn't anything she could do to change what had happened - it had been a freak incident, no one's fault. And it wasn't that she was unaffected by what happened - quite the opposite, really, but Jade wasn't the type to sit and process her emotions

silently in her head. She needed comfort, and god damn it so did everyone else. So Jade did the first thing that came to mind - something she and the others hadn't done in years, but always made her feel better and made her feel loved.

It was time for a fucking puppy pile.

Nudging June, Jade dragged the younger girl upstairs and began raiding every one of Jane's spare bedrooms for pillows and blankets, couch cushions and books, broomsticks and fairy lights and anything else that could be made to make a kickass giant pillowfort.

It wasn't until she got downstairs with all her bounty that she started crying. Her pillow fort engineering buddy had been buried that morning.

It's her wailing that gets everyone moving again, she realizes. Hal and Jane come back in from the kitchen, and Dave sits up from the floor. They look at her, and the pillowfort supplies she's standing in the center of, and how June has her in a hug rocking back and forth, and it's a silent mutual agreement.

Everyone gets their asses in gear and starts covering Jane's family room floor in pillows and cushions, stuffed animals and covers everything with blankets. The spare king sized sheets from the hall closet go up on the old pvc poles Jade and Dirk had made specifically for pillow forts years ago, and the fairy lights are draped over the inner roof before everyone piles inside.

By the time everyone is cozy, they're all laughing through their tears.

"Brilliant idea, Jade," Jane compliments, snuggly tucked beside Roxy and Hal. A pillow rests on her low back, and Dave's head rests on the pillow. Rose is curled against one side, and Kanaya against her; Karkat is sitting at the edge of the fort, too warm to join the puppy pile. Jade smiles and climbs up onto Roxy's side, sliding herself into the mess of limbs and drages June in behind her.

"Jake!" Jade calls out of the fort, "Come cuddle." When no response comes, she pokes her head outside the pillow fort. Jake is nowhere to be seen.

She starts to clamber out of the makeshift tent, when Hal pulls her back, "I'll go, Jade."

She turns back to look at Hal, confused, but his expression is unreadable. She curls back into the group, and joins the others in talking fondly about their memories of Dirk. Jade will fall asleep there, warm in the pile of people she loves, with memories of Dirk in her ears and laughter on her lips and tears in her eyes.

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Hal opts to leave the cuddle pile because first, that's too many people for him to deal with right now, and second because he doesn't want to hear stories about Dirk any more.

So he goes and searches Jane's estate for Jake. Hal finds him outside, just before the edge of the property meets treeline, and Jake is staring up at the night sky through the trees with a three-quarter empty bottle of whiskey in his hand.

“Jake,” Hal says quietly, getting the man’s attention.

Jake turns to face Hal and smiles brightly, with sadness misting his eyes, “Dirk,” he whispers back, and then his smile falls, “No- ah, that is- Hello, Hal.”

Hal pretends the knife in his chest doesn’t twist deeper at that, “C’mon, man. Come back inside, it’s time to try and sleep off all that whiskey you’ve drunk.”

Jake nods drunkenly, dropping the bottle where he stands, and wobbles over to Hal before dropping half his weight onto Hal’s shoulder. Hal drags him back into the house and drops him on the cushionless couch in the family room before lowering himself to the edge of the pillow fort. To his surprise, Roxy is still awake.

They reach out a hand in his direction, and Hal takes it. He watches Roxy snifle, a tear falling down their face before they pull him into the tent.

## E (As in Beginning, End, and Everything)

A week after Dirk's funeral Hal is sitting on the living room floor in what had been Dirk's apartment surrounded by Dirk's things.

It's a normal living room. A couch, a television, a couple of tables. If Hal were able to look at all the pieces instead of the whole puzzle, maybe he wouldn't feel so overwhelmed. The apartment is quiet and the silence feels stale. The machines that Dirk kept whirring are shut down now. The television is off, and Hal hasn't bothered to try and find the remote yet. He... really hasn't gotten anything on his list done yet. There's clean up to do, and things to put into storage, and dvds and puppets and things that can just be thrown away. Hal had come here with the explicit intent to start in on that list.

Hal takes one step into Dirk's bedroom and gets a strong hit of Dirk's cologne. He collapses into the chair at Dirk's desk and accidentally knocks the mouse. The screen wakes up to reveal a picture of Dirk with his arm slung over Roxy and Dave's shoulders, Rose and Hal sitting cross-legged on a picnic blanket in front of them. Jake took that picture. Hal remembers bitterly that he and Dirk had been arguing that day. Dirk was near to completing a new coding project and had fallen deep into that rabbit hole, to the point that he insisted the others would have more fun without him. Hal pointed out that having a family picnic without Dirk but with Jake would be weird, and had eventually physically dragged Dirk out of his apartment.

When Hal finally manages to stumble out of the bedroom and down the stairs, he practically flops onto the floor in front of the couch. He's zoning out, staring into empty space and thinking about the last thing he'd said to Dirk. For once, he can't remember what it had been. When Dirk had his accident, Hal hadn't seen him in a few days. He'd been busy with a project of his own - coding he could have done at any time, he knows now, but at the time he'd just wanted it off his plate.

There's a shrill chiming noise and it pulls Hal from his thoughts. He picks up his cellphone from the table, but the screen is dark. Not his phone, then. Hal looks around and listens, trying to pinpoint- there. Under the couch cushion. Dirk's phone? Who the fuck is calling-

Jake?

*Why?*

...to hear the voicemail, maybe? Better to let the phone ring then. Hal declines the call and sets the phone on the coffee table.

He should... he should get moving. If the bedroom is too much, maybe he should start in the kitchen. The fridge probably needs to be cleaned out, and there shouldn't be any bullshit sentimental attachment to Dirk's ketchup bottle.

So up Hal gets, and he shuffles through Dirk's space into the open kitchen. Arguably, it is the messiest room in the apartment. On the counter there is a stack of soda cases, and the



recycling can is overflowing with empty cans. Dirk never kept much in the way of dishes, in order to force himself to keep the ones he had clean, so it isn't hyperbolic to say that all of Dirk's dishes are in the sink. Mindlessly, Hal starts there. Two plates, a bowl, two forks and a spoon later the dishes are done. Still on auto-pilot, Hal puts them away in their cabinet.

When the cabinet door closes with an audible *thunk*, Hal sighs in aggravation with himself. If he wants to clean out the apartment, those needed to be boxed up.

Whatever, he could deal with it later.

The chiming noise plays again in the living room.

Hal turns his attention to the microwave, which is flipped on its face and seems to have been viciously gutted for parts in whatever project Dirk had deemed the machine to be a worthy sacrifice for. Shaking his head, Hal picks up the precarious pile of junk and screws before placing it unceremoniously into the first of what he can only assume will be the first of many, many black trash bags to come out of Dirk's apartment.

Hal does eventually manage to find a rhythm to his cleaning, and he quickly learns that he's only going to get the cleaning done if he doesn't ponder over the memories of every item before he stuffs it into the appropriate box or bag - Trash, Storage, Keep for Jake, Jane, Roxy, Dave, Rose or Himself.

For tonight, at least, Hal tells himself it's okay to avoid anything in the *keep* category.

When Hal opens the fridge to start cleaning it out, he's met with the aged smell of mildew and the distinct lack of cold and light that clues him into realizing that Dirk had also scavenged parts from the refrigerator. Only this time Hal gets the added bonus that there's no way he's going to fit this machine into a trash bag.

As Hal is scrolling through his phone and looking up appliance removal companies, there is a pounding at the apartment door. Curiously, Hal walks over to the door and looks through the eyehole where he finds Jake English swaying in the wind.

He opens the door cautiously, "Jake?"

The man in question breaks into a big grin, and leans forward further than a sober person could, before he greets, "Lo, Hal. What're you doing here?" and pushes his way into the apartment without invitation.

"Uh," Hal responds, you know - eloquently, "Cleaning. Why are you here?"

Jake wanders the apartment, narrowly avoiding misplaced boxes and bags of trash. He sees Dirk's phone on the table where Hal had left it and snatches it up before wobbling over to the outlet and plugging it in. "Always forgets, that one," Hal hears Jake mumble to himself. "Dirk hasn't answered his phone in a few days," Jake finally responds, "Came to see what was wrong with the ol' chap, but if you're here I reckon he's already been ushered to bed rather fiercely, eh?"

It feels like a smack in the face or a knife to the stomach or some other pain-ridden cliché, Hal thinks, to have to tell Jake once again. And in the back of his mind there's a voice telling him not to bother, that Jake is obviously drunk, and that he'll remember when he sobers up. No reason to upset the dumbass and get a handful of weepy drunk for his trouble. It's another choice, and in retrospect Hal admits he made the wrong one.

"Yeah, man," Hal shrugs, mumbling through his lie, "Sent his overtired ass right to bed when I got here. You should have seen the crap he pulled with the microwave."

Jake smiles, glancing at the stairs that lead to the bedrooms fondly, before turning back to Hal, "Well, chum. You have him call me when he does finally wake, will you? Worried me something fierce, the blasted fool that Dirk is."

Silently, Hal nods. Jake wobbles his way back out of the apartment with a quick "Toodleloo!" over his shoulder and shuts the apartment door.

Hal locks it behind Jake, glares around the apartment for a moment before unplugging Dirk's phone and shutting it off. He drags himself upstairs and into the spare bedroom before collapsing face first into the mattress for the night.

# D Flat (like you fell on your face)

## Chapter Notes

Hey, so. I'm back. I have some backlog for this fic but I stopped working on it because I couldn't get the order of events right - so I added the Non-linear Narrative tag. Also, it's Nanowrimo, so I'm challenging myself to write at least three times a week. We'll see how that goes. Anyway - double update tonight.

The phone rings in the dead of night and Hal's reminded of the first time he was woken up by the shrill sound. A memory stirs when an unfamiliar voice, exasperated in tone asks, "Dirk Strider?"

"No, this is Hal."

"I've got a Jake English here, been calling for a Dirk Strider for over an hour. You tell that one to come pick this one up, huh?"

"Dirk's dead. Which bar is this?"

"I see," the bartender sighs and spits out the name of the bar.

The drive is surreal. Hal's on auto-pilot the whole way, and it's only his internal GPS that draws him out of his haze. He pulls into the parking lot of what has to be the sleaziest bar anyone has ever seen. The neon lights above the roof are half out, turning *Crisanne's Roadhouse* into *Crises house* which makes Hal stop and stare in mild disbelief for a minute. The Roadhouse is a standing cliché. It belongs in a horror novel. It belongs on a long-running formulaic television show about demons and vampires. It is not the kind of place to be associated with Jake English, but that's rather the point. Jake doesn't *want* to be found here, drinking his grief down with dark liquor burning each sip.

Jake's truck is parked outside the front entrance, and aside from one other car, the parking lot is empty. Hal pulls in next to Jake's truck and he's halfway out of the car before he has the engine off. It's cold outside, but he neglected to grab a jacket before leaving the apartment. The car keys slide into his front pocket as he yanks open the door and steps into the bar. The bartender looks up from the glass she's drying to nod at Hal and in the corner of the bar is Jake, slumped over with his head pillowed in his arms. He's staring at the doorway and sees Hal as he enters, but his square glasses are folded on the counter. At this distance, he probably can't tell who walked in. Especially not with how many shot glasses are laid out in front of him.

Hal steps up to the bar and slides into the seat next to Jake, and the bartender sets down the glass and approaches the duo.

“Your friend here came in when we opened at six. He’s had at least two shots of the good stuff for every hour since.”

“What’s the good stuff here?” Hal asks, distractedly checking his watch. Quarter after 2. Eight hours, then?

The bartender turns and swings a bottle down off the top shelf and sets it down in front of the Strider, “This Johnnie can vote.”

Hal stares at the bottle of whiskey, half empty and the color of red oak. Jake doesn’t even *like* whiskey. It gives him migraines, like most dark alcohols. It’s why he sticks to gin or vodka... if he’s not punishing himself.

Hal rubs his eyes tiredly and pushes his bangs up out of his face, then turns his attention to Jake. He’s squinting at Hal like he can’t tell what he’s looking at, so Hal reaches out and slides his glasses onto his sideways face. The nosepiece presses into his skin but he smiles at Hal like he’s just received the best news he’d ever heard. Like he’d won a million dollars and a puppy and a marriage proposal in the same minute.

“Dirk!” he chirps drunkenly.

Hal sighs and keeps his expression very carefully controlled so as not to grimace and looks up at the bartender, “Does he still have to close out his tab?”

The woman shakes her head, “Nah, he paid by the shot. I have his keys though.” The bartender reaches down and pulls something jangly out from a plastic bin, wiping them off with the towel on her shoulder before handing them over. Hal takes them and slides them into his pocket alongside his own keys. With that accomplished, It’s time to get Jake home.

Hal slides off the seat and gets behind Jake, a hand on his back. “Come on, man. Time to go.”

Jake hums and blinks at Hal hazily, then drags himself up to sit and stumbles away from the bar. Hal steadies him and Jake presses into his side, cuddling close, reeking of booze and sweat, and his skin is somehow flushed and clammy at the same time beneath Hal’s hand. Supporting Jake’s weight as he stumbles, Hal walks him out the door and to the space between their cars.

Jake staggers forward and tries to yank the driver-side door of his truck open, and Hal is thankful that Jake had the presence of mind when he was sober to lock the fucking car. Jake pats his thighs, looking bewildered at his lack of keys.

“Jake, come on. You aren’t driving yourself home,” Hal sighs and reaches into his pocket for his keys. He feels the sharp edge of the kitty brass knuckle keyring Roxy gifted him and yanks them free of his pocket, unlocking the door to his car as he does.

“M fine, mate. Fit as a- fit as a... I can drive,” Jake’s blinking owlshly and standing at roughly 150-degree angle, so. No. No, he can not.

Hal reaches past him and yanks open the passenger side door of his car and gestures for Jake to get in.

He pouts and shuffles forward, reaching for Hal, “Dirk-”

Hal sidesteps, but doing so shuts the passenger door. Jake reaches for Hal again and he dodges but his back hits the car, so when Jake reaches for him a third time he gets trapped between Jake and the door to the backseat.

Jake’s hand comes down on the roof of the car next to Hal’s head, and he leans in close. Hal can smell the alcohol on his breath more strongly than when he crashed into him in the bar. He turns his head away from Jake, stares off into the middle distance of the roadway, and crosses his arms over his chest. Hal licks his lips and rolls his eyes. *This shit again?*

“My heart,” Jake starts, “I didn’t mean to make you worry.” His hand settles on Hal’s hip and he leans closer, pressing the shorter man bodily into the car. His forehead comes down on Hal’s shoulder and nuzzles into his neck, “I’m sorry.”

“Jake,” Hal sighs in irritation for what must be the fifth time since arriving at the bar, “Why did you go out drinking tonight?”

Jake hums and wraps his arms around Hal’s hips, pulling him closer, “I suppose I- I must have wanted to let off a little steam.”

Hal tenses his forearms in some attempt to put a little more distance between his and Jake’s bodies, “No, Jake. *Why?* What was the reason? You’ve been at the bar for eight hours. That’s not letting off a little steam.”

Jake freezes and stops trying to pull Hal in close. His head tilts and he stares off into the night with a puzzled look on his face, “It. It’s your birthday? Dirk, it’s- why would I leave you on your birthday to go drinking?”

Hal turns his head back to Jake and fixes his red eyes on green, “Why would you leave Dirk on his birthday, Jake?” Jake blinks, lifts his head off Hal’s shoulder, and stares. His eyes pinch shut behind his glasses and he tries to back away from Hal. In response, Hal’s hands snap out and grab Jake’s biceps harshly, preventing him from stepping back. Hal shakes the bigger man a little and his eyes open again, this time tears trace Jake’s lashes. “Why would you leave Dirk on his birthday?”

Jake’s eyes close again as the tears fall. Hal loosens his grip but doesn’t let go. He is expecting it when Jake slumps forward, so he stays steady on his feet when all two hundred pounds of Jake English drops onto his shoulders. Hal’s hands come up around his shoulders and he twists so Jake is leaning back against the car, supported in his grief.

Hal pulls the passenger door open with one hand while the other stays on Jake’s shoulder to keep him upright while he pushes his glasses up into his hair and buries his face in his hands. “Hal,” he mutters, sounding lost and broken. In lieu of a response, Jake is guided into the car by the shoulder. Hal leans in after him and pulls the seatbelt across, buckling Jake into the car.

Hal isn't expecting it when Jake wraps his arms around his torso. He falls against Jake's muscled chest awkwardly, cracking his elbow against the gearshift and kicking his legs as his feet leave solid ground. "Christ! Fucking- Jake!" He struggles, pushing and shifting until he's sitting upright in Jake's lap with his legs out the door, "Can you at least save the breakdown till I get you on the couch, dude? You do this *every time*. I don't know how you manage to drink yourself to the point of forgetting, but it's fucking annoying."

Jake shifts with Hal as best he can, buckled into the car like he is, and then he gets his arms around Hal's chest and buries his nose between his shoulder blades. "'M sorry. I just- I want-"

Hal's heard it all before. *I just miss him. I want Dirk back. I'll stop drinking, I'll stop doing this. I'll stop pretending he isn't gone.* "Buck the fuck up, Jake. And let me go so I can drive."

Jake's arms fall from Hal's shoulders, and the Strider slips out of the car. He closes the car door, rounds the vehicle, and slips into the driver's seat. When he turns the ignition Jake's head is in his hands again, but he makes no noise beyond that of a shuddering breath.

Hal drives. The music is low, something with a lullaby beat and warm honeyed vocals, too quiet to make out over the rumble of the engine. It's not a long drive from the bar back to his apartment, but it crosses two county lines from where Jake lives. He has to wonder if Jake picked a bar closer to him on purpose, or by sheer luck. When he finally pulls into his assigned parking space at the apartment complex Hal turns the engine off and sits quietly for a moment. "Jake," he starts in a tired voice, "You can't keep doing this, man."

"I know," Jake replies quietly, softly.

"Dude, I work. I have to work in five hours. I'm not gonna get back to sleep until I'm certain your drunk ass isn't gonna vomit on my floor and die of alcohol poisoning."

"I know."

"Fucking hell, Jake. Dirk's gone, man. I'm pissed about it too. I'm upset, I'm hurt. But we have to keep going."

"I know."

"Jake, what you're doing? It's not- It's not going. It's stagnation, it's refusal to process."

"I know, Hal," he snaps, lifting his head and meeting red eyes. Red eyes when he so desperately wants them to be orange. "Damn it all to fucking heck, Hal. I *know*."

Hal stares at Jake for a minute, quiet and resigned to what he's going to say next, he looks away before he can force the words out, "I'm calling Roxy in the morning, Jake."

Jake stares at his shoes, nods once, and unbuckles the seatbelt. He slides out of the car, still slightly unsteady on his feet as he stumbles up the stairs to Hal's apartment.

Hal is slow to follow. He walks with little motivation, the weight of the world pushing at his shoulders as the weight of his keychain drags at his finger. He can't keep dragging Jake's ass

out of the fire, it's too much. Pushing this on Roxy won't be any easier, but maybe between the two of them, they can knock some sense into the idiot's head. If not? Well. Not exactly the call he'd like to make to Jane Crocker, but it could be done. A full-on intervention might be what it takes to get Jake to pull his head out of his ass, and then Hal can wash his hands of the meathead for good.

## C Sharp (Like Tongue and Temper)

Jake wakes slowly, uncomprehending of his surroundings. The lumpy couch, the grease-stained carpet, the smooth whirr of the heating unit in the corner. It's not his space, even in its familiarity. The sun shines brightly outside Hal's apartment window, the kind of brightness that only comes from the noon-day sun shining off snow. He's done it again. Drunk himself stupid and whined and pined for Dirk to the point the barkeep got fed up enough to call the subject of his affections, only to find the subject beyond reach. Jake groans, dragging the scratchy couch pillow beneath his head into his lap and curling around it as he buries his nose into the back cushion.

The small, barely-awake noise Jake makes gives away his state of consciousness and draws Roxy's attention away from the small mess of food in the frying pan. They plate the greasy mess quickly and without thought for presentation. Hangover food is not meant to be pretty. "Jake," they try, now leaning against the doorframe between the kitchen and living room.

He shakes his head lightly, trying to dig himself further into the couch. Maybe if he crawls far enough into the stuffed fabric he'll just disappear into it. Maybe then he won't have to have the conversation that's coming to him as soon as he turns to face the owner of that voice- that bright bubblegum voice that sounds so glum. Sounds so hurt. Sounds so disappointed. Jake burrows further into the cushions at these thoughts.

Roxy makes their way into the living room and sets the plate on the coffee table before they kneel in the space in front of the couch. Their hand comes to rest on Jake's shoulder, gently pulling him away from the back of the couch.

Jake allows Roxy to roll him over, wincing as the sunlight makes his head pulse in a steady rhythm. He grins weakly, pain and sickness clouding his normally bright features, and then he closes his eyes against the daylight.

"Heard you had a party," Roxy says. It should be a joke. It should be a humorous jibe at Jake's hangover. Their tone is reminiscent of a funeral dirge and their expression is grievous.

"Rather a shit party, seeing as how I was the only one invited," Jake whispers, trying to keep his voice low so as not to irritate his hangover. Funny how his own accent makes his headache worse. Maybe that's a thinly veiled reference to how Jake hates himself and only drinks to prove it.

"Oh, I dunno, babes. Heard you had Johnnie and Jack with you."

"Those blokes always help me make the *worst* decisions."

"Hey, could be weirder. I used to party with the Goose like I was a gander."

The low chortle Jake lets out is enough to put a hundred-watt smile on Roxy's face and a sharp shooting pain through his temple. He raises a hand to massage his forehead as Roxy reaches behind themselves to take Jake's glasses from the coffee table. Jake takes the lenses



from their hand and slides them onto his face gingerly, and then Roxy takes his arm, pulls him up into a sitting position, and sets the plate in his lap.

“You eat, and then we gotta talk Jakey. This- what happened last night? It’s just not okay, babes.”

“I know, Rox,” Jake replies and then tucks into the food. It’s good heavy food that’ll absorb the liquor left in his stomach. He knows better than to drink without eating, but last night... well. Last night he’d let his good sense walk off without a chaperone and it disappeared into the whiskey colored sunset.

Roxy lets Jake eat in silence, leaning back into Hal’s couch with a sense of comfort that anyone else would only be able to manage in their own home. But Roxy is always comfortable here, Jake supposes. If not for the fact that they had their own place, he’d assume Roxy lived here. Always over, helping Hal with some project or another.

When Jake finishes with his plate he takes it to the kitchen and washes it, half for another few minutes to think and half because he prefers to be a good guest, albeit an unwanted one. It buys him barely any time, in retrospect, and when he moseys back into the living room Roxy is sitting with their legs pretzelled and cheek in hand.

“You know what I’m gonna say, right?”

Slowly, Jake nods, then shrugs. “I get the idea, yes.”

“Jake,” Roxy sighs, “I don’t think you do. Like. Obvs you get that I want to do the whole *don’t you know you’re worrying me and Hal?* And the *this was your last chance, man*, thing but,” They shrug, “I know where you’re at, kind of? Oh, don’t give me that look, I mean the booze not- not *Dirk*. You’re hurting yourself with this, but you know that. You aren’t going to stop just because I tell you to.”

Jake feels low, small, and fragile. He’s not even saying anything, and Roxy is ripping him open like an easy-peel clementine. He’s not sure when the tears start sliding down his cheeks, he’s not even aware of them until Roxy is brushing them away.

“Jakey,” they say again in that sad tone, “You gotta stop. You’re hurtin’ yourself, which is bad enough, but you’re hurtin’ others too. Me and Hal? Jane’s gonna be furious when we tell her, and we’re gonna. You knew the deal the last time Hal had to go get you.”

It’s a slow nod that Jake provides, still staring at his socks, “Where is Hal?”

“He’s out pickin’ up Janey. She doesn’t know what’s up, not yet. But you’re gonna tell her when she gets here.”

“I don’t- I don’t want her to know. She already worries about me so much, she has so much on her plate.”

Roxy reaches out and takes Jake’s hand, squeezing it hard, “Yeah, I know. But Jake, maybe this’ll be the kick in the ass you seem to need. If it was me, y’know, maybe Jane wouldn’t

freak but you? You're the golden boy. She'll pull out all the stops on you."

Jake squeezes Roxy's hand back, "You know she'd pull the stops out for you too, Rox. She doesn't want you to relapse either."

A wide smile that doesn't reach Roxy's eyes crosses their face, "Sure," they say. Jake knows it's not an agreement to his statement, but he lets it slide. He lets a lot slide. He lets himself slide down on the couch to lean on Roxy's shoulder.

The two of them sit there quietly while they wait for Hal and Jane to arrive. Roxy, quietly resigned to the intervention that's coming, tries to plan out ways to keep Jane on some level of calm. Jake spends those moments lost in his head, trying to put together some defense that will spare him. He's certain Hal is going to march him onto the gallows with glee.

The door opens and Jane walks in with a small chuckle and an exaggerated, "Why thank you, Mister Strider!" It's so off from the tone that Jake was expecting her to come in with that he's taken aback as his attention snaps to her.

Jane steps into the living room and sets her purse down on the corner of the couch, followed quickly by her jacket. Her hands find her hips and she smiles, "Well," she chirps, "You didn't tell me it was going to be the whole party, Hal."

"You didn't tell her?" Roxy asks Hal, and it's so *obviously* not the right question to ask that Jake cringes and shrinks back into his shoulders willing the couch to swallow him whole.

Jane's bright smile fades a bit, turning down barely from the 11 she walked in with to a 10. "Tell me what?"

"Rox, we agreed Jake was going to tell her himself."

"Are you sure? I mean- this whole thing is already gonna suck for him. Do we *really* need to add that to it?"

"Tell me what?" Jane asks again, her arms crossing under her chest. Her smile drops to an expectant neutral. No more games.

"Yeah, we do. He'll keep avoiding it, and that won't get us anywhere."

Roxy sighs, but relents. They grab Jake's hand and squeeze it lightly.

"I really don't appreciate being kept in the dark, and you all know this. What on God's green Earth are you hiding from me?"

Hal glares at Jake, silently pressuring him into explaining. Jake is sure he could double down and refuse to talk if it were just Hal and Roxy, but Jane adds a whole new layer of complication. She does not possess the endless patience or stoicism of the Strilondes, but she does have the will to pry answers from Jake if she knows he has one. So, staring at a stain on the carpet in an attempt to avoid eye contact, Jake says, "Hal had to come pick me up from a bar last night."

Jane's arms drop to her sides and she looks mildly confused until Hal clears his throat and says, "And?"

Jake looks up and meets his eyes for a mere second before he finds the grease stain again. What is that? Motor oil? "And it's not the first time he's had to do so."

Jane raises a hand to her lips and slowly lowers herself into the plush chair beside the couch. She's quiet for a minute, contemplative as if trying to parse meaning from Jake's vagueness. "Are you... Are you saying you've developed a drinking problem, Jake?"

It's Jake's silence that provides an answer for Jane. It's the way he sinks back into the couch, back into Roxy's side. It's the way Roxy says nothing but has an expression that mixes quiet determination and empathy. It's the way Hal steps up to perch on the arm of Jane's chair, quiet and stoic in a way she had thought he'd abandoned alongside the shades that no longer had a matching pair on a matching face. "I see," she says although she really doesn't. She doesn't see how anyone could go that far with vice, how anyone could allow themselves to get that sloppy in a public space.

It's Roxy who speaks up next, "We were hopin' you'd be down to help with the... well, the intervention, Janey."

"Well, of course. I'd rather you not have sprung this on me quite so suddenly, but I think I understand why you did. The first step is admitting it's a problem and all that."

Roxy hides a tight smile by turning into Jake's shoulder. They had been expecting Jane to be snappish and aggravated like she had been when confronted with Roxy's drinking issue. Roxy wishes they could say this was a surprise, that once again Jake is being handled with kid gloves, even if they're doing the same thing. "Okay, then. I'll start?" After a moment of silence without dissent Roxy speaks, "Jake, you're really worryin' me with this. There are nights when no one knows where you are and days when no one can find you cuz you're sleepin' it off in your car or a shitty motel room. I know you're missin' Dirk, but honey, this ain't the way to go about that. Therapy is totally a thing, babes."

This, at least, pulls a scoff of amusement from Jake before he nods shyly. "I am sorry, Roxy. I didn't mean for this to be such a cluster fudge."

"S'okay. But you gotta listen so you know what's got everyone in such a fuss, y'know?" Jake nods again and Roxy looks up at Jane.

"Oh, me? I do wish I had been given a bit more of a heads up about this all, but. Well, I can say that I certainly don't want you out at night drunk off your keister to the point Hal has to rescue you. I can't say that I've been knowingly hurt by your actions, but there have been an awful lot of sick days in the past year or so that are now being cast in a new light. I do hope you'll swear you won't do this again."

Before Roxy can cut in and say something about how that's not really how an intervention is supposed to go, Jake perks up, "Of course. I don't want to keep hurting you all, and I guess I wasn't aware of how much I was putting everyone else out. It won't happen again."

Roxy watches as Hal's expression turns lax, as he stares at Jake with disbelief until he can't do anything besides scoff. "What's got you all huffy, Hal? If Jake says he's gonna stop drinkin' I think we should believe him. Nothin' good'll come of thinkin' he's lyin'."

Jake looks up at Hal with a hopeful, shaky smile.

Hal rolls his eyes and shakes his head. "I'm sorry, Rox, really. I don't mean to step on your whole positive energy and willpower and support system thing, but I'll believe it when I see it. I've heard it all from him, every time I pick him up, every time I keep him from drowning his stupid hungover ass in my toilet, every time a bartender calls me and cusses me out for Dirk being so damn unreachable. I agreed to this because I knew it would get Jane involved."

"Hal-" Jake tries to cut in, reaching out for him but Hal flinches back on the arm of the chair. The Strider is having none of it, none of Jake's platitudes and persuasion, not now when he's on a roll and Jake is the only one dumb enough to be standing on the tracks.

"No, fuck you. I'm done, Jake. I can't keep dealing with this crap. Do you know how much it fucking kills me? To get those damn 3 am phone calls? Every fucking time I'm expecting it to be another nurse, or a cop, or someone else calling me to tell me you're dead. I get flashes of Dirk's call every. Single. Fucking. Time. Clean up your fucking act or have the decency to roll your own fucking corpse six feet under," and Hal stalks off up the stairs, slamming the door behind him as he enters his workspace.

The others stare after him but in the end, only Roxy is comfortable and confident enough to go after him. They rise from the couch and smile, "I'm gonna check on him. Janey, can you take Jake home?"

"Hal drove me, I don't- I can't-" Roxy nods and just hands over their keys. Jake and Jane's quiet mumbling can be heard as they gather themselves to leave.

Roxy makes their way up the stairs and knocks gently on Hal's door, "Hal? Hey, you okay?" There's no response, but if Hal truly didn't want anyone coming after him he'd have locked the door and cranked up the music. When Roxy tries the doorknob it turns easily and Hal is visibly seething at his desk. His arms are crossed over his chest and he's slumped down in the chair, posture imperfect. He's rocking the chair slightly back and forth with a toe on the ground. "Hal?" His attention doesn't focus outward until Roxy sets a hand on his shoulder and he snaps back to attention.

Hal's head snaps up and he traps Roxy's hand against his shoulder until he realizes who it is, "I didn't hear you come in."

"I knocked. You doin' okay?"

A heavy sigh is all the response Roxy receives.

"I didn't think you were gonna snap like that. You really shook Jake, babes."

Hal is silent for another minute before he reaches out to his computer and turns it on. His posture straightens out and his attention drifts to the screen as it boots up. Roxy makes their

way to the couch in the corner, prepared to just sit in silence until Hal starts rambling about some idea or project or topic change. After a few minutes of typing and clicking Hal pushes away from the computer and turns his chair to face Roxy as they lay on the couch with a book above their head.

“Without fail, every single time I pick Jake up he calls me Dirk. He goes out *specifically* to forget, and I get caught in the crossfire every time.”

Roxy sits up and slouches, leaning their elbows on their knees and their head in their hands, “He’s in pain, Hal. He’s not doing what he’s doing to hurt you, he just wants to stop his aches.”

Hal nods, chewing his lip for a moment, “I lived every day of Dirk’s life in his shadow, Roxy. Every day. He was the better friend, the better mechanic, the better *person*. You and Jane are probably the only people who see *me*, and I know for a fact that Jake couldn’t see the forest for the trees if I gave him a goddamn chainsaw.”

Roxy’s face scrunches and they ask, “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying Jake never saw me. He saw *Dirk and Hal* and doesn’t know what to do now that the lead of that duo is gone. I’m saying Jake saw a group and couldn’t parse out the individual because of the similarities, could only see the differences between us. And the only difference between me and Dirk to him was that he loves Dirk and I’m a poorly altered differential. I’m a dependent clause, a dangling subject, an extraneous bit of information that provides unwanted detail and should be cut to fit the fucking word count.” Then Hal turns back to the computer, conversation apparently over.

Roxy sits in stunned silence, processing the hurt in Hal’s tone and words, and slumps back into the couch. They stare at Hal’s tense profile, trying to come up with the right answer to the puzzle before them, and in the end, the only thing they can think to do is step up behind Hal’s chair, wrap their arms around his neck, and bonk their heads together. “For as similar as you and Dirk are, you’re just as different when it comes down to it. It’s like... Well, you’re like crocodiles and alligators. Both can bite your fuckin head off, but the bites are real different.”

“Are you seriously trying to cheer me up by comparing me to a lizard?”

“Technically only crocodiles are in the lizard family, Alligators are classed in the same group as birds.”

Hal is quiet for a minute before he pushes away from the desk, “I’m going to go lay down.”

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