

# FOREWORD

This fanfiction functions as a coda for the abandoned fanfiction [A Shoulder to Cry On Deluxe](#). Reading it isn't strictly necessary, it's really bad. Chapter 0 serves as a retelling of where the story left off, and pretty much everything can be discerned through context clues I think, because not much happens during A Shoulder to Cry On.

Some parts of AStCoD are contradicted because I don't feel like religiously sticking to that continuity so pretend it's all canon to this fic unless said otherwise.

If you want to know if the original fanfiction was gonna go in a similar direction: yeah. Not this exact premise or nearly as exaggerated

Aranea is aged down to 16 here, because if she wasn't this would be a whole different type of story.

TW: Misogyny, grooming, suicide discussions, general awkwardness

Well without further ado, I bring you...

The A Shoulder to Cry On Deluxe Epilogues (working title) Draft 4

## CHAPTER 0

(95% complete)

You keep ending up on the same damn pirate ship.

If there's anything you adore, it's sailing the foamy dreamspace lattice on the hyperbolic paraboloid of fate. And fate apparently deigns this as the only thing your girlfriend has been doing, and you can only meet her like once every other month. If this ship ever stopped at a timeline where "enriching" was a synonym for "mind numbing", you would definitely describe it as that.

Today's cast: Vriska, who is still Vriska. Tavros, who is still Tavros. Meenah, who has never even considered being anyone but Meenah. Karkat told you she's definitely into you in a weird hate-love way but you'd rather not think about that. Sollux and Aradia are doing that thing where they sound like an old married couple, except Sollux is

the only old one and Aradia is the only married one. You suppose it is a pretty cute dynamic they have going on.

And then there's also Davesprite, or (Dave).

It's cool meeting him again. He seems pretty damn chill about being dead. That makes total sense, considering he chose to be dead, rather than alive.

And then there's that stuff about Dave (the one without parentheses) telling him to kill himself, and (Dave) [the one WITH parentheses] being your sister's secret ex-boyfriend, and Dave also having a massive crush on your sister who secretly dated the parenthesised Dave, and..

Wow. Drama. Teenage soap opera love triangles. They're great.

It's still pretty sad, because you wish he wasn't dead, because he's your friend. You don't know. This whole conflict makes you feel kind of sick. It's really complicated, from a moral perspective. You just want everyone to be alright. You'd say you wish you were back at home, but that might be even worse. Maybe everyone else's relationships will only be described with escalating syntactical convolution. The future is now.

They are arguing about something. And-

VRISKA: John, can you 8elieve I have to do everything?

JOHN: huh?

VRISKA: I'm glad I FLARPed for so long, this captain thing is 8asically second nature to me.

JOHN: yeah.

JOHN: you're doing great.

JOHN: you have a crew and everything.

VRISKA: I know right?????????

VRISKA: No8ody else could do this even if they tried.

JOHN: yup.

JOHN: It's really cool.

VRISKA: John, I appreci8 it, 8ut the amount you're praising me is excessive.

VRISKA: Not that I don't deserve it or anything, 8ut it isn't a very good look for you. You do plenty of amazing things too.

VRISKA: May8e tone it down a 8it?

JOHN: er... alright.

It's important. Real important stuff. You think you're following along. Lord English, prophecies, double death, ontology. What matters is we all have to kill Lord English, with the power of teamwork and friendship.

SOLLUX: h0w d0 i explain this shit...

SOLLUX: 0k have y0u ever read the b00k g0del, escher, bach

TAVROS: yEAH, iT WAS REALLY COOL, aND INTERESTING,

SOLLUX: tavr0s i was asking everyb0dy except y0u

TAVROS: oH,,,,,

Vriska is "leading," which is what she calls it when she talks like she's throwing knives and then gets mad when everyone flinches. You're pretty sure you're still following along here. It's hard to focus on, though. You're still thinking about Davesprite, er, (Dave). You wish you had been there for him more, so he wasn't so mopey. You're really trying to be a team player and participate here. It's not all that complex, you just have to pay attention, but. God, they just keep *going*.

(DAVE): hell yeah i breed like erect cattle

(DAVE): seriously this shits unreal

(DAVE): vriska why the fuck did you give me pants you cant keep the man down

What the absolute fuck is (Dave) talking about? Pants? Is he a tailor now? This is like watching someone do cartwheels off a cliff while trying to aim their projectile vomit into trash cans. You think your brain constructing that awful metaphor may have given you a slight case of vertigo. Maybe it's just the ship. You play around with the straps of your suspenders a bit, they feel almost suffocating.

After quite a while of trying to stop things from degenerating, you totally mentally check out. You stare at the mast to ground yourself. You give (Dave) a "hey i'm feeling kind of out of it" glance, he notices and gives you a small nod of acknowledgement. At least you know (Dave) is still reliable on all matters other than being alive.

Was Vriska always this grating?

You hate thinking that. It feels like betrayal. It feels like being one of those people who turns on someone the second they stop being convenient. But it's hard not to notice that Vriska is... she's young. She looks young. She *is* young. She's a thirteen year old ghost and she's trying to argue with people who are adults or nearly adults, and nobody is stopping her, and that makes something in your stomach twist in a way you don't have words for. You wander off even further from the main group, hoping the movement might slow your brain down a bit.

You try not to stare at her too long because then your brain starts narrating her like she's a character in a story, and that's unfair. It's also not helping that a tiny part of you keeps thinking she's performing. Like this whole "redemption" thing is a stage and you're the audience and she's desperate to see your face react the right way.

Terezi called you a douche for thinking that, but what does she know? It sounds douchey when you say it out loud, sure. But she isn't you. It feels like you're just playing at this whole "dating" thing. Just another part of her grand narrative, and you better remember your lines or she'll get all pouty. If Terezi wants you to not make her upset, maybe she should help you instead of insulting you.

You shift your weight, hands shoved in your pockets, and your fingers brush against something hard and smooth and stupidly small.

That stupid ring.

It's been with you for... a while now. Long enough that it feels less like a thing you found and more like a thing that follows you. Like it knows where you're going to be before you do, and it's always waiting there, in the bottom of your pocket, like a coin you can't spend. You don't know why you're being so melodramatic about it. It's just a ring that doesn't do anything. It's gold, you guess. You don't even know if it's made of real gold though, it could be made of coagulated piss for all you know. That's a pretty nasty thought that you're not sure you want to think again.

You bullied Tavros until he gave it to you, which wasn't really that hard, which makes it even more unremarkable. Hey, maybe *THAT'S* why Vriska is into you?

You squeeze the ring once through the fabric, just to remind yourself that it's real. Or maybe to remind yourself you're real.

ARANEA: Hey John!

You freeze.

Your name comes out at you, silky smooth. Not over the argument in the background. Like she didn't need to raise her voice because the universe would just deliver your attention to them anyway.

Of the many things you're uncomfortable with the existence of, Aranea is probably the one you're most embarrassed by. You turn around slowly like you got caught with your hand in the cookie jar.

Because she's... OK, looks like your girlfriend, but closer to your age.

And... different.

Her hair is neatly done, her clothes are tidy in a way that feels deliberate rather than stylish. A silver necklace hangs lower than seems practical, resting almost at mid-chest instead of where jewelry usually sits.

She's got this calm, practiced ease that makes Vriska look like a cornered animal by comparison, which is a thought you hate yourself for having. She's also smiling at you like you're the most interesting thing on the deck, which is- that's not normal. That's not something people do unless they are either flirting or about to ask you for something. Or they're just creepy. Actually that observation doesn't narrow things down much.

ARANEA: Hello?

She tilts her head, smiling like a patient first grade teacher at the slow kid who missed half the class eating glue. The glue eating slow kid is you, by the way.

When she smiles, the background noise of the dream bubble seems to drop out, like someone turned down a slider you didn't know existed. Is this that thing where someone's just really good at eye contact? No. That's not it. You don't even know where she's looking. Charisma? Like a politician? Like Obama? If you were to meet Barack Hussein Obama, 44th President of the United States, would-

ARANEA: Oh! Curious about my necklace, are you?

...No. Not at all. It looks stupid.

Oh crap, were you staring? You feel like a massive pervert.

She tilts her head, perfectly patient, as if this is the sort of silence she deals with every day.

ARANEA: Don't worry, I'm used to it.

ARANEA: You can stare as much as you like.

You make a noise that is somehow both a cough and a surrender. Touche.

JOHN: yeah, actually.

JOHN: it's karkat's zodiac symbol? cancer?

Her face lights up, delighted that you said anything other than "kill me".

ARANEA: Indeed it is!

ARANEA: This is actually the symbol of his ancestor, the sufferer.

ARANEA: I could tell you quite a lot of reasons why I wear this, but I'll just give you the highlights. It's a reminder of the transdimensional burdens that paradox space places on all of its-

You glance over at the main group. They seem to still be bickering. You feel bad about ignoring the very polite lady in front of you, but you still can't focus. You wonder if they noticed you were gone? You can't really tell.

ARANEA: 8lah 8lah 8lah signless

JOHN: hey, uh...

JOHN: listening to this is cool and all, but i should probably check on what the others are talking about right about now.

JOHN: vrisk-

You stop yourself. You were about to say that Vriska would probably freak out if she found out you stopped paying attention to her, but that's probably too harsh. Unless it isn't? You have no idea, actually. You do only see her once every few months, so she would probably be at least a bit justified to react negatively. Aranea looks alarmed by your interjection. You guess she really wanted to talk to you? You don't have to leave, you suppose.

ARANEA: She can 8e a 8it of a handful, right?

ARANEA: 8ut it makes her feel important, so I go along with it.

JOHN: ...

ARANEA: I assume you do too?

JOHN: somewhat.

JOHN: she, uh, really wants to be in control of a lot.

JOHN: but she is also really good at it a lot of the time!

ARANEA: Oh, yes. She's genuinely formida8le.

ARANEA: It's just... history, I suppose. Ghosts don't age mentally or physically, so everyone goes nowhere fast as snapshots of their former selves. They can gain plenty of knowledge, 8ut there are certain...

ARANEA: ...Aspects...

Her silver necklace catches the light weirdly perfectly. She giggles softly for a good half second, as if pleased with herself. What's she so happy about? You let out a little chuckle too, you're happy she's happy you guess.

ARANEA: ...They may find themselves lacking in. They may not 8e a8le to keep up with a constantly changing physical world.

ARANEA: Sometimes this squa88ling gets so tangled up in old roles and expectations that even I have to tune out sometimes.

JOHN: haha, yeah.

She says "even I" as if you're already in on her whole deal. Weirdo.

Her smile never fades in a way that's mostly flattering, with just enough edge to make it feel intentional. Like she knows exactly where she stands.

You keep catching yourself watching her the way you watch someone in a movie when the camera lingers a second too long. Like you're waiting for a line. Or for the scene to explain why she's framed like that.

The silver flashes again, like it's keeping time with her smile, even though that's not really how the lighting should work, logically speaking...? Maybe you should make a drinking game of it.

Whatever. You're probably just nervous.

You feel yourself relaxing. A bit. She seems harmless enough.

ARANEA: It's nice to finally meet you properly, John.

ARANEA: I've heard a lot about you from a variety of sources. Some of them, less reliable than others.

ARANEA: It's very exciting to finally get the primary source on the matter of Egbert.

JOHN: wow, ok.

Your first instinct is to mentally pin that as weird, but that isn't really creepy or stalker-y. You are supposed to be a super important god, and she has this whole librarian look going on, and seems to be some sort of nerd, or weenie.



ARANEA: Despite the varying quality of my sources, I doubt you'll disappoint.

JOHN: and... why is that?

ARANEA: Well from what I can gather, you're a very thoughtful and patient partner to my sister, and a very reliable friend.

ARANEA: I might be getting ahead of myself here, but nothing seems to contradict the mental image that I've built.

JOHN: aw shucks, thank you!

JOHN: you seem pretty nice too, so that means a lot.

JOHN: er... as much as it can with a person i barely know.

ARANEA: Haha, yeah.

JOHN: you're usually kind of quiet, but you seem like you know your stuff.

ARANEA: Yeah, I've seen a lot.

ARANEA: There was a lot of drama in my session. Luckily I avoided most of it, though.

ARANEA: And I've been out here for so long that my powers have matured far beyond what's natural.

JOHN: huh.

JOHN: i was wondering how you two could possibly be mind controlling thousands of ghosts.

JOHN: i assume you're doing most of it?

ARANEA: Yup! :::D

ARANEA: Not to throw my sister under the scuttlebuggy, or anything.

She's bragging to shit and back, her grin widening with pride. Guess the tree doesn't fall far from the apple.

She seems proud of it, and you get the sense she's not exaggerating.

JOHN: woah, that's super impressive.

JOHN: hey, if you are super psychically powerful, does that mean you can... uh... mind control humans?

ARANEA: No, that's just biological incompatibility. I can improve my mental influence over trolls, but not humans.

ARANEA: If you would notice, only trolls are within my army. I would supplement my numbers with powerful human ghosts if I could, but I can't.

ARANEA: I can only put humans to sleep, just like the others of my species.

JOHN: wow, that is a relief.

JOHN: and uh, don't worry about throwing vriska under a skittlebug, or

anything. i get it.  
JOHN: she's great, but...  
JOHN: er, nevermind.  
ARANEA: Wow, they're pretty loud over there.  
ARANEA: Want to continue this 8elow deck?

You look back at the white noise machine behind you. It doesn't look like they got much louder at all. In fact, they might have gotten a bit quieter. You have absolutely no idea what she's talking about.

You know the purpose behind this invitation is to hear you talk more shit about your girlfriend. You're pretty sure, at least. She does give off kind of gossip-y vibes, so that's probably the reason why she wants to hear this so badly. You probably shouldn't do that, it would be kind of mean.

JOHN: i don't know...  
ARANEA: Do you really think Vriska would 8e angry at her sister talking to you for a 8it?  
ARANEA: She isn't \*that\* controlling.  
JOHN: woah, i never said she was controlling!  
JOHN: well ok, i, uh, said she wants to be in control, but that's because she's a super good leader and not because of other stuff that controlling means.  
JOHN: uh, yeah. lets... go below deck.

You can't believe how easily that worked on you.

She leads you to a trap door and swings it open like she's presenting a prize. Below is a wooden staircase dropping into pitch darkness. You can feel the ship creak around it, like it's listening.

You climb down anyway, because your name is John Egbert and your defining trait is apparently "walk directly into the obviously weird situation, but feel bad about it later."

Come on, you've seen movies. PLENTY of them. You know what happens next. That's what you imagine a tiny cute Angel on your shoulder that looks like you saying.

Aranea follows, bouncing along close enough that you're aware of her without looking.

ARANEA: Oooh, is someone nervous about the dark and scary underdeck?  
JOHN: er...  
ARANEA: Don't be. This won't take long!  
JOHN: why? are you going to kill me like your friend does?  
ARANEA: Nope!  
ARANEA: Actually, I would consider what we're about to do the opposite of that.

What, like...

Giving birth...?

JOHN: UH.  
JOHN: ALRIGHT.

You keep walking, expecting to bump into a barrel or a wall or, like, the concept of "below deck."

Instead, a light appears in the distance, and then you're not in a ship anymore.

Or you are, but only in the way a dream is "in a room" when you wake up and realize you were actually asleep on a couch holding a remote like a dead animal and furiously scratching your ass.

Lighting down here is weird. Softer. You look behind you. You're pretty sure she didn't look this... vivid a second ago. Angles almost seem to smooth out. It's probably that anime thing where important characters get sparkles. That's definitely what's happening, you've decided.

The space opens into something that feels like a corridor, but isn't connected to anything. You turn around and there is no trap door. No stairs. No "up." Just... elsewhere.

JOHN: woah, that is pretty neat.  
JOHN: does this ship regularly become non-euclidian?  
JOHN: that seems very inconvenient.  
ARANEA: Perhaps. But as an ancient and powerful Cerulean, I have quite a lot of influence over the mind.  
ARANEA: Including the minds of horrorterrors. And once you have them, the dream 8u88les tend to follow.  
JOHN: wow. your powers are pretty sweet.

She brings you below deck, and the ship's noise just... drops away. The space below the deck feels less like the inside of a ship and more like a private study someone forgot to take with them when they died. You feel like even Rose would call this place pretentious. Warm, amber light pools in the corners, coming from lamps with fabric shades and brass fittings instead of anything practical. Dark wood paneling lines the walls, polished to a soft sheen, the grain catching the light like it's been cared for.

Everything about it has a certain curated quality, from the brass fixtures to the heavy furniture that looks like it's never been moved once it was placed. The desk looks more "paused" than it does tidy. Stacks of loose pages held down by paperweights, margins crowded with neat, deliberate handwriting, the occasional smear of whiteout catching the light. It's the kind of room that assumes you won't need much space; just a few careful steps before you clumsily hit your leg on something or other.

You half expect a glass of something expensive to appear in your hand. It feels like the kind of room where important men once sat around deciding things they assumed would last forever.

You feel your shoulders drop. You guess you can relax here for a minute.

JOHN: huh.  
JOHN: nice room.  
ARANEA: Thank you!

You sink into the nearest chair without really thinking about it. The upholstery is softer than it looks. She takes a chair across from yours, angled slightly toward the desk.

JOHN: so... did you want to tell me something, or... are we just hanging out?

ARANEA: The former.

ARANEA: But the prospect of you and me just having some time together for its own sake doesn't sound too bad! ::::)

That smile. That tone. It's undeniable that she's been flirting with you. Like, definitely more than casual flirting. You feel your face do something embarrassing. You feel like you should feel weirder about this, but she's probably like this with everyone.

Fuck it, your brain is already irreversibly scrambled. Wouldn't it be weird if you were only attracted to your girlfriend, and not... your girlfriend, but closer to your age? Is that how that works?

You really wish you were thinking about literally anything else right now. You fiddle around with your bowtie.

ARANEA: I wanted to let you in on a bit of a secret.

ARANEA: It's pretty significant, so I hope you will forgive me for keeping it hidden for so long.

ARANEA: That ring?

Your stomach drops so fast it feels like you missed a step. You knew something was up with this stupid thing.

JOHN: ...what about it?

You fish it out of your pocket, staring at it like it's about to stare back.

ARANEA: It's an extremely rare and powerful juju.  
ARANEA: One of the most powerful I'm aware of, in fact!  
JOHN: oh, that makes sense.  
JOHN: well, the "powerful" part does not, but the juju part does.  
JOHN: i am 99% sure this ring is completely useless to everybody.  
ARANEA: Oh really? Let me wear it and see for myself.  
JOHN: ...okay, what does it do.  
ARANEA: The ring causes its bearer to actively reject death.  
ARANEA: The dead who don't come back to life. While alive, all injury will be healed in short order.  
JOHN: so... it revives people and makes them immortal?  
ARANEA: Precisely.  
ARANEA: Well, within a reasonable margin of error.  
JOHN: so... no "conditional immortality" nonsense, or snogging balderdash, or...  
ARANEA: Nope, just the ring.

You do the math in your head. There isn't much math that's needed, but you still check over your work again and again in the split second it takes to think of

JOHN: davesprite!!!  
JOHN: er, (dave).  
JOHN: i could give it to him!  
ARANEA: Yes, you could.  
ARANEA: Though, I suppose he wouldn't be a sprite anymore. You would just have a second Dave wandering around.  
ARANEA: It would probably be at least a bit useful, given that you don't seem to have much faith in your Dave's ability to fulfill his destiny of defeating Lord English.  
ARANEA: He probably wouldn't accept it though.

Yeowch. That hit an exposed nerve. She's right, though. You can't force the ring on him.

JOHN: yeah...  
JOHN: you are telling the truth, right?  
JOHN: about this...

You clutch your left hand tight. Almost painfully tight, as if it might jump out while you're not looking.

The ring is as plain as the day you found it. Almost impressively so. No jewels. No engraving. Nothing. A perfectly generic circle of metal.

JOHN: ...thing?

ARANEA: What incentive would I have to lie about this?

JOHN: some people consider screwing with people its own incentive.

ARANEA: Fair point.

ARANEA: But there's nothing to lose by believing me.

ARANEA: Worst case scenario, you give that ring to somebody and it does nothing.

JOHN: i guess you are right.

JOHN: does anybody else know about this?

ARANEA: Not to my knowledge, no.

ARANEA: If news of this got out, it would be pretty bad.

ARANEA: I thought it would be best if you made this decision yourself.

JOHN: i guess that logic is pretty sound.

JOHN: gee, this is a lot to think about.

JOHN: i think i will just ask my alive troll pals which one of their friends they would like to bring back to life.

ARANEA: Really?

ARANEA: I thought your choice would be obvious.

You blink.

JOHN: you did?

You blink again.

...

Oh.

JOHN: oh.

JOHN: yeah.

JOHN: vriska.

Saying her name out loud right now feels like stepping on a rake. She's right, the thought should've been obvious. You feel like a real rotten boyfriend. If there's any indication that this whole long distance thing wasn't working out, it's that you had to be reminded of her existence just now.

ARANEA: Vriska is great and all, but...

JOHN: but?

JOHN: but what?

JOHN: vriska is cool, she could help.

ARANEA: There's only one of those rings in existence, John.

ARANEA: Don't you think she might... cause more problems than she would solve?

Oh, yeah. She is kind of a drama machine.

Huh.

Suddenly, this ring just got a whole lot heavier.

Maybe...

Maybe NOBODY has to know about this ring. Well, nobody except this random lady you barely know. Maybe you could just... cast it into the furthest ring. You can get on without it, right? Your friends are dysfunctional, but they're still super tough. Rose would probably say getting some super overpowered ghost would be defiling the session, or something. Unless that's not how that works. Actually, now that you think about it, why are you worrying so much about the session anyway? Your session was extremely rare for its terribleness, going in with a bunch of gods should make any session a total cakewalk, even with your weird devilbeast Jack intruding and them having prototypes that are equally bad. You guess it's because of Lord English stuff, but you aren't sure you fully understand that. Powercreep is a bitch.

ARANEA: W-well you have to give somebody the ring!

JOHN: huh?

Did you say that out loud? Your mouth is closed. You feel your teeth. Thank goodness they're still there. You give Aranea a lopsided smile,



because smiles are free. She blushes and lets out a small giggle, glancing away. You like making people feel special.

JOHN: yeah, yeah. i cannot just sit on this thing forever.

JOHN: a bad guy might snatch it!

JOHN: and if we fail, and i could have used this to stop it, i am not certain i would forgive myself.

ARANEA: Yeah, the stakes are pretty high. Everybody is counting on you.

ARANEA: I get it.

ARANEA: There are literally infinite possibilities for what could happen with this ring.

ARANEA: It could heal an otherwise broken future from a march towards certain oblivion.

ARANEA: And I have a plan for doing just that.

You...

You're pretty sure you've just been manipulated to the nth degree. You obviously can't tell the folks on the meteor about this ring, not with THEIR big mouths. You certainly won't be able to create a plan for what to do with this thing by yourself, either. You obviously don't know this creepy person, but were just manipulated into potentially giving them an absurdly powerful and rare juju artifact. You have no idea if she's going to cause trouble or has anything sinister up her sleeve, and you have absolutely no reason to trust her.

JOHN: okay.

JOHN: lets hear it.

## CHAPTER 1

You climb back onto the deck, your mind still hazy from all the everything that happened.

You can't get your mind off the stupid ring in your pocket, now feeling like it has an impossible weight to it. You have no idea what you could possibly do with this thing.

You shoot Aranea a nervous glance. She answers with a reassuring smile.

Her plan is essentially that her Sylph of Light powers would let her heal the timeline out of Lord English's influence and under her control instead, and her psychic powers would let her mind control Jack or any other ne'er-do-wells that might turn up. You suppose that seems simple enough.

She seems nice enough. A little... practiced, maybe. But that makes sense, considering what she said about you. And maybe her plan is a bit self-serving, but who isn't self-serving around this crazy place?

Her hand brushes lightly against your forearm as you walk, light as a suggestion.

It's surreal how she fills the space beside you, all ease and confidence, while Vriska keeps herself angled away, armored and small.

Vriska's arms are crossed so tightly she looks like she could splinter. She's bickering with everyone, as usual, like if she stops moving her mouth the air will swallow her.

When everyone notices you, everybody mentally resets. Tavros glances up, then down again. Sollux's eyes drift briefly between Vriska and Aranea before he looks down, like he'd just lost his place in the conversation.

Thankfully, Meenah cannot stand the dead air, and reignites the conversation. Thank goodness one person here isn't an awkward dweeb, a category that includes you.

The conversation lurches forward, like kicking a stuck cart.

Vriska launches into it immediately, same as always. New adjectives, a slightly more unhinged cadence, whatever. Something about how everyone's too comfortable. Nobody's even jabbing at her this time, and she's still mad.

Aranea tries to speak, softly, like she's offering a hand. Not interrupting. Just... inserting herself into the empty spaces Vriska leaves behind.

Vriska keeps stepping on every sentence.

Every time Aranea says we, Vriska spits back you.

Every time Aranea says plan, Vriska hears stalling.

Whenever she does get a word in, it's just her, calmly continuing, like being shouted over is something she's already accounted for.

And Vriska says something-something sharp and personal, something about Aranea "playing nice" and everyone falling for it.

And then she drags your name around like a hook. Like this is somehow your job to manage.

For fuck's sake.

JOHN: vriska, just- just shut up and listen to her!

Vriska freezes. Her arms drop. For a second, she just stares at you, eyes wide, like you just slapped her.

Ouch. You didn't mean for that to come out so sharply, but you think it's something that pretty much needed to be said. Still though, you could do with not being such a jerkface about it.

ARANEA: John, it's OK. She's just passionate.

VRISKA: Passion8?????????

Aranea steps forward smoothly, hips moving slowly and deliberately. Her hand rests on your arm again- not brushing this time, resting. Vriska's composure appears vulnerable for just a moment, before contorting as if she just stepped on broken glass.

JOHN: look, that's- what i meant was-

ARANEA: What John means is that passion clouds judgement. It's natural to cling to what feels familiar, even if it's holding us back. But real progress requires listening to voices that offer clarity, not just volume.

JOHN: yeah, that.

She turns to you then, that warm smile back, but her eyes are sharp. She squeezes your forearm, like she's reassuring you. Anchoring you. Aradia opens her mouth as if she's going to intervene, but silently closes it.

ARANEA: It's alright, Vriska. Everyone's frustrated. We're only trying to help us move forward.

VRISKA: Hahahahahahahaha! I see how it is!!!!!!!

VRISKA: You know what?

VRISKA: Fine.

VRISKA: Holy fucking shit, did I really think I could whip you freaks into shape?

Vriska steps in front of you. Her eyes are cold, cutting into you.

VRISKA: I won't be playing your stupid games anymore.

JOHN: sorry, what?

VRISKA: And you can-

She yanks off the jacket you gave her and slams it into your chest. It falls between you, crumpling into a small pile that looks like roadkill.

VRISKA: You can keep THIS stupid thing!

JOHN: hey, wait-

VRISKA: I can kill Lord English MYSELF! It's boring here anyway!

Her voice cracks a bit when saying that. And then she just... leaves. Just flies away. Like the only thing holding her here was the idea that you were on her side.

JOHN: what the hell...?

The deck feels too quiet now, like the void itself is holding its breath. Your ears are still ringing with the way Vriska's voice cracked. Aranea releases your arm, her delicate fingers trailing slowly down it as she does so. She looks at you in a way that isn't reassurance, exactly. More like she's taking your measure, like she's updating a conclusion.

The rest of the crew is looking away, clearly uncomfortable with all this drama. Sollux and Aradia are whispering to each other, but you can't quite make out what they're saying. You're not really sure what to make of the whole thing. Vriska is your friend, hopefully you see her again soon. (Dave) glances over his shoulder at you with a characteristically deadpan expression. You wonder what he thinks? He might know what you can do to help Vriska feel better.

Just as you step forward, Aranea places a soft hand on your shoulder, not letting the silence linger. She steps closer, her presence steady and warm, like she's the only fixed point in a spinning dream bubble. The rest of the deck seems to blur, like it doesn't even matter anymore. But then there's Aranea by your side, gentle and deliberate.

ARANEA: That was... intense, wasn't it.

She doesn't sound rattled at all. If anything, she sounds like someone who's already processed it and moved on. There's a certain lightness to it. It makes you feel a little foolish for still being wound up about it.

JOHN: siiiiigh...

JOHN: yeah.

JOHN: i am so tired of everything being so dramatic...

ARANEA: Haha, tell me a8out it. It's hard to get anything done when everyone is tripping over their egos. I could tell you soooooooooo much a8out my session.

ARANEA: Vriska treated everything like FLARPing.

ARANEA: And, I think everyone can see that you've 8een more than patient with her. You really don't have to entertain her when the stakes have never 8een higher.

You want to argue with that. You do. But you know she's right. You swallow. Her voice is soft and sympathetic, like she's talking about a mutual friend who's just a little too much sometimes.

The ring in your pocket feels like a live coal, a verdict for a crime you never committed. You resist the urge to take it out of your pocket and fiddle around with it, not knowing what to do with your hands. You laugh a little instead.

ARANEA: You don't have to carry all of that alone, John.  
ARANEA: Don't be ashamed of wanting something that feels easier.

Yeah.

You guess that makes sense.

ARANEA: Well?

She's directly in front of you, real close. You don't remember her stepping in front of you or being closer, but okay. Your hands hover in front of you, and she reaches out and grabs them. Okay, that makes sense. It just seems like the next thing in the sequence, the way scenes usually go.

You guess you're dating her now. That's... probably what happens next. You only knew Vriska for a day before you started dating her.

You still feel awful for what happened with Vriska, but the hammer had to come down sooner or later. You lean in and kiss her, careful and a little stiff. It becomes more intense than you expect, and your brain latches onto that because it's simpler than everything else.

ARANEA: You'll be fine, I promise.

## CHAPTER 2

(60% complete)

[TODO]

You feel a light jab at your waist.

ROSE: Isn't that right, John?

Right about what? What's going on? She has to lean in a bit to cut through the noise of everyone else. Rose nudges you again.

ROSE: Isn't that right, \*John\*?

What are you supposed to be clued in on? Is she trying to make Kanaya jealous again? Is she very proud of a stupid joke? She nudges you AGAIN, and does some weird gesture with her head. You get the feeling this is supposed to be obvious, and you are the dumbass here.

ROSE: Isn't that-  
JOHN: will you cut that out?

Rose suddenly becomes aware that you have absolutely no idea what she's on about, and looks a bit embarrassed.

ROSE: Sorry.

Sure, of course she is.

[TODO]

She adjusts her body slightly, like she's settling into a version of herself that feels especially right today. There's a certain confident ease to her movements that wasn't there before, like something clicked into place. Maybe this is what being a good boyfriend looks like. Or maybe it's just nice to be alive again? It's probably that, actually.

JOHN: er...  
JOHN: maybe you shouldn't enter now?  
JOHN: i get the impression that it is kind of a pressure cooker in there...

You peek back into this meteor's closest equivalent of a common room.

[TODO]

JOHN: i am sure they will, uh...

JOHN: well, they can't be any worse than your co-players, right?

ARANEA: Pro8a8ly not, no.

JOHN: well, i can rest easy knowing that none of my friends are as bad as that dweeb who looked like john travolta, who tried to hit on me.

ARANEA: Haha. I'm not sure if that counts for much!

JOHN: it does, i think. they are all pretty swell, once you get to know them.

JOHN: some of them just have uh. issues. with their brains. that are apparent some times more than others.

[TODO]

Terezi is brooding in the corner, you're lucky she even showed up. Usually she just tells you to fuck off.

Sollux is here for some reason. You guess he just wanted to chill out? Also there are like eight other guys here, too. You guess they can stay. You were planning on sitting on the floor anyway.

You don't remember the last time all of you were together like this. You think it was your fifteenth birthday, and hoo boy was that a god damn mess. That says a lot considering how small this place is. Well, small for a place that has to house four human teenagers, three (now four) troll teenagers, a horrible teenage murder clown who lives in the vents, two spirit guides, two entire armies of chess people, four species' of anthropomorphic amphibians, and a bunch of other stuff you don't even want to get into. Yeah there are the planets but you have to ask Jade to go onto those and it is a whole thing.

[TODO]

KARKAT: WHY? ARE YOU PLANNING ON BREAKING UP WITH ME AGAIN?

JADE: oh my GOD.

JADE: this again????

JADE: john, tell him to shut up!

JOHN: uh.

JOHN: will you start crying again? like you did at my birthday.

KARKAT: GREAT! YOU CAN DUMP ME, TOO!

KARKAT: EVERYONE CAN HAVE A GO!

KARKAT: DAVE, GET OVER HERE AND GIVE OLD KARKAT SOME ALIMONY, WILL YOU?

DAVE:



[TODO]

SOLLUX: That d0es n0t make you s0und better at all dude.

KARKAT: OH MY GOD. WHY ARE YOU EVEN HERE SOLLUX? SHOULDN'T YOU BE GROPING ARADIA'S BONE BULGE IN HELL?

SOLLUX: eheheheh yeah.

KARKAT: HAVE ANY OTHER INSIGHTFUL COMMENTS TO ADD BEFORE WE NEVER SEE YOU AGAIN???

SOLLUX: lol.

KARKAT: FASCINATING!

KARKAT: SOMEONE GET THEIR INEXPLICABLE COLOR CODED PEN THEY CARRY ON THEIR PERSON AT ALL TIMES AND START WRITING DOWN ALL THIS WISDOM OUR MAGE IS CONJURING!

KARKAT: WE WOULDN'T WANT FUTURE BROODS TO MISS OUT ON \*THIS\* TITILLATING CAMEO!

KARKAT: AREN'T YOUR NIPPLES HARDENING THINKING ABOUT THIS, SECRET WIZARD?

SECRET WIZARD: i dont have nipples moron

[TODO: John/Aranea convo, entrance]

Aranea reaches out for your hand. She looks nervous. You grab it and give it a firm, comforting squeeze. You didn't want the fact that you're dating her to be embedded in this bandage ripping session, but you guess the cat's out of the bag early.

Rose's eyes lock on your interlocked hands. The color in her face drains, replaced with abject horror, as if she's seen a ghost. The scary kind, which is dead. Not the alive ghost in front of her.

This can't be about the ring. She's seen you wearing it every day, and she never said anything about it then. God dammit, you thought we were over this hill, but apparently not. She is going to get all jealous and weird again, won't she?

Everybody else also looks like they've seen a ghost. The confusing kind, not the scary kind. Which you guess is a category that includes the alive ghost in front of them.

KARKAT: WHAT AM I LOOKING AT, EXACTLY????

KANAYA: Uh

KANAYA: I Think Thats Vriskas Dancestor

KARKAT: GEE, THANKS KANAYA! THE MASSIVE NEON SIGN THAT SAYS "I SHOWED UP UNINVITED" WASN'T BRIGHT ENOUGH! I COULDN'T TELL SHE WAS A SERKET!

ARANEA: That would 8e correct.

ARANEA: John took the initiative to revive me in order to employ my a8ilities to mend an otherwise 8roken future.

She says it like it's the official version of events-careful, practiced. You can tell she's nervous anyway, saying it out loud in front of everyone. You don't even know what you'd correct.

KANAYA: How Does

KANAYA: Vriska

KANAYA: Feel About This

Why does she care? That's none of her business, but OK. It's really not that complicated, she just freaked out and left because you said one bad thing. You try to open your mouth to explain the whole "Vriska" situation, but Aranea beats you to the punch.

ARANEA: I understand how this appears. 8ut I assure you, this was not done out of impulse.

ARANEA: We're acting in service of the living-and of the future.

SOLLUX: s0...

SOLLUX: y0u're n0t dating each 0ther.

ARANEA: I- urgh!

ARANEA: That was simply a matter of compati8ility.

ARANEA: John was ready for something more grounded.

She says it like it's obvious, even flattering. That makes sense, it's pretty much right.

Kanaya's mouth opens, then closes again. Karkat makes the strangled sound of a newly discovered species of invertebrate he found lodged in his throat. Jade stares at the floor like it might offer instructions.

KARKAT: WAIT A FUCKING SECOND!!!!  
KARKAT: STOP THE INFORMATION PULP INKING DEVICES!!!!  
KARKAT: \*JOHN\* CALLED THIS MEETING, \*JOHN\* IS THE BASTARD WHO OWES ME A NEW SWEATER, \*JOHN\* IS THE ASSHOLE THIS SHOULD BE ABOUT!  
KARKAT: NOT!!!!!! YOU!!!!!!  
KARKAT: I WANT TO HEAR THIS FROM \*JOHN\*.  
KARKAT: LEAVE THE EDITORIALS FOR THE EVENING, MUCKRAKER!

You look around for reactions. Nearly everybody looks like they think that's an obvious idea. Rose just looks constipated. Jaspersprite doesn't know what the hell was going on. Why do they keep putting you into these situations? You don't know anything.

JOHN: you do realize we kinda decided this together, right?  
JOHN: what exactly do you think that would change?  
KARKAT: I DON'T KNOW!  
KARKAT: WHY DON'T YOU TELL ME, EGBERT!  
KARKAT: BECAUSE TO ME, IT LOOKS LIKE \*THIS\* BULGEWRECKER IS \*USING\* YOU!  
ARANEA: I didn't push him into anything! I just didn't complic8 things.  
KARKAT: REALLY? BECAUSE I KNOW JOHN. I KNOW HIM \*BETTER\* THAN YOU "SERKET".  
KARKAT: AND I KNOW THAT HE!!! WOULDNT'T!!! DATE!!! YOU!!!!!!!!!!

God, why do these jerks always feel the need to speak on your behalf? What does he think he's doing? He doesn't even \*know\* Aranea. He met her like, twice. You expect Kanaya or Jade or something to call him out but nobody does.

KARKAT: YOU WANT ME TO NOT BE COMPLICATED?  
KARKAT: OKAY, I \*WON'T\* BE COMPLICATED!  
ARANEA: Now, hold on-  
KARKAT: JUST BLINK TWICE! THAT'S ALL YOU HAVE TO DO, JOHN!  
ARANEA: Look!  
ARANEA: I just think it's natural for people to gravit8 towards what feels... sustaina8le. Rewarding. You know.

Nobody speaks. Everybody's jaw seems to drop, for some reason? But not in a literal, physical sense. Even Karkat seems to run out of words. It feels like you're just staring at each other for an hour.

Terezi gives a look of what can only be described as pure disgust and silently marches out of the room. You remember what she said earlier, about you being a jerk to Vriska, and feel a pang of guilt. Discomfort pools at the bottom of your stomach.

JADE: terezi, wait!

JADE: i'm sure there's a perfectly reasonable...

The door slams shut.

JADE: uh...

JADE: why don't we move on from this?

ARANEA: Yes, I think it would be best for us to move past this point. I believe it's been thoroughly exhausted.

JADE: now, john...

JADE: could you have revived...

JADE: ANYONE?

JADE: or did it have to be, uh.

JADE: this. person. hm.

JADE: what were the, uh...

JADE: constraints, here?

ARANEA: Well, Davesprite didn't even want to be revived!

ARANEA: Besides, would it really be industrious to have two Daves wandering around?

JADE: \*industrious\*?

Jade directs a look at you, clearly trying to tell you to shut her up. You shoot Aranea a glance, to tell her to maybe lay off the "dead secret boyfriend" talk. Or just the "dead friend" talk, since you didn't tell her about any of that stuff. She seems to understand.

The room goes dead silent again. Rose gets up and taps you on the shoulder.

ROSE: John. Can we talk?

JOHN: uh.

Rose grabs your arm, firmly and practically, and rushes you to the hallway outside. She practically runs to the next room over, jolting the door shut behind her.

ROSE: John. This is creepy.

ROSE: Do you understand what this looks like to everyone?

ROSE: You used a power you shouldn't even have and came back with...

JOHN: fuck, yeah. i knew this was coming, just...

JOHN: there is no need to get catty.

Rose's eyes widen. She looks like she's about to murder you.

ROSE: ...Catty?

JOHN: is that a sexist thing to say?

ROSE: Deeply. Pervasively. Irrefutably.

JOHN: fuck, sorry. god, that did sound really awful, didn't it.

ROSE: Yes, it did.

JOHN: just...

JOHN: does this have anything to do with...

ROSE: How long have you known what that ring can do?

JOHN: uh, about a week, i think.

ROSE: A wee-

ROSE: John.

JOHN: i know, i know...

ROSE: So of all the obscenely powerful dead players out there, you just so happen to choose...

ROSE: \*That\* one? And then dumped Vriska, and then started dating her?

JOHN: she's the only one that actually had a plan that made sense!

ROSE: And just how many of them have you interrogated about this?

JOHN: oh, so on top of being a \*dad\*...

JOHN: you want me to be a detective, too?

ROSE: What?

JOHN: like problem sleuth?

ROSE: John, don't be a dick.

JOHN: just... imagine what would happen if word got out about this ring! think of all the annoying drama.

ROSE: "If word got out"?

ROSE: Time in the furthest ring is non-linear.

ROSE: The only way this couldn't "get out" would be if you kept this a secret forever, and even then...

You flinch. You were planning on doing that... maybe it would be better if you had just done nothing with it. That would mean none of this bullshit would happen to you, and you could just hang out with your pals again. Rose's brow raises, clearly noticing that line's impact on you. You really need to work on your poker face.

ROSE: I get not trusting me. I'm a drunk.

ROSE: But...

ROSE: Jade, Kanaya, Karkat, Dave?

JOHN: oh, come on. \*dave\*?

ROSE: Yes, Dave. The guy with the shades. You've known him since you were 10?

JOHN: oh, yeah. let's do trust by seniority. that is a great idea.

Rose's face contorts into a grimace, clearly not amused by your snark. You aren't very amused by your snark, either. Maybe you should take a step back.

JOHN: i know what you think this is about.

ROSE: Please, enlighten me. What \*do\* I think it's about?

JOHN: you know... it's...

JOHN: it's cruel, rose.

ROSE: Cruel?

ROSE: \*You\* want to talk about cruelty?

JOHN: i know, i really hurt vriska's feelings...

ROSE: Vriska?

ROSE: I don't \*know\* how you and Vriska broke up, John. She could be ready to pop out behind you with a big smile on her face for all I know.

ROSE: Well, she could have been. I suppose THAT hypothesis is deconfirmed.

JOHN: come on, you know how she is.

ROSE: No, I don't. Every time I met her I tried antagonizing her.

ROSE: All I \*really\* knew is that she was an insecure teenage girl.

ROSE: But I do know the trolls knew her very well. And even though none of them \*liked\* her-

JOHN: you want to talk vriska? here is what happened with vriska: i told her to stop being mean ONCE and she just left.

JOHN: once!!!

ROSE: And you think this "Aranea" fellow is more "adult" than her.

JOHN: yes! exactly! thank you!

Her eyes narrow, filled with venom and cynicism. That was clearly not even remotely the right thing to say.

JOHN: what, you just want me to date a 13 year old forever?

ROSE: You were handed the only possible solution to that problem on a silver platter. As far as I'm concerned, that's hardly even a factor here.

ROSE: I spent a long time learning to respect your choices, John.

ROSE: Even the ones that hurt me.

ROSE: I told myself it was growth. That you knew what you wanted, and I had to let you have it.

ROSE: And now... this.

ROSE: What do you want me to say? You don't understand what it looks like? Go back to saying you're just sweet and innocent and getting manipulated?

Something in your chest tightens. That word. This. You know exactly what this is about.

And she has the gall to call you creepy?

You back up because you need space. Your heel hits the table.

JOHN: rose, you KNOW it wasn't about that.

ROSE: About what, exactly?

You climb onto it because you can't stand being looked down at right now.

It's stupid. You know it's stupid. You do it anyway. You hope the theatrics win you some points in Rose's eyes, at least.

JOHN: oh, come ON, rose!

JOHN: YOU went on and on and on about how I'm SEXIST for assuming you're just JEALOUS.

JOHN: and now here you are REDUCING my LOVELY GIRLFRIEND.

JOHN: WHOM I LOVE!

JOHN: ...to her RACK.

JOHN: well guess what? i didn't even NOTICE ANYTHING about her body, until you- RATHER OBJECTIFYINGLY, I MIGHT ADD- until you started

implying it!!!

She stands there, her hair looks tousled by wind, but she's otherwise unmoved. An unamused, defiant look sits on her face, staring down an outstretched finger you don't remember pointing. She looks smaller than you expected she'd look from up here. She's already pretty small in comparison to you, but...

ROSE: Who said anything about her rack?

ROSE: I certainly didn't.

JOHN: i-

JOHN: AAARGH!!!!!!

Oh she thinks she's SO SMART doesn't she!

After a beat of silence the door creaks open. Aranea slips in. Oh thank god, someone to diffuse this hostage negotiation.

ARANEA: Is everything alright in here? John, you seem upset.

She places a hand on your arm. Anchoring, like before. Rose's jaw tightens.

ARANEA: Rose, I understand this is a lot to process. But John has seen under a lot of pressure, he's trying to do what's best for everyone. Perhaps it would be best if we just... all left some old insecurities behind?

The air thickens, flooded with silence and tension. It feels like a pin could drop, and then violently explode.

ARANEA: Even if you disagree with John's decision, it was his to make. We're all friends here, right? We have to make the best of it.



Rose mutters something under her breath and storms out.

You sit down on the table you're on, lost deep in thought. You can't believe there were multiple points in that conversation where you almost... god. Why'd you almost lose it? You nearly called her a bitch there, which almost certainly might have totally burnt that bridge for a while. What the hell is wrong with you?

## CHAPTER 3

## CHAPTER 4

## CHAPTER 5