

dog at the door

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/32669581) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/32669581>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	3rd Life SMP , Hermitcraft
Relationship:	No Romantic Relationship(s) , Docm77 & Rendog
Character:	Rendog (Video Blogging RPF) , Docm77 , The Red King (3rd Life SMP)
Additional Tags:	very small amounts of body horror , Supernatural Elements , Minor Injuries , mildly described injuries , Tags to be updated as we go along , post 3rd life , but it talks a lot about stuff in 3rd life , bullshit science that works in minecraft , Hurt/Comfort , with a LOT of (emotional) hurt , a whole lot of coffee drinking as written by two people who can't stand the stuff , no actually theres. so much coffee. , Poor Self Care , Nightmares , the jungle (season 5) but not Really , unreality and delusions , Major Character Undeath , Panic Attacks , Not RPF
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2021-07-18 Completed: 2021-08-17 Words: 66,416 Chapters: 29/29

dog at the door

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Summary

i wake up in some alley on a wholly other plane / can't remember who i am or how to get back to the base

--

Or: a perfectly normal (if somewhat chilly) van ride on the way to Season 8 of Hermitcraft. Everything should be fine.

Wake Up Call

Chapter Summary

Doc works on some prosthetics, the AC stops working, and Ren wakes up.

His dreams are shallow, and his waking is slow. They are most days, considering he rarely bothers with sleeping in the first place, but the comfort of the darkness and the warmth of the blankets feel especially nice today for some reason. Doc takes a deep breath, stretching out, and opens his eyes with a sigh.

He's directly across from an obnoxious bead curtain. It's brightly-colored and barely rustles at all, despite the infinite empty space flying past behind the window it's covering. Something about it makes Doc want to pry it off the wall and use it for... actually, screw using it for anything, he'd very much like to put it in the trash. He closes his eyes again and mumbles "*freakin' hippies*" under his breath, and then that's the first part of his morning routine done.

Coffee next. Doc stretches again, takes another look at the Accursed Bead Curtain so he can work up enough rage to get himself moving, and gets out of bed. Well, not really "bed" so much as it is a couch in the main space of the van, but... someone else is using the bed, right now.

He shakes his head. *Coffee* next. Not time for dwelling on things. He can do that later.

The van is unusually still this morning. Doc is used to getting out of bed and face-planting directly into his worktable, so it's a nice change of pace. He glances out the window again, just to make sure they're actually moving, then moves to poke his head into the driver's area.

"Morning," he says.

Renbob offers him a smile as annoying as the bead curtains. "And a fantastic morning to you as well, Doc!"

"How do you know it's morning?" Doc quips, intentionally choosing to ignore the fact that he'd called it morning first. "We are in space."

Renbob turns his gaze back to space with a shrug. "I don't. But it's much nicer to imagine a beautiful sunrise out there instead of the endless void, y'know?"

"...Right." Doc says. "Okay. Do you want coffee?"

"Already got some, dude!"

"Great to hear it. I'll pour myself whatever's left over, then," Doc says, and that's the end of their interaction for the day. He closes the door to the driver's area, heads over towards the small kitchenette, and pours the remaining lukewarm coffee into the first mug he can find that isn't dirty. He doesn't bother adding sugar or cream or anything of the sort -- he's still half-asleep and isn't going to be able to taste the difference. Coffee goes in mug, mug goes in hands, coffee goes down the hatch.

Back to work. The coffee provides enough of an edge that Doc's able to grab his tools without

stabbing himself, and he grabs the shoebox that rests by his feet. He slides the lid off, grabs the half-built hand from inside, sets it down on the table and stares at it.

It's almost identical to his own. He wiggles his fingers, watching the way the metal slides over itself in a perfect mimicry of a flesh-and-blood hand. He's long since gotten used to it by now, and hopefully by the time he's done with this new one it'll be even better than his old work. Ren should adjust in no time.

...If he wakes up.

Ren's condition hasn't been great. Even "stable" would be overselling it. Sometimes he tosses and turns. Sometimes his form flickers like the universe is trying to fix the severe blood loss. Most of the time he's completely still, breathing shallowly. The external wounds have mostly healed over by now, but Doc suspects there's some internal issues he's simply not equipped to fix -- and while a respawn would *probably* handle those, the limb loss makes it way too risky.

He resists the urge to turn around and look at the bed behind him.

"It'll be fine," Doc mutters to himself, "he's going to be fine," and then he gets back to work. The arm has to be *perfect*, after all.

A couple of hours later, Doc finally straightens up again, wincing at the noise his back makes as he does so. He's made some good progress today -- mostly in connecting the wrist joint to the rest of the hand -- and he allows himself a small smile as he tests it out and the hand swivels around with little to no resistance.

He sets it back down on the workbench, moving to stand up. His coffee's without a doubt gone cold by now, but it's still caffeine. Though it being ice-cold (he grimaces and finishes the cup anyway) is... strange. Maybe Renbob's turned the air conditioner on by mistake? It's definitely colder in the van than before.

Either way, Doc shakes off the chills, moving to the small kitchen counter and grabbing a plate. The van doesn't have much in the way of food, taste-wise. Doc has toast for brunch for the fifth day in a row... or at least he plans to. The toast does not come out toasted. The toast comes out barely even warm at all.

Doc growls, setting the bread back onto his plate before shooting the toaster a death glare. It's not rare for Renbob's things to break, *freakin' hippies*, but Doc is usually the one stuck fixing them. It seems today will be no exception, and he gets back up to squint at the toaster and figure out what's going on.

He tilts it to one side and looks inside, experimentally pressing the lever down a couple times to make sure the mechanics are alright. There's still a soft orange glow from the heating elements. That's... weird.

He huffs in annoyance as he sets the toaster back down, and his breath comes out as a faint white cloud. That's also weird. Actually, scratch that, it's downright *not supposed to happen*. He grimaces and resolves himself to more delays on his work while he fixes the broken air conditioner, then freezes as something catches his eye.

Doc swears under his breath as he watches a faint layer of frost move up his arm, the metal gleaming white. Little ice crystals refuse to melt as he tries to brush it away, and the small area he cleans off just refreezes.

Okay. This is not a broken air conditioner. The cold creeps up his spine, the hairs on the back of his neck stand up, his gut feels like it's sinking -- something is *wrong*, and Doc can feel it with every fibre of his being.

He's back at the door to the driver's cabin in a couple of steps, ignoring the freezing metal as he grabs the doorknob. It hardly budge as Doc twists it, and the entire door creaks when he puts a little more force behind it. Frost is shimmering on its hinges, and the cold quickly spreads to the wood. Doc backs away as the door practically repaints itself silver, his breath hanging in the air around him. Fear tries to lodge itself into his chest, and he forces it back down as fast as he can.

You know what? Renbob can handle himself. He needs to check on Ren, *now*.

Doc swivels towards the bed. Ren's under a couple of blankets that he must have curled up into in his sleep, hiding himself from view. The sheets are thankfully clear of frost, but Doc still pulls up a blanket to test Ren's temperature.

He's as cold as the room. Doc's heart drops. He moves his hand from Ren's forehead to his neck, trembling fingers pressing into his skin to find his pulse.

Cold claws wrap around his wrist.

It takes Doc a second to process that the deep snarl that echoes through the air is coming from Ren, and by the time his mind catches up he's been tossed to the ground. For once, he's grateful that the van has such thick carpeting.

His wrist stings with the beginnings of a bruise as Doc pushes himself up and away from the bed, bracing his back against the countertop. He's barely even able to register the panic in the back of his mind anymore -- Ren is *awake*. Not only awake, but he's got *motor control* and he can *make noises* and it's the most he's seen his friend do for -- he's not even *sure* how long. Since he'd initially gotten into the van, certainly. That's Ren, alive and kicking.

Doc steps forward to help when he sees Ren try to untangle himself from the sheets, but another snarl sends him back against the counter, hands raised. Okay. He can understand wanting to do things solo.

It doesn't take long before Ren's kicking the sheets away with his leg, sending them over the side of the bed and onto the ground. He pushes himself into the corner, pressing as close as possible to the wall, chest heaving with what Doc can only assume is panic. He distantly notes Ren's breath isn't visible in the cold air like his own, but that thought barely registers in the back of his mind as Ren looks up at him.

Red eyes. They glint faintly with something more than the electric lights of the van, a cold determination of some kind. Ren stares at him, and Doc -- not having anything else to do -- stares back and tries to ignore the sinking feeling.

The silence hangs in the air between them, as thick as the mist that has started to swirl around Doc's feet.

"Hey, man." Doc says, trying to keep his voice as soft as he can with how hard his heart is pounding. "How're you feeling?"

No response, for several more seconds, and then Ren speaks in a low tone. "*Where is my hand?*" His accent is not the same. His cadence sounds different. Those red eyes don't break away from Doc for even a second.

Doc laughs nervously. It sounds flat and wrong. "I'm -- I'm still working on a new one for you," he says, gesturing at his workbench. "It's going to take at least a couple days more work. Unless you mean the original one, which... couldn't be salvaged, sadly."

Ren glances at his bandaged arm, confusion flicking through his features before he looks back at Doc. The confusion in that expression does not go away.

There's another hefty pause, and it gives Doc ample time to consider his options. Obviously, he hadn't expected Ren to be in the best mental state when he woke up, but this doesn't feel like the panic he was expecting. His plans for when Ren woke up didn't take into account something like this (and they *especially* didn't include the room going cold as winter).

Doc slowly reaches out his hand again, carefully watching Ren. He doesn't flinch, thankfully, but there is a certain tension that builds in his face until Doc rests his hand on the edge of the bed instead, scooting closer. Ren doesn't move. It's awkwardly silent, and *very* cold, and something feels... off. The sinking feeling grows.

"You've been out for a while." Doc says.

Ren hums, but doesn't respond other than that, still staring at Doc. His facial expression is strange, distant somehow, like he's trying to put his finger on something and falling short. Those red eyes glimmer in contrast to the ice all around the room, and Doc shivers.

"It's going to be a while before we meet up with the others," he says. "We're going as fast as we can, apparently." (For once, he resists the urge to mumble *freakin' hippies* under his breath, even though he's *pretty sure* Renbob could in fact be going faster. The situation's a bit too serious for that.)

"*The others*," Ren echoes, giving him that same weird look. It's getting harder and harder for Doc to shake off the sinking feeling that *keeps coming back*, but he tries anyway.

Doc manages a small smile. "I sent X a message saying we were going to be late. Who knows if he got it. Actually, knowing X, he got it and hasn't noticed."

"X," Ren repeats once more.

Doc bites his lip and stands up straight again, offering his hand to Ren. His instincts are *screaming* at him that something is wrong, *dangerously* wrong, but he pushes it aside to help his friend in the best way he knows how.

"Coffee?"

There's confusion and distrust evident on Ren's face. He does not take Doc's hand. He looks at it for a few moments, clearly internally calculating something, before looking back up at Doc.

"...*Who are you?*"

And the sinking feeling finally hits Doc's heart, shattering it like ice.

First Contact

Chapter Summary

A conversation over coffee, Doc adjusts his expectations, and a lot of awkward silence.

Chapter Notes

(hey, solar here! i just wanted to thank everyone who's said nice things about datd so far because y'all are So Kind and it's been awesome seeing reactions and theories. okay that's it i'll let y'all get to the chapter now)

The first thing Doc learns about New Ren -- besides that he doesn't recognize Doc -- is that he also has no idea what coffee is. He sniffs at the mug he's offered, squinting at the dark beverage inside and swirling it a bit before he takes a sip. His face pulls into a grimace, but he doesn't spit it back out, at least.

"Why is it so sweet?" New Ren asks. *"Is it poisoned?"*

That's another thing about New Ren -- the voice doesn't go away. He always sounds... deliberate, somehow. Calculated, with an edge to his tone that's not quite natural. Doc's going to have to get used to it.

"Sorry," Doc says. "I put sugar in it because I thought it might be too bitter otherwise." *Ren liked his with a lot of sugar*, he thinks, but he doesn't say that out loud.

"Hm." New Ren takes another sip, and makes the same face. *"It doesn't get better."*

"Acquired taste." Doc says and reaches for the mug when New Ren places it down. "We can switch mugs, if you want."

New Ren glances at him, and Doc feels a pang in his heart at the suspicion written on what used to be his friend's face.

"Is that one poisoned?"

"Well," Doc says, "I've already had a sip of it, so I certainly hope not."

New Ren pauses, but hands his mug over to Doc, receiving his mug in return. He seems to like the taste more, but he still carefully watches Doc as he drains the thing. Doc briefly considers pretending to succumb to a previously undetected poison, then decides against doing so. Ren would've gotten a kick out of it, but he doubts New Ren would appreciate the joke.

Doc doesn't know what to think about New Ren. It's Ren's body, without a doubt, but it's not moving like Ren. This body is tense, never relaxing for a second, and the gray tone that has taken over his arms brings back unfortunate memories of Demise. The color doesn't drain from New

Ren's clothing, though, so it's definitely not Grimdog again (smug bastard).

Grimdog didn't have red eyes, either.

There is something deeply unsettling about those eyes, a genuine *fear* reaction kicking in the back of Doc's head whenever he and New Ren look at each other. They're bright, but not in the way Ren's eyes were always accompanied with a smile. It's the glint of frost on glass, of ice over a frozen lake. It's the gleam of a predator, and Doc is not interested in being prey.

He clears his throat, but New Ren is already paying attention, eyes locked onto Doc.

"So. Introductions." Doc places his hand on his chest and tries to ignore that his coat is stiff with frost. "I'm DocM77. Or, really, just Doc." He doesn't ask New Ren for his name in response. It'd feel rude, somehow.

New Ren doesn't offer his name either, instead tilting his head, lips pulling back to expose sharp, *sharp* teeth. The smile doesn't feel real, or at the very least doesn't feel *friendly*.

"Doc it is."

Oh, he does not like that *at all*. Doc fights back the urge to shudder as cold briefly snakes up his spine, and settles instead on awkwardly grinning back and taking another sip of oversweetened coffee. *Ren's teeth weren't always that sharp*, he thinks, and then mentally bundles up that thought and sets it aside carefully to unpack never. He is not talking with Ren right now. He is talking with New Ren. He kind of wishes they had different names, but he's not going to press the guy who just woke up.

"And you said there were others." New Ren keeps smiling. *"Who are those others?"*

"We can go over that later," Doc says, and New Ren shrugs before leaning back against the wall. He stays tense, though, and Doc notes that his fist is tightly clenched, those claws digging into his own skin.

He tries not to be obvious about taking a breath in to steady himself. "I should get back to work on your new arm soon," he says, making a mental note to add claws to the fingertips. "But if you need anything else, feel free to ask." Somehow, saying that feels like a *mistake*, but Doc chalks it up to New Ren's ominous aura and not anything actually bad.

New Ren dips his head in a small nod, but his eyes are distant again, like something is just out of reach in his thoughts. His hair is falling in his face, and Doc holds himself back from offering him a hair tie like he would've used to.

It seems like a bad idea, but Doc turns his back on New Ren and moves to his workbench, somehow not surprised the layers of frost are gone from its surface already. He takes a few moments to get himself back in work mode, and then picks up the arm again and starts tinkering. Tries to ignore the fact that he's being stared at -- if New Ren can't find anything more interesting to do, then he'll just have to deal with the prickling feeling of eyes on him.

It feels like something Ren would want him to do.

Before long, he's slipped back into his work and has almost forgotten about New Ren. Not *entirely*, but *almost*. Nerves don't do much good when he needs to do careful testing, so he's been able to set all that aside and focus on mechanics. The room has mostly defrosted by now.

Doc goes to check and make sure the thumb part of the hand articulates *just* right, and frowns.

Something about it seems *different*, somehow. It works just as well as before, but... surely the fingertips weren't always that sharp. He'd made a mental note to *add* claws, after all -- and yet here they were, already on his own work, as seamless as though they'd been there from the start.

He fights back a shudder again, ignores the cold feeling at the back of his neck, the icy smile he knows is there, and goes back to work once more. He's not sure *how* the claws happened, but hopefully it means New Ren will be willing to use the prosthetic.

It's weirdly quiet. He's used to working in silence, but he's not used to working in silence and being watched intently at the same time. Still, it's not like there's anything he can *do* about it besides striking up a conversation with New Ren, and... he doesn't want to pry. He really doesn't.

He makes it about an hour before his nerves are on their last edge. New Ren hasn't done anything but watch, and it's impacted his work ever so slightly -- Doc scowls at the palm of the prosthetic, where two plates refuse to meet. He's tempted to work until he fixes it, but he listens to reason for once, setting the hand back into the shoebox with a heavy sigh. Part of him feels guilty he isn't spending more time on the hand, but for the most part he's just glad to feel New Ren's gaze finally stop boring through the back of his head.

"I need food," Doc says aloud, trying to ease some of his guilt while also letting New Ren know what he's doing. "I never got to eat my toast."

He gets up. New Ren watches him as he makes his way to the kitchenette again. There's no obvious chill in the room this time, but Doc still peers inside the toaster, making sure. It seems fine, so he puts the toast in and waits.

It pops up toasted. Given his luck today, he'd half expected it to be burned, but it seems fine. Doc takes a bite and tries not to look directly at New Ren, who is *still* silently staring at him.

He's unsure if New Ren has actually taken his words to heart about asking for things, so (even though he really doesn't want to) Doc glances up at him. "Are you hungry?"

New Ren's mouth curves into a smirk. "*Not particularly.*"

Doc bites back a half-formed snarky comment before it can fully coalesce in his mind and takes another bite of toast instead. It's harder to be snide at people when your mouth is full of bread, after all.

Still, New Ren watches him, and Doc's nerves fray further. He hopes this is a temporary thing. He's not sure how much longer he can stand being silently observed until he accidentally says something stupid -- and if Doc thought it was unnerving to have someone watch him while he worked on a prosthetic, he has to admit it's even worse to have someone watch him while he's eating. He brushes crumbs away from his mouth, trying not to feel *too* self conscious.

Eventually, his plate is in the sink, and Doc weighs if he wants to do the dishes while he's being stared at. Glancing over at the several empty coffee cups settles the issue -- he'd given the last clean one to New Ren. He's going to have to do dishes while being stared at, like it or not.

He snaps a rubber glove over his metal hand before turning on the water, setting the faucet as warm as it'll go without burning his hands. He's had enough of the cold for one day. The water comes out more lukewarm than hot, and Doc glances over towards New Ren, still sitting there.

He doesn't ask if everything being cold is because of New Ren. It pretty obviously is, and there's pretty obviously nothing he can do about that. He'll just have to hope he can scrub the dishes clean

enough with soap. He turns back to the sink again.

At least the dishes are like his work, and he can lose himself in the rhythm, sponge sliding suds over mismatched dishes. The water stays the same temperature, and it's enough to scrub coffee stains out of the mugs, though it's barely enough to wash out one of Renbob's health smoothies (he has no idea what the guy puts in those, and he doesn't want to know).

He puts the final dish on the drying rack, scrubs fruitlessly at one of the stained glasses, and stops. New Ren is still staring at him, if the prickling feeling at the back of his neck is anything to go by.

"You know," he says slowly, not turning around, "if you need something, it's a lot easier to ask me directly than it is to try and telekinetically beam it into my mind." *Damnit. Damnit.* Not only has he said something when he was intending not to pry, that something he's said was in fact stupid, and on *multiple levels* no less.

He's kicking himself mentally for mixing up telekinesis and telepathy when New Ren responds.

"*Who said I needed something?*" His voice has a careful edge to it, and Doc can hear the quiet shifting of sheets as New Ren readjusts his position in bed, most likely leaning forward to stare even more intently at Doc than before.

Doc sighs. "I'm not used to being stared at unless people have questions. Is it about my arm?"

"...almost. *I'm more curious about the hand.*" New Ren laughs a bit at his own words, as though there's something funny about that phrasing. "*Why are you bothering to make it? We don't even know each other.*"

Doc turns, though not to face his friend's body. The shoebox is neatly lined up at the back of the workbench, small and unassuming, but the worth it holds is priceless. Or, he thinks bitterly, the worth it *used* to hold to him.

New Ren makes a curious noise. "*And now he doesn't respond. Interesting.*"

"I was just... thinking about it," Doc lies, even though he knows full well that New Ren has to have caught the way his shoulders sagged. "I don't know you, true. But from what I do know, Renbob found you lying half-dead and beat up on the ground, missing parts. It's the very least I can do to help, and it's something to pass the time while we travel."

New Ren hums thoughtfully, clearly considering his next words. "*Will I owe you anything for it?*"

"What server's currency would we even go by?" Doc says, and shakes his head. "No, you won't owe me anything for it, if you want it."

That same sharp snarl as before; Doc flinches despite himself. "*I want it.*" There's an awkward pause, and then New Ren adds another word to the sentence in a much calmer voice. "*Please.*"

Doc nods and sighs, turning around to face New Ren. For once, he isn't staring at Doc -- his eyes are locked onto the bedspread, refusing to look up. He almost looks guilty, but the way his teeth are bared makes Doc think otherwise.

"Honestly, I would've kept working on it no matter what you told me to do," Doc says quietly. "So I'm glad you want it. Makes things a lot less awkward." *Things would be even less awkward if you didn't stare at me while I worked,* he adds internally, then shoves that bitterness aside because clearly New Ren's still adjusting, and being grumpy won't help anything.

Doc gets a curt nod from New Ren, and then he's pulling some of the blankets over himself, laying down on the bed. It's an obvious sign he doesn't want to talk, and Doc quietly moves towards the driver's cabin. He can see red eyes watching him once more, carefully tracking his movement as he opens the door and slips through.

"He's awake," Doc says, shutting the door behind him.

Renbob barely stops himself from jerking the wheel a full 180 degrees, but the van still lurches, sending Doc stumbling into the couch with a grunt of pain.

"He's awake?" Renbob hits something on the dashboard, and the van slows a bit. "Doc, man, take the wheel! I gotta go see my bro!"

"He needs sleep right now," Doc says, only half lying. "Might be a better idea to talk to him when he's less disgruntled." Yeah. Disgruntled. That's... definitely a way of putting it. He's not sure how to break the bad news to Renbob. He's not sure if he *can*.

Renbob settles back in his seat, nodding in thought. "Right on. Getting tossed in the lava probably made him pretty grumpy."

"Yeah." Doc falls onto the couch by choice this time, sighing heavily. "That's what happened, Renbob."

Freakin' hippies.

Old Habits

Chapter Summary

Doc keeps working, New Ren reveals he has a sense of humor, and Doc keeps working (again).

Chapter Notes

(solar here! thanks for all the kind comments on chapter 2! originally we were gonna do a daily update schedule but i decided that eh, fuck it, we've completed two whole chapters today and are already starting on another one, you guys deserve a double update.)

(this one's a little long! i'm not sure why it's a little long because it doesn't FEEL long in the document, but here we are.)

Doc's had enough of staring at the ceiling. He's memorized the entire thing, from the warped metal of the roof to the knots in the wood beams that run from side to side. One of the beams has a nail stuck in it, bent slightly upwards, and Doc considers using it as a coat hanger.

It's a better option than the coat rack at the foot of New Ren's bed. Not... because he doesn't want to approach New Ren or anything, no, that's not it at all. It's just that the coat rack is always *freezing* to the touch, and he prefers his labcoat at room temperature.

The couch fabric is rough and makes it hard to stay in one spot for too long, so Doc rolls onto his side, glaring at the bead curtain. He's pretty sure it has something to do with all of this. It looks horrendously evil enough to wipe his best friend's memories, and he wouldn't put it past Renbob to have a cursed hippie treasure capable of doing such a heinous thing.

...He really needs some sleep. Is he going to get any? Of course not. He's behind on the arm, and New Ren's asleep now, so instead he gets up off the couch and shuffles quietly over towards his workbench.

He pulls the arm out of its shoebox container and stares at the claws he absolutely did not add to it for a few seconds, then sets it on the table and begins working again. It's slower work now that he has to be quiet, but at least he's not making mistakes like when New Ren was watching him.

He's moved on to the carpal bones, and Doc glances at the hastily sketched blueprints for directions. Wrists are fragile if not treated right, so maybe it's a good thing he's having to work slow. He twists wires together, making the general frame of 'bones' he'll eventually piece together from metal.

Eventually, partway through the process, his hands start to feel heavy and his work slows to a crawl. Doc may be stubborn, but he's not *stupid*. He's not going to get any progress done like this. He sighs quietly, puts the arm back in its shoebox, sets the box aside, and slumps over the table.

He'll... get up and get back on the couch in a second. He just needs to rest.

He doesn't realize he's fallen asleep until he feels... something. A cold hand on his shoulder, fingers tapping gently against it. Doc stiffens instinctively, half at the chill and half at... other factors.

"Oh, you're awake," New Ren says, like he wasn't the one who had woken Doc up. *"I was starting to wonder if you were dead."*

"Were those the only two options you considered?" Doc mutters.

The fingers tapping against him stop, and instead there's the sharp pinprick of claws pressing through his labcoat. *"I also considered throwing you out the window."*

Doc's heart nearly stops then and there. He forces the panic back down (it's easier to do when he hasn't looked New Ren in the eyes today and the memory of that piercing stare is gradually fading) and fakes bravado that he's *really* not feeling this early in the morning. "And why would you do that to the person who's working on new limbs for you?"

"You drooled on yourself, and I figured I would save you the embarrassment." New Ren sounds like he's trying not to laugh, and Doc flinches when his shoulder is clapped. *"You're welcome."*

Well. That's about three years off his life from fear, right there. Still, New Ren being comfortable enough to make jokes is... good, he thinks. Progress, or something. "Fair enough. I would've thrown myself out the window too." Pause for effect. "Along with that horrendous bead curtain."

New Ren leans over his back, looking through the open door and at the curtain.

"Wow. That's a fashion statement." He sounds mildly distressed at seeing the thing. *"Almost as bad as a labcoat with no shirt."*

"I know." Doc manages to grin -- this feels normal, like something he could get used to. This feels almost like Ren.

That thought stings enough that he slumps back onto the desk again, letting out a soft breath. This isn't Ren. It's not fair to New Ren for him to expect the same things as he'd expect from his old friend. It wouldn't be right to put that on someone who doesn't even recognize anyone.

New Ren pushes off of him, and Doc hears him fall back onto the bed.

Before he looks at something that is absolutely none of his business, he straightens up, grimacing when he feels a damp spot on his sleeve. It's not gross enough to wash his coat, but he still rolls the sleeve up so it's not touching him.

Right. Okay. Coffee first, and maybe a breakfast to go with it. Doc's half tempted to forgo all that and just start working -- the lingering traces of fear in his system from being threatened by New Ren have him *plenty* awake -- but it's probably best not to break his schedule. He stands up the rest of the way, stretches, and winces as his shoulder makes a popping noise.

"I'm making coffee again," he says. "No sugar in yours, right?"

He can feel New Ren's gaze snap back to him almost immediately; his neck prickles uncomfortably with cold once more. There's a pause. *"If you're willing to share, then no sugar."*

"Eh, what's mine is yours," he says. "As long as you don't want a smoothie. The blender belongs

to the van.”

There’s no answer, so Doc grabs two mugs from the drying rack as he waits for the pot to boil -- if New Ren doesn’t want any, he’ll just drink the second cup as well. Caffeine mixed with his current adrenaline might not be his best idea ever, but he’s sure to get some work done today.

He pulls out a piece of bread and puts it in the toaster, too. Might as well front-load all the usual stuff. Before long, the toast is done and he’s got two mugs full of black coffee. He pauses, hand hovering over the sugar, then turns back to New Ren and silently hands him one of the cups.

New Ren takes the mug by the handle and balances it on his leg, giving him a sharp grin by way of thanks. Doc wonders if he’s burning himself, and realizes it’s a stupid thought a couple of seconds later.

He makes for his workbench again. His tools are still scattered about; he sets a few aside before grabbing the shoebox and sliding open the lid. He’s pleased to see that his wireframe has held overnight -- that’s less work for him. The hand clinks against the surface of the table as he lays it down before reaching for his coffee and taking a long drink (no toast yet, he’ll risk the bread crumbs when he’s working on larger pieces).

“I doubt this is proper lab safety.” New Ren offers, and Doc decides to be a mature adult and ignore the jab.

Ha. As if.

“This isn’t really a proper lab, so it’s fine,” Doc responds, rolling his eyes. “I could put on a pair of goggles if it’ll make you feel safe.”

“I’d prefer you put on a shirt.”

“That’s not happening,” he says, taking another drink of coffee before he picks up a pencil. “That’s *never* happening.”

No response. Doc goes back to work, satisfied with having won the world’s most pointless argument and ready to make the wireframe into something more workable. Renbob might be a weird guy, but at least he has some scrap metal lying around for Doc to use.

Doc makes sure he has the wireframe in the same shape as the blueprint before he takes the more delicate wires and lays them in order. They’re an upgrade from his own hand, where his fingers can move but the flat of his palm can’t, and Doc slots them into the already built part of the hand, attaching the wireframe to the wrist and moving the hand around. It doesn’t pop off with the pressure, so he’s going to consider that a win.

It’s starting to come together. With a little more work, maybe a day or so, it’ll be actively wearable, if not fully tuned. Though he suspects he’s not going to have to do a lot of tinkering, given the way the hand’s already adapted to have sharp nails and also taking everything *else* about New Ren into account. He wouldn’t be surprised if he attached the arm for testing and it just magically became finished.

Not a great idea to count on that happening, though. That’s an absolute best-case scenario, and the chances of that happening are... not great. Better to proceed as though absolutely nothing strange is going on, and there’s not someone staring at him with glinting red eyes again-

He stops. Sure enough, that cold feeling at the back of his neck has returned.

He stops the shiver that climbs up his spine, ducking his head and doing his very best to just ignore it. It's not like there's much else for New Ren to do around the van, so Doc can shoulder through the work even if he's a tad uncomfortable. As long as New Ren doesn't start asking questions, he's fine.

"Is there any chance of a hairbrush in here?"

Well. Not the type of question he was expecting. Doc turns halfway in his chair, looking over at New Ren with raised brows. His claws are pulling through his hair, wincing at every knot he hits, but he's still staring at Doc.

"Should be one in the bathroom," Doc says, "want me to go get it for you?"

"I'd appreciate it." New Ren tugs at his hair again. *"Greatly."*

Doc knows he's being watched as he slides out of his chair and moves towards the back of the van, but at least he knows what New Ren wants this time.

There's two brushes in the bathroom, actually. Doc glances between the pick and the bristle brush for a few seconds before grabbing both of them and leaning out of the bathroom. "Do either of these look good?"

"I should've guessed you've never used a comb before." New Ren says, propping his head up on his fist. *"The bristle brush."*

This time, Doc *actually* manages to not snark back at New Ren, instead silently handing him the bristle brush and setting the pick back down. He waits for the next verbal jab instead. New Ren doesn't seem *rude* per se, but most of their conversations today have been poking fun at Doc, and he's curious if New Ren can manage more than the 'please' he gave Doc.

There's no thank you, but Doc does get a nod, so he'll count that as a win.

He settles back down into his chair, and squints at the hand. The tips of the metal claws have gone a darker shade of grey, but at least there's nothing more than some cosmetic changes.

New Ren is too busy brushing through his hair to watch Doc, which means he's free to make a weird expression at the changed metal before getting back to work on the arm once more, sliding more plating into position over the wireframe to make sure it holds its shape properly. The brief reprieve from being stared at is helpful for this much of a delicate task, but everything seems to be shaping up remarkably well.

His coffee is cold again, but at least it's not frozen, and Doc chugs the rest of his mug. He's not looking forward to the next part of his task, but he's on a roll, and Doc starts threading wires through the shell of the forearm, twisting them together and making sure they stay in place. He grabs the metal ball that's set up to be New Ren's elbow, and slides the pieces together.

They make a satisfying click, and Doc holds his breath as he lifts the complete prosthetic, spinning it in his hands. Realistically he knows it's perfect, but his nerves are getting the better of him these days, and he spends a couple of minutes testing and retesting all the individual joints. They all bend like they're supposed to, the metal clicking against itself and into position, and Doc finally allows himself to breathe, high-fiving the finished hand with his own metal hand.

He pauses. Takes a second to savor his success, then takes a bit longer to clear off the spare scrap from the workbench before turning around. He's not looking forward to this next part -- not because of any rational reason, but because calibrating and testing the limb is going to require him

to be in close proximity to New Ren, and...

He closes his eyes and shakes his head. It's fine. New Ren is *fine*. Different, sure, and a little spooky, but the only thing that's probably going to happen during testing is that Doc's going to end up getting the chills. He shoos away the images of New Ren holding him up by the throat supervillain-style and turns around.

"Alright," he says, "I think it's almost done."

New Ren looks up, hair hanging in his eyes. "*Already?*"

"Well, we still have to test it and calibrate how sensitive your reactions are," Doc says, chewing at his lip. "But the building part? Yes, it's done." Honestly, he's surprised at how quickly it came together. And a little jealous, considering how long his own arm took to make.

...Well. To be fair, his own arm was an *entire arm*, and also he'd had to work on it with only one hand. So maybe it makes sense that it's taken less time. Either way, New Ren's hand is finished, and Doc holds it out towards him, letting him take the limb to look at.

"I'd say I did a good job with it," he says, nerves crawling back up his throat. "Fit for a king." He has no idea why he's just said that. Kings do not usually wear metal prosthetics, and it's not like it's gold and shiny or anything *else* particularly king-like.

New Ren slowly looks up at him, and Doc doesn't know what to make of that distant expression he's wearing, the one that makes him seem like a ghost in Ren's body.

"*I'd hope it is,*" he says, voice soft as he sets the hand down on the bed.

...Oookay then. Doc gets up slowly, tries not to stand *over* New Ren as much as he can when the guy's sitting down and Doc himself is relatively tall. "Do you want me to help you attach it?" he asks, just in case there's some miracle cybernetic knowledge in New Ren's brain and he can get out of close proximity after all.

New Ren sighs, not bothering with brushing away the hair that falls over his face as he nods. "*Yes. Please.*"

Of course the universe wouldn't give him the easy out. Doc grabs for the metal band that will connect New Ren's arm to the prosthetic, but he waits for his patient to give him the hand himself, not wanting to get in New Ren's space before he has to.

He's still wearing that lost look on his face, but he moves over to the side of the bed and hands over the arm. Doc takes it and approaches slowly, trying not to let his nerves get the best of him. New Ren's hair has fallen mostly to one side, but there's still some strands falling over his shoulder and near the missing elbow. He takes a breath in. Brushes the hair aside. He might be holding his breath as he works on getting the prosthetic in place, he's not entirely sure.

The room's cold again. Doc grits his teeth and slides the band into place, the arm clicking in after it.

Frost glimmers at his fingertips when he pulls away.

"It's going to take a second to connect," he says. "But when it does, I'll just run you through some basic movements."

New Ren doesn't say anything, but Doc can tell exactly when the prosthetic connects, can see the

subtle roll of his shoulder as he feels the new weight of his arm. He tilts his head at Doc, waiting for directions.

Doc really doesn't feel like giving New Ren orders. It feels *wrong* somehow, for some reason he can't quite put his finger on. But... well, there's not really much else to do if he wants to make sure the arm works.

"Wiggle your fingers a little?"

New Ren does just that, claws glinting in the van's light. He spreads his fingers apart, and closes them into a fist without Doc leading him into it, curiously looking at where the joints connect -- there's a strange fascination on his face, and Doc can't tell if he prefers the ghost look or this. At least they're both better than being stared at.

"*Could I have another cup of coffee?*" New Ren asks, slowly uncurling his fingers. "*For science, of course.*"

Doc releases the breath that he had in fact been holding. "Yeah, sure. Hand me your mug?"

New Ren silently hands him the mug, and he takes it. Doc doesn't bother pouring a second cup for himself -- that cold feeling is keeping him *plenty* alert -- but his hand still hesitates over the sugar.

He stops. "No sugar and no cream, I assume."

"*No.*"

"Right." Doc nods. "Of course." He turns back to the bed, holding the coffee out towards New Ren, watching as he reaches for it with his new hand, fingers curling around the handle. He wobbles a little, but he's mostly steady, and New Ren looks smug as he takes a sip.

"Does any part of it feel stiff?" he asks, staring at his own work. The dark grey discoloration has spread further down from the claws, and is now a dark stain on the fingertips.

"*The wrist, mostly.*" New Ren squeezes the handle of the mug. "*It feels like it's sticking in place.*"

Doc makes a mental note of that, watching New Ren move around, experimenting with different positions to hold his hand in. The wrist isn't too big of a surprise, but at least that seems to be the biggest issue with it so far. There's a couple smaller issues -- a few plates are pressing harder against each other than they need to, and there's a small *click* noise that happens each time New Ren straightens out his arm -- but those will get fixed too. Doc could probably take the rest of the day off if he wanted to.

He doesn't want to. Any issue with his work is something he wants to fix, even if it's minor, and even if this isn't *Ren*, he wants to do his best on this prosthetic out of sheer diligence.

He doesn't realize he's been staring at the hand until New Ren clears his throat.

"*Something wrong?*"

Doc coughs and turns back towards his workbench, refusing to meet New Ren's eyes. "Well, the wrist, apparently. And several other minor things. I'll need to fix those before I can call your hand complete, and it's up to you if you still want it connected while I do the work."

He can hear the *click click click* of claws tapping against the mug. "*I'm assuming it won't hurt.*"

“No.” Doc says, scanning over the table before grabbing his screwdriver. “It shouldn’t, at least.”

“*Shouldn’t. That’s a good enough guarantee for me.*” New Ren laughs -- the sound sends a cold jolt up Doc’s spine -- and he can once more feel that telltale prickling of red eyes watching him.

“*I’ll keep it on, then.*”

Readjust

Chapter Summary

New Ren tests his hand, Doc makes a hard call, and Renbob hears some bad news.

Chapter Notes

(solar here! this one's a little short. it's also, uh. well. you'll see.)

This was a mistake.

It's not that fixing up the last little bits of New Ren's prosthetic is going *badly*, exactly. It's... fine, from a mechanical standpoint. In fact, it's relatively easy work; New Ren has held his arm perfectly still and barely fidgets with it at all.

That said, Doc's also cold, nervous, and also kneeling on the floor (to get a better angle on the prosthetic) in very close proximity to someone watching him with cold red eyes, so it could *definitely* be going a lot better.

He tries not to let his nerves show, focusing instead on fixing up the wrist so it's less stiff and doesn't stick in place. It's not that he's *scared* of New Ren -- well, he *is* scared of New Ren, just a bit, but that's not why he doesn't want to act nervous. The fear of showing weakness around some sort of entity is eclipsed by not wanting to make New Ren feel awkward. Doc's been the scary person before. He knows how that feels, and it's not always great.

So he does his best to stay collected and keeps working, even as that cold feeling works its way up his spine.

"Palm up, please," he says, watching the wrist swivel as New Ren moves. He thinks he has most of the issue solved, but if he doesn't, it'll at least be obvious. "Okay, can you grab my screwdriver and start pretending to twist it?"

New Ren leans across the bed to grab the screwdriver, hair falling across his shoulders again as he moves. He holds it in the same way someone might hold a dagger, that same sort of careful poise -- Doc's not a fan of that image at all, though, so he sets that thought aside for later to watch the hand move. The movements seem smooth enough to him, but he looks up at New Ren to make sure.

"Any issues?"

New Ren looks down at Doc with a grimace. "*It still feels tight when it moves too fast.*"

"That could just be you getting used to the hand." Doc thinks out loud, taking the screwdriver back as New Ren hands it over. "But it could also be an issue with the joint itself. There's no way to tell unless you keep moving."

"*Is that what it was like for yours?*" New Ren leans forward and over the edge of the bed to tap

Doc's own prosthetic. His claws ring against the metal, and Doc tries his hardest not to flinch away, instead taking a deep breath and trying to remain as professional as possible.

"At the start, yes." Doc almost shrugs, then decides against the motion -- New Ren's hand is still resting on his shoulder, and he doesn't want to be rude and shrug it off (as much as he hates that cold feeling seeping into him through the metal). "Though I had to make mine one-handed, and I wasn't as practiced back then, so the experience is not entirely comparable."

"You mean you weren't kidnapped by a shirtless scientist and given a new limb for free?" New Ren gives him a half grin, displaying a few too many sharp teeth for Doc's comfort. *"And I was thinking this 'Renbob' guy that picked me up did the same to you."*

Doc shakes his head, somewhat relieved when New Ren finally pulls away. "Renbob only called me after he found you." It's the truth, so he's not sure why saying it still makes him nervous. "And I wouldn't exactly call it kidnapping," he adds, immediately regretting it. He bites back the *we thought you were Ren at the time*. Renbob would probably have rescued any random stranger, though he might not have done so with quite as much enthusiasm.

"I guess rescuing also works. All depends on perspective." New Ren falls silent after that, twisting his wrist from side to side, and it becomes apparent that's where the conversation will end.

Doc doesn't mind, letting New Ren move his arm around on his own and internally taking notes on how to fix the smaller flaws he keeps noticing. He occasionally hands him new things to hold on to and use -- mostly more tools, but he does hand over his comm at one point, watching as claws close around the dark screen. New Ren spins it around, obviously in deep thought, letting it drop to the sheets when he's no longer focusing on it.

Doc picks it back up. There's a light dusting of frost on its surface, and he carefully wipes it off on his labcoat. He's not going to ask. He doesn't want to pry, and he doesn't want the answer either. Instead, he puts the comm back in his pocket and waits for New Ren to finish testing the arm out.

It's maybe half an hour later that New Ren slumps against the pile of blankets he's made, waving his hand around.

"Seems fine," he mutters, and Doc can't tell if he's tired or frustrated. *"The wrist cleared up."*

"Good." Doc says, trying to keep his voice soft. "I'll just need to readjust the sizes of some of the plates."

His words trail off when he realizes New Ren isn't paying attention, and is instead pushing himself further into the blankets, his face hidden from view by both the sheets and his hair. Doc tenses, unsure if he did something wrong, but he realizes after a couple of panicked seconds that New Ren looks fairly peaceful. Like he's sleeping.

Welp, so much for finishing the arm today. Doc looks over at the faint layer of frost fogging up the surface of the prosthetic and sighs -- gets up off the ground and stretches, cracks his neck, backs away from New Ren as he sleeps. He'll get it done later. He can start work on the leg now, instead.

...Or he could break the bad news to Renbob. He doesn't *want* to, but it's a heck of a lot better than Renbob finding out and getting his heart shattered on his own. It's pretty obvious that New Ren is here to stay, like it or not.

He shoots New Ren one more glance before he slides back into the driver's cabin. Renbob is in the beanbag stuffed next to the driver's seat, but he perks up when he sees Doc, and something about

having two people look like Ren when neither of them are makes Doc stop to take a shaky breath. But neither of them are Ren, and it's unfair to push his thoughts onto them.

"Doc, man!" Renbob is beaming from ear to ear. "How're you?"

"Fine," he lies. He doesn't have the heart to make it sound convincing. "Listen, uh, you wanted to talk to Ren before, right?"

"Sure did! He doing better today? Less lava grumps? If he wants, I could totally make him a rocking smoothie to help him feel better, dude!"

This hurts. This hurts *so* much. But he can't phrase it any kinder than this. "Renbob... it's not Ren. Whoever woke up, it's not him. Either he lost his memory, or something else, but -- he doesn't recognize me, man, it's not Ren anymore."

Renbob blinks. "That's pretty normal for our bro, right? Wasn't there a whole business with him being dead before?"

"Not like this." Doc slumps onto the couch, head in hands. "Grimdog was just... Ren, but lightly possessed? I think? This is different. He doesn't know who I am. He doesn't know who you are, and he didn't seem to recognize X when I brought him up yesterday."

Renbob goes quiet, and Doc looks over to see his hands fidgeting with the beanbag fabric. He knows all of Ren's expressions, but he can't pin this one because *Ren isn't here*, and it hits him harder this time, seeing someone else react to the news.

"I'm sorry, Renbob," he manages to say. "I really am."

"No, it's -- it's fine." Renbob clears his throat, looking up at Doc with a smile that is so *obviously* fake that it hurts. "Can I still talk to him?"

Doc runs a hand down his face. "Yeah. If you still want to later. He's sleeping right now."

He doesn't particularly like the hippie in the first place, but he still has a heart, and it breaks all over again when Renbob nods, pulling his legs up to his chest and turning over on his side, away from Doc and out into space.

Ren's gone. Ren's gone and he's probably not going to come back, and Doc's just going to have to deal with this new stranger who looks so much like his friend and so obviously *isn't*. And he'll probably have to break the news to the other hermits, too, Iskall and False and all the others.

Not yet. Right now, he has work to do on a prosthetic leg. He has work to do on anything else that lets him stop thinking about this for even a few passing moments. Like it or not, New Ren is here, probably for good. Doc might as well get used to it as soon as possible to save him the trouble of explaining himself. It's the least he can do.

It's what Ren would've wanted him to do.

Winter

Chapter Summary

Renbob learns about his other passenger, Doc learns about proper nouns, and a long-overdue introduction is made.

Doc still doesn't know a lot about New Ren, but he can safely guarantee he's *not* human, in any broad sense of the word. He wakes up right when Doc's comm says 7, declines breakfast again, goes through an entire mug of coffee in a couple of minutes, and despite all of this he's somehow managed to not look like a mess, even though his hair is tangled again.

He's also gone back to watching Doc work, so that's great.

Doc has the blueprints spread over the desk, eraser bits clinging to the edges of the papers. He's never made a prosthetic leg before, but they don't really require as many complex parts as a hand needs, so he figures it cancels out. Ironically enough, pulling an all-nighter on this design has cleared his mind, and he doesn't feel quite as awful as when he started working last night.

On the downside, though, New Ren's still staring at him. But that's fine. He can manage. He clenches his jaw instinctively, very deliberately unclenches it when he notices he's doing that, and goes over the design again.

Thigh, knee, calf, and foot. Connecting them will be easy enough, but it's the measurements he has to be careful of, otherwise New Ren is going to have some killer back pain. The universe loves to mock him, it seems -- the only way he's going to get accurate measurements is by looking at New Ren's leg. Doc sets that aside for later. He really doesn't want to have to deal with those chills yet.

The van jostles a bit, and he can hear New Ren fall over sideways with a groan. That's probably not good. "Everything alright?" he asks, turning around. He immediately has to stifle a snort of laughter, because New Ren has fallen over face-first and is hanging partway off the bed in an extremely undignified manner.

"*Fine.*" New Ren hisses, and Doc tries very hard to put the image of a pouting puppy out of his mind (if anything, it's more of an awkward cat position). "*What the hell was that about?*"

"No idea." Doc watches New Ren pull and push himself into a slightly more dignified position, stomach against the sheets, arms flopping over the edge of the bed. "Renbob claims he's avoiding other ships, but I've never seen any pass by the window."

New Ren's expression becomes guarded. "*Other ships?*"

"Yeah." Doc doesn't know if the guy's worried or just curious, but he doesn't like the sudden ice behind his eyes. "Other ships moving onto their next world, like us."

"*And Renbob is our driver?*" New Ren's eyes move to the door, and Doc feels the temperature plummet. "*Can I talk to him?*"

Something about the two of them talking to each other seems like a bad idea, but Doc nods anyway, getting up from the desk. "Sure," he says, "I'll go get him."

New Ren's eyes follow him all the way to the door, and Doc tries to look as composed as possible as he pokes his head into the driver's cabin. "Hey, uh. I don't know if you still wanted to talk to... uh, to the other passenger, but he just asked for you."

He ducks out before he can hear Renbob's response, closing the door and turning back to New Ren, giving him a once over before he settles down in his chair. Doc's still fairly sure it's a bad idea, but he's at least sure New Ren won't hurt Renbob. Come to think of it -- other than the bruise Doc's still got on his wrist, New Ren hasn't done anything actively harmful besides being a little bit spooky (and completely unintentionally breaking two hearts, but that's *not* his fault, and Doc shoves that thought aside).

He taps his fingers against his workbench, knowing he's not going to get much work done while he waits. The best he can do is doodle shapes on the edges of the blueprints, half looking at the messy drawings, half watching the door, waiting for it to open and not wanting it to do that at all.

New Ren is watching the door too, having scooted to the edge of the bed, sitting upright. His hands are clenched tightly into the blankets, and Doc is barely surprised to see that the darkened metal now reaches up to his knuckles. Doc can't usually read New Ren, but it's hard to *not* see that he's tense.

The door handle moves, and Doc watches as frost spreads across the walls. His breath is visible again, but there's a blast of warm air as Renbob opens the door and steps in.

For a moment, their expressions look almost identical. Stunned confusion marks both faces, and Doc wants to look away and doesn't *just in case*.

"Renbob, huh?" New Ren speaks first, his words cautious and his eyes wide.

Renbob shoots Doc a desperate look before turning back to New Ren, taking in those new features (red eyes, sharp claws, sharper teeth) before he responds. "That's me, man. Uh -- what's your name?"

New Ren looks between the two of them, the shock and confusion slowly fading into a blank slate, like he's trying to look as emotionless as possible. And then he straightens up, shoulders back, eyes glinting coldly.

Ice spreads over Doc's arm. Snakes its way up the walls from where New Ren sits, freezes over the windows. The temperature drops.

"*I am the Red King,*" he snarls, mouth split into a frosty smile. "*And it's so nice to finally meet you, Renbob.*"

"Yeah, dude, nice to meet you too!" Renbob's voice is pitched up by an octave, but he holds a shaking hand out towards the Red King. "Doc was just talking to me about you last night, and I was like, 'man, I really gotta meet this dude!'"

Doc would consider strangling Renbob himself if he wasn't frozen on the spot, nerves keeping him locked in place. The Red King fixes Renbob with a stare, and he makes a nervous sound as he drops his offered hand, shuffling in place to keep himself warm. Any ounce of heat in the room has been thoroughly killed, replaced by a mist that curls around their feet.

"So. So! If you ever need anything that Doc can't get you, let me know!" Renbob claps his hands together, making a beeline for the door. "I can do friendship bracelets and flower crowns, but if you want some custom sandals I'll have to check if I have the right stuff, okay see you!"

The door snaps shut. Doc holds out hope for a couple seconds that maybe all the ice in the room will just go away now that Renbob's not here, but... not even close. Instead the Red King's eyes snap to him and the temperature somehow plummets *further*. He tries not to hold his breath. He can't do anything about his hammering heart, though.

"So. That's our ferryman."

"I don't think Renbob has a boat license." Doc says, because it's the first thing that comes to mind. His wit is rewarded with a deep growl that echoes in the small space. "Ferryman. Driver. Yep. Renbob."

The Red King's smile has vanished, replaced by a line of jagged teeth. *"He called on you to help. What does that make you?"*

"The guy who's good with prosthetics." Doc says. *The best friend of the person we thought would be sitting where you are*, he doesn't say. "I'm just here to help, man."

"And what a help you've been! Fixing me up, replacing my hand." The Red King laughs bitterly, pushing himself up and off the bed, looking down at Doc. *"Is that fate's sense of irony? Replacing the one thing that can't be?"*

Doc shrinks back instinctively. "I don't know what you're talking about." He can feel ice sinking into his arm, biting cold where metal meets skin. "I actually do not know what you're talking about."

"No," The Red King breathes, and Doc watches as icicles start to form above him. *"No, you've just been brought in to replace my hand, haven't you, doctor? Where's the hand?"*

"You're *wearing* it," he manages to hiss out past his own panic. Red eyes bore into his own like cold lasers. There is nowhere to run. He tries to scoot further back anyway. Claws grab his labcoat, and he's yanked face to face with the king.

"Not this one," he snarls. *"The king's right-hand man. My Hand."*

...Oh. *Oh*. If Doc could deflate further, he would. He looks down at the mismatched hands gripping his coat, because he'd rather remember rage than see another person's heart break. "I don't know who that is. I'm sorry."

He can feel the Red King's eyes looking over his face, at the defeated slump of his shoulders. There's a frustrated growl, and then he's dropped back down into his chair as the king stumbles over to the kitchenette.

Doc can hear something quietly dripping into the sink. Everything is still frozen. He doesn't dare move, even as the room slowly creeps up to a more natural temperature.

"If you're not here to replace my Hand," the Red King says, his voice hoarse with tears. *"Then why did you decide to save me?"*

We thought we were saving Ren, Doc thinks bitterly, but does not say it -- does not even *consider* saying that. "Because it was the right thing to do," he says instead.

He doesn't say anything else as the Red King drags himself to the bathroom, slamming the door shut behind him.

Cold Snap

Chapter Summary

Doc finds a side project, the Red King has some concerns, and breakfast is finally eaten.

Chapter Notes

(hi y'all, fluffy here! just wanted to pop in and say thank you for all the amazing comments, the support on this fic has been wild!)

There is a crown on Doc's workbench.

It looks like it's probably made of gold, but it's hard to tell under the thick layer of grime and dried blood that coats most of its surface, inside and out. The design is simple, uncomplicated even -- there's engravings in it, but no other inlays. Something about it makes him deeply uneasy, but he's... going to chalk that up to the fact that he knows exactly who it belongs to.

Well. It's on his desk, and he doesn't exactly have anything else to work on right now -- the Red King's asleep, prosthetic arm still attached, and he doesn't like the prospect of trying to take leg measurements or doing anything else that could wake him up. Doc sighs, rubs the bridge of his nose, picks up the crown and some metal polish, and gets to work.

It's actually kind of relaxing, in a way. Sure, the polish stinks like hell, but this is relatively easy work compared to the type of intense mechanical fine-tuning he's used to doing. Here, the most he has to worry about is not scratching the soft metal and making sure everything's in the proper shape. And using the right polishing cloth, but that's also not so much of a big deal. Before too long, he's forgotten entirely about being apprehensive around the relic and is instead trying to restore it as best he can.

It takes a while. An hour, maybe two hours, maybe longer than that because he briefly registers movement and spots Renbob tiptoeing into the kitchenette to make himself a protein shake. Ah -- he must have pulled another all-nighter again. That's fine. He wasn't going to sleep anyway. Doc takes another look at the now-gleaming crown and leaves it on his worktable again while he goes to splash water on his face.

When he comes out of the bathroom, the Red King is awake.

"I assume it's yours -- the crown." Doc says, his first words to the king since last night. He wipes his hands dry on his jeans, watching as the Red King takes a deep breath.

"*You cleaned it,*" he says, reaching out like he means to grab it, but pulling back.

Doc shrugs, moving towards the kitchenette for the coffee that's become their daily routine. He pulls down two mugs, setting them on the counter and turning to face the Red King. "It was dirty. I

assumed you left it there so I could do something with it.”

A beat. *“I’ve never seen it clean before. Thank you.”*

Doc knows better than to question that, at this point. He’s not going to pry into the Red King’s background; at best it would be inconsiderate, and more likely it’d just be plain rude. He takes the new information and mentally files it alongside that missing right-hand man, and he doesn’t ask, just... nods. “Well, if you want to keep it clean, I’ve got metal polish. Helps keep grime out of my arm.”

The Red King turns to look at him. Doc almost expects the room to freeze over again, but there’s no cold fury left in his face. Curiosity, maybe -- whatever it is, it’s far better than last night, and Doc finds himself able to hold his gaze without the usual chill up his spine.

He’s still the one to break eye contact, though, moving when the coffee pot starts to beep at him. He fills their mugs, stares at the sugar, and before he can stop himself, he’s stirring it into his own mug.

The Red King has the crown in his lap when Doc turns back around, claws gently tracing over the engravings, leaving frost patterns behind. He takes his coffee with a mumbled thanks, blinking in surprise when Doc sits on the edge of the bed next to him.

“We’re going to do measurements today,” he explains, cupping his mug between both hands. “I can’t do much else until I get them.”

The king glances down at his sweatpants. *“Any chance that can come with a change of clothes?”*

Doc hums thoughtfully. “I can see what else we have. I assume you’re not a fan of bell-bottom pants.”

“Those sound awful. Right up there with a bead curtain.”

“I swear I’m going to burn that thing one day.” Doc says, shaking his head. “I’ll check the closet while you have your coffee, and then we’ll start.”

The Red King raises his mug ever so slightly, his other hand still cradling his crown. Doc takes that as a good sign, and takes his own mug with him as he goes to check the closet for anything that’s not sweatpants or hippie pants. The coffee’s a little better sweetened. He’s needed some sort of change from the usual bitter taste.

“Looks like there’s a few pairs of Ren’s jeans here,” he says, then freezes. Oh, he *really* hadn’t wanted to say that. He crosses his fingers wrapped around the mug and hopes that the Red King won’t point it out.

There’s a few seconds of silence before he hears a laugh behind him. *“Well, if they’ll fit me.”*

Doc doesn’t know what to make of that answer, and he doesn’t think he wants to, instead pulling out a white undershirt that had been tucked in with the pants to set on the bed for the Red King to change into later. He takes the already-empty mug from the king, sets it in the sink, and then grabs for his measuring tape.

“Lay down for me?”

He has to push several blankets out of the way, but the Red King settles down on his back, waiting expectantly. Doc leans over, half expecting to be grabbed by the throat or some other similarly

unpleasant thing, but... thankfully, nothing.

He pulls out the measuring tape. He takes measurements. Partway through, he's realized it'd be a lot easier to do this if the Red King's leg was over the edge of the bed, so he has to wait for him to readjust so he can re-measure again.

Doc crouches down, still half-expecting some sort of attack. Still nothing.

The Red King is watching him, but not in the same predatory way as before. More as an afterthought, only somewhat curious about what Doc is doing. The crown is on top of the stack of clothes, and Doc wonders if he's planning on wearing it -- he doubts it can be that comfortable.

He takes the measurements again, both relieved and annoyed when he realizes the numbers have changed, writing down his notes on one of the blueprint sheets. He pauses, looking over the sheet, then erases the NR he'd originally put on the page, switching 'New Ren' over to RK for 'Red King'. It feels more permanent, more like it's for the Red King and less of an old design for Ren.

He's... not sure how he feels about that.

The Red King sighs, propping his head up to look at Doc. *"Everything okay?"*

"Yeah." Doc shakes his head to clear the cobwebs, gesturing to the papers again. "That's just everything I need. Steeling myself for more work, you know how it is."

"Mhm."

"You can go get changed now, if you want." Doc reminds him, nodding at the pile of clothes. The Red King pushes himself up at the reminder, grabbing for the crown and setting it haphazardly on his head to carry, the shirt and jeans tucked against his chest.

Doc leans back against the leg of his desk once the door closes, sighing and running his hand over his face. He takes another sip of coffee -- still warm, this time, and stares down at the plans again. Scratches out another NR that he finds in the margins. He should really... get to work already, but the fatigue's setting in by now.

It'll be fine. He takes another sip of coffee.

He wakes up with a blanket thrown over him, his mug above him on the workbench, and a gentle dusting of frost around where he's curled up on the ground. He blinks the sleep out of his eyes, groaning as he sits up and his back protests the position.

"It didn't look too comfortable." The Red King is hanging over the edge of the bed, looking somewhat amused at Doc's situation. There's a blanket around his shoulders too, but Doc can see the white tank he'd handed over under that. *"I'd offer a heating pack, but they and I don't get along."*

Doc's brain is still trying to catch up after his accidental power nap, and he offers what he's sure is a very dignified "Good morning," before he falls back over to the ground, not wanting to put up with back problems quite yet. The cold carpet is somewhat soothing, at least, and rolling over on the blanket makes it less itchy, so Doc decides to let himself rest for a little longer.

The Red King snickers. *"Very professional, doctor."*

"Mmnrng," Doc responds, attempting to wrestle his brain back into a half-conscious state without making himself anxious. He half succeeds -- he's more three-quarters conscious, but he doesn't

feel *bad* for once. He sits up again, wincing -- he's probably going to have to crack his back or something in order to get it to not be painful as hell, and that's *assuming* it's just sore and not actually hurt somehow. "How long was I out?"

"*Long enough for me to go through two more mugs of coffee.*" The Red King taps Doc with his empty cup. "*Seriously, can't get enough of this stuff.*"

"So I was out for longer than 30 seconds." Doc swats his hand away, listening to his shoulder pop. "That's helpful. Thank you so much, Red King."

The Red King pushes his crown up from where it had fallen over his eyes. "*It's not like I have a clock,*" he says. "*And your comm only responds to you, and I'm not asking Renbob for the time.*"

Doc mutters some choice words under his breath, grabbing for his comm. It's mid-afternoon, meaning he slept for at least a couple of hours, and his stomach rumbles in protest. His head's still fuzzy, clouded over to where he can't quite make coherent thoughts form.

He tries to stand up and is met with a wave of dizziness so strong that he has to immediately grab onto his desk to avoid falling right back over onto the floor again. Oh, right, he hasn't eaten at *all* for the past 24 hours, has he?

The Red King is still staring at him, eyes glinting with what might be amusement as he watches Doc struggle to stay on his feet. "*Maybe try for something other than toast,*" he says. "*I think you need something a little more filling.*"

"I can manage my own food." Doc grumbles, staggering towards the kitchenette. There is some stuff other than bread, but not a lot of things he can practically take out of the cabinet and eat. He opens the cabinet right above the sink, knocking a cereal box down and onto the counter. Hooray for -- he glances at the label -- organic ingredients and natural flavors.

"*That's not what I meant.*"

"I don't feel like cooking," he responds. "Got better things to do with my time."

"*Things like working for two days straight without sleeping on prosthetic parts for someone you barely know?*" The Red King gives him a sharp smile that would probably make Doc want to crawl under the table if he wasn't too tired to care.

"It's the right thing to do."

"*Destroying yourself isn't the right thing to do.*" The Red King's voice takes on the same sharp edge as his smile. "*Fine, don't cook something, but at least grab something better than just cereal.*"

Doc stares at the cereal box, hating that the king's words are actually making sense. It doesn't erase the exhaustion he feels at the *thought* of cooking, but he grits his teeth and grabs an apple from the fruit bowl on top of the minifridge.

"Does that satisfy his royal highness?" he mutters, pouring his cereal into a bowl.

"*The correct term is 'majesty', and it'll do.*" He's still being stared at. It's not great for his nerves, but nothing about the last few days has been great for his nerves, so he just opts to ignore the prickling at the back of his neck this time around.

He sits down. Stares at the dry cereal and relatively unobjectionable apple. A thought occurs to

him. “Hang on, haven’t you literally only had coffee for the past three days?”

“I don’t need to eat. Coffee’s just a thing to pass the time with.”

Doc is a little too tired to think harder about that, and files it away with the other things he won’t ask questions about.

He bites into the apple. Chews. Swallows. Repeats. It’s an easy enough pattern to follow, and the apple is soon just a core in his hand. The Red King holds out his hand, and Doc gives him the core, hearing it thunk into the garbage as he lifts the bowl to his mouth, because of course he would forget a spoon.

“You can’t use your hands?”

Doc ignores the king and continues pouring cereal into his mouth. Stops. Chews and swallows it. Picks up the bowl again, and then pauses as he hears rattling noises in the background. “What are you doing?”

“Getting you a spoon. I can’t stand to see this.”

“Hang on, you probably shouldn’t be standing up at all—” Doc starts, and then the words immediately die in his throat because the Red King is giving him *that look* again, that frigid laser stare.

“Do not tell me what to do, doctor.” Cold climbs up his spine again, and a clawed hand -- his own prosthetic -- comes down on the table next to him. He shrinks back instinctively before realizing that the glint of metal under the palm is in fact a spoon.

Doc quietly takes the spoon and resumes eating his cereal; the Red King falls back onto the bed again in what is probably a very practiced maneuver by now.

When his spoon hits the bottom of the empty bowl, he stands, fighting back the remaining waves of nausea as he places the dish in the sink. “There. Food,” he says. “Can I go back to work now?”

“Depends.” The Red King looks him over. *“How tired are you?”*

Exhausted, but he’s not going to say that out loud. “I’m fine,” he says, almost entirely lying. “I’ve had worse.” (That part’s true.)

The Red King doesn’t say anything, and Doc takes that as a sign he’s allowed to resume working on the leg. He staggers back to his chair, gripping the edge of the workbench as he sits down -- his head is still pounding, but if he can eat food he can work on blueprints, no matter what the king says.

There’s a prickling of frost at his neck, and Doc ignores it.

Ruins

Chapter Summary

Doc dreams of the past, the Red King gets fed up, and Ren is not here.

Chapter Notes

(solar here! thanks as always for the lovely comments! this is a short chapter. it is also an Everything Happens So Much chapter.)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The air around Doc is muggy and humid, sweat sticking to the back of his neck as he makes his way across the jungle paths. There are scattered bits of sunlight, but giant leaves block out most of the sky, keeping him in the shadows, just how he likes it. The usual hum of insects is gone, and Doc is relieved he won't have Bdubs smearing lotion over bug bites later.

But it's quiet, even past the absence of insect sounds. No animal sounds either, no birds chirping. Even the gentle sway of the flora makes no sound. Doc sticks to the shadows and avoids the sunlight, which glints white off leaves and makes him uneasy all of a sudden.

It'll be fine. He knows where he's going, and he knows how to be just as silent getting there. He ducks under a low-hanging branch and still only hears silence as he approaches their headquarters, following small landmarks normal people wouldn't catch onto. And then he stops.

There is nothing there. A handful of ruins, long since crumbled and overgrown, choked out by the jungle years ago. There is nobody else here, and there hasn't been anyone else here for a very long time. Doc's breath catches in his throat. The sunlight glints bright and cold.

...Why is it cold?

He turns back to the jungle that seems to go on forever and sees snow piled atop the leaves that make up the ground. Frost clings to the trees, spreading over bark and turning it white, and when Doc looks back at the ruins, there's no trace of them other than ice spikes jutting out of the ground and into the trees.

"Hello?" Doc calls out, watching his breath mist in the air. "Where are you guys?"

His voice vanishes in the cold, shadows taking the sound and silencing it. There's a cracking noise behind him, but when he turns to look for the source of the sound, there's nothing. Just the snow and ice.

He jerks forward, away from the vanished ruins and back into what should be jungle, the snow coming up to his knees as he tries to run. There's a new sound behind him, the whisper of a familiar voice, but Doc refuses to turn and look. The voice doesn't belong to who he thinks it does.

There's no jungle anymore, no shadows to hide from the cold sun shining off white snow and blinding him. The snow's up to his waist now. He tries to move forward, but it's slow going and the cold bites into his skin. He can barely even see through his breath in the air.

He doesn't call out again. He bites down the urge to scream for help and tries to breathe shallowly. Something else is here. He can't see what it is, but there's something else here, and if it's unfriendly then he's easy prey.

There's no sound, but he can feel eyes pressing in on him from all sides. They make his skin numb where the cold hasn't already frozen through him, and Doc realizes he can't feel his feet anymore. The snow is just under his shoulders at this point, and he knows if whatever is out there doesn't get him first, he is going to suffocate.

He can't die. He has to find them. All of them are waiting for him, waiting for him to do something more, something better--

Doc manages to loosen his arms and claws at his surroundings, hands scrabbling for purchase in the loose snow, trying to grab hold of something, anything that will drag him up out of certain death. It's half digging and half desperately grasping for whatever he can manage to cling to.

Maybe he's too desperate to notice it. Maybe it was there the whole time. But as the snow starts to build up to his neck, there's a quiet snarl, and teeth close around his shoulder.

Doc jerks upright, clawing away the pressure that's around his chest, his lungs still frozen and refusing to work in his panic. The teeth are still around his shoulder, but they don't resist Doc throwing them off. Frostbite burns cold and steady in his heart. He doesn't know why the snow has vanished. He doesn't know where he is anymore. He can barely see at all through the haze of disorientation. Someone's in front of him. Bright red shirt. Dark brown hair.

"Ren?" he manages, weakly.

Ren pauses, and returns his hand to his shoulder -- his hand, not teeth, and Doc leans into the touch as he stares at his friend.

"...I'm not Ren." The Red King says softly.

The silence builds in the van, because Doc is in the hippie van and not the jungle, not a blank field of snow where he's suffocating. It's cold, but not the same freezing cold as his nightmare, where the very air dug under his skin and tore him apart. He looks away from the Red King, nodding.

"Right," he mumbles. "You're not. Sorry. Still half-asleep." It hurts all over again. It *shouldn't* hurt all over again, but it *does*. He misses Ren. He misses Ren a *lot*, but it's *not fair* to expect anything to change from what they got. He takes a deep breath and does his best to steady himself. Finds the knot in his chest and tries to shove it back down.

The hand on his shoulder tightens for a second before he hears the Red King sigh and pull away. Doc stares at the blank wall and sits in silence, barely recognizing the sound of mugs being pulled from the cabinets, or the beeping of the coffee machine -- and then the strong smell of coffee hits him, bitter enough to snap him out of his post-dream haze.

There's a mug being held towards him, metal claws holding it from the top.

"Coffee?" the Red King offers.

"Sure." Doc takes the mug and forces back the knot that's climbed to the base of his throat. He

doesn't drink it yet. He just holds it in his hands and stares down at the dark liquid inside. He doesn't look anywhere else, especially not up at the man in the body of his friend. He doesn't have the energy to face that right now.

The Red King settles next to him, and Doc finally realizes that he's sitting on the bed, not at his workbench. The knot climbs its way back up -- he feels he's fallen asleep in the car and missed several hours worth of travel. Exhaustion washes back over him, and he slumps over again. Some of the coffee in his mug spills a little bit over the edge and drips down the side, but he can't find it anywhere in himself to care.

The quiet of the room presses gently on his nerves. The Red King is staring at him again.

"You're scared of me, aren't you?"

Doc's not sure what to say to that. If there's a right answer, he doesn't know it, and if it's genuinely open-ended he *still* doesn't really know what his answer is. He takes a sip of coffee. It's less bitter than he expects it to be -- there's sugar stirred into it.

"Dunno," he finally says, and hopes that the conversation will end there.

He can hear the Red King lean back, his crown clanking against the wall, but he doesn't say anything else. Doc takes their cups when he's done, slipping off the edge of the bed and washing them out in the sink. He sets them aside, then cups some water in his hands to splash on his face. He runs wet fingers through his hair, combing it back as best he can -- anything to make him feel a little more put-together after that nightmare. Normally he'd do this in the bathroom, but he's just too tired to care.

He grabs for his clean mug again, filling it up from the faucet and taking a drink. Doc hasn't had anything other than coffee for the past couple of days, and he's willing to bet part of the nightmare was his body yelling at him. The other part is sitting on the bed behind him, but he can't easily fix that.

His shoulder throbs with phantom pain from his dream, and Doc reaches up to rub at the skin, more on instinct than anything. His hand hits cold metal instead. Oh. Right. There hasn't been flesh there for *years* now. It still hurts, somehow.

He doesn't look at the Red King. Without even concentrating, he can vividly imagine the feeling of teeth sinking into metal, sharp and cold, slipping under plating and tearing it apart. He has to very intentionally stop himself from thinking about that -- it was just a nightmare. That's all it was. It didn't mean anything.

"Did you put me on the bed?" he asks to distract himself.

"You fell asleep at your table again," the Red King says. *"I didn't want you to wake up on the ground. It seemed rude to do that a second time."*

Doc nods, fingertips tapping at his arm. "Right. I'll head back to my own bed, then. Sorry if I woke you."

"I'll take the couch. You need the bed more."

"I'm not the one recovering from a severe injury," he counters. "I'll be fine." If he had just a little more energy, he could probably even start working on the leg today, since he has all the measurements. The fact that he's not able to do even *that* at the moment gnaws at him.

The Red King hums. “*And I’m not the one who was screaming in his sleep. Tell me what it was about, and I’ll take the bed.*”

It’s a low blow, but the Red King hits the mark. Doc scowls and grips his shoulder tighter, the metal unyielding against his hand as he spins around.

“Fine,” he snaps. “But I’m not going back to bed yet.”

“*You’re not working on my leg either. Sit down. Read a book. I’ve known you for a couple of days, and I have never once seen you relax, doctor.*” The Red King actually looks... concerned. “*You won’t win a battle if you’re fighting every second of it.*”

Doc grits his teeth. He still has work to do. *He still has work to do.* And right now, what he *really* wants to do is tell the Red King to shut the hell up and let him get back to work so he doesn’t have to think about anything at all -- especially not that brief moment where he thought Ren had returned -- but he bites the phrasing back as best he can. Stands up, still clutching his shoulder, and meets that stare with his own as best he can. “Don’t tell me what to do, *your majesty,*” he spits before he can stop himself.

That’s not what he’d meant to say. That’s not what he’d meant to say *at all.*

The Red King goes still. *Frozen,* Doc’s mind unhelpfully supplies when he notices the temperature dropping, but he still keeps the king’s gaze as ice starts to form over his arm, burning cold at his fingertips where his hand meets the metal. It’s too late to back away from this mistake, he’s already *said* something stupid; at the very least, he might as well stand behind his own words .

“*I’ll let that one slide,*” the Red King snarls. “*Since I’m so kind. But watch your tongue with me, Atlas, because I’m the one person you can pass the sky to.*”

Doc doesn’t say anything as the king stands, just watches him move towards the door to the bathroom. His face burns with what could be either anger, shame, or both. He stops, waits to hear the door slam, and then sits back down on the bed heavily. The sheets are, against all odds, warm.

Adrenaline pounds through his veins. He’s more awake than he’s been for two whole days and he has *nothing* to do with all this excess energy. Instead, all he can do is bury his face in his hands and think about what a colossal *idiot* he was for saying that. Any goodwill he’d wanted to have with New Ren -- with the Red King. Any sense of camaraderie. Any chance of them being friends or even friendly acquaintances. All of it, *gone,* because he couldn’t *shut up,* couldn’t get over his own *stupid* hang-ups properly.

Atlas deserved his burden. And Doc deserves the silent treatment he’s probably going to get from now on.

Chapter End Notes

(solar here again with a brief update note. 7/24/21 is a Big Day for us renchanting fans, and i've got some other stuff i also need to be around for, so there's not going to be an update tomorrow. go watch the purple pandas instead!)

Slab

Chapter Summary

Doc has another dream, the silent treatment doesn't last, and a mutual friend is mentioned.

The snow's up to his ankles. Doc whirls around to where ruins once were to see nothing, and the snow's halfway up his lower legs by the time he sees ice spikes there. He grits his teeth. Not this nonsense again.

"I know you're there," he says, voice fogging up the air in front of him as he trudges over to one of the spikes. It's clear as glass and does not reflect his face. He grabs onto it and hauls himself up a block, out of the snow. "I know you're there. Stop messing with me."

Nothing. Wind whistling through ice spires. The snow comes up to his knees again, and Doc grabs onto the spike and pulls himself upwards, out of the snow and back onto the surface again. He still can't see himself in the surface of the ice.

"Stop it," he says, clawing up further as the snow just seems to fall faster. "Just tell me what you *want* already."

Right on cue, there's whispers behind him, a voice murmuring his name. Doc doesn't want to look. He draws his arm forwards like he's reaching for the next part of the ice spike, then slams his elbow backwards towards the sound instead. It doesn't connect, because nothing is that simple.

"Shut up," he says, hauling himself up again. "Tell me what you want from me, or shut the *hell* up. I'm *sick* of this."

Of course there's no answer. Just the feeling of being watched. Doc lifts his arm, determined to keep climbing for as long as he needs, even if this is just a dream. He refuses to wake up screaming again, and it's that thought that has him scrabbling for the next handhold in the ice. He finds it and pulls, the snow not having a strong enough grip around his legs.

Flakes fall into his eyes and he blinks them away, feeling them melt against his cheeks. "I'm so tired. Just say something."

The ice shatters under his fingertips. Doc plunges down into the snow, and it starts to fill his mouth, his throat, his lungs, and he's going to freeze to death--

He jerks upright in bed, out of the dream. He's not screaming this time, so he'll take that as a win. His heart hammers in his chest like he's just been running for his life, though, so it's still kind of a net negative as far as he's concerned.

This time he doesn't say anything. He doesn't bother with coffee. He doesn't even look over at the Red King. He just sits up, swings his legs over the side of the bed, plants his feet on the ground. Stands up. Walks over to his workbench. Sits down and pulls out the plans for the leg and stares at them.

He can probably manage the foot right now. The rest of the leg he can do later, but Doc *needs*

something to work on and this is the easiest solution. He grabs for the shulker box of scrap metal Renbob gave him and pulls out a solid chunk, setting it down onto his workbench with a muted *thud*.

Doc needs to add a spot for the ankle first, so he knows the area he has to work with. His hands move faster than his brain out of instinct, grabbing his hand drill and placing it next to the proto-foot. It won't be as perfect as the hand, but he's still going to make sure it's top of the line, just for Ren -- no, for the Red King. Damn it.

He can't keep slipping up like this. He's not sure why it's *harder* for him now than it was before, it should logically be easier to get used to. It doesn't make sense. None of this *makes sense*.

A prickling feeling on the back of his neck again. *Great*, he thinks, and ignores the cold stare, looking back down at his work instead. He doesn't expect conversation, and he doesn't want it either.

Doc grabs a round drill bit, latching it to his hand drill and giving it a few experimental spins while he moves the proto-foot into position. It's normally a much better idea to do something like this with a machine meant for it, but Doc doesn't have anything besides his toolkit and his shaking hands.

Hands which are soon covered by claws as the Red King leans over him, holds his wrists in place with ice-cold fingers. He doesn't say anything, but the message is clear: *Stop before you hurt yourself again*.

Doc stiffens instinctively, but says nothing back. Instead he stares at the workbench, at the drill and foot, at his own hands, and at the creeping frost that is starting to make its way around the edges of the table. He hates this. He hates everything about this. It was one thing to just get stared at, it was another thing to at least make awkward conversation, but now the Red King just keeps getting in the way of his work, the *only* thing he's been able to do to keep his mind off things.

He doesn't try to pull his hands away. He just stares bitterly down at the table and at the creeping frost and focuses on not saying anything, on not letting his mind wander and hurt him further.

One hand keeps his wrist pinned firmly to the table, and the other reaches for the materials scattered across it. Doc hadn't realized how much of a mess he had made over the past two days until it starts to get cleared away, tools put to the side and scraps to the other. The Red King's claws gently take the shape that will eventually be his foot, and Doc watches as it vanishes into the shoebox.

There's a sigh against his neck, and he tenses up at the cold air -- prepares for an insult, a scolding, a demand for an apology. Instead of any of that, claws pat his hand before they pull away, and the king swings back to his spot at the counter.

Doc keeps staring at the table. He doesn't know if he's too tired to move or if he's scared of what will happen when he does.

He hears a gentle clink over by the Red King, the sound of a mug hitting the counter, and he looks up. The coffee pot is being held out towards Doc in a question, the Red King's claws poised to grab another mug. The silent conversation is easy -- a nod and a glance at the sugar is all Doc needs to say for a cup of coffee. He's handed his mug. He nods in thanks.

The Red King glances between the coffee pot and his own empty mug, clearly debating how much he can pour in before it becomes a spilling hazard. Doc recognizes the look on his face, that very

specific “how much of a dirty look will Doc give me if I drink directly from the carafe” facial expression where Ren would *almost* look lost in thought until someone who actually knew him caught on.

Only this isn't Ren. It's the Red King. And who gives a damn if he drinks right out of the coffee pot, anyway, it's not like Doc can stop him. He turns away and stares back down at the table, holding the mug in both hands, trying to force away the knot that's in his chest again.

Doc hears coffee splatter against the counter with a muttered curse, and takes a deep breath as his progress almost comes undone. This is someone new. People can share habits, and it doesn't make them the same as each other. He lifts his mug to his lips, hands shaking ever so slightly. He's still so tired.

He expects the coffee to taste bad for some reason, briefly even wonders if the Red King decided to take a page out of his own earlier paranoia and poison him. Instead, it's just the right amount of sweetness to where it goes down fine. He takes another sip and stares down at the table. The fear and anger from his dream is waning, replaced by what he hopes is apathy and not something else.

Even though it's quiet, the air in the room is relaxed, and Doc allows himself to slump back in his chair instead of hunching over his workbench, quietly sighing in relief. He's unsure if the Red King is still mad at him, but -- as he watches the King shuffle over to the bed and take a seat on the ground, sending a tired smile Doc's way -- it occurs to him that he can at least try to fix *something* tonight.

“M'sorry,” he says, clearing his throat when the words come out jumbled. “I'm sorry. I'm a dick.”

The Red King blinks at him, inclining his head. *Obviously*, he seems to say.

“I shouldn't have snapped at you yesterday,” Doc continues, moving down to the floor to be eye level with the king. “It was immature and uncalled for, and being tired was no excuse. I'll try my best to not do it again, and I hope you can forgive me.”

“...where'd you learn to give an apology like that?” The Red King has the coffee pot by his side, and lifts it to his mouth, looking somewhat impressed. “*Thank you, but that was the least 'Doc' sentence I've ever heard.*”

Doc looks away, refusing to meet his eyes -- partly out of embarrassment, partly because he doesn't want to watch the Red King drink straight from the coffee pot. “*'How to Write and Give Sincere Apologies,'* a three page brochure by Ethoslab, printed exclusively for me.”

The temperature drops again. At first, Doc doesn't understand what he's said wrong, but the next words that come out of the Red King's mouth make it *very* clear that something he truly does not understand is going on. “*By Ethoslab, you say.*” The name does not sound unfamiliar at all on his tongue.

Doc freezes up, hands tightening around the mug he's still holding. He's suddenly very glad to have turned away from the Red King, because he knows for a fact that his expression betrays much more shock than he would like to show. “You know Etho.” It's not a question.

“*You know Etho,*” the Red King echoes, an uneasy reminder of when he first woke up. “*How?*”

“I asked first.” Doc stares at the door to the driver's cabin, ignoring his coffee freezing solid in his cup. He *had* just promised to be more mature, but this was far more important. The Red King *knew* Etho. And from that tone -- it *couldn't* be a ruse, not with the way the temperature had dropped so

suddenly at the name. Something was going on.

There's a near-feral noise from the Red King, and frost crackles as it spreads across the windows. "*I watched him die. Your turn.*"

Oh. Huh. That's... not what he'd expected to hear. Doc takes a sip of ice-cold coffee, or at least tries to. "We're friends. Have been for a few seasons now. Don't know anything about him being *dead*, though, I'm pretty sure you'll see him when we get to where we're going. He didn't say he was leaving."

Doc listens to the Red King's ragged breathing, still not turning to look at him. He's definitely going to ask Etho why he knows the guy that's taken Ren's place, and then ask him why the Red King thinks he's dead. Etho's quiet, but not *fake-your-death* quiet.

"*He's going to be there with us?*"

"Yeah," Doc says, and then keeps talking before he can stop himself, "yeah he'll be there, there's like -- twenty-five of us, give or take? I think X said we were adding a couple new people, so I don't know where our numbers stand right now."

"*Twenty-five.*" The Red King makes the number sound like a threat. "*Who are the others? Where did you pick them up from?*"

"You'll meet them all when we get there," Doc says, "But the group's from a bunch of different places, we just pick them up as we go along. I'm coming up on my fifth season, but people like X have been there for eight."

Doc's rapidly realizing that this is the most information he's ever volunteered to the Red King in one sitting. It feels... weird, somehow, that this is the first time he's mentioned any of the other hermits. It'd feel less weird if the Red King didn't somehow know Etho. "I'm looking forward to season eight, honestly," he continues, "I've got a lot of plans. Mostly goats, I'm *very* excited about goats, the fact they've been added is--"

Claws sink into his shoulder, and Doc has a brief moment of panic -- *where's the snow why can't I breathe* -- before he's turned around by the Red King.

It takes him a second to realize the king is crying.

"*When was Etho added?*"

"Season three," Doc responds, for once thankful he has automatic responses for some things. "Same as me." And then he goes quiet, because there are claws sinking into his shoulder, and the room is cold and still, and he doesn't know why the Red King is crying, and something primal deep in the back of his head is still *terrified* of being buried in snow or whatever else is about to happen to him.

"*Same as you.*" The Red King stares at Doc, and then through him, like he's not even there. "*I should've known there was something different about him.*"

Doc thinks about responding and decides against it. There's still claws on his shoulder and it's *very* uncomfortable, but at this point he's resigned to his fate. This might as well happen. All of it might as well happen.

The temperature slowly picks back up, frost clearing away from the windows and walls like it was never there. His coffee is still frozen, but there's enough of it thawed that Doc takes a slow sip,

careful to not jostle the shoulder with a hand on it. It's disgusting, as expected, but at least it gives him something to do while he waits for the fog to clear from the Red King's thoughts.

Etho could make him a pamphlet too. *'How to Politely Freeze Someone to Death'*, or some other equally strange and insulting title. Though how Etho could *ever* have gotten along with someone like this is beyond him, given the guy's general disdain for any sort of organized power.

Claws uncurl from his shoulder after a while, but any sort of relief Doc might've had is replaced by his flinch when they drag down his arm -- lightly, without thinking, but still enough to make an unpleasant screeching noise -- before coming to rest over his hand like before. The two of them sit there in the quiet and cold, neither of them speaking, both knowing they're thinking about the same person.

There's still so many things Doc wants to know, but none of the questions feel right to ask. It'd be rude to pry more into the Red King's past -- it shouldn't matter to him, he's hardly asked the backgrounds of any of the other hermits.

So he doesn't ask. He just sits there and wonders how Etho's doing.

Missed Point

Chapter Summary

A memento appears, the Red King talks about the past, and Doc says very little.

Chapter Notes

(hi yall, fluffy here! a much shorter chapter today, but it still holds some important clues. thank you all so much, the support has been mind blowing and incredible to see. have fun!)

There's a sword on his desk this time.

Doc stares down at it, hands on the back of the chair, not entirely willing to approach it and also not sure if he *wants* to ask in the first place. It's in a black leather scabbard, the hilt of the sword appears to be dark-stained iron, and it seems very... plain, all things considered. He looks over towards the Red King, secretly hoping he'll be asleep so that he can figure out what he's supposed to do with the weapon without red eyes watching him the entire time.

He's not that lucky.

The Red King is staring at the sword with something close to horror, pressing back against the wall. There's no frost, but as Doc reaches for the sword the temperature drops ever so slightly, and he hears a pained noise from the king.

"Is this one yours too?" Doc asks, hand closing over the hilt. It's a little too small for his grip, but he has a feeling the Red King's hand would fit perfectly. He glances between the king and the sword, trying to figure out what to do as his question goes unanswered, ignoring the deep seated feeling that something here is *wrong*.

Doc lifts the blade, weighing it in his hands. "Well balanced," he says. "Well made. Are there any enchantments?"

He slips the scabbard off to look for himself. The blade is netherite -- sword's not made from stained iron after all, he must've mixed up the colors -- and the dark metal is engraved with little Galactic symbols. He takes a few moments. Sharpness V -- standard. The other enchantment's less common. Fire Aspect II.

He takes a sharp breath in and hopes that the Red King doesn't hear it. No wonder something feels wrong here. People don't use Fire Aspect much -- it messes with Looting drops and might set things on fire that very much shouldn't be ablaze. It's not really a good enchantment for an everyday sword.

But it's a great enchantment for killing other players.

Doc gives the sword a last once-over, checking for any nicks or flaws in the blade, any lasting stains that might need to come out. There are none. He sheathes the sword again, sets it back down on the table, and stares at it. He can't think of anything else to say. He can tell the Red King is still watching him.

"If you wanted me to clean it up, there's not much to clean," he says, turning around. His mouth is dry. "Looks like it's been well taken care of. Leather on the grip's a bit worn, but I can't do much about that."

The Red King slumps over, hair falling into his face and hiding it from Doc's view. He takes a shaky breath, and the steadily dropping temperature stops. Doc watches his prosthetic hand curl into a fist, tight enough that if it was skin his claws would be drawing blood, and it's warm in the room again.

"Sorry," he whispers. "*Can I see it?*"

It's a sword for killing other players with, and the Red King is some sort of nonhuman entity. He shouldn't. He really shouldn't.

Doc picks up the sword by the scabbard and hands it to him, hilt extended. "It's yours anyway. I don't see why not."

There's a bitter laugh from the Red King as his claws close around the weapon. "*It's not mine. Not in name, anyway.*"

Yet another question that Doc won't ask. If there was *ever* something to not pry into, as a matter of fact, this would be top of the list. He doesn't need to know why the Red King has a weapon of war that apparently doesn't belong to him. He *really* doesn't need to know that.

"I see," he says, in order to fill the awkward silence. He half considers turning back to his desk and starting work on the foot instead of just standing here like he is now. For some reason, he doesn't. He's not rooted to the spot in fear or anything like that, he just... doesn't.

Instead he watches as the Red King unsheathes the sword, sets the scabbard down next to him, and looks over the blade. His claws run over the two enchantments like he's trying to memorize them, grey skin a sharp contrast to the netherite. No ice builds on the blade like it had on the crown, and the Red King eventually tilts the sword so he can unwrap the leather hilt. The stuff is worn and stained with ash under the first layer, smearing across the king's fingers -- Doc can't help but think of the dark metal claws he didn't make.

There's another line of text hidden underneath the hilt, and the Red King brushes away the soot that's collected in the engravings. Doc doesn't want to be *anywhere* near the sword while it's drawn, but he leans over to squint at the engravings despite himself.

"...The Skizz Blade," he reads out. The name sounds... familiar. Like a friend of a friend. He can't quite place it.

"*A very brave man.*" The Red King looks up at Doc. He seems to consider something, fangs biting into his lip before he speaks. "*I was supposed to kill someone with this sword for him.*"

Doc does his best to not instantly pull away. It's information given in trust, but the words are so damning that he's... not sure what to do with them. The Red King is holding a sword made to kill players. He was *supposed* to kill someone with the sword, for someone that Doc vaguely knows the name of. His self-preservation is telling him to get as far away from the Red King as possible,

lock himself in the driver's cabin, improvise a weapon, get away--

He takes a deep breath in. Reminds himself that the Red King has not once attacked him, with the exception of shoving him away instinctively on first waking up. He hasn't even really made any threats, as ominous and downright terrifying as he's been sometimes. This is a show of trust. This is not a threat. He's not in danger, no matter what his hammering heart wants to say about it, and if he is then it's already too late.

"Oh," Doc says quietly, somehow managing to force out one single word through the knot in his throat. There are phantom teeth at his shoulder again. He does not raise his hand to meet them. He takes a single step backwards.

The phrasing is deliberate, he thinks. *Supposed to*. The Red King didn't kill someone with this sword. He doesn't *look* like he wants to kill someone with the sword, either, not with his hand half off the hilt and his eyes faded with memories. The Red King opens his mouth to say something, but stops, instead looking over at the scabbard again. Doc's not sure if he's actually seeing it, or if he's seeing something else entirely.

He wants to offer a cup of coffee to help the tension in the room, but he doesn't move from his spot, watching the king carefully.

"I don't want it," the Red King eventually says, sheathing the blade in one quick motion. *"Not like the crown. Is there somewhere I can put it?"*

Doc wonders why he can't put it where it was before. "Under the bed or in the closet are your two options, there's not a lot of storage in here."

The Red King nods, pulling the blankets off of himself to stand, and is quiet as he makes his way to the closet. He pulls the door open, but before he puts the sword in, he hesitates, then leans against the wall and bows his head.

The scabbard meets his forehead, and Doc can see frost start to spread across its surface. *"If Etho's there, I hope I'll see you too, friend."*

The door clicks shut a second later, and the Red King sinks to the ground. Doc says nothing. Despite the obvious sadness in the room, his heart's still hammering in his chest and he doesn't want to move.

He doesn't feel frozen, though. There's no snow pressing against his chest and into his lungs. He almost wishes there were, so he had some excuse to feel this way.

"Have you ever lost someone?" The Red King looks at Doc. *"Where you thought you could save them, and you failed?"*

No. No, *now* he wants to run away more than anything in the entire world. He takes another step back and bumps into his desk chair. Closes his eyes as that stare bores into him so he can focus enough past the grief that's there, just under the surface. "Yeah."

I'm looking at him. I'm looking at the man I couldn't save. Maybe it's my fault.

The Red King sighs. *"You don't have to say anything else. I just... I needed to know if someone else got it."*

I do get it. I understand, because you're here instead of him.

Doc's not sure how much more of this he can take. He does the one thing left to him in situations like this. He takes a deep breath, steadies himself, and sits down at his workbench.

Back to work. For all the good it'll do him.

Denial

Chapter Summary

Doc overworks himself, lines are crossed, and things are quiet for a moment.

Chapter Notes

hi, fluffy here!

enjoy :).

The leg's coming along... fine, Doc supposes. Progress is slow and careful, half because he's not quite as good at leg prosthetics and half because he doesn't want to draw the ire of the Red King again by overworking himself.

He's got the foot mostly done. He's got some of the other connecting parts done, as well. It's progressing. It's coming along. More importantly, though, he's not thinking about things. He's been focused entirely on the work. Hasn't considered anything else for several hours.

It's *great*.

A glass of water had appeared next to him at one point, but it's since been replaced with coffee and an apple, and Doc bites into the skin as he weighs a ball joint in his other hand. Once he slides it into place in the proto-foot, he can attach the completed shin as well. There's a sense of pride in his chest, right next to the hunger.

Doc glances at the foot and the divot on top of it. There's two screws laying on the table next to his screwdriver, everything laid out nice and easy for him. He wants to have it done, but he doesn't want to risk the wrath of the king, so he... finishes his apple first. Puts the core down on the desk.

Right. Back to it. He picks up the ball joint and slides it into place. Tests it to make sure it articulates properly and doesn't do anything weird. It works perfectly. Everything's going perfectly. He can barely even feel the pressure of the eyes at his back anymore. It's just him, and the work, and the next part of the project.

He slips the band that makes up the bottom part of the shin over the ankle joint as well, holding it in place as he slides the screws in on either side, tightening them and testing the flexibility of the ankle. There's a bumper over the heel to stop the foot from twisting too far back, and Doc carefully twists the prosthetic around, feeling the sense of victory when it all works as planned.

Doc leans back in his chair, gently laying the leg down. He almost feels like crying out of the sheer *joy* he feels from completing this part of the project, but he settles for a sip of -- water. Huh. His drink has been changed out again.

He glances over at the Red King. He's taking a sip of coffee, but he smiles at Doc.

“Good progress?”

“Excellent progress,” Doc responds, grinning back. “Lower leg’s just about done, minus any testing that I can really only do once the whole thing’s complete. Upper parts are also coming along.”

The Red King raises a brow. “Which you’re going to work on tomorrow, right?”

“Why stop?” He’s been waiting for a mood like this to come along, waiting for everything to just *click*. He doesn’t need to *stop*, no, he can’t do that now, not when he’s *finally* back to work regardless of the situation around him. He has to keep going. He can do more. He can go *better*.

The Red King is staring at him. Doc can’t read his facial expression.

“You’ve been at this for hours,” he says. “If you’re trying to pull another all nighter, I’m not going to let you.”

“It’s not going to be another all nighter,” Doc argues, leaning forward on the back of the chair. He’s still smiling, that sense of pride still bubbling in his chest, and he needs to keep it there. “Just until I finish the next part.”

“And then you’re going to want to finish the part after that. And then the next part. Listen, doctor,” the Red King leans forward as well, almost off the edge of the bed. “I’m the one you’re making the leg for. I can wait a couple more days for it.”

“I’m not making it for you,” Doc says, before he can stop to think about the words coming out of his mouth. “It’s for Ren.” Ren will be back soon. Just as soon as he’s done. He’s sure of it, *sure* of it. Just a little more, a little further. Some distant part of him tries to remind him that *Ren won’t be back* and he shoves it back down.

The Red King stares at him with blue eyes -- no, red. They’ll be blue when Ren is back.

“Oh, Doc,” he whispers, and Doc doesn’t understand the pity in his voice, doesn’t understand why until he realizes he’s said the last bit out loud. “That’s why you look at me like that. I’m not supposed to be here.”

No, he’s not. “It’s fine,” Doc says, and he can feel his heart pounding for some reason, “I’m not *mad* at you or anything, and it’s been nice getting to know you! But Ren’s going to be back for season eight, after all.” A pause. “I’d like it if you both were there.”

The Red King reaches forward to place his hands on Doc’s shoulders, and his next words are swallowed by the cold that hits Doc through the heart. He says something. Doc can’t hear it. All there is to see is snow, falling around him, burying him alive, teeth digging into his shoulder as easily as though it were flesh and blood, and he can’t see, and he can’t move, and it’s *cold*, and he reaches out to grab hold of something, *anything, it’s so cold he’s holding on tight-*

-He’s on the ground. Why is he on the ground?

It’s an oddly familiar feeling, the bruise on his wrist and the carpet at his back. There is mist hanging around him, frost covering his arm, and there is a whimper coming from the bed.

The bed. Right. He’s not in the snow. He’s in Renbob’s van. He’s not with Ren. He’s with the Red King. Ren isn’t here. Ren isn’t coming back.

Doc pushes himself up as far as he can manage, head spinning with fading panic and exhaustion,

and the first thing that hits him is *what he just said*, and it's not fear that hits next at all. He's scared. Sure. He's scared and part of him still feels like he's trapped in layers of snow. But mostly he's just so, so *mad* at himself for ruining everything, *again*.

"I'm sorry," he says hoarsely. "I- I didn't mean to say that. I didn't *want* to say that. I-" and the fear kicks in, mixed with a genuine sense of *how do I let him know how sorry I am* "-I'm sorry, your majesty."

There's another pained whine from the bed, and Doc pulls himself further up, hoping if he can look the Red King in the eye and apologize he can fix this oh god *how does he fix this* --

He stops.

The Red King is at the epicenter of an explosion of ice. The blankets are frozen stiff, the wall behind him has painted itself white, and there are icicles, pushing out from the ceiling and reaching towards both of them. His eyes are blank, one hand over his throat, and he's curled inwards. Like he's scared, too.

"RK?" Doc asks hoarsely, because the name from his blueprints is easier to say than the full title right now. He pushes himself up into a sitting position, takes a breath in, and holds out one hand to him (phantom teeth flicker around his shoulder as he moves, but he pays it no mind). "Are you all right?"

It's a stupid question, really, but his heart is aching and it's the only thing he can really even think to ask in a situation like this. He's screwed everything up. Now he needs to fix it.

RK curls up further, and Doc has to take a steady breath when the icicles push down, looming over them.

"RK," he tries again. "Focus on me. C'mon."

His hand is still outstretched, and he keeps it there, waiting, waiting until the ice pulls back by just a hint. Doc can see the king blinking, slowly coming back to his senses, that glint coming back to his eyes before he cautiously lowers his hand from his throat.

"*Doctor?*"

"Yeah- yeah, that's me." He nearly chokes on the words. He's not sure if he deserves that title, right now, but he wants to help, *gods* does he want to help. "You there, RK?"

"*I don't...*" RK glances around the room, eyes darting to Doc's face. "*I'm sorry.*"

The apology doesn't make any sense in Doc's head. "Dude, I -- I tried to *hurt* you, you were just defending yourself."

RK shakes his head, and if the situation was any happier, Doc would find something funny about how dog-like the action was. He doesn't say anything else.

Doc takes a deep breath in and fights back the feeling of snow in his lungs. "And I'm sorry about what I said earlier, too. That was *horrible* of me. That-" he stops. He can't put it into words again. "I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry."

RK shakes his head again, hands covering his face. Doc waits, panic gnawing at the edge of his nerves even as the ice starts to recede from the room. It's a strange sight, watching icicles melt this fast, but soon there's nothing in the room but a persistent chill, and a king peering between his

fingers at Doc.

“I’m sorry,” he says again, and Doc hates himself for how broken his voice sounds. *“I’m trying to get that under control. I used to be better at it.”*

Doc pauses. “You don’t have to be sorry for deep-freezing the room either, RK. It’s a spaceship.”

“But you’re scared of the cold,” RK says, dropping his hands to his lap. *“And I’m... me.”*

Wait. *What?* Doc blinks. Raises his hands to his face to rub the bridge of his nose instinctively. “No, I’m not -- okay, the ice thing is a *little* spooky, but it’s not that at all. It’s-” he pauses, searching for the right words, unsure if he wants to say them. His voice comes out a little quieter. “-it was my shoulder. I had a nightmare about something biting into my shoulder.” It sounds stupid when he says it out loud.

RK stares at him, dragging his eyes to Doc’s prosthetic arm. He gently reaches out one hand to him, claws hovering just a few inches above Doc’s shoulder, and then stops. Doc looks at him curiously.

“Oh,” RK mumbles, dragging his hand back. *“I did do that. I have done that. I’m sorry.”*

“Stop -- Stop saying sorry,” Doc says. “You don’t need to.”

His fangs bite into his lips, but RK nods. His gaze is still locked onto Doc’s shoulder. *“There aren’t any scars.”*

Doc grimaces, but it’s more sheepish than actually pained. “Oh. Uh, it wasn’t a nightmare about how I lost my arm. That happened a *while* ago. Didn’t really leave any scars.”

RK stares for a while longer, leaving the two of them in silence -- and even though they’ve both only just made it out of panic attacks, it’s a nice kind of silence, one that doesn’t feel like they’re just waiting for the next words. Doc slowly climbs onto the bed when his legs start to cramp, and RK scoots over for him, half-heartedly tossing a blanket at him.

“I don’t think either of us are going to sleep tonight,” RK admits. *“But still. Comfort.”*

Doc pulls the blanket around his shoulders, shielding his phantom pain from danger. “Yeah. Comfort.”

They sit there in silence for a while. There’s nothing much else to do. Doc certainly isn’t going to get much more work done on the leg tonight, not after everything that happened, and he’s willing to bet RK feels similarly horrible.

Actually, that... reminds him of something. He clears his throat. “Uh. Hey. I know you’re this whole... ice entity or something... but do you mind if I call you RK? Red King is a bit of a mouthful, and I don’t think I can get used to saying ‘your highness’ or ‘your majesty’ unironically without worrying a *lot* of people.”

RK snorts. *“Sure. People usually called me m’lord or -- they would call me m’lord or Ren. And I’m a god, not an ‘entity’, thank you.”*

A god. Okay. Sure. Why not add that to the pile of questions. Explains how he can live off coffee, at least.

“Huh,” Doc says. “That’s two for two on gods going after my arm.”

RK glances over at his blanketed shoulder. *"You lost your arm to a god?"*

"Not exactly *to* the god." Doc clenches his metal hand into a fist and opens it, looking down at his fingers. "Well, yes, okay, to the god. I beat him in a death game, was stupidly egotistical over it, and the next day it was just. Gone. No pain. Somehow that made it worse."

"You, be egotistical to a god? I never would've guessed." RK gently elbows him in the side, and Doc manages a laugh at the ribbing. *"No, I get that. Feels like a scar should be there, and it isn't."*

"...Yeah," Doc says, rubbing his shoulder absently. "Kind of like that --" a sudden sharp stab of pain from his shoulder, and he realizes something and jerks his hand away. "Ow -- oh, hang on, that explains a *lot*."

He runs his hand over a specific spot on his back shoulder once more, just to check, and shudders as that *teeth-in-flesh* feeling comes back all over again. Okay. Yeah. Something's going on with his arm. Somehow that's a relief, the fact that it hasn't *just* been all inside his head.

"Hold on, can I look?" RK sits up. *"I won't touch, but you can't see what's wrong."*

Doc hesitates, but -- he's already braced for the weird feeling now that he knows there's a specific reason it's happening, and if RK's able to look at it without touching it then that's even better. He slides the blanket off and turns his back towards RK. It's still a little nerve-racking (his survival instinct is *not* happy with him turning his back on a god), but it's... probably fine.

It's a minute before RK hums, and Doc can hear the rustling of sheets. *"I think... yeah, you've got two plates that are out of alignment. One's going into the arm."*

"Into the arm?" Doc turns his head enough to look at RK. "You sure?"

"Yeah," RK says, running his eyes over the metal. *"Is that bad?"*

"It's definitely not supposed to do that. And it explains why I keep feeling teeth in my shoulder." Doc lets out a soft snort of laughter. "I should find the guy who made it and yell at him."

RK leans back against the wall, pulling up a blanket and fidgeting with the material between his claws. *"I think you should go easy on the guy that made it. Sounds like he's going through a lot. I think he lost someone recently."*

Doc stops laughing.

RK fixes him with a *look*, something sad and angry, and Doc doesn't want the pity that's mixed in there either. *"Ren. You couldn't save him because of me, could you?"*

He turns away. Runs his hand over the back of his shoulder as lightly as possible, trying to feel out the misaligned plate so he can pull it back into position. "I don't want to talk about this," he says through gritted teeth. His fingers find metal jutting out.

"Okay." RK sounds tired. Doc can hear him shuffling around, and then his voice is muffled in the blankets. *"You don't have to talk about it then."*

Doc yanks the plate back into place and bites back a scream.

Forecast Warm

Chapter Summary

A dream resolves.

Chapter Notes

it's been a long and bitter breakup with the science of sleep / i'm through the lobby on my stomach with a knife in my teeth

(hi, solar here! this is posting slightly early because it's one of my favorite chapters so far! thanks for all the kind words so far, as always :Dc)

It's snowing again.

Doc knows he's having a nightmare, this time, because it's the third time he's had this exact dream this week and the chances of it being real are slim to none. He rubs the bridge of his nose -- it offers him no relief -- and looks around at the familiar scenery.

White snow. Jagged ice spikes. Doc sighs and heads towards the ruins while he can still move. Crawling out of the snow didn't help. Climbing almost worked, but not really. Maybe he's just supposed to fail, and that'll stop the nightmares.

...He knows better than that, though. He's not going to stop having nightmares because you can't *win* a nightmare. There's no condition for completion where it goes away. It just *happens*, and the most he can hope for is that his brain stops deciding to give him this particular imagery while he's trying to rest.

Doc sits down between a fallen-over wall and a long, partially-sideways spire of ice, and waits, rubbing his hands together to try and stay warm. His breath comes out in white clouds. His reflection still doesn't show in the polished surface of the ice.

The snow falls around him, quiet and unassuming. It's barely up to his ankles right now, but at this point Doc knows full well how it's going to end. Knowing almost makes it worse -- at least the first time he had this nightmare, he had been distracted by the panic, but now all he can do is just *wait* .

He crosses his legs and does just that. Waits. The snow comes up to his waist a lot faster when he's sitting down, which is probably a good thing. The faster he can get this over with, the better. He'd lie down if not for the fact that he really, *really* doesn't want to.

Doc grabs a handful of snow and throws it at the ice spike in front of him. It breaks apart, bits of slush sliding down the surface before they freeze again, and Doc glares at the lack of reflection, now framed by a halo of ice. It's stupid. It's unfair.

“I’m guessing you still don’t want to talk?” He says out into the open air, the words falling flat. “Just going to whisper ominously.”

The snow barely makes a sound when it falls, but Doc swears he can hear his name on every flake. He leans his head back against the wall and tries to move his legs. They’re snowed in already. Good thing he’s already made himself comfortable.

“I’m so tired, dude,” he says, running his hands over his face. The metal might as well be made of ice at this point, but he can’t find it in himself to care. “I know this is nothing. It’s a nothing dream. I’ve had the same dumb nightmare for years now.”

He takes a breath in. “And, y’know what, I kind of hate this variant more. At least the jungle was warm. And it wasn’t as long of a wait.”

Snow falls into his eyes, and he blinks it away. There’s no sun in his dream, but the sky is bright and cold, streaked with stormclouds. Watching the snow fall while staring upwards kind of makes it look like the sky is falling apart, and Doc decides to close his eyes. He doesn’t need to give his brain any more nightmare ammunition.

“Don’t have any other choice, though, huh? *I have* to wait. Let me tell you, next time I actually die, I want it to be quick.” Doc manages a laugh. “Get my head chopped off with an axe. Something fast.”

“*You really don’t want that.*”

Doc jerks upright -- snow falls off of him in clouds as he searches around the dream for the source of the voice. His eyes fall on the ice spike. On the polished surface, where he finally has a reflection, though Doc isn’t sure he can really call it a *reflection* when it’s smiling at him with sharp teeth.

No, hang on. Sharp teeth. Clawed hands. A dull red glint in *both* eyes, just not the cybernetic one. And a bloodstained crown he could have *sworn* he’d cleaned off maybe three days ago at maximum. This isn’t him. This isn’t a reflection.

He snorts, tilting his head back again. “Well, *this* is a new and exciting variation.”

“*I’ll say.*” RK glances around the blank landscape. “*No offense, but your dreams suck.*”

“That *is* why it’s called a nightmare,” Doc says, blinking snow out of his eyes again. It’s up to his ribs now, but he can’t feel the usual freezing pressure in his lungs, so that’s a nice change. “What are you doing here? Actually, no, hold on, more importantly -- why do you look like me? I’m way too handsome for you to pull it off.”

He pauses. “Ah, if you’re actually here at all. I don’t *think* I have a fear of doppelgangers, but maybe this is where I find out that I absolutely do.” (Teeth in his shoulder. He knows why it happens, now, but the pain’s still there.)

The Red King stares down at him, and Doc can’t read the expression on his own face. “*Why are you sitting down, doctor?*”

Doc shrugs. He still doesn’t even know if RK’s actually here or not. “Waiting to suffocate. You know how it is with recurring nightmares.”

“*I don’t need to sleep, Doc. I don’t have dreams like you.*” RK sweeps his hand forward. “*What happens next?*”

“I freeze. I suffocate. Something bites my shoulder and I wake up.” Doc grabs for another handful of snow and tosses it at RK, sighing when the snowball vanishes before it can hit the ice. “Well, the last part’s new. Normally I just suffocate and that’s it.”

“*And you’re letting it happen.*”

“Snow’s new,” Doc says, as matter-of-factly as he can manage with the stuff now covering his upper chest. “Dream’s not.”

It’s bright and cold. Everything here is bright and cold, and it hurts. It hurts Doc’s head and his lungs and his heart, but most of all it just *hurts* -- and Doc wishes it was over already so that he can wake up, have a cup of coffee, and overwork himself again until he passes out and his brain’s too tired to dream. He would take the jungle and the infinity portal any day over this.

RK leans forward, and Doc watches as he slips out of the ice like it isn’t even there. He throws another snowball for good measure. Watches as it misses its mark by several feet.

“That’s really unfair.”

The Red King smiles with teeth that are too sharp for Doc’s mouth and approaches, striding across the snow and leaving no footprints behind. Doc’s coat billows out behind him (kind of like a cloak, Doc thinks) in the biting wind. “*Alright, doctor. Get up.*”

“I’m stuck,” Doc wheezes, gesturing at the snow that presses in around him. It’s getting harder to breathe. “That’s not how this works.”

RK crouches down in front of him, and this close up it doesn’t really matter that he has Doc’s face anymore. Blood drips from the crown onto his forehead, and Doc distantly wonders how *anything* can remain unfrozen in a place like this. “*It is now. Get up.*”

Cold claws wrap around his forearms, both of them, and he is *pulled* out of the snow around them, out onto solid ground. Doc rolls onto his back and lies there, gasping for breath as the Red King stands over him, hands in his labcoat pockets, smiling triumphantly.

The snow has stopped. It doesn’t even feel like snow under Doc’s back; the soft powder has been replaced with the ever-so-slight itch of grass, and he takes a shuddering inhale of warm air. He’s in the jungle again. There’s no vines to strangle him, no mud to sink into, just the pleasantly humid air and warm sunlight scattering over him.

He rolls over onto his side with a pained groan, and knocks into RK’s leg.

“*Jungle, huh?*” He isn’t even looking at Doc now, just staring up into the canopy. “*I prefer spruce myself, but every doctor to their own.*”

“You have a doctorate now?” Doc’s mouth has officially gone far ahead of his brain, which is still stuck on *what the hell just happened* and probably won’t get past there anytime soon.

RK looks down at him with an obnoxiously familiar smirk. “*Do you?*”

“I -- yes?” Doc blinks. “Wait, did you think I was just some amateur mad engineer with no formal training?”

A pause.

“Oh my god, you did.” Doc sits up, trying not to wheeze out of exhaustion. “Remind me to make

fun of you for that when I wake up.”

“*You have no proof I’m actually here,*” RK says, smiling. “*But I’ll keep it in mind -- wait, are you ‘Dr Doc’, or is it ‘Doctor m77?’*”

Doc waves his hand, pressing his head against his knees when he struggles for breath. “The second one. Sorry, I just... give me a second to breathe.”

RK moves back, his labcoat swishing in the gentle breeze. Doc stays curled up until he at least has his breathing under control (though his lungs still hurt), and then finally looks up and around him. It’s the clearing around the skull he built, and even though branches are winding between the teeth and out of the eyes, it’s intact, and it feels *safe* .

“Huh,” he says softly. “Okay.”

“*I would say something about an overgrown skull being your comfort place,*” RK says, leaning against one of the teeth. “*But I’m going to ask how you’re feeling, first.*”

Sore. Tired. Still a bit scared, even. But he’s not cold, and he’s not suffocating, so Doc gives RK a thumbs up. “Better, I guess.”

“*You’re a bad liar,*” RK responds, rolling his eyes.

“I said *better* , not that I’m feeling great,” Doc says, running his hands over his face. “I’m exhausted. How can I be exhausted when I’m still asleep?”

There’s no answer, and Doc takes the silence as an opportunity to stand. He’s shaky, unsteady on his feet. He puts his own hands in his pockets and turns to look at the Red King. “You’re not going to tell me why you’re here or why you look like me now, are you.” It’s not like he minds all that much, he’s getting used to not asking questions and not getting answers, but... it’s weird. Now that the normal dream’s panic has left, his sleeping (maybe only half-asleep) mind is free to catch up to how *weird* this is.

RK cocks his head to the side. Studies Doc, like he’s trying to figure out where he went wrong in his own copy. A thin trail of blood drips from the crown and onto his cheek, like he’s crying, and it’s so stupidly poetic Doc has to turn away to sulk.

He’s not expecting RK to respond.

“...*You were screaming again,*” he says carefully. “*Scared the hell out of me.*”

It’s not a real answer, but it’s as close as Doc’s going to get. He nods, balling up his hands in his pockets, and shakes away the chill that threatens to climb his spine. He’s in the jungle now. There’s no snow here, just the glint of ice behind RK’s eyes.

“What now?” It’s a fair enough question, everything considered. And it’s easier than asking about what the hell’s actually going on, too.

The Red King laughs softly. “*Now? Now you wake up.*”

Good Mourning

Chapter Summary

Everyone wakes up refreshed, Doc doesn't pry, and RK does.

Chapter Notes

(hi everyone, solar here! welcome to the penultimate chapter of the first arc of *dog at the door*. it's great to have you, as always, and thanks so much for all your lovely comments! i'll let y'all get into the chapter now.)

There is a cup of coffee in Doc's hands, and for once he doesn't feel like he needs it. There's a buzz of energy under his skin he hasn't felt in a while, the constant exhaustion washed away and refreshed, sluggish thoughts replaced with a sense of vigor.

RK sits across from him, back in his own body and cradling the coffee pot. Doc raises an eyebrow at him. "We have clean mugs, you know."

"*Pouring coffee takes valuable time I could be using to drink coffee,*" RK says, raising the spout to his mouth. Doc looks away in mock disgust, shuddering.

There's been some changes while he's been asleep, apparently. His tools have been put away into their respective places, with the half-finished leg resting neatly on the surface of his workbench. The door between the driver's cabin and the main room is open, just enough so Doc can hear Renbob singing along to his cassettes, and there's two friendship bracelets slid over the doorknob.

"*He taught me how to make them,*" RK says amusedly, following Doc's gaze. "*The green and black one is yours, I thought you would like the colors. He made mine red.*"

Doc shakes his head slowly. "Okay. I'm still asleep. There's *no way* this is actually happening." He takes a sip of coffee. Things feel... things feel *normal*, and it's *weird* that they're like that. He can't put his finger on *why* it feels off somehow, though, so he keeps the unease to himself.

"*We had a very nice conversation on the dangers of pollution and the evils of capitalism.*" RK sounds like he's trying not to laugh at this point. "*You never mentioned you were government.*"

Doc stares at him. "You're a king. You are *literally* called the Red King. *How* are you anti-government?"

He pauses. Takes another sip of coffee. "Also, it was more of a paramilitary organization, and the details are strictly classified."

"*Is that so,*" RK says. "*Well, the details of my kingdom are not classified, and thus I am able to tell you I was in direct opposition to an attempted monopoly. What's worse -- a king, or a greedy liar who tries to scheme and talk his way out of his consequences?*"

“Usually, they’re the same thing.”

RK rolls his eyes and pours more coffee into his mouth. *“The answer is the liar, by the way. Filthy desert hippie.”*

“I truly don’t know how to respond to that,” Doc says. He doesn’t. “But I *guess* it’s good you’re getting along with Renbob. Someone has to.”

RK makes a noise of agreement. There’s a pleasant chill in the room, something that feels more akin to an early spring breeze than the ice of winter, but it’s still enough that Doc pulls a blanket over his shoulders, warming his hands with his mug. There’s an itch under his skin, a need to use his newfound energy to do something productive.

“You’re not doing any work on the leg today.”

“I hate you.” Doc announces, and grabs the coffee pot out of RK’s hands to refill his cup. “I officially hate you. Government-decreed, you’re no longer allowed in my nightmares if you start to read my mind.”

The corners of RK’s eyes crinkle when he smiles. *“I’m not reading your mind, you’re just very obvious when you’re about to do something stupid.”*

A couple days ago, Doc would’ve shuddered at the thought of RK being able to read him that easily. Now it’s more of an annoyance than anything else, though that uneasy feeling still prickles at the back of his mind. “Now, hang on a second. Which of us has a doctorate again and is actually qualified to do prosthetics work? Because I seem to remember us having a conversation about that last night, RK.”

He wonders if it’s possible to be slick enough about moving back towards his desk that RK doesn’t notice until he’s already sitting at the workbench. He gives it a great deal of consideration as he waits for the king’s response.

“I think it says more about you than me if I had thought you were an amateur engineer,” RK says. *“If I had thought that. Which you can’t prove.”*

“I know you were in my nightmare -- you *saying* that proves you were in my nightmare,” Doc protests. “I can’t believe this ‘doctor’ nickname was an insult all along.”

“You can’t prove this in a court of law. I think. I’ve never actually been in a court before.”

Doc snorts, scooting closer to his workbench ever so slightly. “I have. Our ‘book of law’ was written by the same guy who slapped on an iron helmet and called it a powdered wig. I think my evidence would hold up there.”

“A kangaroo court.”

“I don’t think either of us even know what a kangaroo *is*,” Doc counters. He’s almost there. Just a little bit closer to the workbench. He takes a sip of coffee to disguise his movement.

RK stares at him, eyes narrowed, and cold snakes its way up Doc’s back despite the friendly conversation. *“Don’t think I can’t see what you’re doing, doctor.”* He taps his claws against the table.

“I’m not doing *anything*,” Doc protests. “Stop being spooky.”

“If I have to be spooky to keep you from working, then I’m going to scare the crap out of you,” RK says. *“I swear on my freaking crown, dude. My kingship itself. My honor and duty.”*

Doc scoots away from RK (and towards the workbench again, but all of a sudden the away part is kind of the priority). “Are we sure coffee does nothing to you?”

“I have no idea!” RK says brightly, sticking out his leg to block Doc from moving any closer to the table. *“But you’ll find out if you try to do any work today.”*

“Fine,” Doc breathes out, just a little too quietly for his own liking. He keeps his eyes on those claws tapping against the table. Nothing like getting threatened by a god who can walk right into your nightmares to kill the mood. He tries to stifle that feeling as best he can. Keeps his voice even and unshaking. “What exactly am I supposed to do instead?”

RK leans back onto the bed, propping himself up on his elbows and staring at Doc. *“You could always make friendship bracelets with Renbob and I.”*

“I would rather face your wrath than that,” Doc says, only partly serious.

“Fair enough.” RK smiles at him. *“Since the only other option is having a conversation about Ren.”*

It suddenly strikes Doc why it felt strange to get along with RK.

He takes a breath in and tries to ignore the chill creeping up his spine. Voice steady and even. “I don’t know what you mean by that.” He sticks one foot out and gently shuts the door to the driver’s cabin, just in case.

“Yes, you do.” RK is still smiling, and that’s perhaps the worst thing about it all, the awful feeling in Doc’s gut while Ren’s face is smiling at him. *“But I did tell you that **you** didn’t have to talk about it. So I’ll talk about it instead.”*

“Don’t,” Doc whispers. If the color could drain from his face, it would have. “It’s fine. You don’t have to do anything like that. It’s *fine*.” There’s a knot in his stomach that’s slowly burning its way upwards. He forces it back down, looks away from that sharp smile.

“You think you’re good at pretending,” RK says, his voice low. *“You are not. Would it honestly kill you to tell me what you really think?”*

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Doc repeats. “There’s nothing *to* talk about. You’re here now. There’s really no point dwelling on alternate outcomes.” He keeps his posture as blank as it possibly can be, tense but neutral. Stares down at the bed like he can’t feel those red eyes boring into him. The knot is at his heart, now.

“Who was Ren to you?” RK keeps his voice low as he pushes, prodding at things Doc doesn’t want to think about. Doc’s hands are clenched around his mug, but he keeps that neutral posture, refusing to give anything away. *“Just one question, doctor, and I’ll drop it.”*

Doc stands, placing his mug on the workbench with a scowl. “I said I don’t want to talk about it.” He’s made a promise to not ask questions, to not pry where his business doesn’t concern him. He hasn’t asked about Etho or why RK thinks he’s dead, about the kingdom RK apparently ran, about Skizz or the sword for killing other players, about whoever the Hand is or was, he hasn’t asked about all the ice and frost, he hasn’t even asked about *why the Red King is here in Ren’s body*. It’s not fair. He doesn’t pry.

He doesn't care that he's the only one who's made the promise. It's not fair.

"I asked you a question, doctor," RK says, voice still low and even. He's leaned closer to Doc now, judging by the sound of his voice, but Doc doesn't dare look up to check. *"Answer it."*

"No." Doc clenches his jaw and tries to force down the knot in his throat. Something is wrong. This is *wrong*.

"Why?" RK challenges. The spring breeze has faded back into the bite of winter, and there are teeth in Doc's shoulder that he refuses to acknowledge. *"It's one question, why won't you answer it?"*

"Because he was my best friend!" Doc snarls, turning on RK with a new kind of fury. There is something deep and heavy burning in his gut, and Doc is more than willing to spread the flames, to sear his loss into RK's bones.

The king's face stops him. Ren's face stops him.

The silence is fragile, hanging between the two of them as they stare at each other. RK reaches out towards him, and Doc pulls away, sinking down to the ground.

"He was my best friend," he repeats, hopelessly, helplessly. "And you killed him."

He buries his head in his hands, tucks his knees closer towards him as he sits on the ground. Tears burn hot down his face. Even if he'd *wanted* to say more, dig the pit deeper, the knot in his throat has tied itself around his voice and he can't speak. He's ruined everything, again, for the third time.

Ren was his best friend. Ren's gone. And maybe the Red King didn't *kill* him, but he's here wearing Ren's face and voice and that hurts just as much. This is why he didn't ask. This is why he didn't pry. This is where it was always going to end up, and he *hates* this helpless feeling more than anything else in the entire world.

There's the gentle rustle of sheets, and Doc is prepared for RK to do -- something. He doesn't know what. He would deserve anything the Red King wanted to do to him at this point.

There's no violent hand or words, no suffocating snow or chill up his spine. There are arms wrapping around him, a blanket falling on top of him, shrouding him from everything but this. Keeping him away from everything but him and the Red King. RK is cold, but it's a balm when everything about Doc is *burning* .

"I lost my best friend too."

Right. His Hand. Doc hasn't asked about that, and it suddenly occurs to him that maybe he should have asked after all. Maybe RK had needed him to, and he hadn't done that.

"M'sorry," he mutters, as best he can when words are mostly failing him. If only he could have done something better. If only there'd been someone there, other than Ren's body, another person they could've saved for RK's sake. It can't possibly be his fault, but it feels like it is somehow. "I bet he was a good dude."

"He was," RK breathes, voice soft as he holds Doc, *"he was. But I couldn't save him, and he couldn't save me. And I hate the devil that forced us apart, that mixed my blood with his. I wouldn't blame you if you felt the same."*

"I don't hate you," Doc says quietly. "I don't. I'm still a little scared of you, but I don't hate you."

RK sighs, one hand gently rubbing Doc's back. *"I'm sorry I pushed, doctor."*

"No, I -- it was probably for the best." Doc slumps against RK. "You'd say something about how it wasn't healthy for me to keep it bottled up, if you didn't feel bad."

"That's... surprisingly insightful of you," RK says. *"It's true, though. For both of us, keeping things bottled up about those we lost. I want them to be remembered, but I don't know how to do it without hurting."*

Doc laughs quietly. "I'll let you know if I figure it out."

"And I'll do the same for you," RK promises. *"So we can both do it for them."*

Unlucky

Chapter Summary

The other shoe drops.

Chapter Notes

(hi, solar here! welcome to the final chapter of the very first arc of *dog at the door* -- it's great to have you here! no, seriously, it's been awesome, thank you guys so much for all your support, nice comments, *fanart and analysis* apparently. tbh i'm still stunned people like the fic this much. it's. wow. thanks.

anyway, quick housekeeping announcement: since this is the final chapter of arc 1, we'll be taking a mini-hiatus of about three days. the fic *will* be back -- we have ~10 future chapters written already -- but i've got some life stuff to do and we agreed a short gap between arcs would be a good idea.

uh -- that's about it! i'll let you get into the chapter now. see you in a few days!)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Do you have nearly enough friendship bracelets?” Doc asks dryly. “Or should I pull my labcoat apart to give you more materials?”

RK and Renbob give him the same distasteful glance, the Red King holding up his metal arm to admire the contrast of colors. They're both positively *covered* in arts and crafts projects, from flower crowns to safety pin badges to the dreaded bracelets, and they both look far too pleased with themselves.

Neither of them seemed too happy when Doc suggested taking down the bead curtain for necklaces, though. Freakin' hippies.

He rolls his eyes at them and goes back to tinkering with the leg -- it's nearly complete now. Some parts need attaching, and obviously it needs testing, but otherwise it's nearly done. Given the way RK took to his arm, Doc's got no doubts that the leg's probably going to do some sort of similar mild adaptation, but that doesn't mean he can cut corners.

He's thankful for Renbob, even if he won't admit it. He's got no idea why the guy has a heavy-duty thigh brace, and the hippie's not telling, but it's the part Doc was most worried about, considering RK's leg will be resting in it and they're difficult to make out of metal. But now that he can slip that over the prosthetic part of the thigh, he's about half a day of progress away.

If RK will let him continue, of course. Doc glances up when the Red King starts to approach him, and instantly is wielding the leg as a measure of defense.

“I am *not* wearing a flower crown.”

“Why not?”

Doc looks him right in the eyes, expression serious. “I’m allergic.”

“*You’re joking,*” RK says, staring back, confusion evident on his face.

“I am absolutely not joking,” Doc says, rubbing his nose. “Why d’you think I avoid hippies normally? All those flowers everywhere. I have hayfever, dude, and it *sucks* bad. Not to mention I get laughed at.”

RK drops his hands, the flower crown flopping over his wrist, and looks between Renbob and Doc. “*You started a paramilitary organization because you have hay fever?*”

“No, I started it because of confidential reasons,” Doc says -- probably not a good idea to bring up the aliens right now. “The allergies are coincidental, but it was a good reason to burn all the flowers the hippies left behind.”

“I can’t believe you started a bonfire with my lilacs, man,” Renbob says, and puts another spare flower crown over his head, bringing it up to three. “Totally uncool. Totally not eco-friendly.”

“Your lilacs,” Doc counters, “cost me my *trident*. I was sneezing so hard because of those dang flowers that I tossed my trident into the burn pile and *lost* it. Scar wouldn’t let me live it down for *weeks*-”

The temperature *plummets*. One second it’s normal temperature, the next second there’s ice already climbing up the walls of the van. Renbob scrambles backwards and stammers some excuse about having to check their trajectory before bolting out of the room, closing the door to the driver’s cabin behind him. It ices over, and Doc is left behind face-to-face with RK, who drops the flower crown entirely.

“*Repeat that,*” the Red King says, voice low and strained. It’s not a request.

Doc suddenly remembers why he’s scared of RK on occasion all over again. He takes a step back and forces his words to work as best he can. “Scar... wouldn’t let me... live it down... for weeks?”

“*The devil himself,*” RK whispers.

The words don’t connect in Doc’s brain. Scar. The devil. They’re about as far away as possible as two things can be. *Scar. The devil.* Doc can admit that Scar is a bit shady at times, but he’s always been the server sweetheart.

...For the most part. An image of smiling blue masks comes to mind. Doc struggles to shove the mental picture away, focusing on the much more important part. It’s in the past.

“You know Scar?”

“*You know Scar,*” RK echoes him, and it’s eerily similar to their conversation about Etho. “*I don’t care that you asked first. How in the bleeding hell do you know that monster?*”

Doc takes another step back, trying to get as far away as possible from the downright *murderous* expression on the Red King’s face. “He’s -- he’s my friend. We work together, sometimes. He’s going to be in the world we’re going to. He’s one of us -- he joined in season four, one season after Etho and I?” It doesn’t make sense. None of this makes sense. How can the Red King know *Etho*, but not *him*? How would *Scar* have angered a god *this badly*?

Something clicks in his mind when his hand touches the closet door.

“The Skizz Blade,” he blurts. “Skizz is -- he’s Impulse’s friend, isn’t he?”

And somehow it gets *even colder*. Ice radiates out across the room, sharp spikes that freeze Doc’s metal arm in place against the door to the closet. He presses himself back against its surface; the glint in the Red King’s eyes has gotten even *worse* somehow, and he does *not* want RK anywhere near that sword-for-killing-players.

The Red King laughs, hoarsely, and the chair he’s leaning against for support has been covered in a thick layer of translucent ice. “*Oh, you know the traitor, too. I suppose he’s another one of yours. I suppose they all are. Cleo, Bdubs, Tango, Grian, the whole lot of them.*”

“Yeah,” Doc manages to breathe out, trying to back up even further. “How do you--”

“*Kingslayer,*” RK laughs, and the sound is brittle, his tears freezing on his cheeks. “*Bloodthirsty. Time King. The coward. And the mastermind behind it all, the loyal soldier to the very end, the whole damn reason either of us are in this mess.*”

Crystals spread out from where RK is standing, icicles starting to jut out from the floor. The whole room is white, and the air is no exception, a thick mist pouring from nowhere and swirling around the both of them. Doc’s breath freezes the second it leaves his mouth, little ice shards falling to the ground.

“*And Etho’s here too,*” he whispers. “*Did he betray me as well? Was there anyone I could trust but my Hand?*”

Doc steps down on an icicle, breaking the point off before it can stab him in the leg. “We’re all friends, RK! I don’t know why you hate them so much, but we’re *friends*. They’re going to be happy to see you.”

RK’s face is almost entirely hidden by the mist, but Doc can see the glint of his eyes as he stares at Doc. “*Happy to see me?*”

A band of ice circles its way over Doc’s throat, and suddenly he can’t breathe.

“*Happy to see me!?*” The Red King *snarls*, and there is nothing human in the noise. It’s the sound of a beast of war. “*I’m sure the man who put an arrow in my back will be thrilled to see me again, if only to use a sword this time.*” His breathing is ragged and broken. “*Is this the afterlife I deserve? After everything, this is the hell I’m going to endure?*”

Doc’s heart is pounding so loudly he’s *sure* the Red King can hear it. He claws at his throat -- he doesn’t know what will happen if he has to respawn while actively between worlds, but it *can’t* be good. He knows for sure the white spots in his vision aren’t entirely caused by the ice storm in front of him.

The band around his neck loosens just enough that he can gasp for breath, wheeze and take air into his lungs. “*Afterlife? Afterlife? We’re--*” and he’d double over wheezing if he could move at all “*-- not dead! RK! What the hell is going on?*”

A break in the ice. A whisper of spring.

RK stares at him, the expression of frozen anger slowly melting. He takes an unsteady step towards Doc, balancing himself against the kitchenette, dragging himself forward until they’re face to face.

“...*What?*”

“I don’t know how the *heck* you thought this was the afterlife,” Doc wheezes, trying to shrink back further and entirely failing, unable to look away from those ice-cold eyes, “but it’s *not*. We’re not *dead*. Well, keep this up and *I* might be, but you? You are *very much alive*.” He’s not even sure what he’s feeling anymore. Terror, certainly. Confusion. Bewilderment. Worry. Terror again. He’s going to die here.

“*You said --*” RK stumbles back. “*You said other ships. ‘Other ships moving on to their next world, like us,’ that’s what you said.*”

Doc doesn’t say a word. He’s too scared of the desperate look in RK’s eyes.

“*And Renbob. Renbob is our ferryman. Why does he look like Ren -- like me -- if he’s not part of our afterlife?*” RK isn’t even waiting for answers anymore, curling into himself, hands clawing into his shoulders and drawing black blood. “*It was a hardcore world. It should’ve been permanent. Ren was **dead** when I found him again, I thought I had just followed--*”

“*Hey! Don’t use the hand I built you to hurt yourself,*” Doc snaps, attempting to wrench himself free of the ice, barely even paying attention to the suffocating pressure around his neck and chest. “*RK, come on man, what are you on about? I don’t know about any of this! Someone attacked Ren at the end of last season, and Renbob -- who is Ren’s brother by the way, or maybe just his cousin, but they look like each other because they are literally related -- called me in to help! I know nothing about a hardcore world and I have no idea what your beef is with the other hermits, but I won’t let you hurt them and I won’t let you hurt yourself, either!*”

Red eyes snap to him, the feral look behind them vanishing the second he and RK make eye contact.

There’s a second where they look at each other -- and then there’s a sharp inhale from RK, the band of ice dissolving from around Doc’s neck, just like everything else *winter* in the room.

“*I don’t -- I’m sorry -- I didn’t --*” RK stammers over each fragment of the sentence, backing away from Doc as swiftly as he can manage. “*I hurt you.*”

Doc reaches for him, and the Red King flinches away. “*RK. Calm down. It’s alright.*” He pauses, looks down at his outstretched hand, and then rubs his neck instead of approaching further. It’s sore. It’s almost definitely going to bruise. “*...Hey, we kind of match now, right?*”

It doesn’t help. RK’s hand flies to his own neck, eyes going wide. “*You shouldn’t -- you don’t want to match with me. Not over this. I shouldn’t have hurt you like that.*”

“*I’m fine,*” Doc says. “*I’m alive, aren’t I? We’re both alive.*” He reaches his hand back out.

“*We’re both alive,*” RK echoes back, eyes still wide. “*And if -- oh, Doc, if **I’m** alive then that means --*”

He turns, lunges past Doc for the door to the bathroom. Doc’s too slow to stop him -- he reaches out one hand, but barely even manages to brush by cold fabric. The door locks before he can grab the handle, frosts over as if to spite him.

Doc slumps down against the closet door, head hazy, heart still pounding. He doesn’t know what’s going on anymore. It’s not cold anymore. He’s not used to it.

Despite his racing thoughts, Doc tries to put together what RK had said. It makes no sense. Hermits

in a hardcore world. Scar, a *monster* . Why anyone would talk about his friends with such *hatred* in their voice. The fact that this entire time, RK thought he was dead. He's sure the pieces all connect somehow, but the puzzle is too big, too complex for him to even start wrapping his head around.

And then the bathroom door opens, and there is an entirely new puzzle to solve.

"...Doc?" Ren whispers.

Chapter End Notes

FIRE AND SMOKE

AN EGG

HATCHING

RENDOG RETURNS

THE RED KING RETREATS TO THE SHADOWS

Returned

Chapter Summary

Ren explains it all, or at least most of it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Doc?” Ren repeats, eyes wide. “Doc, is that you? What’s going on? Where *am* I?”

It’s Ren. It is *absolutely* Ren. Doc has no idea how he could have *ever* mistaken RK for Ren, now that the difference is starkly obvious. Ren doesn’t carry himself like the world’s on his shoulders; he staggers against the doorframe, red eyes wide and scared.

“Doc?” Ren tries again. “Doc, man, I’m freaking out here -- what the heck is going on!?”

Any chill in the room has vanished. The frost from the doorknob has dissipated as though it was never there. Doc wonders for one brief, wild moment if RK was ever even here at *all*, but then he catches sight of claw marks on Ren’s shoulders and the sight of blood, no matter how small the amount, sends him forward.

Ren sinks against him as Doc brings him into a hug, holding Ren tight against his chest.

“You’re awake,” Doc breathes. “You’re here.”

Ren is shaking like a leaf in strong winds, clinging to Doc like he can’t believe it either. He doesn’t seem willing to let go. “Yeah, I’m awake, I’m awake, what’s going *on* Doc? Why are we in Renbob’s van? What happened to my hand, where’s my *leg* ?”

“...You should sit down,” Doc says quietly. “Come on.” He guides Ren back over to the bed carefully; Ren’s not quite as graceful leaning against objects to move forward, unlike RK. He stumbles several times and eventually pitches face-first onto the mattress with a *mnprh* noise.

Doc lets Ren settle himself out, turning to the closet and starting to rummage for the bandages he knows are in there, sorting past each item until his hand closes around the box of basic medical supplies. It rattles when he takes it out, and Doc flips open the lid, grabbing the roll of bandages and the tube of anti-infection cream.

Ren hasn’t managed to sit up, or even roll over on the mattress. He’s staring at Doc, his face half-hidden in the pillow, ears pressed back against his head in fear.

“What’s wrong?” Doc asks, quietly.

“I’m back,” Ren breathes. “I’m back. I shouldn’t be back.”

Doc ignores the familiar sinking feeling in his gut and closes the closet door behind him, leaning against it. “It was touch and go for a while there. Renbob says you lost a lot of blood.”

“Oh, joy.” Ren shudders, twisting his head around to follow Doc. “Was that after I fell into the

lava or after I got my head cut off?"

Doc misses a step, fumbling for the supplies in his hands as he stares at Ren. "Your *head* got cut off?"

Ren nods more to himself than Doc, his eyes taking on a familiarly distant look, but there's no ice behind the gaze anymore. "After season 7, then."

"We're headed to season eight, yeah." Doc rubs the bridge of his nose with his free hand. "Your head seems pretty attached to your neck though. Can I see your shoulders really quick? It looks like you've been dinged up there." He's not sure why he doesn't mention RK, but something in the back of his mind is just... telling him not to. Not in a supernatural way, just an ordinary bad feeling.

Ren sits up slowly, pushing himself up on shaky arms and whimpering with every too-sudden movement he makes. Doc carefully sits next to him, popping open the lid of the cream, holding his breath when Ren grabs onto his labcoat for support.

"Never thought I would see this thing again," he whispers. His claws snag on the fabric slightly. "Just as torn as the last time I saw it."

"And you'll see it plenty more times," Doc says. "This might sting a bit, so hold still."

Ren flinches with each touch of Doc's hands against his shoulder, taking slow breaths to avoid making noise. It doesn't take too much time to clean the scratches, and before long Doc is carefully bandaging the wounds, holding Ren steady as his friend leans against him.

Ren's claws snag on Doc's coat again, and this time he actually seems to notice them. He looks down at his own hands, goes still as Doc finishes bandaging his shoulders, and keeps staring down at them even as Doc goes to put the bandages and ointment away.

"Hey, Doc, what happened to my hands?" It's definitely lowercase-h hands, the inflection RK used isn't there. But something else is. A strange edge to his casual tone.

"Your left arm should be fine," Doc says matter-of-factly, even as he gets the feeling this isn't what Ren's asking about. "Right arm I had to replace from the elbow down. I think it's some of the best cybernetic work I've ever done, actually."

"Right," Ren says slowly, opening and closing both hands, claws pricking into his palms. "Only that's not what I just asked you, Doc. What I meant is, *why do I have claws?*"

"I don't know," Doc says. It's not entirely a lie. In fact, it's mostly the truth -- he *doesn't* know why Ren has claws. He doesn't know why RK had claws, *either*, but that's not what Ren asked.

Claws keep unclenching and clenching into fists. "You're sure you don't know?"

"I'm sure, dude. I just built the prosthetic based off of your other hand." Doc ignores the hint of guilt that tries to settle in his gut.

Ren sighs heavily, turning over his palm and pinching the grey skin between his fingers. It turns white under the pressure, and he grimaces, looking back up at Doc. "Did you say we're headed to season 8?"

"Yeah," Doc says, eagerly moving onto the next topic. "Renbob's driving us -- or, flying us. I'm not sure what kind of license you would need for a spaceship van. He's the one who found you."

“Huh.” Ren looks around him, as if to try and get his bearings, and then stiffens and freezes up. At first, Doc thinks it’s an overexaggerated reaction to the bead curtain near the window.

And then he realizes Ren’s looking at his own reflection. Red eyes. Sharp teeth. Grey-tinted skin.

“Ren -- hey, Ren,” Doc says, grabbing for his hands when they start to pull and scratch at his face, trying to feel every new detail. “Ren, man, you’re just freaking yourself out. Look at me instead, okay?”

Ren’s breath is coming in shallow, chest heaving with panic as he stares at his reflection. His claws twist in Doc’s grip, trying to break free, and Doc hurriedly covers them with both hands, trying to stop Ren from shaking so hard.

Ren closes his eyes. Seems to hold his breath for a few moments, then releases it slowly. He turns towards Doc, and there’s a strange look on his face that, despite how long they’ve been friends, Doc can’t put his finger on.

“Doc,” he says, with that same tense undertone as when he’d asked about his claws, “I *just* woke up, right?”

A beat.

“Yeah,” Doc says, keeping his voice even. “This is the first time you’ve woken up.” It isn’t a lie.

Ren’s eyes search his face, carefully studying his expression. He knows Doc too well, knows all his little tics and tells, and there is a moment where he thinks Ren knows, until he looks away and down at his covered hands.

“If I’ve said anything, Doc, if I’ve done anything... it wasn’t me.”

And there’s the source of that sinking feeling. Doc frowns, like he doesn’t know exactly what Ren’s talking about. “What do you mean?” Pause. Relieve the tension. “It’s not Grimdog back for revenge or something, right?”

Ren laughs bitterly. “Grimdog. No. No, Doc, if you’ve talked to me before now--” He looks up. Stares right at Doc, looks him right in the eyes. “-then that *wasn’t me*. D’you understand?”

“No,” Doc says, and it’s the honest truth. “I have no idea what’s going on right now.”

“Maybe it’s best you don’t understand right now,” Ren mutters, dropping his head back down. “But just -- keep your guard up, dude, okay?”

Doc nods, gently releasing Ren’s hands when he tugs to free them. “I will, I guess,” he hesitates, not used to asking questions anymore. He decides to phrase it as a joke, *just in case*. “Still, can’t be worse than Grimdog?”

“Oh, it definitely can,” Ren says, and his tone is deadly serious. “It *definitely* can.”

His claws slowly raise to his throat, tracing the skin there.

“It was a blood god.”

Doc stares at him. Tries not to rub the bruise on his own neck that’s starting to sting again, now, because he doesn’t want to call attention to it. If there ever was any doubt in his mind before as to whether or not Ren was talking about the Red King, that doubt is now *long* gone. There’s not a lot

of gods around that possess people, and the image of his own face dripping with blood is still fresh from his dreams. It's not cold. Somehow that makes everything so much worse.

"I think you need to tell me what's going on," Doc says, as slowly and as evenly as he can possibly manage. "I think you need to tell me what's going on *now*, Ren." He's sick of not asking questions.

"It's a long story."

"Yeah?" Doc stands up from the bed. "I've got coffee, and plenty of time." It might be too aggressive of an approach. He sighs. His shoulders sag. "At least tell me *something*. About -- about this blood god of yours, or why you said it's not you if you woke up earlier, or why you got your *head cut off*. You're worrying me, dude."

Ren pulls a blanket around himself, falling back onto the bed with a heavy sigh. "Alright. Coffee first. And then I'll tell you about Third Life."

Doc heads over to the coffeepot and turns it on. Waits for the water to boil. Absently rubs at the bruise on his neck as he does so. He can tell Ren's still staring at him, even as the water boils and he pours the coffee into Ren's mug straight over the ridiculous amount of sugar (it's, what, three tablespoons?) that Ren prefers. Ren doesn't stop staring at him. He sits down at the table and sets down Ren's mug near enough that he'll be able to grab it from the bed.

"So," Doc prompts. "'Third Life?'" There's no chill in the room, but he still shivers. Something seems deeply *wrong* about the name, like someone's walking over his grave.

Ren reaches for the coffee, motioning for Doc to wait as he takes a sip. His face instantly pulls into a grimace, but he doesn't spit it back out, at least.

"Dude," he coughs when he's able to talk again. "Why is it so bitter? Is it poisoned?"

"Absolutely not," Doc responds. "I put your usual amount of sugar in. Unless the sugar's gone bad, it should taste the same."

"Hm." Ren frowns, and his eyes go distant briefly. "Maybe my tastes have changed." He slides the mug away from himself. It sits on the table between them, still mostly full of over-sweetened coffee.

"I feel like I'm asking this a lot," Doc says, reaching for the cup himself and tasting it to make sure he didn't do something to the coffee (it's overly sweet, he definitely didn't make it wrong), "but seriously, what is going *on* right now?"

Ren pulls his claws through his hair, untangling several knots. "I don't even know where to start."

"Try the beginning," Doc quips, and something feels so, so *wrong* about the smile Ren gives him.

"Okay," Ren says, taking a deep breath in. "So Grian had this idea for a side series."

Doc's heart feels like it's going to fall into his stomach. Grian. *The mastermind behind it all, the loyal soldier to the very end*. He does his best to clear that thought from his head, even though he now knows *for sure* that RK is related to all this.

Ren is staring at him. Doc clears his throat. "Go on."

"It was supposed to be, like, a kind of Demise-type thing? Like a hardcore world, but with three lives, and then on your last life you were supposed to try and kill other players. A fun minigame."

Ren stares down at the table. “There were fourteen of us, including me. A handful of hermits. Some other friends of Grian’s. It was supposed to be a good time.”

He looks back up at Doc. “And then it wasn’t a game anymore. I dunno what happened -- if the programming for the lives system messed with our heads somehow, or if there was something weird about the world itself, or if some outside entity came in and went ‘hey, what if I make this serious’ just for fun -- but... suddenly we were all playing for keeps. And it got... bad.”

I was supposed to kill someone with this sword, the Red King had said.

Ren is staring at Doc again, eyes narrowed. Doc shakes his head to clear his thoughts. “Which of the hermits? I need to know if anyone else is arriving in the next season sans body parts.” He means it as a joke. It falls flat.

Ren counts off on his fingers, not breaking eye contact. “Me. Etho. Grian and Scar. Impulse and Tango. Cleo and Bdubs.” His eyes don’t glint with frost, but they bore into Doc with the same intensity. “But you already knew that, *didn’t you Doc.*”

“...Yeah,” Doc says, keeping Ren’s gaze. “I already had a list, but I wanted confirmation.”

Ren’s eyes soften, and he sighs. “At least someone noticed. Buncha hermits vanish for two and a half months, someone would put together a list,” he gives Doc a small smile. “Glad you were looking out for me.”

He wasn’t. He’d had no idea about Third Life until Ren had told him about it just now. He’d had no idea about any of the other Hermits until RK had started reacting to them. *He hadn’t known.* Doc does his best not to slump in his chair right then and there, attributed heroics he had absolutely nothing to do with. Two and a half months. Some *friend* he is.

He doesn’t deny Ren’s statement. But he doesn’t confirm it, either. Doc just lets him keep talking.

“It got bad. *We* got bad,” Ren says. “Scar and I especially, we were at opposite ends of the war that broke out. He was all -- freaky Convex mode, just without the Convex.”

Doc knows where this is going. “And you got possessed by a blood god?”

“More like, I let my right hand man sacrifice me to a god of blood and war who then proceeded to take control of my body and kill people.” Ren pauses. “Or something like that.”

“Something like that,” Doc echoes, thinking about RK. Who’d had a sword for killing players and wanted him to hide it in the closet. Who’d asked again and again where his friends were, where his Hand was. Who hadn’t attacked him, not once, until he’d thought he was *dead and going to hell.* Doc wonders what kind of war god would do those things, why Ren would’ve gotten desperate enough to summon *any* sort of entity. He doesn’t ask.

Ren’s staring at him again. *Probably waiting for me to say more*, Doc realizes, and clears his throat. “Is that... why you have claws now?” (And sharp teeth. And red eyes that used to glint with ice.)

Ren glances down at his hands, flicking his claws. “Yeah. I think so. My body is still supposed to be its body, I’m just the one who has control now.”

Doc falters. That doesn’t sound quite right, because RK hadn’t sounded confident at *all* about waking up in Ren’s body. He’d been... scared, maybe? Projected that fear outwards into winter, or something of the sort. But there had barely even been any mention of the body being *his*. Doc

clears his throat. “Ren, man, I hate to pry about this otherworldly contract, but you didn’t... set terms and conditions or anything? Wouldn’t h-” no, hang on “-wouldn’t it have only had your body during the hardcore world?”

Ren takes a deep breath, squeezing his eyes shut. “I did have terms. It had my body to protect Dogwarts and her people, and once that was done, it was supposed to go. I don’t know why it’s still here, Doc, and I’m *terrified*.”

Doc passes up the opportunity to laugh at the name *Dogwarts*, instead placing down his coffee to lean forward and grab Ren’s hand, giving it a comforting squeeze. Ren shoots him a grateful look, and laughs when he starts to fidget with one of the friendship bracelets.

“Renbob was worried about me, huh?”

“Yeah,” Doc says, and it’s the truth. “I think we all were.”

He sees Ren mouth his words, frowning. “We?”

Something sinks inside Doc’s gut. He’s made a mistake.

“Yeah. We. The hermits,” Doc says, and it’s still not a lie, he’s a hermit and he was worried, but Ren is shaking his head, the frown sticking in place.

“You said Renbob was the one who picked me up.”

Doc can feel the lie unraveling in front of him, but he’s still not quite sure where the hole is or how to patch it in time. He tries to ignore his dry throat. “Yeah, he found you and then came to get me. What’s going on?” Deflection. He needs Ren to tell him what hole in his story to patch over.

“You said ‘we *all*,’ Doc. Not ‘we *both*.’” Ren’s hand curls around his. It’s sharp. He’s a lot less careful with his nails than RK was, unused to the claws. “So *who else is here?*”

Doc says nothing, and Ren leans forward. “Hey, Doc. *You didn’t happen to talk to anyone besides Renbob before I woke up, did you?*” The claws dig into his arm slightly. It’s no longer unintentional.

His heart sinks further. This is *bad*. He’s been trying not to lie, but... what other choice does he have, at this point?”

“No. I haven’t talked to anyone besides him, and I’ve barely talked to him if I’m being honest.”

“You’re *not* being honest,” Ren snaps. “I know what you sound like when you lie, Doc, and you might’ve been telling the truth before, but you sure as *hell* aren’t now.”

He doesn’t say anything, and Ren pushes off of him to stand, scanning every inch of the room like the Red King is waiting in one of the corners. Doc thinks the cold might be better than this, the lack of faith Ren now has in him, but they are both slowly suffocating him.

He watches as Ren’s eyes catch on RK’s crown, tucked away at the back of Doc’s workbench.

His gaze drags, ever so slowly, down to Doc. He blinks.

“I was right,” he says, the words hanging over both of them. “I shouldn’t be back. I’m just on borrowed time.”

Ren’s eyes roll back into his head, and he promptly passes out.

Chapter End Notes

Returned / At the end of each season, this player has a chance of being called back to the Void.

Stubborn

Chapter Summary

Someone wakes up, more questions are asked, and Doc speaks of the devil.

Chapter Notes

(solar here! as always, thanks so much for all your kind words! i don't have a lot to add other than that fluffy and i appreciate the fan response immensely. oh also, just so you don't get *too* high an opinion of me, the t key on my laptop has been broken so i've been borrowing a friend's computer to write and copy-pasting "t" whenever i need to post. somehow this works.)

Doc spends the next two hours cleaning up the van. RK's crown and sword are moved to the very back of the closet to have a blanket tossed over them, all the coffee mugs are scrubbed clean until there's not a single stain, and his workbench is put back in order.

He puts blankets over the windows after a brief moment of decision. It's not like space has much of a view anyway.

It's only when he's paced the room several more times, trying to figure out if anything even remotely looks like it could be from the Red King, that he realizes he's being watched, red eyes the only thing not hidden by a pillow or blanket.

Doc stops. Squints. Focuses on the temperature of the room. Sighs.

"Next time you pull my dead best friend out of nowhere, I want a warning."

"*And hello to you too, doctor,*" RK says, poking his head out of the blankets with a smug smile that makes Doc want to strangle him. "*I'm guessing it worked.*"

"He freaked out about being back for a solid fifteen minutes, told me you were a dangerous blood god and to be careful, found out *I had* spoken to you, and passed out. I wouldn't call that 'worked,' RK." Doc pauses to consider his next words.

"Ren says you two made a contract," he says, finally. Slowly, really considering the words as he says them.

"*We did,*" RK says, looking thoroughly unbothered. "*He gave himself over for Dogwarts and her people. He's not exactly lying about the 'dangerous blood god' part, Doc.*"

Doc wants to banter. He wants to pretend like nothing here is hard to accept, like his conscience is clean. He takes a breath. "He had someone cut off his head for you."

"*All rituals have a cost.*" RK doesn't look quite as smug, now. More... thoughtful.

Doc sits down. Rubs the bruise on his neck as he weighs whether or not he wants to say this. “Ren also said something went weird with the world you were all in. Made everyone get way more intense than normal.”

“You’re wondering if that was me,” RK says, and Doc nods. *“No. No, if anything, I was affected by it too.”*

“And your Hand. The one you’re missing. He was Ren’s Hand too.”

RK pulls the blanket down over his eyes, sighing. Like clockwork, frost starts to appear on Doc’s arm, slowly spreading until the Red King starts to talk again.

“Ren was the king first. And then came the red winter.”

Oh, Doc thinks, looking down at the frost patterns across his hands, *of course*. He doesn’t say anything else, just... sits down. Waits for RK to keep speaking.

“Rituals require sacrifices. Ren wanted safety for his kingdom, for Dogwarts, for its people. We struck a bargain. His head for his heart. His body for his people. War was brewing, so he sought protection from someone in that domain.”

“...The Hand. He killed Ren to summon you.”

The Red King grins, sharp and empty. “Yes.”

Doc leans back against his workbench, trying to take in the weight of everything he’s learned. All the information seems too big, too far apart from Doc, too removed from the life he’s used to. The only things he has to go off of are RK and Ren’s stories, and they’re offering conflicting views on what are almost definitely the same events.

A hardcore world with limited lives, all struggling to win. An entity that looks like Ren, talks like Ren, and yet is so different. Grian and his damn death games.

Doc sighs. “At this point, I’m more surprised I’m talking to you instead of Grimdog.”

“I have no idea who that is,” RK says. *“But I’m guessing I should be glad of that.”*

Doc mumbles an agreement, dragging his hands down his face and staring up at the ceiling. The ceiling is nice. The ceiling doesn’t have emotions Doc has to be careful with.

He rubs the bruise on his neck again. There’s really no way out but through, here. “Ren said... Ren said you were supposed to leave him, once you were done with Third Life. But you’re still here. And you’re scaring him.”

RK gives him a strange look. *“He gave me his body to protect Dogwarts and her people.”*

“Right,” Doc says, “and Dogwarts doesn’t really exist outside of Third Life. But you’re still here.”

RK leans forward and pushes himself up, sitting on his knee as he beams at Doc. *“Dogwarts? She’s lost to time, yes. But her people still roam the worlds, and I promised to protect them too.”*

Doc stills.

“...You’re keeping Ren’s body on a technicality?”

“He’d be dead if I wasn’t,” RK says, and his smile falls a little. *“I thought I had failed there, for a*

while. Taken us both to the afterlife, instead of neither.”

Doc takes a deep breath in. “Well. He’s alive. They all are, clearly, considering I know for a fact that everyone you named off the last time we talked is going to be in season eight.” He leans forward. “And I hate to say this, but if you’re going to freeze up the room if you so much as hear mention of, say, Scar, then *you need to leave Ren alone.*”

The room does in fact get colder. Doc weathers it, even as the drop in temperature puts him in mind of the last time they’d talked about this. He reaches up to rub the bruise once more, reminds himself he’s still breathing.

RK’s hand flutters to his neck at the same time, claws covering what Doc now knows must be an invisible axe wound, but his expression twists into something darker, and for the first time, Doc watches as frost lines spread over RK’s own skin, encircling his throat like the world’s worst choker.

“He deserves this,” he says, gesturing to his neck. *“He deserves the fate that fell to Ren.”*

“And what would you deserve, if Scar decided he needed revenge?” Doc shakes his head. “Get out of Ren’s body, RK.”

“Doctor,” RK says coolly, and the temperature drops further, and the ice grows a little thicker, *“don’t order me around. We both know how that ends.”*

“I don’t *care*,” Doc snaps, standing up. His heart is pounding in his chest, and he can almost feel ice drawing in around his neck again. “If you’re going to hurt my friends, *any* of them, even in the name of another friend of mine, *you need to leave*. I’ll -- I’ll find a way to *make* you leave, if I have to. I don’t care if you’re some ultra-dangerous war god. I’ve already faced down one god and *I’ll do it again.*” His breath comes out as cold fog in the air. He does not break eye contact.

There is a flicker across RK’s face. Not of emotion, not as part of some other gesture, but something *other* -- and for one brief second, Doc can only see teeth made from ice, dripping with blood, and then he is looking at a human face again.

“The devil and his demons must be worth it to you,” RK says, looking away. The cold does not vanish, but it stops. *“That you’d stand up to another god for them.”*

“They are worth *everything*,” Doc breathes. “And if you try to hurt them, you will be *nothing* to me.”

He keeps staring, even as he expects claws at his throat at any second. “Scar’s not a *devil*. He’s my *friend*. You *admitted* something was up with that world, RK, you don’t get to turn around and decide that they were *pure evil*.”

He doesn’t know what respawning is going to be like between worlds. He’s got a feeling he’s about to find out, seeing as the cold is back again, a phantom feeling around his neck.

“And what will become of you, doctor?”

“I don’t know what you mean by that. And I don’t care. Leave them alone.” *Focus on me instead, if you have to.* He doesn’t say it out loud. They both know he’s thinking it.

RK lifts his lips in a silent snarl, and Doc braces himself for the suffocation, for the cold --

“Does the M in your damn name stand for ‘Martyr’?” He reaches out and pokes Doc in the chest

with a very cold claw. *“Or maybe ‘Moron’? Why are you so determined to carry the world by yourself, doctor? You’d face a blood god in your friend’s body to bring him back, but you wouldn’t let him do the same for you.”*

The anger is still there, the half-feral growl in RK’s voice, but his eyes are soft as he looks Doc over.

“You don’t need to carry every burden alone. I told you I’d share the weight of the sky.”

Doc grits his teeth. The claw at his chest feels like it’s going to freeze a hole straight through him. *“You’re deflecting. I don’t need to be told I’m an idiot.”* He pushes RK’s hand away; the feeling of an anchor in his gut remains. He takes a step forward. *“Tell me you won’t hurt them, RK. I won’t back down otherwise.”* Another step.

“...Even if I said no, you’d crawl out of your grave to save your friends.”

“That’s not a definite answer.” Yet another step. He is directly over RK now, a claw still poking into him.

RK closes his eyes. Drops his head and hand, fingers now splayed across Doc’s chest to try and push him away.

“Okay.”

“Okay, what, Red King?”

“Okay, I won’t hurt them.” His hand weakly pushes against Doc. *“I’d win. But you’d keep coming back. Defying death for the devil.”* RK looks back up at Doc, his eyes shining with tears.

“Mortals. You stupidly stubborn lot.”

Doc’s chest is cold. The room’s cold. His heart is still beating fast and loud, and he’s *certain* RK can hear it. He breathes out. *“Then we’re good.”*

Waning

Chapter Summary

A new perspective.

Wherever he is, it is grey.

There is no ceiling, no walls, no floor, no sun or moon or stars. There is just an expanse of air reaching from him to wherever he can see. Walking provides no better view, and neither does laying down. Closing his eyes just turns the grey into black, and while he's never been scared of the dark, he'd much rather *see* whatever's coming.

And he knows something's coming. He's not stupid. He's on borrowed time, and its lender is toying with him.

He says something. He forgets what he says right after, the words having been taken into the grey the moment he opened his mouth, silence waiting on every side of him. He takes a second, looking down at himself, the only existing thing in this space. The words are his -- if he is allowed to exist in this place, then surely his sentences should as well. He looks up.

"This isn't fair," Ren says to the nothingness. "I didn't get to say goodbye to him."

He expects to be mocked. For there to be some type of taunt, or maybe a threat, even just a disapproving chill in the air. There's nothing.

"You were supposed to--" he starts, and then can't finish his sentence, because he's not sure how he was going to finish it. It doesn't matter. He's alone. His time's up.

He starts walking again. It does nothing, leads him nowhere, but he needs to move, he needs to find something solid other than himself, something that isn't grey. Time shadows him, and Ren can hear his heartbeat in every step he takes -- and he thinks that's a little unfair, that he's dead and is reminded of his heartbeat, reminded that he doesn't have long until he is simply swept into the grey like everything else.

He doesn't want to die. He's already dead.

"Get it over with," Ren says, still walking. He forces bravado into his voice, unwilling to give whatever's doing this to him the satisfaction of seeing him crumble. "Just get it over with already."

He's trying everything to drag *something* out of the shadows here, even if it's some sort of monstrosity. Even if it's angry at him. Anything's better than nothing.

"Should've known better than to trust a war god," he says. "Or a blood god. Whatever you are. A coward, for sure."

There's nothing that visibly changes in the grey. It remains the same featureless expanse of nothing, with nothing in it but Ren and his words, with the dreaded sense of something coming.

Whatever it is, it's arrived. It says nothing, makes no sound, no shadow, no sign of anything there,

and yet Ren *knows* something is watching him from a shadow that doesn't exist.

He balls his hands -- claws -- into fists, and stops walking. "You heard me," he says, refusing to turn and give it the satisfaction of his fear. "You're a *coward*. Haven't killed the guy you've possessed yet, and why?"

Maybe it's messing with him. That's the most logical explanation. It hasn't had its fun yet, so it's playing cat-and-mouse with him, letting him claw his way back to life just to recapture him all over again. It feels hopeless trying to stand up to this thing. The most he can do is try to enrage it into killing him.

"I'm not scared of you anymore. I'm just sick of this." He takes a deep breath in. "And stay away from Doc. He's not part of this. He didn't make a contract with you."

Come to think of it. "Oh, and you're a *cheater* on top of everything else, you hear me? We made a deal and you're *breaking* it. You're supposed to be around for Dogwarts, but it's *gone*, dude. You *lied*. About *everything*."

Because it did. It offered him protection. And then it didn't protect *any* of them. "A liar and a cheat and a coward. Some *god* you turned out to be."

There are claws curling over his shoulder. His claws.

Finally.

"You gonna kill me now?" Ren dares.

"Quite the opposite, dog. Have fun."

And the grey turns to color and shapes like a screen flickering to life. Ren reels, disoriented by the feeling of something having *shoved* him to the forefront of his own mind. He pitches forward slightly.

Blankets. He's in bed. He can *see* everything around him just fine, but his brain's struggling to make sense of it all. Workbench-kitchenette-chair-table-door, all of it blurs together. His claws leave small holes in the blanket as he clutches it. And he's back, god no he's *back*, it *is* toying with him. Have fun, it said, *have fun*.

Doc looks up at him from over at the workbench, where he's working on some sort of prosthetic leg. His eyes widen in surprise. He moves to get up, and Ren scrambles backwards. Can't be near him. Can't risk that *thing* hurting him. He puts as much distance between himself and Doc as he backs up until he's in the corner, back pinned against two walls, claws digging into the mattress.

"Ren," Doc is saying, "Ren, what's going on?" It sounds like it's coming from far away, or muffled as if through several layers of snow. He reaches towards Ren, and fear grabs him by the heart.

"Don't get near me," he half shouts in desperation. "Doc -- Doc, don't get closer dude, it's *toying* with us, it could be back at any second. I don't want to hurt you."

Doc's hand pauses. He looks at Ren, and he can't tell if the metal on Doc's face was always that blank sort of grey or if this is a trick, if he's still in the room of nothing. Ren clutches the sheets closer, trying to feel if they're real too or if they're made of smoke.

"It's real," Doc says softly, somehow knowing the path Ren's mind is taking. "Hey -- it only

knows Third Life stuff, right? I was the bailiff in the Logfather court case. You got sent to hermitjail until ‘the devs bless us with another update.’ Scar thought it was a wedding at first.”

That’s all true. It shouldn’t know any of that. So he’s definitely awake, then.

On the other hand. *On the other hand.* Doc’s just said “it only knows Third Life stuff” and Doc doesn’t make assumptions that big. Ren tries and fails to back away even further. “Doc. Doc, I told you not to talk to it. You can’t trust *anything* that --” he fumbles for an insult both accurate and family-friendly enough to say aloud “-- *devil* says, Doc.”

Doc winces, and his hand clutches the desk like he’s bracing for something. Ren stares at him, trying to read his body language. All he sees is his own apprehension reflected back at him.

“Did it do something to you, Doc?” he breathes out, staring at the person he hopes is his friend. “Did it trick you like it tricked me? Promise its protection for loyalty? Offer something else in exchange for a contract?”

“No,” Doc says, shaking his head slowly. “No, nothing like that.” He reaches up to rub the bridge of his nose, and Ren notices something on the side of Doc’s neck. A faint dark discoloration, like a healing injury or a growing bruise.

It’s not quite an axe scar, but it still matches the shape.

“How long?” Ren demands. “How long have you been talking with it?”

Doc shakes his head again. “He’s got a name, Ren.”

“And he’s got a face too, but he stole that from me,” he snaps. “I’m not supposed to be back, Doc. Did you make a bargain for *me*?”

Doc breathes in. “I didn’t. You know I would have. But I didn’t.”

He’s telling the truth. Ren’s been friends with Doc long enough to know that everything he’s said so far has been the truth, but that doesn’t ease his fear. The (don’t think the name, the devil comes when called) king and Doc have been talking, long enough to where it’s made a mark on his friend’s skin, and he doesn’t know what that means. He still doesn’t know what *have fun* is supposed to mean.

He looks down at his claws. He hopes they won’t hurt Doc.

“I’m fine, Ren,” Doc says, voice a little shaky. It’s not a *lie*, it’s just that there’s more to it than what he wants to say. “Really. Look, I’m... nearly finished with this,” he says, gesturing to the prosthetic leg on the table, “do you want to help me test it?”

It looks like a normal leg. Ren squints at it for hidden knives or other things, but it really does look like a normal leg. “I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

Doc sighs. “Alright.”

The two of them sit there in awkward silence as Ren goes through everything he can think to say in his mind and decides none of it is as important as one question. “Doc. What’s with your neck?”

Doc’s hand flies to the marking, emotion flicking across his face. Guilt. Worry. Unease. No fear in that expression, at least. “Uh. An... accident happened.”

An accident. Ren laughs. “Blood god inflicted accident?”

“Ren.”

“Doc,” he says, taking on the same tone his friend has. “Unless you can come up with something else in this van that bruised you like that, I know what happened.”

Doc leans forward, reaching out his hand slow enough that Ren can pull back if he needs to. He doesn’t, and lets Doc trace his hand over his throat, where an axe split the skin. The pain is numb. He’s experienced worse things now. He knows what to really be scared of.

Doc’s thumb presses against the side of his neck. “You don’t have a scar.”

“It’s not always there,” Ren says quietly. It’s cold. He pulls one of the blankets over his shoulders. “Just on bad days,” he adds, and he’s not sure why this isn’t counted as a bad day.

Doc pulls his hand away and rubs the discolored area on his own neck, wincing slightly. “It really was an accident, you know. RK didn’t mean to.”

Ren narrows his eyes. “Oh, you two are on a *nicknames* basis, are you.” He tries to ignore his heart stopping briefly at that. Something happened to Doc, or he’s covering up for something. Or maybe none of this is real and the war god has just managed to get all the way into his head, pull through his memories and create a fake world to mess with him in.

He’s not so sure about that last one, though. It’s too cold to be fake.

“Has Renbob got the AC on blast or something?” He changes the subject as fast as he can, before Doc can respond to his “nicknames” jab. Just in case. “It’s... really cold in here. I’m freezing.”

“Temperature in the van’s always janky,” Doc says. It’s not an answer. Ren’s heart sinks. The scenery around them might not be fake, but the thing that took his body is still here, lying in wait. He shrinks away from Doc again. Sits on his hands, like that’ll stop anything.

“Should get someone to look at that,” he says, wincing when his voice breaks. “And in the meantime I might need more blankets.”

There actually are fewer blankets on the bed than last time he was awake, whenever that was. Ren’s pretty sure the god in his head doesn’t want polyester and cotton as a sacrifice, but he can’t fathom where the rest of them would’ve gone, unless Renbob took them for the driver’s seat. Doc watches him shiver and pull the blanket over his shoulders closer around him.

Ren blinks when a warm labcoat is draped over him, looking up at Doc.

“Blankets are in use for other things,” he says softly. “And I’m used to the temperature at this point.”

Ren stares at him, trying not to let his distrust show. “Are you now.”

Doc sighs. Looks away. Ren pulls the labcoat off his shoulders and hands it back to Doc. “Look. You should still have this. I probably won’t need it for much longer, anyway.”

“What do you mean?” Doc stares at him, hand hovering over the coat.

“Dunno how much longer I have,” Ren says weakly. The cold’s creeping in. He’s tired, so tired, and he’s been already dead the entire time. “I don’t think I’m gonna wake up as me. It’s here, Doc,

I can *tell* it's waiting for me to drift off."

He shoves the coat at Doc with his last bit of waning strength. There are claws curling over his shoulders again, and he distantly recognizes them as his own, except this time they are actually here and he's curling in on himself as a shiver crawls up his body.

"My final words," he mutters, the cold drawing out his thoughts. "It wasn't fair, Doc. I shouldn't have come back. I only did to say goodbye."

Doc's hands snap to his shoulders, covering his hands and fighting to keep him upright. "Hey, hey, hey! You're not dying Ren, not while I'm still alive."

"You're gonna have to lose this argument, dude." Ren's eyes are slipping shut, his tongue heavy in his mouth. "Sorry."

"You're not *dying*, Ren. It's only been a couple of hours since we last talked, it'll only be a couple more until you get to see me again."

Ren laughs softly. "You're right on one count, Doc. I'm not dying. I'm dead already."

And the room goes cold and dark once more.

Regret

Chapter Summary

RK wakes up (again), Doc squares up (again), and actions have consequences.

Chapter Notes

(hi, solar here! apparently there's some kind of tumblr log off protest going on today. that will not stop me from updating this fic, though. been looking forward to this chapter for a while now.

anyway, thanks for all your kind words as always! have fun with this one. i know i did.)

It's been two days since Doc's spoken to anyone else.

Well. Technically that's not strictly true, he's made awkward small-talk with Renbob once or twice, but that's not really what he's counting when it comes to speaking to other people. Maybe it's more accurate to say that the person in the bed -- RK or Ren, whichever of them -- hasn't woken up in two days. He's stirred, but not opened his eyes.

It's heartbreakingly similar to the early days, when Doc was working on the prosthetic arm without knowing if the person he was making it for was ever going to wake up. Now it's the same thing, but the leg's done and he's triple-checking everything and going out of his damn mind without any other projects to work on while he waits to see if *anyone* will wake up.

He hopes it's Ren. He's going to have to have a talk with RK and he's not looking forward to it.

Doc's comm beeps with the alarm he's set for himself, and he glares at the 8 AM he's supposed to be waking up to, not going to bed at. He refuses to lose track of the days this time -- he hadn't even realized RK had been around for just ten days until Renbob pointed it out in their small conversation.

Ren was around for a total of 30 minutes. Half an hour to tell Doc fragments of a story and then tell him he was already dead.

It's going to be a *very* long talk with RK.

The leg's perfect. He knows it is, he knows every surface at this point, every lever and joint that fits together. He's even added more than the blueprint shows, in the form of little hooks that will keep the leg straight when whoever has it uses an elytra. It's some of his best damn work in a while, and there's no one around to use it.

Doc grits his teeth and checks that the knee doesn't bend too far again. There's nothing else to do. He's barely eaten. He's barely slept. He doesn't care.

The person in the bed stirs again, and Doc turns to stare at them, waiting for something, any sort of motion, any sort of change in the airflow around them.

It gets colder. Doc's heart sinks. He'd had a feeling this would happen, especially since Ren had thought it was his last few minutes of existence, but it means he's about to have to go toe to toe with RK for -- what, the fifth time? He's lost count. He really should be keeping track.

RK sits up. Runs a hand through his hair. Doc is already staring at him.

"Hm. All teeth in place. No bones broken," RK rolls his shoulders, making a face when Ren's bandages pull. *"Those were already there. He's in tip top shape, doctor, so I don't understand why you look like a ravager stepped in your breakfast."*

Doc raises his squirt bottle. RK snorts.

"Red winter, doctor. Good luck spraying me with that."

"Rubbing alcohol," Doc says, his own voice chilly, "doesn't freeze. But it'll definitely still spray, Red King."

RK pauses, giving the squirt bottle an appraising look before his gaze switches to Doc, frowning at the tense way Doc is holding himself. The smug attitude melts off of him, and he scoots himself to sit against the pillow.

"You actually are upset. Just because I woke up this time?"

"Where's Ren, RK?" Doc stares at him, holding the spray bottle like it's a weapon. Like it'll do anything at all. It's the thought that counts, he supposes.

RK stares back at him, and there's a glint of a pained expression in those red eyes. *"All right, what did he say about me?"*

"He thinks you're toying with us. Or that I got tricked into making a contract, or something else." Doc takes a breath in, rubs the sore spot on his neck with his free hand. "RK, he said he was *dead already*. And I haven't seen him since. So if you'd like to explain, I would *really* appreciate that."

"...He said he was dead?"

"Yeah," Doc says. "Dead already, and not coming back."

RK folds his hands over his chest, staring at Doc. The temperature hasn't dropped beyond him waking up, but Doc watches him carefully for any signs of ice as he hums. *"I have no idea what he's talking about. If I'm alive, then so is he."*

He yelps as he gets squirted, flinching away from the rubbing alcohol now dripping from his hair. Doc brandishes the squirt bottle again.

"You didn't think you were alive either," he counters. "Put a little more thought into your answer this time, RK."

"I don't know what's going on," RK says, and then he ducks as Doc squirts him again.

"Bad answer. What did you *do* to him, RK?"

"Fine." RK stares at him, brushing hair out of his face. He looks serious, pained even. *"Look. I'm trying to get him back, Doc. But he's fighting me every step of the way."*

“I didn’t ask why he’s not here, though it’s great to know you’re trying to get him back.” Doc leans forward. “What I asked you is, again, *what did you do to him?*”

*“I haven’t done anything -- put that squirt bottle **down** -- I haven’t done anything but possess him and lead his soul back to the controls.”* RK throws his hands up in the air. *“He’s put himself behind the curtain because he thinks I’m out to get him. My only crime is the original contract I made with him, doctor.”*

“That’s not the full truth.”

“That’s the most truth I can give you,” RK says, fixing Doc with a steely glare. *“If I could have some information in return, Doc, I’d be able to help you. No one’s told me how he lost his limbs, for example. That certainly didn’t happen in the battle of Dogwarts.”*

Doc puts the spray bottle back on the workbench. “I don’t know how he lost his limbs either. Renbob might, but he certainly hasn’t told me about it other than the fact that lava was apparently involved somehow.” His hand hasn’t left the bottle; he uses one finger to tilt it back and forth idly. “My turn. Ren thinks you tricked him into something, or lied about the terms of the contract you made. And I don’t think he was *just* talking about you being here, right now. Any idea what else he could mean?”

“I-” RK seems to genuinely falter. *“I’m not sure. Why **would** he think that? I suppose if he hadn’t watched past when I took control of his body originally, but I’m **sure** he was still paying attention.”*

“That’s a worrying sentence and I’m going to need you to elaborate.”

RK groans, pulling the pillow out from behind him and throwing it over his head instead, ears pressing flat against his head. Doc waits for him impatiently, partly wondering if he’s hiding his face so Doc can’t spray him. It’s an unpleasant few minutes before RK is willing to lower the pillow, propping his chin on top of it.

“You always ask the questions that make me sound evil, doctor.”

“I hardly ask any questions, so stop complaining, and start answering.” Doc starts to raise the bottle again.

“Backseat possession, I think is the best way to describe it. I get the driver’s seat, and he gets to look and maybe yell at me, if he wants to,” RK says. *“It’s not a perfect analogy, nothing is, but the point is I had full control and he had the option of opinion. He never said anything, but I thought he was at least watching. Maybe not. Maybe he locked himself in the trunk.”*

Doc raises a brow. “If I’m using your metaphor right here, you stole his car, locked him in the trunk, and wondered why he sees you as a bad guy?”

RK rolls his eyes. *“No. If the ferryman -- if Renbob locked us both in this part of the cabin and wouldn’t let us up near the front of the van, that’s different from me locking you in a closet.”*

“It’s still pretty messed-up.”

RK sighs. *“He agreed to the contract. He knew he was giving his body over, Doc. I did not push him. He found and followed the ritual himself. He paid the cost himself. He and the Hand both knew what they were summoning. If anything, you could say he handed me the keys to the vehicle himself.”*

Doc lowers the bottle. Rubs the bruise on his neck again. “Why’d he do it, RK? Why would he do something like that? Ren’s got a little bit of a track record for going over the top, but handing his body over to a blood god?”

“He seemed convinced it was the only way,” RK says, his voice soft. *“Death game magic or his own mind, I couldn’t tell you.”*

“And the Hand didn’t have any common sense? Yeah, seems like a good person for second in command,” Doc snaps, and the temperature plummets. RK is glaring at him, claws digging into the pillow and tearing the fabric.

“Watch your mouth, doctor,” he snarls. *“Insults against myself I can handle, but I will tear your throat out with my damn **teeth** if you say another word against our Hand.”*

Doc backs up. The situation is far from RK finding out he wasn’t dead, but there is much more danger here, the god’s eyes locked onto him in a way that makes Doc truly understand how it feels to be prey. This is no mere chill up his spine -- every bone in his body has turned to ice.

“I’m sorry,” he breathes, watching RK’s shadow twist into something very much *not* Ren-shaped. “I’m frustrated, but I shouldn’t have insulted the Hand.”

RK snarls again, flashing sharp teeth, but the shadow on the wall stops distorting quite as harshly. *“And another Ethoslab apology saves your skin.”*

“...Yeah. Don’t tell him that though. He’ll never let me live it down if he knew I’d actually used his advice.” Doc slumps against his chair, pushing the spray bottle of rubbing alcohol aside. Not like it would do much good if he’s literally frozen to the spot. “You really care about the Hand a lot, don’t you?”

RK seems to consider his words. There’s still something larger about him, something more inhuman than he’s ever been. Doc waits for him to speak, barely breathing.

“Yes. I do.” For a while, it seems like he’s not going to say anything else, and then he looks away, out towards the darkness of space. *“I wish he were here. He’d know what to do. I’m sure of it.”*

Doc nods. His hand absently finds the bruise on his neck once more, and RK seems to see it for the first time, a dark green splotch running in a semicircle around his neck, too even to have been made by anything natural and too jagged to be anything but an injury.

“Is that -- did Ren do that?” RK motions towards Doc’s neck, eyes wide. *“Is that how freaked out he is?”*

Doc looks away, refusing to meet the Red King’s eyes. “Ah, no. Ren didn’t do this. An accident happened. I’m all good, so don’t worry.”

“An accident,” RK laughs, but the sound is bitter and cold. His shadow flickers again. *“It looks like someone tried to **strangle** you, doctor. I wouldn’t call that an accident.”*

For the first time, Doc wonders if he’s being messed with. He hasn’t been able to stop thinking about how he got the bruise for a full two days, has worried that it would be the last memento he had of either RK *or* Ren. And now RK doesn’t remember causing it.

Doc pops up the collar on his lab coat, pulling it over the bruise. “It’s fine. Really.”

*“It is absolutely **not** fine,”* RK says, shadow now fully warping around him again, breath coming

out as ice crystals, frost radiating from where he's sitting. *"If he hurt you-*"

"-It's not from Ren," Doc says, putting a hand over his popped collar and holding it there. *"It's from two days ago. Before Ren woke up. It was an accident."*

RK pauses. Doc can see the wheels turning, can see the exact second it all clicks into place. *"It was an accident,"* he repeats, softer this time. *"And I don't hold accidents against people."*

RK takes a sharp breath. *"We match now,"* he mutters, bringing a hand to his own throat. He looks up at Doc, blood red eyes *burning* with guilt. *"That's not something to be proud of."*

His shadow rises as he pushes away from Doc, curling in on himself as his breathing becomes panicked, ice hanging in the air around him, shielding, protecting him from some unseen danger. The walls of the van seem to twist inwards, centered on RK as the god tries to distance himself as far away as he can from Doc.

Doc reaches out for his friend, and their shadows cross.

Guilt. He is drowning in it, the feeling pushing inwards and trying to crush his heart between unforgiving fingers.

Doc snaps his hand back, and the crushing feeling subsides. He takes a deep breath in and steadies himself. Looks over at the Red King again.

He can't let RK do this to himself. He reaches out once more, braced for that feeling this time. Stands up from his chair, holding his hand out still, and approaches step by step even as ice radiates outward in waves and his chest feels like it's going to be crushed by more guilt than it should be humanly possible to bear.

He crosses RK's shadow again, the shape ever changing as it lunges for his fingers.

This is not an accident. Accidents happen out of ignorance, and he willingly chose to put that bruise there, to make a forever lasting mark on Doc. Doc, his friend, who has not pushed, who has stood firm against the wrath of a god, who looks at him like the blood in his title is for loyalty and not death.

He has hurt his friend, and his friend thinks it's a sign of trust. What a tragedy of a god he is.

"Hang on," Doc mutters, half to himself and half to RK, "hang on." It's hard to think with this much pressure and this much of an outside sway, but it's at least easy to tell that the thoughts aren't his own when they're in an accent he can't quite place. He approaches further, slowly, carefully, until he's as close to RK as he can manage in the cold.

He reaches out again and grabs his hand. Curles his fingers around RK's arm, even as ice climbs up his own arm and through his labcoat, starts to feel like frostbite pressing in around him. But he's still breathing normally, so he'll take it.

Come on, he thinks. Come on. We can make it out of this.

The cold and shadows curl around him, trying to take him with them. *Five dead. Five dead, and he will make it six, he will drag everyone who gets close to him down, his battlefields are frozen over with the blood of his friends. You cannot trust him. War god. Blood god. Be scared.*

I am scared, Doc admits to his thoughts. But you're coming out of this with me, RK. If I'm worth it, then you are too. Your Hand would say the same, I think.

He grips RK's hand tighter before he loses feeling in his fingers. *Besides, five people dead? What kind of blood god are you, man? Those are weak numbers.*

"I was supposed to keep them safe," RK whispers, and the pressure around them subsides as the shadows stop flickering as harshly. *"I was supposed to protect them. I doomed all of them. I broke my promise to Ren."*

Doc is prepared to have to force his words out, but they come through smoothly, barely even shaky from the cold. "But you tried, didn't you. You tried, even though it was to the last man standing, you tried to have everyone make it."

"I-"

"He asked you for the impossible, RK, and it sounds like you nearly got it for him anyway."

A beat of silence. The temperature rises.

RK sits up slowly, still clutching Doc's arm for support as the ice slowly melts and the frost slowly recedes. He gives Doc a weak, shaky smile. *"Whatever happened to making me sound evil, doctor?"*

Doc snorts. "Well, for starters, *I'm* the megalomaniac around here-"

"-You, doctor, have not eaten in two days if I know you well enough. You are not a megalomaniac. You need lunch."

He lets go of RK's hand, rolls his eyes. "And just like that, he's back to being ominous at me in order to get me to eat food. Some things never change."

Interlude

Chapter Summary

RK and Doc eat breakfast. No, seriously, that's the chapter.

Chapter Notes

(haha, fluff time -solar) (fluff time! -fluffy)

“You really know what you’re doing, Doctor?”

“No, I just make everything up and your arm runs on imagination,” Doc says, glaring up at RK. “Pull your hair back if you’re gonna watch me slide your leg on, I can’t see otherwise. Better yet, let’s cut it.”

“I don’t remember you being this stressed when attaching my arm,” RK leans back, sweeping up his hair into a ponytail. *“Tense? Yes. Pissy? No.”*

“I can build prosthetic arms in my sleep.” Doc slides the brace over RK’s thigh, adjusting the straps to make sure it stays in place. “Legs? I could build one out of toothpicks and it would be the same quality.”

“You must be very good at toothpick art.”

Doc snorts. “Sure. That’s one interpretation of that sentence. Trust you to have the most charitable view of me imaginable.”

“The crossing of shadows goes two ways, doctor.” RK scoots to sit at the edge of the bed. *“I have full faith in you.”*

He takes a deep breath in. “Right. That... happened.” He doesn’t ask, on account of he truly *does not* want to ask. Better to let it lie. He adjusts the straps one more time, tests to make sure they won’t strain too much under RK’s weight. “Any luck finding Ren yet? Maybe you two can sort out some kind of schedule?”

RK motions for Doc to stand up, grabbing onto his arm and pulling himself up into a standing position. Doc’s hands hover over his shoulders, ready to grab him if he falls, but RK swats him away, testing out the leg in simple fashion.

*“None. I can still feel him, but it’s like he doesn’t want to be found. Or, based on what you said, doesn’t think he **can** be found.”* RK shifts his weight between each leg. *“Some cushioning between the bottom of my leg and the brace would be nice. Otherwise I think it might chafe.”*

Doc breathes out. Pulls out the plans for the brace and checks for where he’ll be able to apply fabric. “Hm. Yeah, there should be enough room to put material there, I’ll just have to make sure

it's something that can stay long-term. Prosthetics get weird when you combine them with respawn."

"Is that so?" RK looks back over at him curiously.

"Yep," Doc says, not elaborating to spare RK the whole tangent. He checks the plans, then rummages through the workbench again to find padding that'll work properly. "Alright, let me see that leg again."

RK sits back down, sticking out his leg for Doc to unstrap and slide off again, taking the padding when it's handed to him. Doc grabs his glue, carefully applying it to the inside edges of the brace. The padding switches hands again, and Doc sets it aside to dry, looking at RK with a shrug.

"Maybe two minutes until that's ready to go again."

"I'm surprised that wasn't followed up by 'two minutes where you could look for Ren.'" RK pokes Doc in the chest. *"Thank you for not treating me like a friend detector."*

Doc snorts. "Maybe your lectures about things needing time to work are starting to sink in." That's hardly what it is, though. It's more that he doesn't really want RK to vanish completely. The guy's spooky, sure, but after whatever *that* was yesterday... he can't really distrust him. Not completely.

Even before he understood what was going on with RK, he hadn't wanted to treat the guy like a temporary Ren stand-in. And despite everything, that's still how he feels. RK's his own person. That's all there is to it.

Doc stands up in order to get himself away from the leg before he starts tinkering with it again, and heads over to the kitchenette. Starts looking through the cabinets, more for something to *do* and less for something to *eat*. A familiar prickle at the back of his neck tells him that RK's watching him rummage.

"You could always go for cereal. Heard that's filling."

Doc makes an impolite gesture behind his back, listening to RK laugh as he grabs a box of premixed ingredients, setting it on the counter before he checks the mini fridge. Eggs and milk are set next to the box a few seconds later, and Doc grins as he checks the bottom cabinets and finds *exactly* what he's looking for.

"Waffles sound like something you would like?" He pats the waffle iron as he sets it down on the counter, unplugging the toaster and moving it to the side. "I doubt you've had them, if you never had coffee before this."

"I haven't. Heard of them before, though I didn't realize they were food."

Doc thinks for a few seconds, trying to figure out how that could have come up. He hits on it eventually. "Oh! Someone must've insulted Grian's face around you. It's a common joke." He waits to see how the offhand comment will go over, crossing his fingers for good luck around the mixing bowl he's pulled out. "It's either 'the back of your head looks like a waffle' or telling him he looks like a cod, in my experience."

A slight chill in the room. Nothing *too* bad, though.

"Neither of those are my favorite insults, though," Doc continues, cracking the two eggs into the bowl and setting the eggshells aside. "Cleo once told him he looked like a twelve year old playing dress up, and I haven't stopped laughing since."

RK takes a breath, and the chill vanishes. “She did like to insult everyone.”

“She does,” Doc says. “You won’t be spared once we get to season 8. Neither will I, actually.” He pauses, feeling out the chill in the air. “Okay, bad wording. The point is she has a sharp tongue and the only thing standing between us and verbal oblivion is Joe.”

No recognition. Well, that’s about what he’d expected. Doc keeps stirring the eggs as he waits for some sort of response, gets none, and decides to change the subject. “Forgot a Grian insult. *Pesky bird* is the most common one. Him and his whole thing with -- chickens, parrots, you name it. The amount of times I had to clean up my base after a fly-by egging, you’d think his Poultry Man persona was a supervillain.”

“...*He can fly?*”

Doc frowns. Adds the milk and keeps stirring. “I mean, yeah. He’s the best damn elytra user out of the entire whitelist, if I’m being honest -- don’t tell him I said that, though, I don’t want his cod head getting any bigger.”

“*Elytra*,” RK repeats, and Doc can hear him grabbing the leg again, metal tapping against metal. “*He’s a beetle? Is that the same of everyone else where we’re going?*”

Doc pauses, holding the boxed waffle mix in one hand as he turns to look at RK. “You don’t know what an elytra is?”

“*I just said -- beetle wings. Elytra is what you call beetle wings.*”

“Not to us,” Doc says, and turns back to his mixing bowl, pulling the bag open and pouring the waffle mix in. “Well, kinda. They’re wings that *we* wear, and we use them to fly around our worlds. I guess it would make sense a hardcore world didn’t have them, but you’ve still never heard of them?”

RK tightens the straps again. “*Never. But flying sounds... well, it sounds interesting, to say the least.*”

“Well then. If you decide to stick around when we get to season eight, I’ll have to show you how to use one. Deal?” He keeps stirring the waffle mix. Sticks his hand over the iron to check and see if it’s heated up yet (it has), puts in nonstick spray, and goes back to stirring. He’s now officially starting to get hungry.

Doc waits for a response as he pours in the first batch of waffle batter and closes the iron, wondering why it’s taking so long for RK to think on it. He drums his fingers against the countertop, measuring time.

When RK’s answer comes, it is quiet. “*You want to keep me around?*”

Doc turns to him with a raised brow -- RK is standing, carefully leaning against the wall as he tests out the leg, refusing to meet Doc’s eyes. “Sorry?”

“*You’d want to keep me around. After all of this.*”

“Course I do.” Doc looks back at the waffle iron, watching some batter leak out of the side and drop onto the counter. “We’re friends now. Can’t get rid of me even if you wanted to.”

The temperature drops for a half second before it rises again, RK making a pained sort of noise. “*That’s not -- Doc. You barely know me.*”

Open the iron. Pull the waffle out and set it on a plate. Pour more batter in. Close the iron. Doc quietly follows the motions, trying to think of a good enough answer for RK, one that soothes the tone of grief in his voice.

“I don’t,” he finally says, ducking into the fridge to pull out maple syrup and powdered sugar. “But I think I’d like to.” He picks out another plate to put the second waffle on and really... deliberates on if he wants to say this next part.

He’s about to decide not to, and then RK gives him a look. *“There’s more, isn’t there.”*

“I have a feeling that you might not have a choice but to stick around in some capacity,” Doc admits, sliding the first waffle across the table to RK and gesturing vaguely at the maple syrup. “If I understand the contract in the way you’ve hinted at it, he’s given you a set of keys to the vehicle, and because of how you finagled the contract, you’re *probably* stuck with that set of keys now.”

RK grabs the bottle of maple syrup, turning it over to pour a tiny amount on his finger and taste it. *“That’s unfortunately true. Neither of us can break the bargain, and no one can break the bargain for us without one of us turning out dead.”* He spoons an ungodly amount of powdered sugar on top of his syruped waffle, grinning at his sugar monstrosity and then at Doc. *“Well, if I keep getting treated like this, I don’t mind being forced to stick around.”*

Doc hands him a fork. “And you can’t... I don’t know, split off? Go back to your own body while still protecting him?”

“I don’t have my own body to go back to, doctor.”

“Then where were you before Ren summoned you?” Doc pulls another waffle out of the iron, setting it aside for RK. “Surely this isn’t the first time you’ve been summoned.”

RK pauses, fork hovering over the plate. His frown is... tired. A little bit pained. *“It’s not. But it’s the first time I’ve kept someone alive.”*

“Really.” Doc raises an eyebrow, picks up the maple syrup to pour some over his own waffle, and sticks a fork in it. “You certainly could have fooled me.”

RK pulls off a piece of waffle, powdered sugar dusting the plate below as he lifts it to his mouth. *“Think about the kind of people who would call on a war god, doctor. I’ve been called on for things like legendary weapons. Armies that spring from the ground. The opposing general dropping dead. Baseless violence.”*

Doc motions for him to go on, fork flicking syrup over the table.

“I’ve never had someone summon me to protect something,” RK says quietly, taking another bite of waffle. *“That’s what struck me about Ren. He truly cared about Dogwarts and the Red Army. He was a second thought to himself.”*

Doc sighs, and he can tell RK’s caught on to his shift in mood just slightly. A little more low-key. A little more melancholy. “Yeah. Yeah, that’s Ren for you.” He takes a bite of his own waffle, finally -- it’s a little lukewarm, but it tastes just fine. “And that’s why you bent the terms of the contract. You got attached.”

RK nods silently. Eats more of his waffle. They both just... sit there in silence, or rather RK sits there and Doc leans against the counter and gets himself a second waffle.

“...You never answered my question,” Doc says carefully. “Where were you before Ren

summoned you?"

RK looks back down at his empty plate, scooping up powdered sugar onto his fork and eating it. His eyes take on that familiar faraway gleam, but now there's a haunted quality to them as well, a chill that settles in the room and beneath Doc's skin.

"I don't know," he eventually says. *"Somewhere grey."*

Somewhere Grey

Chapter Summary

Ren finds himself back on the altar.

Chapter Notes

(welp, hope you enjoyed the fluff while it lasted. we've got places to go now. buckle up. -solar)

Mumbo K. Jumbo had once proposed a very interesting theory about the void. He reckoned that it wasn't, in fact, endless, and that if a player could fall for long enough without dying, they would end up in a place Mr. Jumbo referred to as the 'between'. His theory was that the 'between' was the space that connected all worlds, single or multiplayer, and that it was the same place they went to when they traveled between worlds. His reasoning held the following points: 1) The void is one of the few things every world has in common, located right below the bedrock. 2) There was an unidentifiable space every player went to when moving between worlds. 3) The only absolute way out of a world was under player control, and the only death that couldn't be thwarted with items or logic was the void.

Sure, this theory might've been proposed when Mumbo mistook redstone for strawberry lemonade powder and threw it up at 4 AM when Ren came to check on him, but he was starting to think Mumbo might've hit on something in his delirium.

So maybe he's in the void. Maybe he's in the void forever, wandering a black-grey expanse as the Red King uses his body for the rest of all time. What a bum deal.

Ren sits down on the nonexistent ground and flips the bird at the nonexistent ceiling. At the very least it's something to do. He takes a deep breath in. Looks around, expecting to see nothing -- and his eyes catch on something. Stone bricks, floating in the nothingness.

He's on his feet before he can have a second thought -- there is something else in the grey other than him. There is something new here, some point of reference, some solid ground that he can stand on. His feet hit against nothing, and then stone, and he trips over stone stairs and sprawls across the platform that has appeared.

The stones are carved. The stones are bloodied.

Ren scrambles to his knees, hands already completely red. The blood is cold, almost frozen, but it still drips down his wrists and arms. Frost builds at the edges of the platform. He frantically wipes his hands clean as fast as he possibly can, holds them over his throat like it'll do him much good.

He's back on the altar, and it is winter, and he is kneeling, and all of this is *wrong*. The Hand -- Martyn -- isn't here anymore. He shouldn't be back. There shouldn't be anything *in* the void in the first place.

A shadow falls over him. He doesn't look up. He knows exactly what he will see if he does.

"Hello, Rendog."

It's his own voice, twisted by some archaic accent he can't quite place, distorted by cold power. Ren grits his teeth and does not look up at the Red King. Not even for a heartbeat.

"You and the doctor both have miserable dreams," the Red King continues, and Ren can hear the sound of footsteps -- he's back on the altar, and it is winter, and the sun hangs low and cold in the sky, stretching their shadows across the stones like they will be next to be sacrificed. *"Though I suppose it isn't really a dream for you. Mirages, tricks of your mind in this dead space."*

"Stay out of Doc's dreams." Ren drags his hands down from his throat to his chest, hugging himself as the frost grows closer. *"Stay out of his mind. He hasn't made a deal with you."*

"I don't need a deal to save him from his nightmares." The Red King laughs, and the sound cuts through Ren. *"The bloody crown doesn't suit him, though. Not like it suits you."*

If it was possible for Ren's blood to run any colder, it would. This can't be happening. He doesn't want it to be happening. There's nothing to stop it from happening. *"Stay away from him,"* Ren repeats, eyes still locked onto the stone between the two of them. *"Stay away from Doc, you bastard. He wasn't part of our bargain. Leave him alone."*

The Red King makes a soft *tsk* noise. *"Ren, Ren. I am not here to discuss the doctor. We are here to discuss **your** contract."*

"I don't have anything left to give you," Ren says, and it's the honest truth. *"Leave me alone. Leave me to rot, Red King. You've had your fun."*

It squats down next to him. He can't move, can't flinch away. *"Look at me,"* it says, and a single cold claw tilts his chin upwards. He'd squeeze his eyes shut in defiance if not for the fact that he can't seem to get his body to obey his thoughts.

The Red King looks... different, somehow. He can't put his finger on how -- it's still got sharp teeth and glinting red eyes, still looks like him (including prosthetic limbs, now), still has a grey half-cloak frozen over with frost, is still stained with blood that drips over its face from a dully glinting crown. Everything looks the same.

Something is different about it, though. And that does nothing to settle Ren's nerves. The Red King has *changed* since the last time they spoke. He doesn't know what it's capable of anymore.

"Why are you keeping me here?" Ren says, his voice quiet in the expanse of nothing. *"The bargain's over. I'm dead."*

"Who said death was the end of the bargain, Rendog?" It snorts, tilting Ren's head from side to side, looking over his face. *"Even if you were dead, we wouldn't be over. But you aren't dead, and your body is still mine to use as I see fit."*

Ren can't move. He is frozen, in both ways, frost patterns creeping across his face from where the Red King is touching him, the blood on his hands turned to red ice and cutting off feeling. He isn't dead. *He's not dead*, and it's a source he can trust, ironically, because he knows the Red King wouldn't lie about that, wouldn't miss the opportunity to mock him.

"But since your body is mine to use, I get to do this." The Red King smiles at him like they're friends, not two spirits bound by blood. *"**Stand up, Rendog.**"*

He does. He hates every second of it, as the Red King steps away from him and his body moves from kneeling to standing, evenly and smoothly even though he should be shaking like a leaf right now. Its smile only broadens, teeth sharp and glinting.

It puts a hand on his shoulder. *“There you are. Back on your feet.”*

Ren wishes it would just finish him off already. He can't say it out loud, his voice is still frozen in his throat, but he's pretty sure that the Red King can tell. It must find this *fun*, of course. A predator tormenting its prey just before their bitter end. Cat and mouse.

“I don't do that anymore,” it says softly, squeezing his shoulder. It hasn't taken its gaze off of him this whole time, hasn't given him a second of reprieve.

He surprises himself. His claws, iced over and red, curl into fists before they freeze again. The Red King raises a brow, placing its other hand on his shoulder as well, dusting off imaginary bits of lint from the void.

*“You really hate me that much? Rendog -- Ren -- with the gift I'm about to give you, you should be **thanking me.**”* It tilts its head back, staring up into the grey with that same sharp smile. *“Take a guess, Ren. Guess what I have to give you.”*

A sweet death. A quick snap between breaths, sending him into the afterlife.

The Red King sighs, and the stones start to shimmer beneath their feet. *“Not quite. Death isn't your reward,”* it says, and looks back down at Ren. Pulls him closer, into what could almost be a hug. Its words leave a faint cloud of breath behind, a cold feeling at the back of his neck. *“No. **Wake up, Ren.** Your king commands you.”*

The grey flickers around him, solidifying into colors and shapes, the Red King vanishing into a cloud of mist as Ren's eyes snap open.

Ren sits up, runs his fingers through his hair. Doc is staring at him from the edge of the bed, eyes wide and searching and *hopeful*, and Ren grins at him.

None of this, however, is under Ren's own power.

“He's here,” the Red King informs Doc, positively *beaming* with pride that Ren can feel swelling in his chest like it's his own. *“Passenger's seat, to use our imperfect metaphor.”*

Doc grabs for Ren's -- the Red King's hands, and Ren can feel the warmth of his friend's hands over his own, can feel himself take a deep breath in without controlling the action.

“Hey Ren,” Doc says, looking up at them. He is smiling too. “I think I win this argument, dude.”

Negotiations

Chapter Summary

RK and Doc talk things out over coffee.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“I believe the exact words were, ‘Doc, you absolute moron, what the freak did you do?’” RK informs Doc over their cup of coffee. RK also has a glass of water, apparently to soothe Ren when the taste of caffeine gets to be too much. *“He hasn’t said much else. It’s mostly emotions, at this point. Oh -- there’s the hatred.”*

Doc has to stifle his snort into his mug. “That wasn’t there before?”

“Well it was, but it’s since been overlaid by fear, exasperation, disgust, and absolute joy when I spilled the coffee on my shirt. A real sadist, this guy.”

“Be nice to RK, Ren,” Doc says, raising his brow at RK’s instant laugh. “Did he say something?”

“No,” RK laughs, a pleasant chill spreading around the room. *“No, you just sound -- you sound like a teacher, or a dad. ‘Be nice to the blood god or you don’t get waffles.’”*

“Fortunately for you, I am neither of those things.” Doc takes a sip of his own coffee. Considers elaborating, then realizes he has no idea where to go with the conversation. “But, hey, if I was being possessed, I’d *also* find it really funny if the guy possessing my body didn’t know how to drink coffee.”

RK huffs, grabbing his coffee cup and glaring at Doc. He opens his mouth, surely to retort with something witty, but is promptly distracted by spilling coffee on the table.

Doc is laughing as he passes a towel.

Sooner rather than later, RK is sitting on the bed again, Doc in his workbench chair facing him. He likes to think he’s getting better at reading RK, and the Red King almost looks *nervous* as they approach the topic neither of them want to talk about, for very different reasons. Frost is slowly creeping around the folds of the blankets.

“...So.” Doc is first to speak. “You two need to come to an arrangement.”

RK shakes his head slowly. *“I know. But Ren is... he thinks I’m up to something.”*

“He doesn’t trust my word on this?”

RK stiffens briefly. *“Ah -- sorry, that would be him screaming at me again. He’s quite sure that I’ve done something to you, and I don’t really know how to convince him otherwise.”*

Doc leans back in his chair, propping his legs up on the end of the bed, a faint frown on his face. He idly plays with his labcoat, rubbing the material between his fingers as he looks back over at

RK, trying to think of how to convince Ren.

“I’m not a walking freezer? I feel like that’s a good giveaway to when you’re possessing someone, it’s hard to hide.”

“Really?” RK stares at him. *“Out of all the traits, that’s what you go for? Not red eyes, or claws, or grey skin?”*

Doc shrugs, dropping the edge of his labcoat to gesture vaguely at himself. “Red cybernetic. Part creeper. Metal plates. You could easily hide some of your more physical traits if you were possessing me, or at least had a little influence.”

RK nods slowly. Closes his eyes and draws in a long, frustrated breath as Ren presumably responds. He seems pained by whatever’s been said, whatever Doc can’t hear.

Doc waits. The silence is tense and awkward.

“...He says that rules out possession, yes, but not... other things. Ren thinks --” another several seconds of silence. The temperature wavers.

RK taps the side of his neck, hands shaking slightly. *“He doesn’t think that was an accident. He assumes the worst of our interactions thus far, I’m afraid.”*

“And you can’t show him, I don’t know, your memories or something?” Doc asks. He doesn’t understand how this possession thing works still, he thinks it’s a fair question, but RK’s face says otherwise.

“I’m not a mindreader, doctor. Surface level emotions, whatever he chooses to tell or show me, and it’s the same the other way around. Neither of us can force anything on each other -- Ren, that’s your body, not your mind, I don’t control your thoughts too.”

“And he doesn’t --”

RK holds up his hand, stopping Doc from continuing the sentence. *“He’s here, Doc. You don’t need to direct every question through me.”*

Doc bites his lip, glancing off towards the door to the driver’s cabin. He’s not good at emotions. He’s not good at any of this, not like Ren is (was?), and he’s struggling to wrap his mind around any information.

“...Okay,” he says slowly. “Ren, you don’t think I would know how to stand up against a god, if I was being threatened?”

RK pauses, and then deflates, shoulders sagging. *“His exact words were ‘not if there’s a hostage situation involved.’ And then some more self-defeating nonsense that I will not repeat for everyone’s sake.”* Doc has never seen a more dejected usage of finger quotes in his life.

He manages to bite back a “look what you did, Ren, you’re making him sad” and rubs the bridge of his nose. “Ren. I get where you’re coming from, dude. But I’m pretty sure that in terms of threats being exchanged, I’m usually the one threatening RK whenever things are serious.”

“He says he won’t believe you unless you tell him where the mark on your neck came from,” RK says, volume barely above a strangled whisper, and Doc wishes he could shake Ren by the shoulders and tell him to knock it off.

Doc closes his eyes. Takes a few seconds to figure out wording. “RK thought he was dead too, Ren. And I think he assumed I was half trying to replace the Hand, half taking him to some sort of hellish afterlife. I’d just mentioned I was --” he glances over at RK, braces himself for the inevitable chill “-- friends with Scar, on top of everything else going on. Which, I don’t know much about Third Life, but it really seems like if that’s your first experience with Scar, you’re going to be a little wary of someone who says they’re friends with him.”

He pauses. Makes eye contact with RK. “I don’t think he meant to attack me. I think he wanted to make sure I couldn’t attack *him*.”

RK holds his gaze, though Doc gets the feeling it’s more for Ren’s sake and he wants to turn away. His claws curl over the blankets, pulling them closer and poking holes in the fabric as he listens to whatever Ren has to say, and Doc crosses his arms as he waits.

The van drops a few degrees. RK takes a sharp breath, still staring at Doc, eyes now fixed on the bruise on his neck. Doc pulls the collar of his labcoat away, showing the darkened skin to his friends.

“It doesn’t hurt,” he says calmly. “It was a misunderstanding and an accident, Ren. He was horrified the second he realized he’d hurt me.”

“He says it still happened when it shouldn’t have.”

“Your -- *our* -- friends sometimes cross the line without meaning to.” Doc kicks his legs off the bed and stands, the nervous and frustrated energy running through his body starting to spill over. “You gonna hold it against any of us if we go too far? Gonna hold Grian responsible for this Third Life nonsense? Gonna make Scar pay for being on the opposite side of your war?”

RK pauses. *“The magic of the world --”*

“Right, that’s what I’m *saying*. RK says he was affected too, Ren, and I can’t think of any reason he’d *lie* about that if he was trying to intimidate me.” Doc is pacing now, trying to work out some of his excess energy. He hasn’t gotten to work on *anything* with his hands, lately, and it’s starting to get to him. “Ren, dude, c’mon. It sounds like something happened with RK that sucks. But this isn’t that. And if I can get over Grian spawn-trapping me in Demise, I think you can *try* to get along with someone who is *trying to help*.”

RK stares at him. He looks... concerned. Maybe even worried. He doesn’t say anything, and judging by the blank look on his face, Ren’s not saying anything either.

“I trust him,” Doc says, feeling somewhat like a petulant child as he crosses his arms and stares at RK. “And I hope you trust me, dude.”

The silence in the van isn’t bad. It’s a thoughtful silence, maybe a worried one, but not tense or cold. Doc stays standing, looking down at RK, refusing to back down from him or Ren. He’s said his piece, and meant every word. If Ren doesn’t want to trust RK, Doc is going to figure out a way to project his mind into the Ren-Bod, just to smack his friend.

...He might need to work on his anger issues, but he still stands by everything.

It’s a while before RK says anything, obviously hesitant to share either Ren’s words or his own.

“For once, Ren and I are in agreement,” he says carefully. *“You are far too trusting of me.”*

Doc doesn’t have a response to that. He can tell that his face has fallen with the rest of his mood,

but he's past the point of bothering with masking his emotions at this point. He sits back down. Puts his hands in his pockets and stares at the table for a bit.

"Ren says you weren't supposed to take it personally, it's just that he remembers the nonsense with Grimdog and doesn't want you repeating it. Whoever 'Grimdog' is."

Doc snorts, glad for the opportunity to change the subject matter. "Okay, now hang on, if we want to talk entities intimidating people into *contracts*, Grimdog *literally* said he'd kill me if I didn't harvest someone's soul for him. I don't think that's a fair comparison."

"He did what?" RK raises an eyebrow. His claws dig into the table ever-so-slightly.

Doc waves his hand. "Another death game, another time Ren got possessed. I got someone who wasn't in the game though, and it still fulfilled the bargain. Grimdog is gone now, though, off doing... I don't know. Whatever things that possess Ren do."

"We'll be having a talk about your death bargain later -- are possessions a common occurrence?"

"Not quite, and not to your extent. I don't know how many are possessions and how many are just," Doc sighs, batting RK's hand away from damaging the table further. "Really weird cousins that are around when Ren isn't. Most of them seem to be around for jokes."

RK tilts his head, staring at Doc. *"I'm not quite sure how to respond to that. Rendog seems smug that you can't tell, however."*

Doc scowls at them. "As long as Tomato Yoshi is a relative and *not* a possession, I don't mind not being able to tell the rest."

"He says 'no comment.' Make of that what you will."

"Right. Great. Cool." There's not much else to say. Doc drums his fingers quietly against the table and tries not to think about the conversation they'd been having before the tangent. It doesn't really work, but he also can't really come up with anything new to add to the conversation.

There is ice on his arm. Doc rubs at it, glancing at RK, who's taken on a troubled expression.

"It's strange," he says, when he notices Doc looking at him. *"Our friendship has been formed from your grief and my guilt. And now that the object of those feelings is here, is **alive**, I almost don't know what to talk to you about. It's like we're strangers again, doctor."*

That's... a very spot on guess to how Doc is feeling. Ren has been the only topic the two of them have managed to carry a good conversation about, and even though he considers RK a friend, he can't think of another thing to say to him to break this awkward silence.

In his defense, it'd be a lot easier if he wasn't also worrying about Ren and the fact that, as far as he can tell, the guy is *pissed*. Which is not something he's used to; usually *he's* the angry one and Ren's trying to talk him down. It hasn't been this way since...

...Well, since they were last on opposite sides. But it's been a while. He puts it from his mind -- it's been years, after all -- and tries to come up with something to say in response.

"I'm not sure what to say, either. I've been focused on work most of the time we've been talking, and now that it's done I don't really have anything else to do with my time." It's not really a full response, but it's the answer he's most comfortable with giving to both Ren and RK.

RK hums, and tilts his head as he presumably listens to whatever Ren has to say. Doc isn't expecting him to laugh -- and by the looks of it, neither is RK, the king holding a hand over his mouth as his eyes shine with mirth.

Doc leans forward. "What'd he say?"

RK slowly lowers his hand from his mouth, giving Doc a little grin that looks very self-satisfied.

"Apparently, doctor, he wants me to ask your favorite color."

Doc blinks. "Really?"

RK rolls his eyes. *"Well, no, his specific words were 'why don't you just start asking nice-to-meet-you questions about each other and bond over your favorite colors, if you're going to be all buddy-buddy about this,' but I think it sounds like a good idea anyway."*

Doc sighs, half amused and half tired, and rubs the side of his neck again. "Okay, sure, why not?" He tilts his head back up towards RK again. Smiles a bit sheepishly. "I'm particularly a fan of red."

Chapter End Notes

(i'm sure this is fine. i'm sure everything here is fine. look it's wholesome what could possibly go wrong.
tomorrow. a ruby tuesday.
see you then! -solar)
(im sure there are no missed points here. -fluffy)

Boiling Point

Chapter Summary

The only thing more dangerous than an angry animal is a scared one.

Chapter Notes

(a ruby tuesday. you were warned. -solar)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Doc finally knows what it sounds like when someone screams in their sleep.

It's a half-strangled yell that snaps him away from his own rest, sending him scrambling off the couch and onto the ground, staring at the door to the main cabin as his mind tries to catch up, tries to process the sound he has just heard.

He can hear metal hitting against metal, and oddly enough, it's the first thing he physically reacts to, still processing the scream as he grabs for the door and throws it open. He sees blankets still falling to the ground. Coffee dripping down the side of the counter from where the pot has been overturned. Just a flash of red and grey before the bathroom door slams shut, and Doc is left to stare at the mess.

...He closes the door behind him. Takes a deep breath in, then grabs some paper towels and starts wiping up the coffee while he wakes up fully. It takes about two minutes, and by the time he's done the worry has fully set in.

He should've been there. He eyes the uncomfortable couch near his workbench and wonders if being in closer proximity to Ren and/or RK is worth the back pain. It might be, if this sort of thing is going to happen. He puts the mostly-empty coffee pot back, soaks up the stain on the carpet as best he can with paper towels, and then sits down on the bed with a heavy sigh.

The sound of water running comes from the bathroom, steady and loud. Doc can't hear anything else from there besides that noise. It's hard to tell if it's the sink, the shower, or both of them at once. He knows there's no towel in there right now, so he grabs one from the closet and sets it outside the door in preparation, pacing the length of the room with nothing else to do.

At the fifteen minute mark, when the water is still going, Doc grits his teeth and starts to pull boxes of food, containers, and various kitchen utilities out of the cabinets, setting them on the counter and starting to reorganize. He glances at the kitchen sink when he drops a dusty bowl in it, looking between the faucet and the bathroom before flicking the water on.

It runs ice cold, even when he tries for hot water. He has a feeling he knows who's behind the bathroom door right now. Or, he starts to suspect, and then he glances over and sees steam curling out from under the door and remembers that sometimes people use all the hot water like bad roommates.

Steam. Cold fog. Could be either. Both make him uneasy.

It's maybe another half hour before the top cabinets are fully reorganized -- food to the left, dishes and tupperware in the center, cooking utensils to the right -- and the water hasn't stopped in the bathroom. Doc grabs for the fallen blankets, shaking the carpet fuzz and other lint off the cotton.

He throws the covers back onto the bed, tucking the edges and smoothing out the sheets, and grabs for the pillow to set upright when he notices the droplets of blood scattered on the fabric. A small cluster, each droplet maybe the size of a pinhead, but any blood is enough to make him worry right now.

Doc stands up straight and immediately heads over to the bathroom door. Presses his ear against it to try and make out some noise past the running water. There is none. He takes a deep breath and knocks.

"Everything alright in there?"

No response, but he'd kind of expected that. He takes a deep breath in. "I cleaned up the coffee. There's a little on the rug, but I can make a second pot no problem."

Still no response. The water keeps running, and Doc can hear it splatter against the sink and the walls of the shower. He knocks again, just once, trying to bring some confidence to his voice. "We don't have to talk about it. I just want to make sure you're safe."

He waits a few seconds, hiding his sigh of relief when he hears the squeak of the shower handle being turned, the water slowing and stopping before all that remains is the sound of the sink. He smiles at the wood, hoping the gesture can somehow pass through and to his friend, stepping back and away to give them some space.

"Have a towel out here too. Let's get you some coffee and food."

Slowly, so slowly, almost too slow, the door opens, the sink still going in the background. Doc tries his best to not rush forward when -- Ren? RK? -- comes swaying out the bathroom, leaning against the doorframe with such a *defeated* look on his face that Doc has no choice but to grab the towel himself, slinging it over the soaked tank top and rubbing at dripping hair.

"What sounds good?" Doc asks, ruffling dark hair and sending some water droplets to the ground. He's nervously rambling at this point, but he can't seem to stop. "There's some bacon in Renbob's fridge, I could make waffles again, or we could go simple with cereal if you're hungry right now. Coffee or hot chocolate?"

His friend says nothing. He just clings to the towel with sharp claws and buries his face in it, like he's trying to wipe something off. Doc watches, concerned. The air is lukewarm with steam from the shower, and he still can't quite tell who he's talking to. Whoever it is, they're not giving him any hints.

Scratch that, they're giving him one hint. The towel's not monotone and he hasn't been threatened yet, so it's still not Grimdog. Which is a relief, because even wrangling one entity has been a hassle and Doc would sooner actually die than talk about his feelings with Grimdog.

He breaks away from his own internal tangent and eyes his friend warily. The air hasn't gotten any colder. Shoulders are slumped and tired. He scrubs at his face still, like there's something stuck on.

Doc's not sure if his heart is soaring or plummeting. Flying and falling both feel so similar. "Hey,

Ren.”

There’s no verbal response. Ren just glances up at him, long enough for Doc to see solid red eyes, no gleam or light to them. Dead, if he wanted to be morbid. He doesn’t. They’re just red.

“Hot chocolate it is. And I’ll make waffles.”

He gets a nod before Ren goes back to scrubbing at his face, and Doc is sure if his skin still held any pigment it would be red and raw by now. His hair falls in his eyes as he slowly walks to the bed, and he doesn’t bother to brush it away, just lets the water drip down his face. His shirt and pants are soaked too, and Doc hesitates before ducking his head into the closet, finding a new tank top and a pair of shorts and setting them on the edge of the bed.

He pretends to not notice the way Ren is slowly shredding the towel to threads. He just turns to the kitchenette, pulls out milk, and starts heating it as he waits for the coffee to boil. Politely averts his eyes when Ren notices the clothing left out for him. Waits.

Waits longer. Ren’s changed into the tank top and is rummaging through the closet for something. Doc adds hot chocolate mix to hot milk and pours himself a cup of coffee as Ren pulls sweatpants out of the closet and puts them on instead.

And then Ren reaches for one of the blankets.

Doc doesn’t realize anything is wrong at first, assuming that the clatter he hears is just things falling over in the closet as Ren rummages around, and that the sound of metal hitting against the walls is just Ren’s arm brushing things aside.

Then there’s an all-too-familiar prickling feeling at the back of his neck, and he turns around to look at Ren.

Ren is staring at him, carrying a dark blade in his hands, and the feeling was falling all along.

“Where did you get this?” Ren asks, his voice thick with emotion. “Don’t try a half-truth here, Doc. Where did you get this sword?”

Doc grimaces. “It showed up on my desk, like the crown did. RK doesn’t know how it got here, either.” It sounds like a *lie* when he puts it that way, like a really bad story, but it’s not like he can come up with a good lie either. The most he can do is elaborate. “Look, uh, it’s in the closet because RK didn’t want to look at it either. I honestly didn’t even remember it was there.”

Ren’s metal hand curls around the hilt of the sword as he taps his claws against the scabbard. It seems very much like he’s about to draw it.

“I know -- I *know* how ridiculous that sounds, Ren, but it’s the truth. It just showed up.”

Ren flicks his wrist, and the sword comes loose of the sheath, the leather falling to the ground as Ren inspects the blade, claws dragging through the inscriptions. “Did it tell you where the blade came from?”

“No,” Doc says, pushing himself as far into the kitchenette as he can. “I just know it’s the Skizz Blade, and he was supposed to kill someone with it.” Doc bites back the other part of the sentence, the fact that RK didn’t *want* to kill someone with it, that he wanted it far away from him. Ren wouldn’t take it well, not today. He can tell.

Ren runs his thumb over the hilt inscription, where the name of the blade lies, and he takes a

shuddering breath before sinking to the ground, holding the blade close against him, the metal pressing flat against his skin.

“Martyn made this.”

It’s a name Doc has never heard before. But the raw emotion behind it, the way Ren struggles to say Martyn’s name, he knows *exactly* who that is.

“The Hand. The Hand made the blade for you.” Doc crouches down next to Ren, wary of the sword still. “Do you want to talk about it?” Ren eyes him suspiciously, and Doc backs up a bit.

“Why?” Ren says, hoarse and tired. “He’s dead. Just like everyone else. World’s gone. Sword shouldn’t even be here.”

Doc rubs his temples. “It sounds like he meant a lot to both of you, is all.”

“Is that so,” Ren says, and then he stands up. Leans against the frame of the closet, sword still drawn. Doc awkwardly gets to his feet as well, surreptitiously backing up a little further as Ren fidgets with the sword. “It *did* like Martyn, didn’t it?”

Doc doesn’t like the odd tone that has leaked into Ren’s voice, but he still nods. “Yeah. First thing he asked me. ‘Where is my hand?’”

“It liked Martyn,” Ren repeats, turning the sword over in his hand, letting the hilt rest in his palm. “And he’s dead. It liked Etho. Etho’s-”

“-Hang on, don’t you say ‘dead,’” Doc interrupts, despite the bad feeling in the pit of his stomach. “Etho’s coming back for season eight. I know this for a *fact*. I do *not* have the energy to go down another ‘I’m dead and so are all my allies’ rabbit hole, dude, Etho is *fine*.”

Ren looks up at Doc. It’s not the ice of RK, or the dull and dead expression Ren wore earlier. There is a fierce heat behind Ren’s gaze, and his lips curl into an angry smile.

“‘Allies,’” he echoes Doc, claws curling tighter around the hilt. “Not friends? We’re *assets* to it, Doc. Everything it liked -- everyone it liked? All dead. All gone. It’s only sad because it hedged its bets on the wrong person.”

“Okay, hang on, *hang on*.” Doc throws his hands in the air. “First off -- that was *me* misspeaking there, dude. Allies. Friends. Same thing. RK clearly cared a lot about Skizz and Martyn and Etho and -- if you had anyone else with you guys, I’m sure he cared about them too.” He takes a breath in.

“And RK wasn’t ‘betting’ on anyone, you *summoned* him.” It’s out of his mouth before he can think about the words he’s saying.

There’s a moment of silence in the van. The sink is still running in the bathroom.

Ren takes a shallow breath. The tip of the blade drops to the ground, his claws still wrapped around the hilt.

“Let’s make one *freaking* thing clear, Doc,” Ren says, his voice low. “I may not have been the hero here. But, dude?”

Doc only has a few breaths of time to react, a split second to scramble back as the Skizz Blade flashes in Ren’s hand, sears a line into the carpet right where he’d been standing.

“Don’t you *dare* make me the villain.”

“Ren,” Doc holds up his hands, trying to calm his friend down. “Drop the sword.”

“Drop the sword,” Ren echoes, taking a step forward. “It likes you, too, Doc. *Really* seems to think highly of you. Funny, isn’t it, that all its assets -- allies, friends, *whatever* -- end up dead, huh?”

Doc takes a step back. Ren takes another step forward, raises the sword to point directly at his heart. “You’ve bought in, haven’t you? Yet another sucker to a war god’s promises. Just like I was.” His laugh is bitter, tired. “It’s getting familiar, people pulling the rug out from under me and leaving me for dead. I’m *real* tired of it, man.”

“Ren-”

“-Y’know, it’s funny. I can’t tell if it’s me or the god that wants to put this sword through your chest.”

Another heartbeat’s worth of tense silence.

Doc works up the courage to take a breath, and the sword pricks into his chest as he inhales. He slowly brings his hand up to the sword, metal fingers pushing the blade away. Ren snarls -- it’s quiet, but it’s there, the threat hanging where the blade was a few seconds ago.

“It’s you,” Doc says, refusing to let his voice waver. “You want to kill me. Because all RK wants is his friends back.”

Ren stares at the sword, now pointed haphazardly to the side. Heat shimmers over the netherite, the enchantments shining in the dim room. He doesn’t respond to Doc.

“Drop the sword, Ren.”

He does. He closes his eyes.

“...Do you want a hug, dude?”

Ren clenches his hands into fists and nods, the movement jerky and sudden. Doc carefully kicks the blade aside as he walks past, sending it under the bed before he drags Ren into his arms, ignoring the sharp claws that dig through his labcoat and into his back.

“It’s okay, Ren.” Doc mutters, holding his friend close. “Neither of us are going to hurt you.”

“I can’t see, Martyn.” Ren grips him tighter, and Doc can feel tears splash against his skin.

“There’s too much blood.”

Chapter End Notes

:Dc -fluffy

Shadows

Chapter Summary

Doc finds himself stuck. The sink is still running.

Doc doesn't know what to do.

He's gotten Ren back into bed, half-awake and mumbling incoherently, eyes still shut. He's called Doc 'Martyn' three more times, and he's burning up. Doc doesn't know if he's triggered a flashback, or if Ren is actually sick, but either way the most he can do is throw a damp washcloth over his forehead and keep a glass of water by the bed.

He sinks into the couch, burying his face in his hands as he listens to Ren mumble. Gives himself a couple minutes. Gets back up to start hiding RK's stuff -- better, this time.

He shoves the Skizz Blade into the newly organized cabinets. It barely fits, but it's the only place Doc can think of that Ren won't look. The crown, likewise, is taken from its spot in the closet and placed at the back of the minifridge, hidden behind the eggs and milk.

"Keeping it cold so it doesn't spoil," Doc mutters to himself as he closes the door. "Or something like that." RK probably won't appreciate the joke, but at the very least if Ren sees it there, the weird hiding place might make him laugh instead of attempting to kill him with the pointy bits of the crown.

He pauses, unsure how to proceed. It's been a few minutes, so he checks the washcloth and turns it over before sinking back down against the side of the bed and burying his head in his hands once more.

Ren tried to kill him. That's a fact, that's something Doc can barely wrap his head around, *Ren tried to kill him*. It's an ugly truth he wants to hide away in the cabinets with the sword, but it's not something he can so easily shove out of sight. The seared edges of the carpet smell something awful, making Doc's eye sting even as he hides his face -- oh. Oh. He's crying.

He pulls his hands back, staring at the tears that cling to his skin and metal, watching them slowly drip down his fingers. Any other time, he would wipe the tears away and pretend he was infallible, but this isn't 'any other time,' this is the aftermath of *Ren trying to kill him*.

It still doesn't sound real. It sounds like a Hermitcraft punchline for some stupid joke. Doc wipes away the tears that still flow from his eye. Maybe he can ask Renbob for some flowers to put on the table or something, and then he can pretend that his eyes are just watering because of allergies. Yeah. That's-

He snaps his head up. *He hasn't talked to Renbob about Ren being back yet*. Oh, he's an *idiot*. He needs to do that. He should go do that. It'll suck as far as conversations go, but he can't leave the guy in the dark. He should really, *really*, get up and wipe his face off and go do that.

He doesn't move. He just sits there and stares at the singed edges of carpeting, unable to muster up the resolve to do anything, even lift his arms. He just sits there uselessly.

The sink's still running in the bathroom. He should turn that off. His head hits against his knees instead. He stares at his jeans.

"I hope all this water is being put to good use. Bit of a waste, otherwise."

"It's an infinite water source tank," Doc mutters -- and his head shoots back up when his brain processes what he's heard.

Ren is laying in bed, blankets tucked around him. He's sound asleep, as far as Doc can tell.

There's something else in the room with them, though. A mass of shadows coalesces on the couch, spreading across the fabric before shrinking again, bits of dark mist curling off the edges before dissipating. Doc watches as two head-shaped blobs push to the surface of the shadow, seemingly looking at him before they're taken back into the dark of winter.

"This is marginally more horrifying than taking my face," Doc says, his brain far past trying to process danger and just settling on *tired*. "But I guess I'm not asleep, am I?"

"Give it a second," RK's voice says. It doesn't really come from the shadowy shape, nor does it come from Ren, sleeping on the bed behind him. If anything, it feels like its origin point is centered on Doc somehow. *"Haven't done this in a while. Certainly never while in a vehicle moving quite this fast."*

Doc tries to put in the effort to stand up, and still can't get himself to do it. So much for competency in the face of crisis. "Are you going to explain --" he gestures at the shadowy mass, which has at least started to become roughly humanoid "-- this? At all?"

"In simple terms? I'm not actually here. In more complicated ones... well, this is what I look like, if not like someone else. I told you I didn't have a body of my own." The shadow -- RK seems to duck his 'head' in embarrassment, sinking further into a humanoid form. *"It seemed like a better option than taking Ren's body. At least in dreams I can take your shape."*

"Cool. Great." Doc rubs the bridge of his nose, sighing. "Do you want me to look away or something?"

"That's not necessary, doctor."

Doc slumps a bit further down, fidgeting with the edge of his labcoat as he watches RK take shape. The science half of his brain -- which is itching to be used again -- takes note of the way the couch still has a slight imprint, wonders about the weight of sentient shadows. The other half of his brain is too tired to even muster up a fear response, so Doc just... sits there.

Eventually, an arm forms. The sleeve of a coat. A heavy boot. The outer edges of a body. There's no color, it's still all dark mist and shadows, but apparently it's solid -- fingers brush across the top of the head, hair falling down over the featureless face before the hand rests on the edge of the couch.

The eyes are the last to form, but the first to color. Striking red irises, of course, but as the color bleeds over the surface of the skin, Doc realizes with muted interest that it's a different desaturated hue from Ren or his own mimic.

"Who's this?"

RK looks down at himself, as if Doc's question is a surprise to him, and then sighs. *"You're a smart man, doctor. I think you can guess."*

Someone he's never met. Someone who clearly means a lot to the Red King, at least enough for him to take their shape. "Your Hand, right?"

RK sighs. Doc's still not used to the weird feeling of his voice being centered towards him instead of over by the couch, but he's starting to suspect that it's an effect that's not going to go away. "*You needed to know more eventually. And this way, on the off chance Ren wakes up, he'll direct his anger at a more deserving target than you.*"

Doc takes a look at the Hand, at this *Martyn* that has come to mean so much to RK and Ren. Most of his body is hidden beneath the long red and black coat, but RK has to keep brushing back messy hair, ineffectively held back by a headband, and there's a necklace that drops below the shirt collar. He's got RK's teeth and claws, of course, but other than that he looks... normal. To Doc, at least. He doesn't say it out loud.

"So you heard the whole conversation?" Doc asks, looking up towards RK. "Deciding to save me now, and not when I had a sword at my chest?" It's an unfair jab, and they both know it.

RK's eyes flick over to Ren, drawing his legs up to his chest when he mutters in his sleep. "*He wasn't listening to me.*"

"Couldn't tell," Doc says, and closes his eyes, taking a deep breath. "Sorry. That's rude. Are you okay? I don't -- can you two hurt each other?"

RK hums thoughtfully, a sound that's somehow far more unsettling when it's resonating from the back of Doc's head. "*Couldn't tell you. As far as I'm aware, though, he can't hurt me, and while I'm sure I **could** hurt him, I absolutely will not be doing so.*"

"Hm," Doc says, still trying to muster up the energy to stand and at *least* turn off the faucet in the bathroom, since the noise is beginning to bother him by now. "I'm not sure if that's worrying or reassuring."

"*Take it as neither, then. A statement of fact.*" RK stares at Doc, and then stands up, shape flickering at the edges ever so slightly as he approaches. "*Are **you** all right, doctor?*"

"My best friend just tried to kill me," Doc laughs, the sound falling flat. "First time it's happened? No. First time he really meant it, though."

RK stands in front of him, hands shoved into his pockets, coat occasionally turning shadowy on the edges where it moves. "*That's not an answer, Doc.*"

"I know it's not." Doc lets his head hit his knees again. "No. I'm really not doing great here, RK. I don't know what to do. I *hate* not knowing what to do."

The Red King sighs, and Doc can feel the temperature drop. Heavy boots kick at the carpet, dislodging the ash from the burnt section and sending it scattering into the ground. Neither of them have much to say except for empty apologies and hollow words.

Doc tilts his head just enough to look at RK. "You're standing. Can you turn off the sink?"

"*I'm not actually here, doctor,*" RK says, and kicks at Doc's leg. His boot passes through the skin like it's not even there, though it leaves an awful chill in his bones. "*You're going to have to do this one yourself.*"

"You just messed with the carpet," Doc counters. "You *clearly* have some amount of physical influence on the world."

“An interesting hypothesis. One that you cannot prove by just sitting there.”

Doc sighs. “If I could get my body to let me stand up, trust me, I would.” He can feel the beginning of a headache coming on. He’d rub his temples if he felt like he could move his arms properly to do so. “It’s not that I don’t *want* to, trust me. I just... can’t.”

“You can now. Get up.” RK holds out his hand, his tone calm, his words non-judging. There is a chill through the room, something pressing against his chest, and it passes again. *“If you can’t do it, we’ll do it together.”*

Doc just stares at the offered hand of a stranger. “I can’t.”

RK’s fingers rest on top of his hand. Gently curl around his wrist, pulling lightly at him. *“Doc --”*

“Stop. I -- I just *can’t*, RK.” Doc squeezes his eyes shut. “I’m sorry. But I can’t.”

RK’s fingers keep holding his wrist. He doesn’t move. Doesn’t say anything. Doc tries to steady his breathing, embarrassment heating up his face, pressing his head further into the rough material of his jeans.

“Did Etho ever help you with this?”

It’s still in Doc’s head. But the voice has changed. The feeling of fingers around his wrist has changed, like RK is wearing gloves.

“You better not look like him right now, I swear,” Doc mutters into his knees. “Or I’ll -- something. I will do something.”

RK’s laugh is hauntingly familiar. *“That’s what I am trying to get you to do, yes.”*

“You’re the worst,” Doc says, waving away RK’s hand. He stops. Looks up just enough to examine his hands. “Oh, hey. I can move my arms again. You’d better not get a big head over this, RK. I’m sure you have plenty of other, better accolades.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, doctor.” RK’s tone has gone from familiar to obnoxiously smug, though there’s still clear concern under the surface. The gloved hand around his wrist flickers, back and forth from fabric to cold skin. *“Want me to help you up, yet? Or do you need longer?”*

“Help,” Doc sighs. “Please.”

RK pulls at his wrist, and this time, Doc lets him. His head comes away from his legs, looking up towards RK, and for one brief second, he gets a glimpse of Etho’s face before it’s Martyn again.

“Never look like Etho again,” Doc mumbles, stumbling forward. RK pulls him into a very loose hug, cold arms wrapped around his side. “Two red eyes is a really bad look for him.”

“C’mon,” RK laughs, leading Doc towards the bathroom. *“Let’s turn off that sink. And then I have a sleeping dog I need to visit.”*

Lost

Chapter Summary

Ren is in Dogwarts.

Chapter Notes

(hi! hello hi yes i forgot to say this last time but thanks so much for all your nice comments and kind words and general enjoyment of this fic!!!! i'm so glad you like reading it as much as i like writing it!!! -solar)

Ren is in Dogwarts.

The stone bricks press into his hands and knees, but he is staring up, up at the blood red sky. Everything around him is tinted the same shade of gore -- the trees, the walls, the stone, and Martyn's eyes as he climbs the altar with the axe.

"Martyn," he whispers.

"Long live the king," Martyn says, and raises the axe over his head with a determined look in his eyes--

Ren is in Dogwarts.

The stone bricks press into his hands and knees, blood dripping from his palms, reflecting the blood red moon that hangs low in the sky. Its light reflects in the water, in the eyes of the golems that only watch, and in the blade of an axe inscribed with winter as Martyn climbs the altar.

"Martyn," Ren pleads.

"Long live the king," Martyn says, his hands shaking as he raises the axe over his head--

Ren is in Dogwarts.

The stone bricks press into his hands and knees, blood pooling around him, covering his arms up to the shoulder. Everything around him is red, and soon he will be too. He can smell smoke, but it is with a flurry of snow that Martyn climbs the altar, the axe hanging from one hand.

"Martyn," Ren says, reaching out towards him.

"Long live the king," Martyn snarls, and he raises the axe over his head--

Ren is in Dogwarts.

"Not anymore, you're not."

Something clicks, or maybe more accurately *un*clicks, and the ground beneath Ren's hands is coarse podzol and mossy cobblestone. No grass, and no hard stone bricks. The sky is red like a sunset. The air is cold and crisp, and tall spruce trees tower overhead.

Ren snaps his head towards the source of the voice, and then immediately wishes he hadn't. The figure isn't wearing his own face anymore, no, it's *Doc* now. Sharp claws and teeth. Prosthetics gleaming silver-white with frost, both eyes glinting red and cold. It leans against a tree, gaze steady beneath a bloody crown that doesn't quite sit right on Doc's head, and waves lazily at him like absolutely nothing is wrong.

"Hey."

Ren lunges for the Red King. He passes right through it, and Ren smashes into a tree instead, shredding bark with his claws as he turns to find it again. It's leaning against another tree, using Doc's face to stare curiously at him.

"Not quite the reaction I was expecting." It glances down at itself, grimacing. *"Ah. That would explain it."*

"I'm going to murder you," Ren promises, rage simmering just below his skin. "I am going to rip your *stupid freakin' head* off your body for touching Doc."

The Red King gives him a small smile, fingers tapping against the tree. *"What, he's not allowed to make friends?"*

Ren throws himself towards the king again, knowing he won't land a single hit on it. It doesn't stop him from ripping the bark away from where it had just stood, scraping his hands against the rough wood and ignoring it when they start to bleed. He scrambles for a good sized chunk of cobblestone laying on the ground, clutching it in his hand and scanning the small clearing.

"Too scared for a fair fight?" Ren yells into the expanse of trees. It's a challenge with no confidence behind it -- a fair fight against the Red King would be no fight at all -- but he is far too furious to care. "Scared of the guy you're possessing?"

"I'm waiting for you to wear yourself out," comes the response, from somewhere above him this time. He turns -- there's a shorter tree in the clearing, and it's sitting on one of the taller branches, a handful of blocks out of reach. It stares down at him, expression unreadable. *"Ren, Ren, come on now. You know full well you can't do anything to me."*

Ren draws back his arm and throws the rock at it, full-tilt, a fastball special aimed directly at the god's face. It seems to consider moving, briefly, and then the rock bounces off its face and into its hand, leaving a deep gash bleeding red down Doc's forehead.

"Are you quite finished?" It turns the rock over in its hand, inspecting the blood splatter on the block. *"Is seeing your friend bleed because of your own actions everything that you thought it would be?"*

"You are not my friend," Ren snarls, jabbing a claw towards it. "Wearing his face doesn't make you him."

"Still his face." The Red King tosses the rock from hand to hand. *"Still his blood."*

Ren glares at it, briefly considers trying to climb the tree and knock it off its perch, but -- the thought of hurting something that still wears Doc's face, has his voice, it's enough that instead he turns around and storms off into the forest.

“Where are you going?”

Ren doesn't answer. He just breaks into a sprint, ducking between trees as fast as he can, bare feet kicking up podzol as he runs. Nothing chases him. The forest stretches onwards, and onwards, and loops back around on itself at some point, and he keeps running with nowhere to go until he's exhausted.

He takes a deep breath in. Reminds himself that this is a dream. Starts running again, even as rocks dig into his feet and it gets harder and harder to breathe, to force air into his lungs. He doesn't know where he's going. He doesn't know where this even *is*. He stops running, again, heaving for breath, hands on his knees.

Ren looks up. It's still sunset, and he's lost.

He falls against a tree, slumps to the ground and pushes his back against the wood. His claws dig into the ground, sinking through the layer of podzol and into the dirt underneath with ease. He's lost -- any thought beyond that is too much for him to handle.

There's no axe above his head, there's no unnatural red glow to the sunset, but Ren still thinks it might be the same nightmare. The dream where he loses everything. Lost, in the two senses of the word.

He barely feels like himself. The Red King's image of him feels more real than he does. Not that it even looks like him, right now, but that's not exactly any *better* when it's taken the shape of his friend.

...His friend. Doc's his friend. He tried to kill Doc.

Ren buries his head in his hands, and no tears fall. Not for lack of hoping, just because there's nothing there. He's done. Spent. Lost.

The air gets colder around him. He refuses to give it the satisfaction of letting on that he's noticed the change, and ignores winter as it approaches.

Snow flurries start to fall around him, gentle as they stick to his skin, melting after a few seconds. There's ice, too, winding its way across the tree bark, just a product of the cold and not used against him. Ren keeps his face hidden. It's a dream. The snow isn't real.

“There you are.”

The voice is -- it's no longer Doc's voice. And it's still not his voice, either, and he knows who he'll see when he looks up. It isn't toying with him, no, it just wants to *hurt* him now.

“Leave me alone,” he mutters, bringing his legs up to his chest and squeezing his eyes shut. “You *know* I was just having a nightmare about him, you sick bastard.”

“Is that what you'd consider it?” It's close by, now. He can't tell where, and if it's approaching him then it's doing so without making a sound. The snow falls gently, but it never seems to build up any further than a light dusting. *“A nightmare about the Hand. I would have categorized it as a nightmare about execution, personally.”*

Ren doesn't say a word.

“Unless they're the same for you, at this point.” A pause. *“Is that what it is, dog? The Hand that holds the axe, one and the same?”*

There is a scar on his neck now. It burns, sears its way into his skin, and Ren claws at his throat, trying to find some relief from the pain. He is in Dogwarts. He is not in Dogwarts. Martyn stands in front of him, but there is no altar, no axe.

“*Ren,*” Marytn says softly, and there are ice-cold fingers pressing into his burnt and bleeding neck, soothing the pain. “*You’re hurting yourself.*”

Ren whines, eyes still squeezed shut, claws grabbing for the cold hands against him. It’s a balm and a curse, a relief to his pain and yet a sign of winter. He’s lost.

Somewhere deep down, he knows it’s not Martyn. He’s not stupid, after all. Lost, tired, hurting, maybe even delirious, but not *stupid*. He shoves that aside. Martyn’s here, because the alternative is too much to face. Martyn’s here, because the idea of the war god that possessed him choosing to show him kindness is too much to bear. Martyn’s here. Martyn’s not here. He’s here, and he’s not here.

Cold hands slow the burning sensation, staunch the bleeding. The pain begins to ebb away, and Ren breathes evenly again instead of heaving breath through shaky lungs. He does not open his eyes.

“*It always hurts more than you think it will,*” Martyn (not Martyn) says quietly. “*I get it, I really do. I was there too, Ren.*”

Words are beyond Ren at the moment. He presses himself into Martyn’s cold hands, into the hands of a ghost. It still hurts. Ren worries it won’t ever stop hurting.

Distantly, he questions if he’s talking about his throat or the Hand. If the pain stems from red winter or the searing lava. There’s been too many things that hurt, too many things that left their mark on him.

“*We understand,*” Martyn says, dragging him forward, and Ren buries himself in the hug he is given. “*Doc and I understand that you’re hurting, but you can’t hurt people in return, Ren. I hurt Doc because I was hurting, and it wasn’t fair to him.*”

Martyn and Doc have never met. Ren ignores that.

“*He’s not mad at you,*” Martyn continues. “*I know he’s not. He’s just worried about you.*”

Martyn and Doc have never met. Ren continues to ignore that.

Martyn (it’s not Martyn, though, is it) laughs softly, tiredly. “*Is it really that hard to believe I give a damn about you, Ren?*”

It’s not Martyn. The hand against his skin is cold, too cold, even as it feels like he’s burning up from the inside out. Claws are pressing against his back, holding him in place, and Ren is too tired to try and escape. It’s not Martyn holding him.

“*I felt you dying,*” his own voice murmurs, as soft as the snow. “*And I came to help. I’m sorry this is where we ended up.*”

Ren died. Ren died and wasn’t supposed to come back. He barely recognizes himself. He doesn’t fit in his own body anymore. He’s stuck somewhere between his skin and the soul of a god, and neither place feels right anymore.

Ren is in Dogwarts.

Someone who looks like him and is not him extends a hand to him with a sharp, kind smile.
“Alright, Rendog. Let’s get you back to yourself.”

Found

Chapter Summary

A quiet conversation between friends.

Chapter Notes

(first of all: holy shit it's fluff. second of all: thank you for the incredible support on this story, it's been mind blowing to see. have fun! -fluffy)

For a second, Ren thinks he is still dreaming. The van's lights are turned off, leaving only a soft red glow in the room, the light barely strong enough for him to see a couple feet in front of him. Doc is sitting at the end of the bed, his eye the source of the glow, but he's turned away from Ren, enough so he can't see if Doc has two red eyes.

The blankets over him are warm. Uncomfortably so, his hands sweaty and sticking to the sheets as he carefully pulls them away, his head pounding with what feels like a fever headache.

There's movement out of the corner of his eye -- Ren swings his head to try and find the source, but all that's there is shadows. He looks back towards Doc, who's barely moved at all. His head droops slightly. He's probably half-asleep, or at least very convincingly faking it.

Movement in the shadows again. Ren extracts himself from the blankets as slowly and carefully as possible, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and very carefully setting them down on the ground. He half expects something to grab his ankles, but nothing happens.

He probably shouldn't be moving around with this bad of a headache, but he does anyway. Heads quietly over to the closet, skirting as far around the sleeping Doc as he possibly can. He winces as the door squeaks slightly, but Doc doesn't seem to notice.

It's dark. It's hard to see what he's looking at, but not quite as difficult as it *should* be. Figures that he'd have better night vision thanks to -- thanks to *his circumstances*. He manages to pick out something that should help him with his headache and pads over towards the kitchenette to get himself a glass of water.

He swallows the medicine and throws back the water, grimacing at the bitter taste that still lingers in his mouth, even when he pours himself more water and swishes it around. He considers getting something to eat, but the thought of food makes him queasy, and he sets his glass in the sink before quietly making his way back to the bed. The van looks oddly different in the dark. Smaller. Quieter.

The door to the driver's cabin is slightly open, and Ren leans forward to look through the small gap, watching the way Doc's eye glow catches on the bead curtain that hangs over the doorway. Normally he'd say the beads were hideous, but there's something oddly peaceful about watching light fractals spin off the walls, cutting off into the shadows.

There's a soft *thud* from behind him, and the red light shifts around somewhat, and he turns around to see that Doc has fallen backwards onto the bed, still fast asleep. Ren snorts softly, thankful the noise wasn't anything bad, and watches the shadows flicker oddly again.

Somehow it's less unsettling than it should be. He'd still rather not be in the room, though, so he takes a deep breath in and then ducks through the gap in the doorway and into the driver's cabin.

The beads clink against his arm as he passes through and looks around the small space. There's no one at the wheel -- even though Ren can still feel the van moving -- or on the couch right next to the door. There's a small bookcase that he runs his fingers over as he moves further in, enjoying the feeling of paper under his fingertips.

"Oh! RK, man, didn't know you were awake!"

Ren slowly drags his searching gaze downwards, looking at the beanbag tucked between the driver's seat and the wall of the van, where Renbob is sitting up and beaming at him.

"Here for some more friendship bracelets?" Renbob reaches for a box of thread in the jockey box, tail idly thumping against the beanbag. "Since you already know the seven string jellyfish pattern, I was thinking I could teach you the fishtail or candy stripes. They're both super simple dude, you'll love them!"

"...I already know those ones," Ren says quietly, reaching up to rub at his eyes. "You taught me those patterns, Renbob."

Renbob stops rummaging through his thread box. Glances up at Ren, blue eyes wide and confused.

"Hi," Ren says. "It's Ren, actually, not RK."

Renbob stares at him, opening his mouth to say something -- nothing comes out, for a few seconds, and then he closes his eyes, takes a deep breath in, and pushes himself up out of the beanbag chair. "Does Doc know?"

"Yeah. We've... talked." It's easier to sum it up like that right now. Renbob doesn't need to know about interpersonal drama (that's putting it mildly, but he can't think about it right now).

"Alright, man," Renbob says, spreading his arms, "bring it in."

It's such a normal action, so unlike the rest of Ren's life right now, that he just blinks at Renbob.

He's throwing himself against Renbob a few seconds later, wrapping his arms around him and squeezing tight. Renbob hugs are common but special -- warm and comforting, one hand rubbing soothing circles over his shoulders while the other starts to play with his messy hair.

"It's late, man," Renbob says, untangling a knot. "When did you wake up?"

"Not too long ago," he mumbles, leaning into the comforting touch. He hadn't realized how cold he was until now, the hug washing away any winter that had been clinging to him. "Why're *you* up?"

"Couldn't sleep." Renbob shrugs. "I was meaning to doze off anyway, but then you showed up and I thought you were, uh--"

Ren rolls his eyes, even though Renbob can't see him doing it. "Dude, are you *seriously* teaching

the war god how to make friendship bracelets?”

“...Is there some kind of law against that?” He can tell that Renbob is grinning sheepishly. “Because if so, man, you know how I feel about the establishment.”

“Laws of friendship,” Ren grumbles, but it’s hard to stay mad at someone like Renbob. “Laws of honor.”

Renbob laughs, starting to massage his fingers into the tense muscles of his back, leading them over to the couch when Ren starts swaying with exhaustion again. “Big Friend and his corporate lobby hold no power in the hippie van, brother! Individualistic, home grown powers of friendship and love only, man.”

Ren snorts, his face pressing into the fabric of the couch as he slumps over, Renbob still pressing into his strained back. The two of them fall into a comfortable silence, only broken by the soft sounds of fabric brushing against fabric and the occasional groan of relief from Ren. Renbob snaps a hair tie off his wrist, and quickly braids Ren’s hair back, combing the frizzy strands into place and patting his head when he’s done.

“Should grab some of my flowers,” Renbob says, hand settling on Ren’s side. “We’d be identical, then.”

“Y’know, apart from the prosthetics and eyes,” Ren says. He props his chin up on the couch, just enough to look up at Renbob. “Don’t think you’d want the teeth either. I just cut my cheek with them.”

Renbob shrugs. “Dunno, man, I think the teeth are pretty cool. Maybe I’ll start wearing plastic fangs, then we can match.”

Ren snorts. “That’s the worst idea I’ve ever heard, and you’ve had a lot of bad ideas.”

“Haven’t we all?”

Comfortable silence falls over the room, only broken when Renbob leans over onto Ren, yawning. “I’m glad you’re back, man.”

“Me too,” Ren mumbles, his eyes feeling heavy all of the sudden. “Even if it’s only kinda.”

Renbob hums, the sound vibrating through his chest, sounding so much louder when he’s pressed against Ren like he is. He slowly starts to scratch right where Ren’s ears connect to his head, combing out the fur and brushing hair away from it, the hum slowly forming into a song Ren can’t quite recognize.

The door to the cabin moves by a fraction of an inch, and Ren swears he can see glinting red eyes in the shadows -- and then it’s just the dim light of the van, and the soft red scattering through the bead curtain.

It’s tense for a few seconds, and then Doc starts to snore. Loudly. Ren snorts, and Renbob laughs quietly, and then in the middle of them both cracking up Ren yawns widely.

“Still tired?” Renbob raises an eyebrow.

Ren nods. “Yeah. ‘M gonna go back to sleep now,” he mutters, falling backwards onto the couch.

“G’night, brother,” Renbob chuckles, and Ren feels something sliding over his wrist, peeking open

his eyes just enough to see the red and blue friendship bracelet that Renbob's given him. "It'll all sort itself out, eventually, and I'll be here for you while it does."

Ren sighs, eyes already slipping shut again as Renbob starts to hum a new song, and it's not long before he's pulled into a peaceful sleep, for the first time in a very long time.

Instability

Chapter Summary

A match is struck. Everything comes together.

Chapter Notes

(and here we are. have fun! -fluffy)

As offputting as the cold has been, Doc's starting to get used to it. The warmth he wakes up to is jarring compared to the winter climate the van usually takes on, and Doc blinks a few times as he adjusts to being awake, shuddering when he feels sweat sticking to the back of his neck.

He doesn't remember falling asleep on the bed, nor does he understand why he is tucked into the covers where Ren/RK should be. There is noise and light around him, and Doc sits up, surprised to see the blankets removed from the windows, even more so when he realizes part of the light is coming *from* the windows. A sun, close enough that it currently looks the size of Doc's fist, is visible from the window over his workbench.

They're getting closer. Moving into territory where things -- worlds -- exist, instead of just empty space. Doc stands, stretches, and checks around for Ren and RK. The bathroom's not occupied, and neither is the couch near his desk, so that just leaves the driver's cabin.

He crosses his fingers behind his back, hoping that Ren's anger yesterday only applies to him and not Renbob. Considers poking his head into the driver's cabin, then decides when his stomach rumbles that he's too hungry for this and goes to get breakfast instead.

The sword and crown are still in place, so Doc can say with almost certainty Renbob is not dead in the driver's cabin. He grabs for the almost empty cereal box, glancing around the cabinets for something more filling, and eventually just decides to put milk in his cereal today.

He puts the carton back in front of the crown, and sets his bowl on his workbench.

"RK?" Doc says, looking around the room. "You there, man?"

No answer. Not even a change in the temperature. Okay, so Ren's in the driver's cabin and RK's taking some time off. That's... fine, it's fine. He takes a bite of cereal, barely even tasting it. It's early, for some definition of the word, and everything is quiet, and Doc's alone.

It'd be the perfect time to get some work done, if he had anything to do. Maybe he can sketch out some starter base plans, actually -- he pulls out a new piece of paper and starts sketching. Halfway along the line it turns into mostly doodles of goats. There's still no sign of Ren.

Doc adds an angry face to one of his goats. The pencil lead snaps.

He's in the middle of looking for a pen when the door to the cabin opens up, and he looks up at

Renbob comes through, beads clicking gently against each other as he gives Doc a warm smile.

“Morning, dude!”

Doc manages a smile back, trying to avoid looking around Renbob and into the driver’s cabin. “How do you know it’s morning?”

“Cause the van’s wifi clock hooked up to HC-8!” Renbob leans forward, ruffling Doc’s hair as he looks over blueprints and doodles. “We’re a couple days out still, but we’re at least in the solar system. Van’s running low on juice though, man, so we gotta take it slow.”

“The van is hooked up to a nuclear reactor,” Doc says, scowling when hair falls into his eyes. “How does it get low on juice?”

Renbob shrugs. “It just does, man. Kinda like when you leave a car sitting for a few months and the battery runs out, but the other way around.”

“Right,” Doc says. He’s going to pretend he understands what that means. “So…”

“You want anything for breakfast, man?”

“I just ate,” Doc says, and it’s not technically a lie but he half expects to get called out for it anyway.

However, unlike RK, Renbob doesn’t seem to have a vested interest in his eating habits, and just nods at him instead. “Right on, man. Ren’s sleeping like a bear in hibernation on the couch out there, so I’m gonna make something for him.”

Doc straightens up at that. Abandons his pen search. “Ren? Not RK?”

“In the flesh!” Renbob beams as he goes to grab a mixing bowl and pulls some bacon out of the fridge, not even giving the sword and crown a second look. “Give him some time, though. Your vibes are gonna kill his mood, dude.”

Doc doesn’t know what kind of ‘vibes’ he’s giving off, but from the way Renbob is wrinkling his nose at him, he’s going to guess they aren’t good ones. He goes back to searching for a pen with a huff, grabbing one from the bottom of his toolbox and starting to outline his grumpy goat.

Maybe after all of this is done and over, he’ll put it on a shirt for Renbob.

A horrible crashing noise interrupts his thought process, a sound like a thousand tiny beads falling onto the floor -- on account of that’s what it is, Ren’s entered the room and has torn the bead curtain down. He stares down at it.

Doc scoots his chair back slightly, half expecting that Fire Aspect sword to just *appear* in Ren’s hand or something else similarly ominous and deadly. He’s vaguely aware that Renbob’s giving him a weird side-eye, but that’s... fine. Renbob’s not the one in danger. He scoots back a little further, ready to bolt if need be.

The beads clatter around, knocking against each other, falling from where they’ve caught in Ren’s hair and down to the carpet. He looks up at Renbob and Doc with wide eyes, and Doc is surprised to see tears shining in them.

“I --”

“Hey, brother,” Renbob puts down his spatula, moving across the van, brushing past Doc and bringing Ren into a hug. “It’s all good! I got 20 more of those in the side storage, got a wild deal for ‘em on my way to HC-7.”

“I still broke it,” Ren says softly, mumbling into Renbob’s shoulder. “Sorry.”

“I’m surprised it lasted this long! I started with 50 of them.”

Doc suppresses the shiver that goes up his spine -- not from RK, but out of sheer horror and disgust from just *imagining* that many bead curtains. Out of everything he’s experienced, *that* has got to be the scariest.

...Almost the scariest. It’s hard not to think about what happened yesterday. He decides not to call attention to himself. Hunkers down and starts doodling again, nothing in particular this time. Idle loops that don’t look like anything at all.

The silence becomes awkward, or maybe comfortable. Whatever the case, he can tell that Ren’s staring at him. He says nothing.

Renbob keeps up the chatter, and it blends into the background noise for Doc, the sound of his pen on paper, the sizzle of bacon, the quiet hum of the van all providing the perfect noise for him to zone out, watching the spiral on his page get larger and larger, until there’s a goat taken by the ink.

...Hm. Doc might have to see what a goat does if it’s suspended above the void. Zedaph did that with a pig, right?

He can hear Ren settle into the bed with a sigh, but Doc can still feel the prickle of eyes on the back of his neck. It’s a normal feeling by now, and when Ren starts to talk he almost expects it to be in RK’s accented tone.

“Morning, Doc.”

“Good morning,” Doc says, drawing little stick figure goats running from his black hole of ink. He tries his best to keep his voice even, does his best to not let his heart quicken even as fear starts to pulse through his veins. “I was worried when you weren’t in bed this morning.”

“I woke up early,” Ren says. “Went to go hang out with Renbob. And then you fell onto the bed and I figured I should just leave you there.” It’s hard to read his tone, for some reason.

“Sorry about that,” Doc says. *Tone even, head down. It’s fine. Don’t make yourself a target.* “Hope you slept well.” He should really turn around and look at Ren. He doesn’t. He can’t meet those eyes right now.

“Really well,” Ren says, and Doc hates the tension that’s filled the air between them. “Renbob makes a great cuddlebuddy.”

“You know it, brother!” Renbob cheers, and slips bacon and eggs onto two plates, spinning towards the two of them with a wide grin. “Doc, man, I know you said you didn’t want anything, but sharing your troubles over breakfast is usually the best way to talk!”

That’s enough to give Doc pause -- he looks away from his increasingly violent doodles and to Renbob with a raised brow, pointing his pen at him in a threat he hopes the hippie gets for his own safety. He can see Ren out of the corner of his eye, face buried in his hands, slumped over.

“Renbob,” he mutters into his hands, voice muffled. “Don’t do this.”

“You two obviously have a problem.” Renbob sets a plate down in front of Doc, stealing a piece of bacon for himself before he puts the other plate on the sheets, patting Ren’s knee. “And I’m not letting either of you off this bus until you can talk. Mental health, dudes! Talk to each other!”

Doc opens his mouth to say something, but Renbob snatches the pen from his fingers, crunching on his bacon as he waltzes back into the driver’s cabin.

“It’s killing me to see you like this, Ren,” Renbob says gently, beads scraping against the floor as he swings the door shut. “Work it out with your friend.”

The door closes with a quiet click, and Doc swears under his breath as he hears it lock behind Renbob. He’s stuck. He takes a shaky breath in and takes a bite of bacon instead of saying anything. Maybe, maybe if he can just make himself a fixture of the room instead of a target, Ren will leave him alone.

It sucks. He doesn’t *want* to be afraid of Ren. But he doesn’t really have a choice right now, all things considered. He takes another bite of bacon. Waits for Ren to say something. Hopes that he won’t.

“So,” Ren says quietly.

“So,” Doc echoes, keeping his voice as even as he can.

It’s quiet again. Cold silence between the two of them. Doc struggles to take a breath -- *it’s not cold, there’s nothing in his lungs* -- before he tries to talk again.

“Don’t do this?” Doc echoes, his voice steady. “Renbob’s done this before?”

Ren sighs. Doc can hear his claws shredding through the blankets, threads pulling apart. “Season 6. G-man and Impulse had a small disagreement over some building stuff. Real small argument,” he says. “But Renbob locked them in the van anyway.”

“Small disagreement,” Doc manages a laugh, fingers closing into a fist. “Not something like --”

“Like the fact that I tried to kill you?”

“...I was just going to say ‘like yesterday,’” Doc mutters towards the desk. “But that works too.” He misses the cold, right about now. The cold’s been a lot less hostile towards him. RK didn’t outright try to kill him.

Awkward silence. Again. Doc keeps his ears alert for the sound of movement, listening as Ren pulls at threads on the blanket and does not otherwise shift from his spot. Doc stays similarly still, tapping his fingers against his leg, hoping that maybe Renbob will just give up after a long enough period of quiet and let them out.

Failing that, he could always get up and lock himself in the bathroom, but he’d rather not resort to that.

He doesn’t have his pen anymore, thanks to Renbob, but Doc has always been a master of distracting himself from his feelings. He takes out a new piece of paper and carefully creases it in half, ripping it at the seam to get a square. He can feel Ren watching him, but he keeps folding, making sure all the creases are tight before he moves onto the next step.

“Didn’t I teach you origami?” Ren says as Doc sets a paper crane aside and reaches for the other half of paper. “Working on the stock exchange?”

Doc keeps his eyes fixed on his hands. “I lied about that. You just seemed really excited to teach me.”

“Sounds like you,” Ren mumbles, and Doc can hear him laying down on the bed, spoon scraping against his plate. “Lying for my own good.”

That, that hurts him even more than getting stabbed might. Doc tears a thin strip off the not-quite-square paper remaining and starts folding it into a paper star, still fighting to remain calm. “Sorry,” he says, and his voice sticks in his throat.

“‘Sorry,’” Ren echoes dully. “That’s all?”

Doc’s fingers fumble over the paper star, but he doesn’t say anything else. He’s really, *truly* not sure what else there is to say. He puts it down. Picks up his fork and slowly, deliberately, takes a bite of lukewarm egg. It’s still pretty good, though it’d taste better if he wasn’t low-key fearing for his life (or at least his closest friendship).

“‘Sorry’, and he avoids the rest of it,” Ren says, and Doc can hear him take a shaky inhale before laughing. “Yeah, seems par for the course for the guy who lied about the *blood god* in my body.”

Doc doesn’t know what to do. He doesn’t know why this keeps happening, why the thread of friendship between the two of them keeps fraying. He’s so terrified this might be the point where it could snap, and he holds his fork tight in one hand, ready for a sword at his back.

“I can hear your heartbeat,” Ren says, a note of frustration beginning to worm its way into his tone. “Are you that scared of me, dude?”

“You can hear my heartbeat?” Doc’s grip tightens on his fork, his heart racing faster. “When did that happen?”

“New thing, apparently. Ever since I woke up the first time. Stop avoiding the question.” Something in Ren’s tone makes it very clear to Doc that he’s officially missed out on his chance to pretend to go to the bathroom.

“You tried to kill me,” Doc says, slowly and quietly. “How would *you* feel, if your best friend woke up after you’d thought he was dead and gone, and then tried to kill you a few days later?”

“Depends on why,” Ren says, and Doc’s hand tightens further around the fork. “See, if that best friend had been possessed by a war god and I’d been ignoring that potential danger, well...”

“RK didn’t *try to kill me*,” Doc snaps, turning around to glare at Ren, and the fork bends out of shape in his hand. “Not once. At most I was held back or he said something *slightly ominous*. I didn’t get held at swordpoint by *RK*, Ren.”

“You didn’t get possessed,” Ren snarls. He’s still laying down, but that doesn’t stop him from glaring at Doc with eyes that glint like fire. “Get your freakin’ *soul* ripped out of your body, Doc, then have your best friend tell you *he’s* best friends with the thing that replaced you. Tell me afterwards if you don’t want to murder him.”

Doc stands -- fast enough that his chair tips backwards and hits the ground, the sound muffled by the carpet. He jabs the bent fork in Ren’s direction, scowling at the near-animal snarl he gets in return.

“I thought you *died*, Ren,” he says, voice low -- still even, still steady. “You weren’t the only one who thought you were gone for good. I thought I was making an arm for your *corpse*, man, that

I'd have to bury you with it still unfinished. That I'd have to explain to all the hermits how I couldn't save you."

Ren sits up, hair falling into his eyes as he laughs. "Oh, that is *so* like you, Doc. Worried more about yourself, how others see you, than you are over anyone else. We're just things to boost your already-inflated ego, huh?"

Old whispers. *Egotistical, self-righteous*. Doc's free hand finds his shoulder, and he runs a thumb along the metal as he tries to process Ren's words as coming from *Ren*. It's hard to hide how hurt he is by the comment. He decides not to, for once.

"What *happened* to you, Ren?" he mutters. The corner of his organic eye has started to sting. He thinks he might be crying again, but no tears fall. "Would you say that to anyone else? Iskall? False? *Martyn*? Are --" he takes a step back "-- *are* you even Ren? Or are you just using his face to hurt me?"

He should stop talking. He should really, *really* stop talking. "I missed you. I missed you so, *so* much, this entire artificial winter I hoped you were alright somehow. I didn't *know* about any of this, Ren, because I didn't ask. How was I supposed to? What was I *supposed* to do?"

"I'll tell you what you *weren't* supposed to do." Ren scoots to the edge of the bed, swinging his legs over. "You chose a blood god over me, Doc. You chose the war god that *took over me*, Doc."

Ren takes a shallow breath, eyes wide as he stares at Doc. "You *lied* to me about it, over and over, pretending you weren't just so you could feel good about yourself. If you were so damn worried about me being gone, you could have bothered to say it, instead of making my death out to be my fault."

The fork snaps in Doc's hand. Both pieces fall to the ground.

"I don't know why you bothered to bring me back, Doc. I really don't get it," Ren says, standing, now close enough to Doc that his heart starts pounding in his ears. "I could've stayed dead, Doc, and you'd be happier than you are now, kicking it off with your new best friend."

"RK brought you back on his own." Doc takes a step back, away from Ren, and his back hits the edge of his workbench. "Ren, he--"

"-Oh, it brought me back *on its own*, did it," Ren says, voice dropping lower. "What am I, then, a fun *party favor* for it? Some offhand thing for it to pass across the table as a gift for a *loyal subject*?" He steps even closer, and Doc could *swear* for a moment that he sees faint wisps of smoke curl out of the corner of Ren's mouth. "You keep on believing the best in everyone, Doc, and you're gonna get screwed over."

"Ren. Ren, I don't know what's going on," Doc says, hands gripping his workbench for support. "I didn't know what was happening. I would have told RK to bring you back if I *had* known. I *did* tell him to, dude, but you're on some Grimdog *nonsense* right now and -- and *I don't know what's going on*."

"*I died!*" Ren's claws snag in his labcoat, eyes wide and wild as he stares at Doc. "I *died*, Doc, and not just once. I got to feel the arrow Scar put in my back, and that was it for me, Doc, *that was it*, right up until I was back in season 7, and *none* of you guys were there. No one was there! No one bothered to find me, except for a freakin Sith who threw me in lava."

Snow. There is snow, or something like it, at his chest, pressing against him, pressing into his

lungs.

Ren drops his labcoat, claws settling on Doc's shoulder, head pressed against his chest. "You *were* making the arm for my corpse, Doc. I was *dead* until your precious god brought me back *different*. I don't get to rest. It could bring me back with one word, and I'd be pulled out of whatever afterlife I'd settled into. *I don't get to die anymore, Doc.*"

It's not cold. It should be cold, but it's not. Flakes of something like hot snow are building up in his lungs. He is burning from the inside out.

Doc takes a breath in and chokes on what his body knows is clean air and his mind suspects is not. He coughs. Ren barely pays it any attention.

"Fine," he wheezes, through breath that should by all rights be steady. "*Fine*. Blame everything on me. Get rid of me entirely, if you have to. Do me a favor, though, when you show up to the next season alone, just go ahead and lie about it. Tell them I'm taking a break. It'll be easier on everyone."

Claws dig into his shoulders. The metal whines under honed talons, and Doc can only make a strangled noise of pain as he feels blood pooling under his labcoat. Ren does not let go. He raises his head to look at him, and Doc knows he's not imagining it this time when smoke trickles from the sides of Ren's mouth, swirling around the edges of his fangs.

"You are just so *selfish*," he snarls.

"And you're always so determined to pin the blame on someone else," Doc refuses to move, refuses to struggle. "Guess what, Ren? A bus with just you in it, you'd have no one else to blame." He laughs, tilts his head back even as it feels like fire is eating away at his lungs. "Look at that. I'm good for something after all."

The claws just curl in tighter, and Doc bites back anything louder than a hiss through clenched teeth. "Go ahead. Get it over with." He feels water run down his cheek. Wishes he could've started crying sooner. His vision's blurry through both eyes now, and he can't tell if it's a heat haze or just delirium. "I just missed my best friend, Ren. I just missed *you*."

Quiet. Neither of them say anything, neither of them move. The only sound is the faint crackle of flames, and Doc resolves himself to never knowing where the sound is coming from. People don't respawn between worlds.

The claws slowly pull away from his skin, and Doc waits for them to reappear at his throat, or maybe his chest. Stares up at the ceiling, watching ash swirl through the air, little snowflakes landing on his face. Not a bad last sight.

He waits.

Instead of his own blood, he feels tears splash against his skin.

"...I came back," Ren whispers against him. "Just once. While it still had control. And I couldn't see anything but blood, Doc. Innocent blood. Scott did nothing to me. It *hurt*, Doc."

Doc slowly looks down. Blinks the ash out of his eyes, tears dripping down his face.

"I don't want your blood to blind me as well," Ren mumbles. "I don't — I don't want to kill you. You're taking me home. You're my friend. Like Martyn was."

Doc's voice sticks in his throat. Another case of mistaken identity. "I'm not Martyn. I'm sorry." *I can't do anything right, unlike him. Whoever he was.*

"I know that, Doc," Ren says, voice still muffled. "I missed you, too."

Recalibration

Chapter Summary

Ren apologizes in his own way, and Doc gets a helping hand.

Chapter Notes

(hello everyone!! as always, thanks for all your kind comments now! we're heading towards the end pretty fast. i'd talk more about what you can expect when we get here, but i'm short on time and fluffy's busy today, so maybe tomorrow. i'm glad you're all enjoying the fic, and rest assured this will not be the end of Content for this au! -solar)

(also, a brief warning -- this chapter contains what i'd like to flippantly describe as "teen-rated mechanical gore." while it'll be hard to read the chapter without going over these sections in some form, the part you may want to brace for starts with *Then he raises his arm the rest of the way.*)

When Renbob opens the door, Doc is waiting for him. The hippie scrunches up his face as he's flicked on the nose, before raising an eyebrow at Doc.

"That's better than the punch Ren talked me out of," Doc says, crossing his arms. "Never pull something like that again."

"You two were never going to talk about it," Renbob says, and swats Doc's hand away from his face again. "We both know it, man! Drastic actions lead to drastic consequences. Read that on a fortune cookie."

Ren sighs deeply from his spot in the corner of the bed, awkwardly squishing to the side when Doc crawls next to him. "Still, Renbob. Please don't do that."

"Jeez, you two are both grumpy," Renbob says, rolling his eyes and picking up Doc's plate off the workbench. He stops. Sniffs the air, nose wrinkling. "Hey, why's it smell like smoke?"

Doc shrugs. "Dunno," he says, and it's not *really* the truth, since he's got a sneaking suspicion, but it's not really a lie either. "I didn't do it," he adds, which *is* the truth.

"Huh," Renbob says, grabbing Ren's plate and heading back towards the sink. "Guess we've got a mystery arsonist onboard. Or the toaster needs to be cleaned."

Doc sighs and gets back up from the bed. "Alright, alright, I can take a hint. I'll get to it, bossman."

"That hurts even more than punching me in the face, brother. No bosses on *this* hippie van."

"Really?" Doc leans against the counter. "Then what kind of economy are we running on the bus?"

Renbob bops him on the nose -- Doc blinks, looking down at the hippie as he starts to clean off the plates, smiling to himself. "No goods, no services, no economy, dude. We're just running a clean ol' friend-ship here."

It's about as weird as everything else Renbob says, so Doc's glad one of them is feeling normal. He grabs a glass from the dishrack, filling it up with already-running water before making his way back to the bed and handing the glass to Ren. He takes it, giving Doc a confused side-eye before taking a sip.

"Thanks?"

Doc waits until he's actually on the bed and next to Ren again to talk, keeping his voice low enough that Renbob won't be able to hear them over the water. "You've got ash in your teeth. Soot? Charcoal? I don't know, just something like that."

"... *Oh*," Ren mutters, taking a larger sip and quietly swishing it around in his mouth. "Well, that'd be the weird taste in my mouth, huh."

"Yep." Doc's metal arm has gone stiff. He knows exactly what's going to happen when he tries to move it and he's not looking forward to it, so instead he just sort of sits next to Ren awkwardly and watches Renbob do the dishes.

...His other shoulder hurts, too. But it's manageable as long as he doesn't think about it too hard. Doesn't look at the flecks of blood staining the outside of his labcoat from within.

Something brushes against his hand. He barely manages to stop himself from flinching -- instead of that, though, he glances down to see Ren's hand resting against his, metal claws gently pressing against his skin. Doc looks at Ren.

"Can you put a note in your comm?" Ren asks quietly, taking another sip of water. "Just something to remember."

"Sure," Doc says, pulling his hand away from Ren's to reach for the comm inside his pocket. The screen lights up, and as he waits for Ren to tell him what to put down, a thought crosses his mind before Ren can speak. "Where's your comm?"

"Lava? If it wasn't with --" Ren pauses, briefly closing his eyes like it's painful for him to say his next words. "-- RK, then I don't have it."

Doc hums. "We'll let X know you need a new one. What did you want me to write down?"

"Just something short," Ren says, leaning against the wall. "That I owe you a better apology. Shove that in my face if I forget it."

He snorts softly as he types the note in. "Duly noted." Doc side-eyes Renbob, who's still washing dishes, and lowers his voice so the hippie can't overhear them. "I mean, hey, apologies don't get much worse than trying to kill me a second time, so at least there's nowhere to go but up?"

Ren snorts back. "Okay, okay, point taken. Write down that I owe you a *much* better apology." He gestures vaguely with his free hand as he takes another sip of water. "But not, like, an IOU type of apology, because I don't want that getting into Grian's hands somehow."

"Or Joe?"

"Yeah, good point. Or Joe."

Doc nods. There's not much else to say. He saves the note and puts away his commlink again; Renbob has finished washing dishes and is making himself a protein shake (which seems a little counterproductive, given how much of a mess those things make). He holds the glass towards Doc and Ren, who both make twin noises of disgust, Doc shaking his head and Ren pulling the pillow in front of him to hide.

"They're not *that* bad, dudes," Renbob huffs, starting to walk back to the driver's cabin. "RK likes them!"

"That stuff got put in my body?" Ren presses his face into the pillow. "Doc, I'm gonna puke."

Renbob smiles at the two of them, raising his glass in a toast before he's back in the cabin, and it's not long before 80s music starts quietly playing, the van faintly rocking as they start to move again. Doc and Ren exchange looks -- and Doc reaches out with his foot, shutting the door between the rooms.

"More of a 90s fan?" He elbows Ren as he settles back into his spot on the bed and gets a faint smile in return... before it drops as Ren rubs at his face with his free hand.

"I can still hear your heart, dude. You don't -- if it's making you that nervous, you don't have to sit next to me. We're both -- there's a lot still going on, and I don't want you to feel pressured into this, man."

"Exposure therapy." Doc plucks the glass of water from Ren, taking his own drink before he hands it back. "That's a thing, right?"

Ren raises the glass, and Doc starts to ask what he's doing before stopping (mostly out of sheer confusion) as lukewarm water trickles over his shoulder. Ren gently rubs at what bloodstains he can see, probably trying to wash them out somehow. "That's for, like, people who are scared of dogs or crowds, Doc. Not people who tried to kill you."

"I'm still scared of a dog," Doc says, grimacing as wet fabric sticks uncomfortably to his skin. "So you have no excuse."

He pauses. Takes a breath in. "Also, you might want to try colder water for bloodstains."

"Oh?" Ren raises an eyebrow. "Who taught you that one?"

"Stress. I believe she was helping me clean out your shirt after she quick-draw shot you for something."

"Oh. Oh, yeah, she *did* do that, huh." Ren laughs bitterly. "Man, I've just got really bad luck when it comes to people shooting me with arrows."

Doc doesn't ask what other incident he's referring to. Instead, he takes a deep breath in, steadying himself. "Okay. I'm going to move my other arm."

"... You sure?"

Doc grimaces. "Gotta know how bad it is."

He wiggles his fingers. Nothing. Moves his forearm up and down. Roughly the same amount of pain as his other shoulder -- not *great*, but not *awful*.

Then he raises his arm the rest of the way, and nearly whites out from *sheer agony*. Manages to

choke back most of the yell, but not quite *all* of it. It *hurts*. Hurts like hot metal against bare skin. Doc manages to steady himself with his good arm just quickly enough to stop himself from falling over entirely.

His vision is blurry, from tears or the pain he can't tell, but he can hear Ren talking, can feel a hand forcing his arm back down. It almost hurts as much as raising it, but Ren gets his arm back to his side, and Doc whimpers at the sound of creaking metal.

"Freakin hell, Doc," Ren hisses, and his hand raises to his shoulder. Doc almost starts sobbing on the spot at how much it hurts. "I can't fix this, dude. This is a you-level of engineering, I left *puncture holes* in it."

"Can you see any wires?" Doc's other hand is closed into a fist, nails biting into his palm to help ease even a little bit of the pain. "It's only really bad if you can see the wires."

Ren makes a frustrated noise, and Doc has a feeling he would be digging into Doc's shoulder again if he wasn't consciously holding back. "It's only bad if you see the wires' -- bro, you almost blacked out."

Doc grits his teeth. "Meant the damage to the prosthetic, not the pain. Hurts like hell either way, but if none of the wiring's super busted then I might be able to turn the thing off entirely and work on it that way." It's been a long time since he's needed to do maintenance on it. Figures that something like this would happen.

"I don't know what 'super busted' means," Ren says slowly, raising his hand up from Doc's shoulder (another jolt of pain as he adjusts to the absence of pressure), "but I'm worried this qualifies."

"It's *fine*," Doc mutters. "I was gonna have to do a tune-up anyway. Just... tell me what it looks like, so I can figure out how bad it is. As descriptive as you can be -- don't worry about technical terms, just let me know what you see."

"Right," Ren mumbles. "Right, okay. Uh, puncture holes, obviously. I can see a few wires in there, the metal's kinda warped and pushing them out of line. Do you need to know the colors?"

"Not really," Doc says, flinching as Ren's hand rests lightly on his shoulder again. "Some misaligned wires shouldn't be doing this."

Ren pauses, and then Doc barely holds back a scream as claws drag across where two of his plates should align. "You've got rust. I -- I didn't realize, I just thought that part of the arm should be that color, but you've got rust right here."

"Rust and wires don't add up to feeling like my arm's gonna explode, Ren," Doc snaps, and takes a deep breath. "Sorry. Nothing else?"

"Told you I wasn't good at this," Ren says, snorting softly. "What am I *looking* for, anyway? That might help."

Doc waves his currently-operational hand. "Something that looks bad. Rust on the inside's close, but it wouldn't be this sharp. Maybe a whole bunch of wires pinched together, or --"

"...Two plates that look like they've been newly welded?" Ren's voice is quiet, sheepish.

Doc takes a shaky breath in. "*Oh*. Yeah, that... that would do it. Okay."

“Doc, I’m-”

“-You can feel bad and apologize after I’ve got the arm turned off,” he interrupts, before Ren can go on a tangent. “Okay. Bad news, the wires in there being a little out of place means the off switch might not work as intended.”

“Is there good news?” Ren’s voice has gone up about half an octave. “Doc, please tell me there’s good news.”

Another deep breath in, out. “The *good* news is we can bypass that. There’s a blue wire dead center of the entire mess. It’s kind of out of the way on purpose so it can’t get damaged easily, but if you cut that then the whole arm should shut off.”

“Cut it with -- what? I don’t know how to use a wire cutter, dude.”

Doc rubs his temples as best he can manage with one hand. “If your claws can poke holes in metal, then they’re sharp enough to cut a wire. Just... reach in and yank it out. Cut it. Whatever works as fast as possible.”

“Isn’t that gonna hurt?” Ren shuffles around on the bed, sitting in front of Doc. “Like. Hurt *a lot*?”

“Bad news part two,” Doc says, managing a smile at Ren, trying to keep a brave face. “Good news part two, do it fast enough and I won’t feel it for that long.”

Ren scowls at him, scooting back into a better position to reach Doc’s arm. “You’re the worst.”

“RK would never say such horrible things to me,” Doc jokes, lightly kicking Ren with his foot. He braces himself as Ren looks through the puncture wounds, trying to find the blue wire. “Am I allowed to ask how he is?”

“No,” Ren mutters, claws raised just above Doc’s shoulder. “But you still can, after this.”

“Glad to hear he hates this as much as you do, then.” Doc rolls his eyes, still braced as Ren carefully pulls a plate away from his shoulder and sets it on the bed. “Got line of sight on it?”

“Yeah. Doc, are you *sure* about this?”

“I trust you.”

“Right,” Ren says, and then reaches in.

Discomfort. Sharp but faint pain as Ren’s claws find the wire, and his thumb settles under it. “D’you want me to count down?”

Doc sighs. “If it’ll make you feel better, I’ll do it. On three.”

“Right,” Ren repeats, fingers shifting around the wire. “On three.”

“One,” Doc says. “Two.” His fingernails are digging tightly enough into his palm that they’ve drawn blood. “*Thr-*”

He does not manage to stifle the scream, this time. The most he can do is cut it off as fast as possible as pain sears through him. There is no metaphor for this, for how badly it hurts. It’s a couple seconds at most. It feels like an *eternity*. Finally, mercifully, his arm goes limp, sensors and mechanics entirely turned off. The absence of pain hurts in its own weird way.

His throat is raw, but he manages to open his eyes (when had he closed them?) and give Ren a thumbs up with his organic hand. “Thanks, dude.”

“That’s all you have to say?” Ren pulls his claws out of Doc’s arm, the sound of nails on metal making them both flinch. “Thanks?”

“Anything else needed?” Doc mutters, grimacing as he sits up straight and can feel the dead weight of the arm pulling at his back and neck. “Thanks, I’m all good, I can fix it now that the hard part’s done?”

“I guess.” Ren flicks a piece of wire filament sticking to his claw away, watching as Doc reaches for the half-empty glass of water. “You sure you’re okay? That was kind of awful, dude.”

Doc downs the whole glass before bothering to answer, wincing as he swallows and his throat stings still. “It’s not like I haven’t had to do this before, Ren. It just sucks each time.”

“...Y’know, Doc, I worry about you sometimes.”

He snorts. “Someone’s gotta do it.”

Spring

Chapter Summary

Doc has a moment of quiet with the shadows.

Chapter Notes

(im not even sure what to call this chapter. it ain't fluff and it ain't angst so... enjoy the bittersweet? -fluffy)

The room is dark. Save for the pale glow of Doc's eye, every inch of the room is covered by shadows, blankets hanging over the windows again to hide the solar system's sun. Doc's considered asking if Renbob has an eyepatch, so the room can be in total darkness -- but with the way Ren's passed out on the bed, he doesn't really think he'll need it.

He leans back into the chair, sighing as he looks over Ren again. Physically, he looks fine, but there's still so much he doesn't know about Third Life and RK, things that Doc can tell left a deeper scar than a blade ever could.

It doesn't startle him when the temperature drops in the cabin -- if anything, the cold's welcome, this close to the sun they're passing by. He just sighs and looks over at RK, barely fazed by the mess of shadows that's almost overtaking him.

"Hey," Doc says, nodding in the general direction of the shadows. "Van's slowed down, in case you're having trouble adjusting."

"That would explain it," RK says, voice echoing from just over Doc's shoulder, which seems to be the usual for this form. *"Can't wait to be on solid ground again."*

Doc snorts softly. "Same here. I've got extreme cabin fever, and that's putting it mildly. Been ages since I've seen *grass*. At least I have something to do now." He gestures at his current project, which is laid out on the desk in front of him. He's detached as much of the arm as he can, and his shoulder's currently covered by a makeshift cap so he doesn't damage it further.

"He didn't enjoy that." RK is solidifying much faster than last time. Doc can already see a pair of boots sinking into the carpet. *"Neither did I."*

"Oh, you were awake for that?" Doc flicks one of the bolts that keeps his elbow together, watching it spin on the table. He can't do much work in the dark, but he can still at least see the parts. "Were you around for the first part of that, too? Or were you keeping damage control?"

"Damage control was the most I could manage without him knowing I was there," RK says, his voice pained. The shadows press into his face, color already starting to seep into place on his clothes. *"You're lucky that arm is only as bad as it is now. He was seconds away from setting fire to the cables inside."*

Doc grimaces. “Suppose I should thank you for that. Which is to say, uh, thanks for that.”

RK smiles with newly-formed sharp teeth. “*You’re welcome.*” He cocks his head to the side, staring at the desk, but he doesn’t say anything else, so Doc takes that as a go-ahead to keep talking.

“Not gonna lie,” he says, gesturing at the bench, “getting this thing off hurt like hell. Though I suppose you could tell, what with the... noise. Sorry about that.”

“You know, doctor, you really don’t have to apologize for being in excruciating pain. It’s not exactly something under your control.”

Doc gives him a one-armed shrug and spins the bolt again with another well-placed flick. It glints dully in the red light of his eye.

RK’s wearing Martyn’s face, which means Doc can’t read him as easily, and he doesn’t know what kind of look RK is giving him as he leans over Doc’s shoulder, one shadowy claw trapping the bolt against the table. Doc scowls, batting RK’s hand away.

“You’re worse than Ren. Or maybe that *was* you, mixing the screws out of order.”

RK snorts, looking over the messy table. “*This **has** an order?*”

“My kind of order,” Doc says, and RK goes silent as he pulls away. Doc sets the bolt against the crease of his elbow before he turns around, and then... pauses. Blinks. Takes a second to readjust. “Not a fan of Martyn’s face anymore?”

“Not what I’m thinking about,” RK quips back, and Doc’s own face gives him a lazy grin as he settles on the couch, crossing his legs and leaning back. *“I’m proud of you, doctor. Ren’s lucky to have a friend like you. His emotions are a lot less scrambled, that’s for sure.”*

“And all it took was Renbob locking us both in a cabin until he tried to kill me again,” Doc says, rolling his eyes. “I’m not mad at you this time, in case that wasn’t clear. My insides are not on fire, and that’s very helpful, thank you.”

“I was trying to compliment you.”

“I’m bad at accepting compliments,” Doc responds frankly. He picks up the bolt from the table. Tosses it up and down a few times in his palm. *Almost* considers tossing it from hand to hand, but remembers just in time that he doesn’t exactly have the “to hand” part available. “I’m glad Ren’s doing alright. I was worried I might’ve freaked him out a bit too much with --” he gestures at the parts lying on the table “-- y’know.”

He pauses. “No offense to Ren, but I was half expecting him to tap out and make *you* do it instead.”

“He tried,” RK laughs. *“I refused. I didn’t trust myself to be as precise as him.”*

“I’m sure that’s the only reason,” Doc mutters, twisting the bolt between his fingers. He glances over at Ren, watches the sheets gently rise and fall, the light from his eye highlighting Ren’s face where his hair isn’t covering it. “What’re you planning on doing when we get to Hermitcraft, RK?”

RK hums, eyes flicking towards Ren as well. He mutters something in his sleep, turning over and pulling the sheets tighter, the ends of the fabric getting stuck on his claws. Doc wonders if they’ll run out of blankets before they get to season 8, waiting for RK to start talking.

"I'm not sure," he admits, leaning forward, propping his chin up with his hand. *"I think it would be best if I was just... a quiet voice in the back of his head for a while, after I talk with him. Give him some breathing room."*

"And what if I want you around?" Doc flips the bolt between his thumb and forefinger, the movement automatic at this point. This is the most questions he's ever asked RK, and he can't hide the nerves that make his voice crack a little. "You're my friend, too."

RK gives him a faint smile, rubbing at the bridge of his nose like Doc does so often. *"We'll have to ask Ren when he wakes up. It's his decision too. His body."*

"Speaking of which," Doc turns away from his doppelganger, dropping the bolt back onto the table. "Is this actually his body, RK? Things aren't adding up here. You took over from him in Third Life. He died, respawned in our old world, died again, and now he looks like he did in the deathworld? You brought him back, as he said, 'different.' What does that mean?"

"...Ah." RK makes a thoughtful noise that sounds remarkably like a soft villager *hrm*. He taps his claws against one leg. *"Yes and no. It's his body from 'season seven,' if that's what you were asking."*

Doc narrows his eyes at the arm on the table like it's the source of all his issues. "It wasn't. You know what I meant."

RK takes a breath in. *"If I am given a body, like with Ren's initial contract, I require certain... accommodations."* Doc glances over, surprised by the formal wording, and is met with another form change.

"Ren again?"

"Doctor, do you want me to finish explaining or do you want me to go into the exact mechanics of shadow projection?"

"Point taken," Doc says, and makes a mental note to actually ask about "the exact mechanics of shadow projection" at some point in the future.

RK huffs softly and rolls his eyes before continuing. *"Any body I possess takes on the accommodations I need. I took Ren's in Third Life, and when he died it was my body. When I found him again, it was his own body, but my presence in his body changed him again. You wouldn't say a... tattoo, for example, meant whoever had put it there now could tell you what to do."*

"So you're just a tattoo with sarcasm," Doc says, waving his hand when RK opens his mouth. "I know, I know. No perfect metaphor, I'm still going to use it. It's his body, with your modifications?"

RK nods, not saying anything else as he rises from the couch and takes the short few steps towards the bed, watching Ren as he sits on the edge of the sheets. Ren stirs slightly, curls away, and RK sighs.

"He still thinks you're --" Doc wiggles his fingers in the air, vaguely mimicking the way Cleo makes armor stands pose "-- in control, I guess? I don't know how to convince him otherwise. The evidence is pretty damning, I'll be frank."

"I'm aware," RK says, still looking down at Ren. *"Trust me, if I could think of a way to fix it, I would."*

Doc looks from RK over to Ren (still fast asleep), and then back over to RK again. "It still technically *is* your body, isn't it? Because of how you bent the contract."

RK lets out a soft huff of laughter, and the air in front of his face fogs up a little. "*I am consistently surprised by your keen eye for small details, doctor.*"

Doc rolls his eyes. "Answer the question."

"Yes," he says simply, running a hand through his hair and smiling at Doc, even though he looks exhausted. "*He died again, and I took over again. I didn't realize until you two had your argument that it's why I'm still around.*"

"So he did die." Doc closes his eyes, clenching his fist around the bolt until the edges cut into his palm. "Ren died twice and you were there both times to take him over. No wonder he doesn't like you."

RK sighs, and Doc listens to the rustling of fabric. "*He's dreaming, right now. Dogwarts, if war had never come, would be called Renchanting. He's planting flowers instead of building walls. Watching fireflies and stars. Martyn is there.*" RK pauses, and Doc opens his eyes, watching wisps of shadow streak down his cheeks before they fade. "*After every winter comes a spring, Doc, and they never got to experience it. Thanks to me.*"

Doc sighs. "I'm getting the feeling you used to really suck as a person."

A pause. RK's laugh is quiet and bitter. Hollow. "*Used to.*"

He reopens his eyes and grabs the partial fork from the side of the desk, brandishing its prongs ineffectively at RK. "Don't you self-deprecate at me, your majesty."

"*Or what? You'll attempt to solve the situation single-handedly?*" RK blinks, expression briefly clearing as he seems to realize something. "*Oh -- pun not intended.*"

Doc ineffectively muffles his laughter as best he can with one hand. "No, point taken, point taken!" He drops the fork back on the table and rubs his face. "Man. We're really bad at this, aren't we?"

"*Life was a lot easier when I didn't care about anyone,*" RK agrees, smiling. "*Though I guess that's not much of a life, taking it away from other people. Damn you, Martyn. Damn you, Doc.*"

Doc doesn't say anything to that, leaning back in his chair with a sigh and watching Ren. He looks calm. Peaceful. It makes sense, if he's planting flowers in his dreams like the freakin' hippie he is, but it's still a relief to not see worry or anger pulling his friend's face into something nearly unrecognizable.

There's a quiet chime from his workbench. Doc sits up straight, RK following suit, both of them looking at each other. Doc takes a shaky breath as he turns away from the Red King's confused expression, scanning the table for his comm until he finds it, half-hidden under his metal hand. He turns it on.

<Xisuma> Hey, Doc! Just got your message about being late.

<Xisuma> I'm not sure how far out you guys are, but we're starting S8 in a couple of days :-). Hope to see you soon.

Doc blinks at the message that they're apparently in range to receive now. Scrunches his face up as he tries to recall exactly how many days away Renbob had said they were, and comes up short.

<DocM77> Still headed your way. See you soon

<DocM77> Might need new commlink for Ren btw. I think he lost his somehow

He pauses. Waves the commlink at RK. “You want to let X know you’re hitchhiking, or would you rather stay a secret?”

RK raises an eyebrow. “*Do I have a choice?*”

“Ehhh.” Doc shrugs. “What X doesn’t know won’t hurt him.”

“*Hm,*” RK laughs quietly at that. “*I’ll let Ren decide when to tell all your hermits, then.*”

Doc ignores the next message that comes in from X to reach out and kick at RK. “Hey. You’re a part of this now. They’re *our* hermits, man.”

“*They’re only ‘our’ hermits if you let me kill Scar,*” RK says, and yelps when Doc aims another kick at him. “*I’m joking! I’m not going to kill anyone, doctor, I promised!*”

Doc takes the half fork again, pointing it at RK with a scowl before he sets it back down on the desk, yawning. He’s exhausted at his workbench again, but for once it’s a good kind of exhaustion. Something that sinks deep into his body, washing away the earlier tension, the fear and pain. There’s an unusual feeling in his gut -- not bad, just *there*, and Doc turns back to RK with a sleepy smile.

“Did you mean that, earlier? D’you really think I’m a good friend?”

RK smiles back. “*I don’t say things I don’t mean, Doc.*”

“Cool,” Doc says, resting his head down onto his table and closing his eyes. “Cause for what it’s worth, I think you’re a good friend too, RK.”

“*Thank you, doctor,*” RK says quietly, and Doc can feel a cold hand on his back. “*Now get up and get to the couch. You’re not falling asleep at your desk again.*”

Restart

Chapter Summary

Ren and RK have a talk. It could've gone worse.

Chapter Notes

growing obsolete / obsolescence feels complete

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Ren opens his eyes and immediately shuts them again, groaning at the bright light that has seared its way into his retinas.

“Freakin *hell* .”

“Good morning to you too,” Doc says, sounding somewhat amused as he clatters around the kitchen. Ren can smell coffee already. “Sleep okay? How’re you feeling?”

“Like a ravager stomped my head into the dirt after I’d chugged a potion of harming,” Ren mutters, peeking his eyes open enough to watch Doc moving around. “You’re smiling, and it’s kinda freaking me out, man. Why’re you looking at me like that?”

“Got a message from X last night, which means we’re now in radio range of season eight! *And I have an idea.*”

Somehow, Ren gets the feeling this isn’t the full story, but he’ll let it slide. He pushes himself up into a sitting position and eyes the room warily -- Doc’s arm is still resting on the desk, there’s a replacement bead curtain over the door to the driver’s area, and there’s no sign of any ice or blood or general doppelgangers. It’s also hard to see his reflection right now, seeing as the window currently has a whole entire sun within range.

“Alright,” he says slowly, “I’ll take the bait. What’s the idea? Somethin’ with goats?” He takes a second, watches Doc bustle around the kitchen. “Also, my dude, are you *sure* you wanna be working with hot liquids when you’re down an arm?”

“Yes, absolutely.” Doc is beaming as he grabs one coffee mug off the counter and shoves it at Ren. “Drink this.”

Ren doesn’t take the cup, instead warily eyeing the light brown liquid inside, almost entirely hidden beneath a tower of whipped cream. “Last time you told me ‘drink this’, G looked like a cod in a sweater for a couple of days.”

“That wasn’t my fault, that’s just what he looks like,” Doc says, gently bonking the mug against Ren’s hand. “But I can promise you it’s not anything that may or may not have given you hallucinations. Just a drink.”

“That’s like the least reassuring way to get me to drink this,” Ren complains, but he still takes the mug between both hands, savoring the warmth before he brings it up to his lips.

It’s... well, Ren can safely say it doesn’t taste like one of Doc’s homebrew potions, but he can’t quite put his finger on the taste. There’s definitely some coffee in it, and that’s as much as he can tell.

“What is it?” Ren lowers the mug back down to his lap with one hand, wiping off the whipped cream mustache he can vaguely feel on his upper lip with his other hand.

Doc pauses. Glances down at the beverage and back up at Ren. “Have you never had a mocha, Ren?”

“This isn’t a mocha,” Ren snorts, and licks away the whipped cream from his finger. “I’ve had mochas before, Doc, and they did not taste like this.”

Doc blinks. “It’s coffee with hot chocolate mix in it. I’m pretty sure that’s what a mocha is.” He seems genuinely confused, which means he’s definitely not messing with Ren.

“Huh.” Ren takes a bite out of the whipped cream pile on top. “Tastes different than I remember. It’s good, though.”

“*It’s not bad,*” an all-too-familiar voice agrees, and Ren starts, just barely steadying himself in time to prevent the drink -- which apparently *is* a mocha by definition -- from spilling all over the bed.

Doc gives him a worried look. “You okay there?”

“Did you not hear that?”

A soft snort. “*He can’t hear me, Ren.*”

Ren very carefully places his mug in his lap, despite his shaking hands, and makes a vague gesture towards his head, meeting Doc’s eyes. “It. Um. I’m not asleep, right?”

“Why would you be asleep?” Doc moves away from the kitchen, standing above Ren, still giving him that worried look.

“*Very much not asleep,*” the Red King agrees in his head, and Ren takes a deep breath as a brief chill runs down his spine. “*I’m the passenger now. Go on, talk to Doc. He looks worried about you.*”

“Red King,” Ren mumbles, and Doc makes a soft noise of understanding, moving to sit on the bed next to him. “I don’t like this, Doc.”

Doc gently takes Ren’s hand and places it back over his cup, and Ren appreciates the warmth from both his friend and the beverage as the cold vanishes for the time being. He shakily raises it to take another sip, watching as Doc gets back up and grabs a plate from the counter, setting a stack of pancakes next to Ren with an apologetic smile.

“I know, man.” Doc reaches back towards the table, handing Ren a fork once he’s placed his mug back down. “But it’s the best solution. RK and I were talking last night, and it’s all up to you -- whether you want to tell the hermits about him, I mean.”

“Mhm.” Ren goes to take another sip of mocha and realizes he’s holding a fork and not his mug.

He pauses. Grabs the mug with his other hand, takes a sip, and places it back down. "It... doesn't seem like a good idea. I mean, it -- he's going to have to mind his business, right? I've got season plans and they do not involve blood gods. No offense, Red- uh, RK."

"None taken, dog."

He stiffens, and the fact that the cold chill up his spine is imagined this time doesn't make it any less unsettling. "Uh -- one sec, Doc."

Deep breath in. He's about to do something that before he's learned the hard way not to do, and the only different thing he has going for him is the *possibility* that the Red King has changed for the better. "Hey, man, can you *not* call me that maybe? It's kind of condescending."

Even if the Red King is in his head, he can almost see the way he pauses and looks at Ren. Red eyes, the same as his own, boring into him.

"Of course. I didn't realize it would be insulting. My mistake."

"Thanks," Ren grimaces, stabbing his pancakes a tad harder than needed. "Ren works fine. Or even Rendog."

"Fuzzball, if you're being stupid," Doc says, raising a brow at Ren. "I'm surprised I don't call you that more often."

There's a huff inside of Ren's head. *"Smack him for me."*

Well. He can't pass up an opportunity like that, even if it's the Red King asking. He reaches out and smacks Doc's leg with the back of his hand, flicking some syrup onto his labcoat in the process. Doc just sighs, poking Ren in retaliation before he starts ineffectively wiping at the sugary stain, and they both relax in the quiet of the morning, the sounds of fabric and the clinking fork normal enough for Ren that he doesn't have to think about the god in the back of his mind.

"How are the pancakes?"

"Good," Ren mumbles through a mouthful of the aforementioned food. "How's your arm?"

Doc looks over toward the desk. "Coming along fine. A little slow, but that's mostly because I'm working one-handed. Might need your help with a couple things in my shoulder, since I can't fully detach that."

"You can't ask Renbob for help?"

He snorts. "Renbob's not my best friend. I'm not letting that freakin' hippie anywhere near my inner workings. No offense to him, I just don't want him getting flower pollen in there or something."

"Right," Ren says, rolling his eyes. "Forgot you had allergies."

"Why do both you and RK assume I'm lying about *that*, of all things?"

"Why'd *you* start a paramilitary organization over your allergies?" Ren points his fork at Doc. "It just screams coverup. I've never even seen you sneeze over flowers."

Doc grabs the pancakes on Ren's fork and pulls them off, popping the small bit into his mouth despite Ren's offended gasp. "Because I usually take allergy medicine -- seriously, *this* is what I'm

lying about? You know when I'm lying, Ren."

It's true, but Ren doesn't want to give Doc the satisfaction of being right about something. He just shrugs and finishes off his pancakes, setting the plate to the side when he's done, and reaches for the mocha mug next. The cup is still warm, even if the stuff inside has cooled down.

"*We should probably talk.*"

Ren almost chokes on his drink, his throat burning as he forces it down, and his voice comes out raw. "Can you *not* do that when I'm drinking something, please?"

"*It's pretty funny, you have to admit,*" the Red King laughs. "*But fine. We do need to talk, though.*"

He sighs. Takes another sip of his drink and looks over towards Doc. "Hey, I'm gonna start mumbling to myself. Don't let me distract you from arm work, mmkay?"

Doc nods, shoots him a thumbs-up, and gets up from the bed. He heads over to the desk, pauses, and then turns to grab his own cup of coffee from the counter first. Pauses. Turns back around, puts the cup down, picks up Ren's plate, puts it in the sink, and *then* picks up his coffee cup again.

Ren can hear the Red King snort softly. "*Scatterbrained.*"

He sighs. Looks over at Doc, who's back at his workbench, and then swings his legs over the bed, drains the last bit of his mug, sets it down on the countertop, and looks over to the bathroom.

...Well. If he has to have this talk, he'd rather have it as far away from Doc as possible. The guy's clearly biased (although Ren can't really say in whose favor, at this point. Maybe both of them).

Ren gets up, gives Doc one last nod, then slips into the bathroom and locks the door behind him.

He turns to the mirror. Red eyes stare at him. They're his own, and yet they're so unfamiliar to him that it feels like a stranger is staring at him from the mirror. His canines poke out from his lips even when his mouth is closed, and Ren pulls his face into a grimace, his reflection following suit. Grey skin crinkles in all the right places, and smooths back into place when he drops the expression, moving to sit on the edge of the sink, his back against the mirror.

"Alright," he says. "Let's talk about... whatever you want, I guess. Are we gossiping? Are you threatening me again? Or, heavens forbid, are we talking about our *feelings* or whatever?"

There's no answer. Ren frowns, leaning his head against the mirror too.

"Look, you wanted this talk, not me. Least you could do is give me a topic so I can start preparing insults."

The sink turns on behind him, and Ren stumbles away from the faucet before the back of his shirt can get wet, scowling at the handle flipped to 'cold'. "Is this what talking is like with you? You do a buncha freaky ghost stuff? This cannot be how you and Doc became friends, dude." He lifts his eyes back to his reflection.

He doesn't have one. His mirror image has vanished entirely, and Ren quickly brings a hand to his neck, feeling for a scar *does he have the scar*, not sure how to feel when his fingers find unblemished skin. It's not a nightmare, then. His neck itches with phantom pain, but that's about it.

"Cool party trick, dude," he says, rolling his eyes and biting back the deep-rooted dread that comes from looking at where his reflection should be. "Why aren't you, I dunno, actually saying

anything? You were talking just fine a couple minutes ago.”

Soft, low laughter, one that comes from no identifiable point in the room. It’s not cold in the emotional sense, but it puts him on edge. *“I’m concentrating, Rendog.”*

“On *what?*”

“This.”

Ren blinks, and in the split second he opens his eyes again, his reflection has returned.

It’s not really his reflection, though, he can tell that much. The thing smiling at him from the mirror still wears his face, but it’s... distorted, like he’s looking in a funhouse mirror. Taller, for one, but also less *alive* and more gaunt and inhuman. Its teeth gleam like knives in the light of the bathroom as it leans forward and taps against the mirror like it’s a piece of glass between them, and Ren catches blood out of the corner of his eye.

It’s more scarred-up than him. Thick black liquid -- less like blood, more like pitch -- oozes from a gash along its neck. It’s covered in red markings across ashen skin that glint in the light like they’re not quite healed yet. The shapes are... oddly regular. There’s some repeated symbols, like a crosshairs-looking one that reoccurs on its forearm, the opposite shoulder, and near its throat. Writing, he realizes.

The Red King smiles at him, eyes shining red like the names scrawled over its body, and Ren takes a step back from the sink.

“It’s not that scary, is it?” The Red King tilts its -- *his* head to the side, studying Ren, taking in his face and stance. *“Hm. I’m getting fear, disgust, a little bit of hatred in there --”*

“Stop that,” Ren hisses, ears pressed against his head like that will stop the Red King from reading his emotions. “Get -- Get out of my reflection, man. You could’ve just stayed in my head.”

“You know, I could’ve made you look like this instead of your current appearance.” He examines razor-sharp claws for a moment, glancing back up at Ren. *“I do prefer certain accommodations. Everything is a weapon. I decided it would scare Martyn too much, in the end, so I settled on an in-between.”*

Ren takes another step back, pressing up against the bathroom door. “And what, I’m supposed to thank you for that? Bad news for you, man, I still look like a werewolf extra from some B-rated horror movie.”

Some of the liquid drips from the wound in its neck, dropping to the ground, and Ren flinches when the puddle appears next to his own foot, spreading over the ground like tar. The faucet is still running (somehow), and the king dips his fingers into the water, combing back his hair from where it falls into his face. Red eyes pin Ren to the spot -- entirely red; sclera, iris, pupil, all slightly different shades that bleed into each other to the point where it’s hard to tell which parts are which.

“I don’t want you to thank me for anything,” he says quietly, and Ren watches as he raises his hands to the edge of the mirror, claws curling over the frame and into Ren’s side of the reflection. *“I just want you to know what I’m really like. What you’re going to have to deal with for the foreseeable future. I’m trying to be better, Ren, I really am, but you have a blood god in your head and it’s not going to be all pleasant, and for that I’m sorry.”*

The Red King pauses for a moment, briefly closing his eyes.

"You still don't trust me, and I can't blame you for it."

Ren laughs nervously -- what else can he do, at this point? "I already knew you were a melodramatic jerkwad, but thanks for confirming it for me."

The Red King snorts, and frost fogs up the mirror where his breath would have landed. *"I picked up the melodrama from you and the Hand, actually. Things take the shape of their summoners, and sometimes that's metaphorical."*

"Get to the point." He can feel his nerves fraying. It's not cold, not on this side of the glass, and somehow that's worse.

"You're a good man, Rendog. But good men don't summon blood gods. Not usually, anyways." Its -- his, the distinction is difficult to make, so maybe both -- smile is about as soft as it can be, when everything about the god seems to be made of sharp edges. "I've changed, yes. But I'm still here because of you."

Ren scowls, closing his hands into fists, claws digging into the soft skin of his palm.

"Don't look at me like that," he says quietly. *"It's just as much your fault as it is mine. You found that book. You decided summoning me was the only course of action."*

"The world was messing with our heads," Ren mutters, but they both know it's a weak excuse. "Besides, it's your ritual. You need a sacrifice, you're telling me you didn't decide that?"

The Red King laughs, and the sound bounces off the walls, echoes through the air. *"It's funny. I already told Doc part of this, but you're the first person who has summoned me to protect something. I'm a war god -- blood god, however you want to phrase it, people don't summon me because they want peace."* He bows his head, resting it on his side of the mirror. *"And they don't offer themselves up as a sacrifice either. You're one of a kind, Ren, and I thought you were so different that I would die with you."*

"Who else would I sacrifice?" Ren fights back the nausea that rises in him -- he's not in Dogwarts, not right now.

"Political enemies. Disposable servants. A lesser man would have sacrificed Martyn." The reflection shimmers, and for one precious heartbeat, it's Martyn on the other side of the mirror, gaunt and grey and sharp, and then Ren is staring at himself again. *"An even lesser one would have put Etho, BigB, Skizz on that altar. But we've ended up here, Rendog. A changed god and a healing human. I've made my peace with us. Will you?"*

He sighs. "First off, I don't really have any say in the matter, do I? Not anymore."

"I am offering you exactly that, Ren, as best I can. If you want to keep being in denial, I will wait for you to come to terms with what you have done. This is our moment alone. Our talk, our hour of honesty. You're worried everyone here is against you, and I want to show we aren't." There's exhaustion in those blood-red eyes. It's strange to see, really.

"Okay," Ren says, and it's not *really* okay, but he's not sure what else he's supposed to say in response to something like that. "Second of all -- did you *really* have to do all this? Couldn't we have just telekin- telepathied at each other or something?"

*"You **did** call me a 'melodramatic jerkwad,' did you not?"* The Red King chuckles, and somehow his sharp angles seem to have softened just a little (or maybe Ren's just adjusting to the horror, but either way he'll take it). *"But I thought it best to be fully honest. For you to know everything about*

what you're getting into, this time. For me to apologize, Ren. I'm sorry I made you think you were a monster."

A hand stretches out from the mirror, grey skin covered in a light layer of frost. He turns his hand palm up, reaching towards Ren.

"Not to get literal," RK laughs gently, *"but I can offer a hand. It's just up to you to take it, Ren."*

Ren closes his eyes, and takes a breath.

"...I'm sorry I blamed you for me becoming the monster."

RK *tsks* softly, and Ren's not sure why. Seconds later, his hand meets RK's. Fingers curl around his wrist, and the Red King is smiling, and Ren doesn't know how he knows that. There's a chill in the air, and just as soon as it comes, it vanishes as there's gentle knocking at the door. Ren lets go and turns to the door, opening his eyes again.

"Hey man," Doc calls. "I don't know how much longer that talk is gonna be, but if you want to wrap it up, Renbob's calling for us."

"Go on. He's going to need your help with his arm."

"You can't do it yourself?"

RK's not here anymore -- Ren's reflection has gone back to normal, the sink's been turned off, and everything is very *regular* again -- but Ren can practically picture the sheepish grin on his face.

"I'm a blood god, not a cybernetics expert. I barely know redstone, Ren, I'm not touching something as delicate as that with a ten-foot pole."

"You're a wimp," Ren responds, rolling his eyes. He stretches, takes a deep breath in, and then turns back to the bathroom door and opens it, leaning out towards the main area of the van. "Hey, Doc! Sorry that took me a while, man."

Doc blinks at him from over at his seat by his workbench. There's a screwdriver in his mouth; he puts down the metal part he's holding, grabs the screwdriver from his mouth, and waves it at Ren. "You look... better?"

RK snorts, and Ren allows himself a genuine smile as he walks to Doc's workbench, leaning over the back of his chair. "Good talk. How much 'better' are we talking?"

"Well, you're smiling," Doc mutters, placing his screwdriver down. Ren rests his chin on the top of Doc's head, looking over the busted arm. Doc's heart is a normal rate, despite their proximity, but Ren ignores the sound of his friend's blood under his skin. "So I count that as a win. Renbob keeps yelling for us to come look. You up for 80s music?"

"Please, no," RK says. Ren cocks his head to the side and really thinks about it for a good few seconds.

"I'm up for whatever he wants to show us, and I'm up to hear RK complain about 80s music while not being able to do anything about it. You gonna be able to finish your arm in time, though?"

Doc makes the same grumbling noise that he also makes while concentrating intensely on something as he stares at the project on the desk. "Ehn, *maybe?* Hard to tell. We're still a few days out, and I doubt Renbob wants us to stare out the window for a week straight."

“He would if it was an interesting enough flower,” Ren says, pulling away from Doc as his friend stands up as well. He glances over Ren’s prosthetics for a brief moment, despite how perfectly they fit and work, and Ren sighs. “They’re fine, Doc. Worry about your own arm.”

Doc pulls a face and ruffles Ren’s hair, pulling strands out of the ponytail he’s swept it up into. “I still need to adjust them. Lag, stiffness, decalibration, other pains — this is all stuff I had to deal with my first time too, I don’t want you to go through it if I can avoid it.”

“I’ll let you know if I feel any of those,” Ren says gently, and tugs on Doc’s hand, savoring the warmth. “Cmon. Let’s go see what Renbob wants to show us.”

With any luck, it’s home.

Chapter End Notes

(it's too early for me to get horribly sentimental, but thank you all so much for all the kind comments and word of mouth and the like, et cetera, you've all been so nice! it's been a blast writing this, and i for one absolutely intend to return to this au for some HC8 stuff. stick around for the epilogue and we'll tell you our plans then! -solar)

(agreed: far too early to get sentimental, but never too early to say holy shit, thank you all for the, quite frankly, incredible support on this story. solar and i certainly didn't expect this, and it's been incredible to see. see you in the epilogue! -fluffy)

Epilogue

Chapter Summary

...where is the Hand?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He's falling.

It's dark and he's falling, and worst of all, he's alone. Falling through nothing with no one.

He was told that this was what he deserved. That this was his price to pay for their unhappiness, their displeasure. He'd told them to promptly shove off, thank you, and then they'd left him to fall forever.

He wasn't alone to begin with, though. There used to be something else here. Something cold, holding him tight as they both fell through darkness. The cold had told him it was proud of him. That it was sorry. And, eventually, that it had to go, because someone needed it, someone was dying and maybe it could actually save him this time.

And he'd shrugged, and told it to go do the right thing, and that's how he's ended up where he is now. Tumbling through darkness, with no sign of landfall, just because some weird voices really wanted him to stab his best friend and he'd told them to stuff it.

...Martyn's getting really good at doing flips.

He's learned some fun stuff while he's been falling. Apparently his thumb is double jointed. He doesn't actually need to breathe, wherever he's falling, and the longest he's bothered to hold his breath for is seven minutes. He's made a revolutionary game where you can play rock paper scissors against yourself.

He's also learned that when someone spends a long amount of time in the void, any color seems painfully bright. His coat is currently tied around his waist, and Martyn is staring upwards and into the dark. It's not even dark, not really.

It's nothing.

One flat sheet of nothing. No shape, no pattern, no way to tell how far he's fallen, since he can't even access his stats or log out of the world. Sleeping is impossible. Apparently, starving is as well.

It's all worth it. *Long live the king* if he's being dramatic, *piss off* if he's having an off day. It's a general habit of his to tell Unseen Voices to go screw themselves, and Martyn doesn't regret a single decision that landed him here in the void.

He's just so damn lonely.

Martyn didn't die alone, and he didn't pass into death alone, and now that it is just him and his thoughts, the only thing he can think of is the way it felt when Ren first pushed the axe into his

hands. Not the emotions, but the physical heft of the thing. Handle not quite fully polished, slightly splintery. Heavier than diamond should be. Edge of the blade slightly jagged, not from misuse but as if from intent.

Okay, that's enough thinking about the axe, or he's going to accidentally summon the bastards that put him here. He sighs and mentally lets go of the axe in his hands, and then pauses.

There actually *is* something clutched in one hand. It's scratchy and rough, kind of like the surface of... good stationary? That's... hang on. That's weird. That shouldn't be happening.

He looks down at the thing in his hands -- it's a letter. It's got a bright orange seal on it that hurts his eyes to look at in the gloom, a fact that is *not* helped by the fact that the wax seal appears to be iridescent and glittery. Martyn rolls his eyes. *Scott*. Drama queen.

...Wait. What?

Hold up. *Hold up* .

He's never believed the word around the block, the *rumors* about this kind of thing before. People say the MCC letters just *appear* despite the fact that they're not supposed to be able to receive mail. He'd always just shrugged it off, though, they'd gotten to him in his mailbox just fine before.

Apparently, the rumors were not, in fact, just rumors. This is definitely an MCC invitation. He puts a thumb over the seal. There's a little cat pattern pressed into the wax. He turns it over, and the front of the envelope is addressed to *Martyn Inthelittlewood(s)* in Scott's handwriting, and then in smaller print *wherever the hell you are*.

He snorts. Thanks, Scott. Real specific. (Then again, *he* doesn't know where he is either, so that's fair enough.)

Martyn slides his thumb under the side of the envelope and pops the seal off. Normally he'd use a letter opener, but normally he's also, y'know, not falling through infinite nothingness, so he'll just have to make do.

It's definitely an invitation, no matter how he looks at it. The words swim in front of his eyes -- been forever since he's had to *read* something, really -- and he can't quite parse the teammates section, but it sure is the same wording as the MCC letters he usually gets, fancy stationary and printed-out lettering and everything.

There's a little section for him to sign at the end of the letter, to say he'll be attending. Same place it always is. Grants access to the practice server, which is where Martyn used to spend a lot of his time.

...He doesn't have a pen.

He's about to throw his hands up in the air and absolutely give up the ghost when he shakes the envelope still in his other hand and realizes there's something else inside it. He folds the letter back up and very, *very* carefully extracts the pen from the bottom of the envelope. It's one of those fancy astronaut pens, the kind where you're supposed to be able to write upside-down or freehanded with no backing and also underwater and basically anywhere.

"Aw, Scott," Martyn says, voice hoarse from disuse, "you *shouldn't* have."

He still holds the paper flat against his leg -- not like it makes much of a difference, his signature is messy anyway -- as he signs it, tucking the pen away into his pocket and folding the letter back up,

sliding it into the envelope. Martyn doesn't exactly have the tools to reseal it, but whatever rules the MCC invites run on don't seem to care much about that; the orange cat sticks back against the cream-colored envelope like it's attached to a magnet or something. He's pretty sure he's crinkled bits of the stationary, but it looks pristine in his hands, and he awkwardly holds it out towards the void.

"Uh," he says, as eloquently as possible. His throat feels dry, all of a sudden, and he holds back the cough he can feel coming up. "Here? I don't have a mailbox, y'know."

There's no noise, but Martyn imagines a faint *pop* as the invite vanishes from between his fingers. His fingers are covered in glitter, however, and Martyn scowls as he tries to brush it off and away from his clothes. It's just about as annoying as the bastards that stuck him here, so he hopes they enjoy the gift.

A few brief, harrowing minutes of silence. Of being back to nothing, again, nothing but falling, no proof of what just happened except for the pen in his pocket and the weird glitter on his fingertips.

And then -- light. Color. *Noise*.

Martyn's back hits the ground at a far slower speed than it should have (whatever happened to terminal velocity?) and it is *loud*. He can hear his own breathing, his own heartbeat. He can hear airflow. Leaves rustling. Distant redstone mechanisms. He puts his hands over his ears and squeezes his eyes shut. Everything is too *much*, and there isn't even anyone else around to see him acting like an idiot over very light background ambience.

...Acting like an idiot. Being overstimulated. Same difference. Martyn groans and drags himself off the main path towards, if he remembers the practice server correctly, a few decorative bushes near the entrance to one of the minigames. A corner to curl up in.

Martyn pulls his coat over his head. Hiding in the darkness and muffled quiet.

He manages a weak laugh. For whatever it's worth, he's back in action somehow. *Thanks*, Noxcrew.

Now he's just gotta figure out where home is from here.

Chapter End Notes

(i don't think i could've predicted how this story would've gone, to begin with. we had a very different idea to begin with — different ways ren would've woken up, how rk would've acted, how doc would've shared information. but i think at the end of the day... this is a good story. this is a really good story, and im proud of solar and i. we started writing this a bit into July, but we had been talking about the red king in a Hermitcraft setting since... oh my gods. okay, just checked the timestamps, we started writing this July 17th, and we only started talking to each other June 30th. wow. huh. we had a clear idea we were going for: the red king and doc on the hippie van. it didn't take a lot of time to escalate from there. i suppose, at the end of the day, what i want to really say is: thank you all. the amount of support this story has gotten is incredible, and breathtaking, and everytime i see someone recommend it to a friend, or call it 'The Fic' i lose approximately half of my braincells in shock. i didn't have a lot to begin with, guys! it's been a wild ride from

start to finish, and im glad i got to share it with solar and you guys.

get yourself a co-author, and have fun.

see you soon!

-love, fluffy)

(hey y'all, solar here. it's been one heck of a month, hasn't it? it sounds weird when i put it like that. *dog at the door* has been a thing fluffy and i have talked about for a while, but "a while" being a month and a half is... a unit of time i have trouble wrapping my head around. maybe it's too short. maybe it's too long.

definitely didn't expect this much kindness to come our way over this. like fluffy said, the responses to this have been frankly stunning -- i don't think "flabbergasted" is a particularly professional term to use, but anything less strong than that would be underselling my surprise. seeing people recommend the story to each other, hearing that people talk about it in chats and other spaces i'm not even *in*, people calling it The Big Fic, all the analysis of symbolism and theming... it means a lot, more than i can put into words. thank you guys.

it's been a blast writing this with fluffy, and it's been a joy sharing it with you. more to come eventually. catch you on the flipside. and, of course, the sign-off i usually write -
- be gay, do minecraft. -solar)

The next installment in the DATD AU will mainly be set at the start of HC8, and will mainly have different POV characters. We might be doing something a little bit different with genre, but it'll still focus on the same base concept -- RK and some of the other more *affected* 3rd Life players readjusting to life on Hermitcraft.

We don't have a 100% definite story arc yet, but we've got a good draft laid out. No set date of release -- it's coming when it's ready.

if you wake me on a january morning at four / don't get excited if i bark at the door.

Works inspired by this [one](#): [The beating of a heart](#) by [genesis_frog](#), [\(Standing Up\) Screaming at a Ghost Again](#) by [Takeoffyourskin](#), [frostburn](#) by [fluffy_papaya](#), [frostbite](#) by [fluffy_papaya](#), [knights and kings](#) by [Fearthefuzzybear](#), [unstoppable force \(martyn\) vs immovable object \(doc\)](#) by [genesis_frog](#), [permafrost](#) by [fluffy_papaya](#), [The Process Of History](#) by [jaz_it_up](#), [Starry Savior](#) by [Pancake Overlord](#), [Mistakes](#) by [Fearthefuzzybear](#), [Fray](#) by [underoriginal](#), [The Test](#) by [darkleweather](#), [mirror, mirror.](#) by [Dynamex2308](#), [And now you're here.](#) by [kinnotfound](#), [come in from the cold](#) by [GoodTimesWithScar](#)

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