

CHAPTER 4 – GONNA GET YOU BACK

=> TRY TO BE A LITTLE MORE MULTICULTURAL

You're *trying*, but this neighborhood makes you nervous. Everyone outside is human, and they're all giving you that *look*, you can tell. You pull your hood up and try to ignore them. When you notice you're hunching your shoulders, you force them back down immediately. You have every right to be here.

They're still looking; you have the prickles on the back of your neck and the tips of your ears. Did Strider know this would happen when he invited you over for the video thing? What a shit, but well fucking played, you have been successfully set off-balance. You guess you can make that a mark in his favor.

Not that he's been playing the game. Now he brushes off slights with 'I don't care,' cuts off 'I'm sorry's with 'Whatever.'

'We're good.'

'I'm fine.'

He's so anxious to be apathetic, and it would be almost entertaining to watch if it didn't make you want to punch him again, if it didn't make him wary and watchful, so ready to edit and redact, then redo for optimal effect. It makes him careful, like he's stepping back from an edge he didn't want to go over. You think you can push him.

You think he doesn't want to be pushed.

Dumb fuck! He should start keeping his hands to himself, then, quit correcting your form with little nudges at your elbows and knees, and he should definitely stop with the quick touches to your upper arm when he's trying to make a point, quicker flicks to your ear and jaw when you're trying really hard to ignore him. It'd make it that much easier to not return the favor.

You put your hands in your pockets and thoroughly consider chewing them off at the wrists, except that's the stupidest thing you could possibly do, *ever*. Maybe you could just keep them in your pockets forever, or at least for the entire time that Dave's doing his cut-copy-pixilate deal, yeah that plan seems all right. You need to take at least one hand out of your pocket so you can check the address again anyway.

You light it up on your phone, tilt it a little so the sunlight will actually fuck off and allow some visibility. Plus side of running on semi-human time: no one asks questions about a troll in goggles. Not to your face, at least, and you've gotten good about ignoring the double-takes and

the sudden, worried stares. So good that when one turns confrontational as you catch the door and slide in after an actual resident, you just say, 'Thank you,' in your best tones, and *smile*.

He takes the elevator. You take the stairs.

It's four flights up, a sad pants-piddling excuse of a walk, and you double-check the number before knocking on the door. No answer, but someone rustles around inside.

You knock a little louder. When he yells something back, you kick the door, but don't bother responding otherwise. Your Human's not good enough, and your accent's shit besides. Something falls in the apartment, and you can almost make out the following disdainful mutter. You kick the door again for good measure.

It whips open and you both freeze. He recovers first.

"You're... early."

He's in complete disarray, and for once you manage not to say anything stupid, possibly due to shock. You still stare though, because his shirt's undone, his hair's sleep-rumpled and sticking up *everywhere*, and he also needs to wipe his eyelashes. Badly.

"The word you're looking for is 'punctual.' I know it's difficult for morons to wrap their heads around complicated vocabulary, but could you at least make an effort?"

"No, you're like forty-five minutes *early*. You know what, I'm just going to round that up to a full hour. You are an hour early, Vantas. There's 'hello, let me help with the party prep, I brought a casserole,' and then there's 'holy fuck, let me put my make-up on.'"

"You don't wear make-up."

And you just won Dumbass of the Year award! He's thankfully too busy buttoning his shirt to call you out for an acceptance speech. Partway through, he turns his head towards his shoulder to stifle a yawn. "Course not, I'm already the pretty one in this dynamic duo, and I don't want to make you cry. Come on in."

He disappears into the first room on the left and shuts the door, leaving you in what you assume is the start of the hallway. Food preparation block to your left - oh god, what are those things on the counter, maybe if you look away, they'll- *fuck*, there are just more of them in what you're going to assume is the [living room]. When he pokes his head back into the hall, you've got your hands in your pockets and what you hope is a safe distance from the largest pile of grotesquely misshapen felt. He sniggers.

"Don't make eye contact. I swear to fucking god, those things see into your soul. C'mon over."

You edge past the plush and follow Dave into his room. You're still not quite sure where to step, there are wires *everywhere*. He just treads carelessly over them, barefoot, and you try to figure out if you should have taken your sneakers off at the door.

"Take a seat," he says, making a vague gesture to either the crates in front of his desk, if you even want to call it that, and his bed. "Want me to pull the shade?"

"No, I'm all set." Human rules don't necessarily come in a tidy, thoughtful packet, but there might be one about indoors and a dark room that means 'goggles off.'

He's sitting down, and you eye the extra crate, the relation of his knee to its edge, and sit on the bed. His eyebrows go up, but he doesn't say anything; shit what did you do? Defiantly, you swing your feet up and perch them on the intended seat. Yeah, that's what you meant to do all along.

He slaps them off. "Gross, dude. But check this out."

He pulls up some program in all oranges and reds, and lets the draft run. You watch the footage run, hear the weird half-finished beats of the track, and god, it's not like watching the end product at all. You could fucking do this.

Before it runs through to the end, you glance over at him, see if maybe he's busy gauging your reaction. Hopefully an hour was enough practice for the artful half-sneer you've been trying to cultivate. But no, his gaze is rapt on the screen, narrowed eyes and creased forehead, mouth slightly open.

"Okay," he mutters to himself, like he's forgotten you're there. "Okay, okay, I'll get that."

His hand's moving, scratching down notes with a pen he got from fuck knows where. He's still staring at the screen. When you try to take a peek at what he's jotting down, you just get a glimpse of some sort of indecipherable mess. Probably he catches the movement, because he says, absently, "So what'd you think?"

"Not bad for a first effort," you say, and he snorts.

"No shit, sherlock, you ever hear of a work-in-progress? It'll get better. Still tippy-tapping through the baby steps now, but once I get all that out of the way, forget running before you walk, son, more like sweet ninja flips and sticking the landing."

"In that case, I suggest you add in that Sunset Park combo, maybe like, half a minute in?"

You swear his face lights up, and then he's off again, rattling his way through a poorly constructed debate on why his choices are *obviously* the right ones (though he is very much mistaken!), but actually his reasoning's fairly sound. And once you look at the clips again, you sort of maybe see where he's coming from.

You change the subject.

"Is this how you do everything?"

"Kinda. I mean, obviously medium differs from work to work, but like for now, yeah, this is it. Record, rehaul, rinse, repeat."

You scoff. "You cannot tell me with a straight face that anything like that kind of thought went into Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff."

He grins at you, a quick cut of teeth. "Wow, you really are a stalker."

"Well, excuse me for having an educated interest in the internet personages I follow! I *happen* to like being well-informed--"

"Stalker." His grin gets wider. "You actually read them?"

"I somehow made it through what was left of the archive without taking a rusted serving utensil to my brain, yes. What happened?"

"Little bit of background check here, little bit of tone-policing there, hey what do you know? Not actually that interesting."

You huff a disbelieving snort through your teeth. "Oh yeah, Mister Cool Guy, nothing big about sedition."

He flicks you a sharp little glance then shrugs. "More like some basic fucking rights, but hey, I guess if you're okay with getting offed on some hemochromatic whim, then we're all good."

"Like hell it's a 'whim'! That's a *severe* understatement of *millennia* spent stabilizing an expansive and fractious empire spread out across fucking *galaxies*, and even a pathetically under-endowed dunce like yourself should at least be able to appreciate the strategic mind behind this kind of effort."

"You know 'under-endowed' just makes it sound like you're talking about my junk, right?"

You flush hot. "It does not! I was referring to your brain--"

"If that's what you want to call it," he says wryly. "And yeah, okay, complex and lasting murder-happy civilizations, wowee, I'm super-impressed but come on, dude, there's something a little fucked up about the murder-happy part. I mean, really? Really?"

"Yes, really. For the betterment of a society as a whole--look, altruistic thinking, shitstain, try it sometime--sometimes sacrifices have to be made."

"Holy shit, you're brainwashed."

"Excuse you! Some of us might actually like using our brains for something that isn't mix-and-match idiocy with a matching soundtrack. That 'some of us' is me, by the way. Just me, of the people in this room at this very moment."

"Okay, well, you know what? I give, since you obviously have thought this through so well. Must be real nice preaching from your high horse of not having any chance genetic anomalies, huh?"

The back of your neck prickles, and you clench your fists, will your voice not to shake. "Don't even fucking try to pretend that you have any more than an *embarrassingly* rudimentary understanding of a complex cultural system put into place for the betterment of a *galactic empire*."

He yawns, delicately patting his hand over his mouth. "Sure."

It is with great difficulty that you manage to keep from grinding your teeth together. Instead you lean in and snarl, "You can keep making the noncommittal sarcasm expulsions all you like, it still doesn't change the fact that I'm right."

You don't realize how close you've gotten until he swats your finger off his chest and pushes you back. Then he turns to his left and clutches somewhere in the vicinity of his multi-chambered pump-sponge. "Thank god, officer, you came just in time. Nearly got victimized by a mack-and-run. Yeah, repeat offender, same perp as last week."

He shakes his head at you and drops his hand. "C'mon, cut it out, Karkat, no time for fooling around."

"The fuck are you talking about?" you snap, mostly by reflex; you know exactly what he's talking about.

"I'm talking about quit it with the pretty much illegal amount of unsolicited lip-lock that's been going on, especially since you never stick around to buy me dinner or bring me breakfast in bed. Are you just messing with me? Not cool, dude. Not cool."

"Oh does that sting, coming from *you*." Somehow you manage to load it with just the right amount of sneering derision instead of choking up. "Are you feeling all right, Dave? Should I leave a note telling your weird lusus to pick up ginger ale and stale semi-palatable foodsquares for you?"

He ignores you. "Also? It is actually illegal to have an interspecies mouth-macking mixer, so how about keeping your hands to yourself next time, and maybe you can keep yourself pure for your *very first bucket*." He laces his fingers together and sighs the words, fluttering his eyelashes at you.

"Don't worry," he adds, setting his hands back on the keyboard. "I won't tell if you don't."

"Like I give a shit! I have much better things to do with my life, like perhaps

"Fine."

"*Fine!*"

He goes back to the video but his concentration's broken; his clicks are too pointed, and he replays clips over and over without any remark or even any indication that he notices. Not that you're paying attention.

He pretends to hold the door open for you, makes a sweeping gesture with his free hand.

"Rage before beauty."

You sneer at him, but slide past; anything to get out of his room. As you pass, he says, without even trying to lower his voice, "I am hells of too good for you anyway."

You wheel on him, teeth bared, and he doesn't even flinch. He just stands there, head cocked and grinning, hooking his thumbs through his belt loops.

You shove him. Hard. He exhales sharply, harsh and surprised, but you're already halfway to the kitchen. You're rummaging through the cabinets. He didn't offer but you weren't waiting around for an invitation.

You don't *shriek* when one of the soulless ass-puppets falls off a shelf and into your face, and you will defend that assertion until the day you die. Dave, however, laughs until he folds bonelessly over the kitchen table, then sits down to watch your progression through the kitchen, grin wide and smug and completely unbearable. The slight narrowing of his eyes as his

eyebrows lift shifts the expression to 'mocking,' and when he asks you to pass him a juicebox five minutes later, you throw it at his face.

He barely ducks in time, and it still clips the top of his head before skittering across the floor, and he sits back up to roll his eyes at you. "A for effort, F for fuck you, take a chill pill, what is your *damage*."

You tsk and refuse to answer, instead continuing the search for comestibles, or whatever it is that passes for edible in this horrorshow of a domicile.

[--this insult cannot stand--charged atmosphere -they start making out because they are stupid]

You break away to breathe, and he has his eyes shut, mouth slightly open and you are *so upset* by how much this makes you want to lean in again, wring out several more marks of his capitulation. You switch angles, scrape your teeth against the soft hollow just beneath his jaw, then lick your lips and suck, and he makes a strange high sound in the back of his throat, squirms against you.

You are so close to making a horrible series of decisions right now.

"Dude," he says, tone ruined by his breathlessness, "we have *got* to stop meeting like this."

[Missing something] "Fine by me."

He starts up off the wall, eyes open. He searches your expression, not for long, just a moment, and whatever he finds there makes his own close down.

"*Fine*," he says, then lifts one hand to splay his touch-stubs across your chest, pointedly, delicately, and push.

This sad display is nowhere near enough to move you, but you back up anyway, one step, two, four, and he flicks his shades open, pulls them on, you cannot *believe* he still has them hooked into his shirt, even now.

=>

It's been two weeks since you and Karkat officially agreed on this new, totally platonic relationship, all holds barred, no touching. No nothing. No whatever weird aggressive

one-upmanship flirtation you guys were doing before and that is such a stupid concept and you hate Karkat for even make you think it. Sort of. Not like *that*, but more in like a... in a figurative way.

It's complicated.

Way *less* complicated, however, is the overwhelmingly positive reception to 'Times Two Combo.' Two thousand hits in just under a week? Nice.

[Deciding on name, then they still bicker over moves, and bicker again about a team name before deciding to hold off for now - they keep bickering about stupid shit and end up sucking face again, like very intensely sucking face, but they're both also like 'what the fuck are you doing'-takes two to tango, dudes]

[Ends with weird tense stand-off like, they don't know where to go from here. They already said they were going to stop but it just keeps happening and they don't know how to talk about it and they just sort of awkwardly leave and dave is like 'well what the fuck is this anyway']

=>

You should stop.

Not right now. Too much forward momentum and you're already half into the power step, and it's only twenty minutes into your solo practice besides.

You mean you should probably stop going to Dave's sessions. You *know* it was working out, you know you were getting better, but too bad, not worth it. Not worth dodging the issue of your faulty genetic make-up every time he gets his mouth near yours, not worth implicating him as an accessory in your stupid worthless act of treason, and definitely not worth getting turned in because you were a goddamn snot-nosed little [pantswetter] who couldn't keep one. Fucking. Secret.

How hard could it fucking be? Get to the city, go to a session, build up your skillset and *lie fucking low*, how does anyone fuck up a plan that mind-numbingly simple? Maybe make a few connections if you can, but aside from that, how about just focusing on staying *alive* for a little

while longer? Why not just waste some more natural resources as a futile and ultimately completely fucking pointless ‘fuck you’ to the empire, you’re a traitor anyway, glory be!

You jump.

It’s nice, in a way, deciding to dangle outright over a potentially gruesome fate no matter how you slice it or how you get sliced, haha, a nice cheerful thought for the afternoon. Your feet hit the wall hard, scrape against concrete as you slide then latch on to the windowsill. Room’s been empty for the past week; no takers on the low, low rent, not that you blame them. Probably they all have somewhere better to be than this festering gutrot of a [...gross] city, something better to be than [karkat and his complicated relationship with himself]

[KK practicing solo – fucks up – NOT because of what happened with Dave earlier – his landing area fell through on him – gets himself in a stupid situation, hanging on a ledge with no good landing – decides to do the trashbag drop – fucks up – bad light, didn’t really see dumpster – whangs right into it, which fucks up his roll, which was already sort of fucked]

you crash forward, completely misjudge the distance but somehow manage to tumble into a sitting position. You have a sore shoulder, a flattened ass, and a bright, sudden sear of pain across both your knees. It barely even stings until you glance down at it, see the rips in both legs of your jeans and the red soaking through the edges of the fabric.

Oh. No.

Oh, fuck, no.

You clamp both hands over your knees and fight down a snarl. Stupid, stupid, *stupid*! What kind of ass-backwards little wiggler even *makes* that kind of mistake anymore? Who even skins their knees at nine fucking sweeps? *Nine fucking sweeps*. They knew before you were going to hatch, they must have, and they flooded your hatching chamber with the human Grub-B-Gone, didn’t they? It didn’t kill you, in some unfathomable, jaw-gaping miserable oversight of whoever was in charge of that sort of shit, but it had to have happened. There is no other reason for you to be this much of an utter, inescapable fuck-up.

There’s also no way for you to get home without running into at least one other person, why the fuck did you think living in the densest part of the city would be such a good idea- OH THAT’S

RIGHT, because past-you is an idiot and a frothing, nub-scraping imbecile! You're going to get culled tonight, you just know it. Thank the human-jegus that you landed by these trash heaps to cower behind; at least fate knows what an utter shitstain you are upon existence and stuck you right where you fucking belong.

A noise and a slight movement at the edge of your (admittedly terrible) peripheral vision makes you jam your back against the wall. Oh fuck. You didn't actually mean that part about dying tonight. You didn't want to mean that part about dying tonight. Your hands have clamped over your knees, mouth dry and pulse pushing traitorous blood too fast through your ears, your throat, your wrists. Without meaning to, your feet have pushed back, settled flat on the ground, ready to launch. You can run on the adrenaline, and you can sure as hell run on those knees. The question is if you'll be able to run fast enough. You think so.

"KK?"

OH FUCK. OH FUCK OH FUCK OH FUCK, IT'S STRIDER. OH FUCK.

Well, absconding has done a neat flip out the window. As for grieving, well... Grieving left like fuck right around the time absconding did.

"The fuck's going on, you okay? Way to sit out with the trash, Oscar the Grouch, hope your deodorant's better than your fashion sense."

He's coming closer. You try to scrabble away, but it's hard when you have to keep your hands over your knees and your feet are suddenly filled with lead. One hand slips, and there's no fucking way for him to mistake the color for anything else.

"Whoa, haha, dude, who'd you kill?"

You can fucking hear the rest of that thought process trail away as he works it out, smile freezing. He stops where he is, and stares.

And now breathing isn't working so great for you, and you look at your knuckles, curved tight over knees, open your mouth to see if that will help.

Which doesn't turn out to be the greatest idea. While you get a good mouthful of air in, that just means more fuel for the unmitigated shitstream of words that goes spewing out of your face at the first opportunity. Part of you knows that there are probably people around and you should probably not be screaming this, and especially not at Strider, who will not give one single fuck, but it's impossible to stop now. Future-you--if there even *is* a future-you, god, you hope there will be a future-you--can just take a good hard hold of his shameglobes and deal with it.

And Strider hasn't moved at all. Hasn't reached for his phone, hasn't said a thing, hasn't twitched so much as a muscle in his gut-churningly wretched face. Not that that's surprising. You want to grief him and go down swinging, you want to curl in on yourself and howl like an abandoned little wiggler. You want a lot of things, but most of them, you can't have right now. Suddenly, teeth and bones aching from being clenched too tight, you're very tired.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

"Take a seat," he says, waving a hand at either a low crate or his bed; frankly, your attention's still caught by his desk, just a long plank laid over stacks of concrete blocks. You have no room to judge, you don't even *have* a desk, but still!

"Nice wood," you say, and scowl at him when he laughs. You even keep from kicking him, which is an admirable display of self-control on your part, but you seriously reconsider when he wheezes out an "Oh my god," and collapses onto one of the crates in front of his computer to laugh some more.

You hook the second one with your foot, drag it

"Okay, fine. You wanna do the smokescreen evasion act, you go right the fuck ahead, but first of all, you're not a fucking ninja, and second, we both know what's happening here."

"Let's just get something clear between us: There is nothing. Happening here."

"You're shitting me. You are actually shitting me right now. I don't know what you consider 'nothing,' but there's your basic fucking vocab misunderstanding right there. Let's bust this back down to the building blocks. Round two of schoolfeeding, hey, that fucker's pretty cute, let me just write this out on paper: 'wan 2 kiss, y/n, circle 1 plz'. Hang on, let me get a pen."

Oh god, he is actually starting to glance over his computer table. He starts to reach behind his monitor and you grab his wrist. "Stop that."

He shakes you off. "No way, class is in session. If you're planning to skip, at least take a copy of my notes, there's a test later."

"I'm not skipping anything, there's not going to be a test, you're going on about nothing."

"Well, guess who decided to stay through the lecture, thanks, Vantas, take a seat and check out this useful diagram." He stops poking around his desk and holds up his hands, ticks off his points. "Times you have straight-on initiated a solid round of tonsil-hockey on me: that time at the park, when you flipped the murder-switch on me. That time near Kinsey Street and 4th. That time beneath the bridge. Then just last week, after we set off that car alarm. What'm I supposed to think?"

Shit, right, that fucking incident. You will admit that was not your finest moment. "I panicked!"

"You 'panicked' your hand right onto my ass."

Of course it sounds dumber when he says it like that.

"You know what? I shouldn't even have to explain this to you. There are at least ninety kajillion reasons--"

"Not a real number."

"--that this would never work. Number one: I have taste, and you are *terrible*."

"What's obvious? That you're in denial about your xenophilic hankering for this incredibly prime piece of real estate? Because yeah, that is pretty sad to see."

"All right, fine. I will grant that you are --let's not bloat our already corpulent [...] ego over this-unusually appealing for a human."

"Uh. Why's your ego getting bloated, too?"

"For fuck's sake, let me finish! But I think you're blowing this whole thing way out of proportion."

“Like your ego?”

“Like your absurdly ... meathusk in ten sweeps after you

“Sounds like a blast.”

“[I don’t know what you’re trying to say could you clarify]

“This mean I don’t get smooches?” [...] “I mean, you’re pretty much a cranky sack of bricks with probably the worst fashion sense out of any guy I know, and if we’re going by your shit taste in movies, I guess this is the part where I tell you that you smell like cat food or something? But that part was sorta okay.”

[...] “This means you quit it with that obnoxious set of noises whistling through your squeak-tubes and wait. It’s called ‘going with the flow,’ are you familiar with the concept?”

It takes him a second, but he laughs, a low, quiet sound. “Are you seriously asking me that? Hey, I’m cool if you’re cool.”

“You’re not cool.”

“Yeah, but neither are you, so I think we’re all set.” He tosses you a grin, easy and only slightly self-conscious, then stays turned towards you a moment longer than strictly necessary, like he has something else to say, another weak singe to hand out. You raise your eyebrows at him, and he tips his head, corner of his mouth pulling further up, then turns back to his computer. Bluff. Called. You almost wish you hadn’t.

[SBHJ reference - then talk about politics n stuff - holy shit you’re brainwashed]