

Phase 3

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Phase 3

by [TheMissingMask](#)

Summary

Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency receives a fair number of cases from a fair number of people, so it's probably not really that noteworthy when one just happens to be ex-Blackwing.

Notes

This was going to be a one-shot drabble, but might become something more. I have thoughts...

Chapter 1

Todd had barely been gone fifteen minutes. Just a quick trip down to the nearest bank to cash in a cheque from their latest client. Dirk had declined to join him, which was neither peculiar nor ordinary, so Todd had thought little of it. Of course, he would come back to find an old man with an impressive moustache standing in the middle of their entrance area, facing down Dirk on the other side of their reception desk, plastered as close against the wall as was possible within the realms of standard physics.

Even from the other side of the room, the terror in Dirk's wide eyes was painfully evident. Todd growled and strode straight across the room to take up a position between him and the intruder.

"You alright, Dirk?"

The man in question nodded mutely, visibly relaxing somewhat at his partner's presence. Todd took his hand beneath their reception desk and squeezed it lightly in reassurance as he turned back to their 'guest'.

"You're with Blackwing?"

"Not anymore. I was dismissed for being too close to the subjects." He looked past Todd at Dirk, "You have to believe me, I had nothing to do with the latest round of experiments."

"But you did with the ones before." It was a statement, an accusation.

"Yes."

"And you knew. You knew what they were doing, didn't you?" Dirk whispered, voice cracking painfully.

"I didn't know they would take it that far."

"But you didn't stop it."

"Reports claimed they were making progress, and-"

"Progress with what?!" Dirk yelled suddenly, causing Todd to flinch as he stepped forward and slammed both hands on the desk, "Controlling the freaks?! Containing the utterly uncontrollable?! Which, in case you didn't notice, is bloody impossible!"

"Svlad," Dirk flinched back at the name and the man quickly corrected himself, "Dirk. I am not the enemy. I'm here to give you a case. Don't you want that?"

"I don't want anything from you." Dirk mumbled, burst of rage suddenly dissipating back into fear and melancholy. He stepped back towards the wall, eyes glistening with incipient tears.

Todd levelled a glare at the man.

“You need to go.”

He made no move.

“Now.”

With a weary sigh, the moustached man took one step forward. Dirk took a step back to press flat against the wall. Todd remained firmly between them.

A manilla envelope was placed on the front desk and the man, taking a final sad glance at Dirk, turned to leave. The pair watched, silent and motionless, until their new client had driven away and simultaneously let out long, deep breaths they hadn't realised they had been holding.

With another steadying breath, Dirk took a step forward and reached for the folder. Todd shot a hand out to stop him.

“Todd...”

“I know.” The shorter man smiled, “The universe will make us take the case, whether we like it or not. But, the universe can wait until tomorrow.”

He shifted in between Dirk and the desk, between the detective and the new case, and wrapped his arms around his boyfriend's shoulders.

“For now, I say we call Farah, get some pizza, and watch some obscenely trashy films from the 90s.”

Dirk smiled broadly and leant down to capture Todd's lips in a characteristically energetic - characteristically Dirk - kiss.

“Sounds a most excellent idea.”

The case, which ultimately involved a headless biker and five missing persons, was solved with their usual arguable efficiency. It had been so complicated with so many moving parts to it, that all three of the detective agency's full-time employees had almost forgotten from whom the case came until it was finally time to report its completion to the client.

Todd and Farah insisted on accompanying Dirk when he insisted on reporting the case in person. He was proud of this one. Proud of friends, and proud of himself. He enthusiastically recounted the various confusions, enigmas, and peculiarities that had almost thwarted them along the way. Praised his companions for their ingenuity on many occasions. Explained the connections that he hadn't seen at the time, but saw now, and how his 'intuitions' had led him from one answer to another until they had all the pieces of the puzzle and he was able to declare “solved it!”.

Riggins, the man's name known only to Todd through Farah's digging, listened with rapt attention. He gleefully praised Dirk for his detective skills, said he was impressed, said he was proud. Never once called him Svlad. The way Dirk beamed in response to the kind words made Todd's stomach churn. The former Blackwing subject was still so utterly desperate for the approval of a man who condemned him to years of inhumane experimentation. Todd imagined there was probably a psychological explanation, even a name, for that kind of mental cluster fuck.

But, even though the entire scene makes him feel sick, Todd joins in with explaining the case to this Riggins bastard. More than anything, because he wants to make it clear to the asshole that Dirk in no way needs that man or his fucked up organisation. He is determined to show the former Blackwing agent that Dirk is a detective now, and will never again be a scientific curiosity to be prodded and poked in a cold, lonely bunker.

Dirk chattered about the case all the way home, explaining with his usual zeal how it must be connected to the one they had finished in April. Todd welcomed the characteristic theories, and he and Farah were soon both joining in with the excited discussions. They could almost forget that they had been standing before a former Blackwing operative only minutes before.

That same evening, somewhere in a basement computer laboratory in Blackwing, the file on Project Icarus was updated. Results from Experiment 3.0.1, as reported by Agent Riggins. It had been a valuable proof-of-principle for the new phase of testing. Ken smiled to himself as he closed the file, thrilled by the knowledge that he was one step closer to gaining complete control over the D-bug function of reality.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

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“Farah!” Dirk exclaimed gleefully as the woman walked through the door, arriving at their agency at precisely 8.00 AM as she always did. An hour that always found the place either entirely deserted, unless they were in the middle of a case when Dirk would most likely be wide awake and rambling inanely at an asleep Todd.

Today, however, they had no case. And yet when Farah surveyed the room, she could clearly see both men and a new lampshade all adorning the front desk, surrounding a bottle of champagne, three mugs, and a tray of brownies.

She smiled warily and slipped her jacket onto their coat stand, “What are we celebrating?”

Todd gave Dirk a knowing smile, raising his eyebrow in silent invitation for the detective to explain.

“Well,” He began, failing to entirely suppress his proud smile, “Today marks the three month anniversary since Todd last had an attack.”

“Three months?” Farah gave Todd a fond squeeze on the shoulder, finding herself grinning too, “That is worth brownies.”

“This new medication is great,” Todd poured champagne into Farah’s mug and handed it to her, knowing full well she would pretend to drink and not touch a drop, never one for alcohol before it was well-and-truly evening, “The last time I had an attack was during that case in Iowa when we ran out and couldn’t get more. Other than that...nothing! Not since I switched meds.”

He sipped his own sparkling wine and shrugged, “It’s just a pain it’s so much more expensive than the old one, but...”

"Nonsense Todd." Dirk beamed smugly, "I told you before, the universe will provide for you. The cost of your medication is irrelevant."

Todd couldn't help but be amused by Dirk's unwavering resolve in that particular element of his abilities.

"The universe provides for you, Dirk, we're just tagging along for the free beer. I doubt it's gonna take account of me or my pararibulitis."

"Of course it will, Todd. You're an integral part of me, ergo, it will account for you too."

Sometimes the American wished his partner didn't say such heart-melting sweet things so off-handedly. It always took him completely by surprise, and he found himself blushing into his mug.

"Oh!" Dirk suddenly leapt from his seat, "We need candles! Three candles for three months."

He rushed to get his jacket, disappearing behind their coat stand and reappearing a moment later with a cyan leather jacket.

"No. It should be 92, for 92 days attack free. Back in a mo!"

With that, the detective bounded out of the agency with all the same bright energy he had radiated all those years ago when he first broke into Todd's apartment. That Dirk had almost disappeared after Blackwing took him back, but it had been creeping back slowly since. Now, Todd found himself caught up in the ecstatic enthusiasm more than he warded off the melancholy.

That was worth more than brownies.

Todd smirked and shrugged at Farah as Dirk disappeared down the street. He reached for a brownie knowing that Dirk would end up returning not just with the candles, but with more brownies, probably peanut butter and teabags, and definitely a case.

Were it anyone else, Todd would be worried if they took an hour to make a twenty minute trip. Ok, no, that was a lie. Were it anyone else, aside from Amanda, he wouldn't give a shit if they took an hour to make a twenty minute trip. But that wasn't the point. The point was, Dirk had been three hours.

Todd had started worrying at two. He'd allowed the hour buffer to account for the pull of the universe and Dirk's invariably distracted mind.

At four hours, he conceded to panic and called his boyfriend, leaving a voicemail as politely requested by the recorded message. He sent a text too. Just in case.

At five hours, the number of voicemails and texts had collectively reached nine. By six it was at 20. Farah had gone out looking for him twice, following the same route the detective would have walked to the shops, and all likely detours he might have taken.

Nothing.

Dirk had vanished, and at seven hours, Todd was officially freaking out.

He put the phone to his ear, ready to hear Dirk's voicemail once more. Instead it rang. Rang again.

Todd held his breath.

It rang once more.

"Todd!" Dirk's voice was far too strained to be as happy as it sounded.

"Dirk! Where the hell are you?!" Todd yelled, fingers gripping the phone so tight he could barely feel them.

"Where? I'm...on my way back. Right now, so I'll see you soon."

With that, Dirk hung up.

Dirk never hung up on him. Ever.

Todd stared at his phone, somewhere between shocked and seriously pissed off. By the time the door to the agency clicked open and Dirk let himself back in, all the shock had vanished and Todd was well and truly, completely and utterly, pissed off.

Todd immediately shoved Dirk up against the door.

"Where the hell have you been?!"

"Nowhere."

"Nowhere? You were nowhere all fucking day?! And incapable of answering your goddamn phone?! Seriously?!" The shorter man shoved him harder against the surface for good measure.

"I was just...I got...lost?" Dirk attempted sheepishly, at which Todd released him and turned around, fuming.

"That's it?! You got 'lost'. Am I really supposed to believe that, Dirk?" He ran a hand through his hair, "What? You don't trust me all of a sudden? Or, do you just not trust me in general? I thought..."

"No. It's not...I do trust you, Todd. I'm not...it was just..." Dirk stammered, reaching for Todd but aborting the movement when the other man recoiled in anger.

"Just what, Dirk? What?!"

Dirk bowed his head and tapped his fingers against his thighs nervously, but said nothing.

"Jesus Christ, Dirk!" Todd cried out, raising his arms in anger and hopeless desperation, "We thought you'd been taken by Blackwing!"

"I was."

The room seemed to suddenly freeze. Silent and motionless.

“What?” Todd breathed. Dirk nodded, and that single, barely-there motion suddenly brought the room to life. Farah rushed to the windows, pushing Dirk away from the door and peering outside. Todd took two steps back before immediately rushing forward and starting to check his partner for any injuries. Mona morphed from a table into a chair.

“How did you escape?!” Farah was asking, “Did they follow you?”

“No. No, I don’t think so. Well, no more than usual, I suppose.” Dirk fidgeted with the cuff of his sleeve, “They let me go.”

“They let you go?!” Todd repeated, about an octave higher. He should probably have been a soprano... “Why? Did they do something to you? What did they do?!”

“Nothing,” Dirk refused to look up, “It was nothing.”

“It wasn’t nothing, Dirk.” Todd grasped his arms, crouching just slightly to place himself in Dirk’s lowered eye line, “Talk to me. Tell me what happened. Please.”

At the final, imploring note, Dirk shuffled his feet nervously, frowned, and finally met Todd’s eyes.

“It was a reminder. A warning, really.”

“What kind of warning?” Farah stepped in, but the man didn’t seem ready to catch her gaze.

“That they can take me back whenever they want. That they’re not done with me yet.” His eyes dropped again so he missed the panic that struck Todd’s features.

“We...we could leave!” The brunette said hurriedly, glancing to Farah for support, “Go into hiding again. We can keep them away from you Dirk.”

The woman nodded in agreement, “Todd and I evaded them for months, and we weren’t exactly being discrete in looking for you. If we’re not leaving a trail of hacked databases and stolen cars, we could probably keep them off our trail for...”

“No.” Dirk shook his head, auburn hair falling into his eyes, “No. If they want to get me, they will. That’s just a fact we have to accept.”

Todd was ready to object, and Farah looked prepared to knock the detective out if that was what it took to get him to agree, but Dirk cut both off before they could speak.

“They’ve already taken so much. I’m not going to let them take this.” He gestured to the agency, to the sign behind the desk, “I want to be Dirk Gently, and solve cases with you, and help people, and to not be alone again, for as long as I can...”

Todd pulled him into a hug as the words trailed off.

“I won’t let them get you.”

“And if the universe decides that’s where I’m meant to be?” Dirk’s voice was muffled against his shoulder.

“Then the universe can go fuck itself.”

Dirk laughed, the sound reverberating through Todd’s body, “I think that’s a logistical impossibility.”

“That’s the universe’s problem.” Todd brushed his fingers through Dirk’s hair.

“You sure your ok?” Farah asked, still peering out the window cautiously.

“I’m fine.” Dirk smiled, “Everything’s fine.”

Somehow Todd just didn’t quite believe him.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Dirk has a secret

Chapter Notes

Thank you for the comments! It is really, really nice of you to take the time to comment. :)

Everything sort of just went back to normal after that Blackwing incident. Dirk continued to avoid discussing anything related to the fucked up organisation, and Todd was really pretty cool with that. He hated thinking about what was done to a guy who, far as Todd could tell, had spent his life trying to do good in the face of the relentless tug of the universe towards danger and despair.

So, just like Dirk, just like Farah, and probably just like Mona, Todd put the whole thing out of his mind.

Or tried to.

But something was just *off*. Dirk's celebrations at a case solved were just a little forced, a bit too much like Dirk was *supposed* to behave, and his intermittent moments of melancholy silence were getting less intermittent and more melancholy. The nightmares had got worse too.

Todd couldn't ignore all that. He tried to. He pretended it was fine. But after six months and nine days of it, he had had enough.

"That's it!" Todd slammed his book down on the table as soon as Dirk's footsteps had faded on the stairs, taking him on a post-case wander as had become a strange new habit of his.

Farah looked up flatly.

"This is not normal! There's something wrong here, right? It's not just me. Dirk is acting fucking strange. Stranger than usual! I mean, every time we solve a case, he looks like someone kicked his cat - not shark cat, obviously, I mean that would be... - but you know,

he's moody or sad or something! And then he always 'needs air'. Are we living in a fucking vacuum or something? Not enough oxygen for him in here?! Seriously, what the fuck is going on, and where the hell does he keep going?! Is it just me who realises that something's wrong? Something's up, right? It's not just me. Something is definitely up."

Farah waited patiently for Todd to finish his rant, before calmly clicking open her laptop. She clacked away at the keyboard for a few moments while Todd recovered his breath, and looked back up calmly.

"It's not just you, Todd. That's why I planted a bug in his jacket. We can listen in on what he's up to."

"Oh." Todd just stared for several seconds, "Farah, you're amazing."

She shrugged off the praise, but a slight blush crept into her cheeks, "Yeah, well. He's hiding something, and that's a cause for concern."

She picked up the laptop and headed over to sit beside Todd, turning the volume up so they could both hear the slight rustle of Dirk's jacket as he walked wherever he was going.

The indistinct noise continued for almost an hour, during which the pair continued various other activities, Todd strumming mindlessly at his acoustic guitar while Farah got through some paperwork, a task she never entrusted to the boys. Finally, the rustling stopped, giving way to an almost-silence, broken only by slight static. They huddled around the laptop and waited for something to happen, barely daring to breath as if Dirk might hear them if they did.

"Evenin' Svlad." The familiar southern drawl sent a chill through Todd's spine, "Lovely night for a stroll, ain't it?"

"Here." Dirk's voice, followed by a rustling.

"Nah. I want ta hear it from you."

"Why?" There was a slight crack to Dirk's voice.

"Because I miss your voice, little Svlad Cjelli."

"That's not my name."

"It's more your name than Dirk Gently'll ever be. He's just a fantasy. You'll always be dangerous little Svlad Cjelli."

A few moments of silence, eventually broken by Dirk's quiet and subdued tones, "You have the report. Now leave me alone."

"I said, I want it from you."

More silence, a slight rustle, and a sudden quickening of Dirk's breath.

“Let me go.” He pleaded.

There was more rustling followed by a loud cracking sound, then nothing for several moments. Finally, Dirk began to speak again. Slow, quiet and broken. The sound made something tighten painfully in Todd’s chest. Farah took his hand. He held it like a lifeline.

In subdued tones, Dirk recounted their latest case to the other man, detailing the mystery, the intuitions and where they led him, how the solution was found, and what they did to finally wrap it all up. He was interrupted at points with questions that he matter-of-factly answered.

“Thank you, Svlad. I’ll be seein’ you real soon.”

Dirk said nothing, and the rustling resumed for several more minutes. Long enough that the two eavesdroppers thought Dirk must be heading home, and were about to break their baited silence, when it stopped and was replaced with frantic, short, sharp breaths.

Todd knew that sound. He buried his head in his arms, squeezing his eyes shut and clenching his hands tight. He could feel Farah’s eyes on him, questioning, because she didn’t know that sound. She didn’t live with Dirk. But he did, and he had spent too many unbearable nights listening to Dirk on the verge of a panic attack, fighting himself desperately to keep it away, to drive the memories that haunted him back into the shadows of his mind.

He knew the sound of Dirk just barely holding on, and he knew with painful certainty that, on his own, the detective couldn’t do it.

So he shut his eyes and waited for the harsh, fast breaths to morph into wracked sobs, too broken and too unrelenting for Dirk to draw a breath. He heard the choked gasps for air between helpless quiet whimpers and broken cries begging the universe to tell him ‘*why*’.

An eternity passed as Todd and Farah sat and listened to the man break apart. Mona clung tightly as a blanket over Todd’s shoulders. He didn’t know if she was offering him support or seeking it herself. Both, probably.

When the sobs finally subsided and the shuffling resumed, slow and lethargic, Todd didn’t move. He sat with his head buried in his arms, feeling hollow and exhausted, and remained that way until Dirk finally opened the front door and stepped in. Farah immediately shifted herself between the detective and the door, in case he decided to run from the conversation Todd was about thrust upon him.

But he wasn’t running.

This was Dirk, and within seconds of entering the room, he must have seen the connections.

Slowly, he reached in one breast pocket, then the other, and fished out Farah’s bug, placing it carefully on the table. Then, resigned and looking as drained as Todd felt, he took a seat across from his boyfriend. Todd looked up at him, eyes rimmed red, gaze empty.

“Why were you talking to Priest?” He muttered. The words were echoed from the laptop.

“I’m sorry.” The reply was barely audible, “I’m so sorry. I had no choice.”

Todd said nothing. The apology echoed around them and hung in the air.

“I...” Dirk began but frowned and found himself unable to finish.

“Did they threaten you?” Farah asked, stepping forward.

Dirk shook his head.

“Us?”

Dirk didn’t respond. That was answer enough.

“Dirk,” Todd reached out to take one of the detective’s trembling hands, “I know you want to keep all this, our home. I do too, but we can run. Start again somewhere they can’t get us. Or, like, have a mobile detective agency or something.”

“There’s no running from it.” Dirk mumbled, “There’s no running from them. There never was.”

Farah crouched down by the table, trying to catch Dirk’s eye, but he looked quickly away, then up at Todd. For a moment, he seemed to consider his words, making several attempts at speaking but aborting them instantly. Finally, he gave the simple explanation.

“Blackwing have control over the supply line for your new medication.”

Farah stood up angrily, turning away and muttering to herself, while Todd let his head drop to the table.

“Shit.”

“I’m sorry Todd.” Dirk shook his head again, tears glistening in his eyes.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Todd breathed, hand still holding Dirk’s.

“Because I knew you would blame yourself.” Dirk fixed his boyfriend with a desperate gaze, “But it’s not your fault! It’s my fault. This whole thing is my fault. If it wasn’t for me, Blackwing wouldn’t even know you exist. Either of you! I dragged you into this...”

He buried his head in his hands, “I should just go back to Blackwing. It would be safer for everyone.”

“But it doesn’t look like they want you there.” Farah pointed out, always reasonable, always pragmatic, “They could easily have taken you by now, so that begs the question, what do they want the case reports for, exactly?”

“I don’t know.” Dirk looked up at her, shaking his head to reinforce the point, “Ken never said.”

“Ken? The Bart guy?” Farah asked, “So he’s actually in charge now?”

“I guess so.” Dirk shrugged, turning back to Todd, “I didn’t want to lie to you, but I thought that if you knew, you might think...”

“That it’s a terrible idea? Yeah, obviously.” Todd rolled his eyes before looking seriously back at Dirk, “You have to stop this. It’s too dangerous.”

“No!” Dirk exclaimed suddenly, shooting up from his chair, “I don’t want to see you suffer those attacks again.”

“I don’t want to lose you to Blackwing again.” Todd retorted angrily.

“Did they say you have to give the reports alone?” Farah, their blessed peacemaker, interjected.

“No...” Dirk hesitated, “But you can’t come with me. What if they decide to kill you?”

“Then they’d lose their leverage.” She pointed out, “Ken seems to be a pretty smart guy. I doubt he’d throw away his only real control over you.”

“But still...”

“Either we come with you, or you stop the reports.” Todd provided the ultimatum. Obviously there was no choice in there for Dirk. With a sigh, the detective nodded and slumped back into his seat.

“Alright, but Mona stays here. I won’t put her in danger too.”

It was agreed.

Next time a case was finished and Dirk was called upon by Blackwing to deliver a report, he went with backup. At the meeting point, Farah stood furthest from the group, gun at her hip, eyes on the scene before them. She was well within range to take out anyone who might attack them, and more than willing to do so.

Todd was at Dirk’s side, where he belonged, offering silent support. Strengthened by his friends, Dirk approached Priest and his Blackwing entourage standing tall, eyes fixed on the man he feared, and not trained on the ground.

He held out the manilla envelope with their case report.

“What’s this?”

“The report.”

Priest nodded to one of the men in black, who immediately grabbed the file from Dirk’s grasp, “You brought your friends? I don’t like your friends.”

“What you do or do not like is irrelevant.” Dirk replied sharply, taking both Priest and Todd by surprise with the sudden bite in his voice, “The deal was I bring the report. I have done so. There was never any stipulation regarding how I deliver them, nor with whom.”

“My, my, Svlad.” Priest tutted, “You’ve become mighty rude. I think it’s about time I took you back home, reminded you your manners.”

Todd expected the threat to hit Dirk hard, break his resolve, dissolve him into submissive and afraid just as when he had been when he heard Priest’s voice in the Cardinas’ house. Instead, the detective kept his eyes locked with Priest’s and his head held high. Although his fists were balled tight at his sides, and there was an almost imperceptible tremble to his hands that told of the thin resolve he was clinging to, he stood strong. Brave. Unafraid.

Todd smiled, unable to keep the expression from his features. In that moment, he was too overcome with love and pride for his boyfriend. At the man he had become.

Priest drew his gun and shot Dirk in each thigh.

The detective let out a harrowing cry and dropped to the floor. Farah rushed at Priest, but one swift strike with the butt of his pistol, and she was out cold.

Priest let out an unsettling, high-pitched laugh.

Todd stared desperately at the maniac, then at Farah unconscious just feet away from him, and finally Dirk breathing frantically beside him. He dropped to his knees, calling the detective’s name. Priest laughed again, delighting at Dirk’s pain and Todd’s panic. Although his gun was still drawn, loaded, and ready to fire, he seemed to be in no hurry to bring this chapter to a close. He was having far too much fun.

With absolutely no idea what else to do, Todd tried reaching out to cover the nearest wound with his hands, to try and put pressure on it like people always did in films. But, Dirk let out a cry at the contact and Todd recoiled instantly. He looked at the man he loved, at the wounds, at the blood everywhere around them.

So much blood. Dirk’s blood.

It was all over Todd's hands, his jeans, his shirt. And it burned. Like hot oil or some kind of acid, searing through his skin and Todd didn't even register the fleeting thought that he had forgotten his meds that day as the pain became unbearable and he curled in on himself, screaming.

He heard his own cries, the fizz of the acid on his skin, and Priest’s disturbing laughter. Faintly, like a fading dream, he could just make out his own name in Dirk’s broken voice. He felt a hand take his. Dirk’s hand. A touch he knew so well. It was comforting, and soothing, and the acid burnt a little less. But all too soon it was pulled from his grasp, leaving behind a burning that was worse than ever, and two pills in his palm.

By the time Todd had figured out what they were, had actually managed to swallow them, and the medicine done its job, Priest was long gone, and with him Dirk.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

X_X = current state of being. Coffee is needed.

I warn for some violence and strong language in this chapter

After failing to get any sort of reaction from the very unconscious Farah, Todd forced himself to ignore his own exhaustion and the lingering sensation of unfettered pain in his hands, and half-drag, half-carry the woman to their car. It took all the strength he could muster just to get her there and into the passenger seat, and he almost passed out trying to walk around to the driver's side, barely catching himself on the wing mirror before he hit the ground.

Screwing his eyes tight against the protests of his every nerve, he managed to take two steady steps before almost collapsing again. Unable to go further, he braced himself against the bonnet, he tried desperately to get control of his harsh, ragged breathing and force his mind to focus.

Focus on Dirk, on what had just happened, on what they needed to do now.

Which was what? Follow Priest? How in hell would he even start to do that? His mind had been too busy sending waves of agony through his hands for him to have even heard the SUV drive away, let alone have registered the direction in which it went. But he had to do something.

God, he wished Farah was awake right now.

He willed his legs to move again, and pleaded with his panicked mind to just *think*,

Stay calm, focus on the problem.

Dirk was gone. Priest had taken him. *Blackwing* had taken him.

The thought came with a simultaneous new wave of panic and sense of urgency, which overwhelmed his every sensation and gave him enough strength and presence of mind to jump into the driver's seat, start up the car, and get it back en route to the agency.

At nearly 2 AM, the roads were blissfully empty. A wonderful fortune given Todd didn't bother with anything superfluous such as red lights or lanes. Skidding the car to a stop outside their building, Todd jumped out and sprinted to the entrance. It was locked, obviously - Farah always insisted they locked it when out. In general, perfectly logical, and sensible, and very 'Farah'. Right now, a serious fucking inconvenience. Without hesitating for an instant, Todd pulled the airgun from his belt, barely bothering to really aim, and fired. Their lovely frosted glass door shattered. Dirk would be upset. Fine. Upset Dirk was better than Blackwing-captured Dirk.

"Mona!" Todd yelled as he jumped through the empty doorframe, scanning the furniture inside for anything out of place, "Mona! Can you please, I don't know, just be here?"

There was a soft clatter followed shortly by gentle tap against his converse, and Todd looked down to see the Panic Pete stress toy had rolled against it.

"Thank you." He breathed, grabbing her from the floor and dashing back out, straight into the waiting car. Without a moment's pause, he floored the accelerator and sped them away from the agency, away from the city, and out onto the open road.

Todd had no notion of how long they had been driving, or even where they were going, but he just had to drive. Whether his intent was to chase Priest or to get Mona to safety, he really had no idea, but at that moment, driving was the only thing his mind seemed capable of getting him to do. The sun had long since started to rise, sending thin rays over the horizon that glittered off the morning dew that littered the rural surrounds of their city.

It was so still and quiet and serene that Todd nearly swerved the car into a ditch when he heard a stirring from beside him.

“Todd?”

He turned to find Farah looking at him groggily, one hand to her head and the other braced against the window as she struggled to sit upright.

“Farah! Oh, thank god. You’re awake.” Todd’s eyes were wide and frantic, his pulse that had calmed during the drive immediately starting to race again, “I was worried you had a serious head injury or something, and I really wouldn’t know what to do. Don’t know what to do. Oh shit, this is...everything is...”

“Slow down.” She massaged the back of her neck and squinted at him, “What’s going on? Where’s Dirk?”

“Gone.”

“Gone?” Mona’s ephemeral voice from the back seat of the car seemed little more than a whisper.

Todd glanced at her in the rearview mirror, bit his lip, and returned his eyes to the road.

“Uh, yeah. But-but don’t worry, Mona. It’s gonna be fine. Everything’s gonna be fine.”

“What do you mean, gone?” Farah asked in her ‘no bullshit’ warning tone, all grogginess of the head injury seeming to have been washed away by the very real state of emergency appearing before her.

Todd swallowed thickly, “Priest took him.”

“Shit!” Farah's exclamation was echoed by a gasp of mixed agony and fear from Mona.

“Yeah, but, it's ok Mona. We're gonna get him back, ok?” Todd tried to quickly reassure the shapeshifter, half afraid that she would transform into a tank or something and squash them all, half desperate not to let her - or himself - succumb to panic.

“You don't know that.” She pouted, and it would have been almost entertaining in its childlike manner in any less dire situation.

“Yeah, yeah I do.” Todd frantically looked at Farah for support, but she was already tapping away at her phone and whispering under her breath, so he turned to the same mantra he had been reassuring himself with the past four hours.

“I mean, Dirk always ends up where he's meant to be, yeah?”

“Yes.” Mona was fidgeting now, clearly displeased with being kept in human form by this conversation.

“And, well, do you think Blackwing is where he's meant to be?”

“No.”

“So, we'll get him back. It'll be fine, just...”

“Yes, but *which* Dirk will we get back?” She asked angrily, and promptly disappeared into something small and insignificant in the back of the car. Something too small and too insignificant for Todd to see from his position.

“Shit.” Todd cursed, “Farah, what do we do?”

The woman was still muttering to herself, apparently lost too much in her own musings to hear him.

“Farah?” He tried again, “We-we should call Amanda, right? Tell them to lie low or something.”

“No!” The woman looked up sharply, “We need more information first. We don’t want to get the Rowdies worked up for no reason, and we still don’t know what exactly this means.”

“What this means?!” Todd almost forgot the road to stare at her incredulously, “What this means is that Dirk has been taken. Again! The Rowdy Three might be next, which means Amanda’s in danger too!”

“But Priest didn’t go after Mona.” Farah reasoned calmly.

“He didn’t know where she was.” Todd argued, “Hell, *I* didn’t know where she was.”

“Ok, but, just, let’s try to think this through first. We don’t know how the Rowdies will respond to a threat like that. They might flip out and draw attention to themselves.” The woman was clearly thinking through every possible scenario and solution as she spoke, “Blackwing might not even know where they are at the moment. Amanda’s good at keeping them in check, but the threat of recapture is too much of a wild card. She might not be able to manage them through that.”

Todd huffed slightly, but he knew she was right. She generally was.

“What do we do then?” He asked at last.

“We start by trying to get eyes on Priest.” Farah said, turning back to her phone, “We know what his car looks like. We know what his men look like. We know what *he* looks like.”

“So, what? We look for someone Instagramming a bunch of guys looking like they’re on their way to a Call of Duty convention?”

She frowned at him, “What? No.”

Tapping at the screen a bit longer, “We know Dirk is injured, and that Blackwing wants him alive, right?”

“So?”

“So, we look for hospitals and surgeries nearby and hope Priest takes him to one of those.” She resumed her browsing and finally exclaimed, “Yes. See? There’s an emergency medical centre ten miles from here. Dirk’s injuries are pretty bad, so they’d need medical attention soon. It’s our best bet.”

Todd tried not to remember the sight of Dirk writhing on the floor, pain etched on his features and blood pouring out of both thighs.

Instead, he nodded stiffly, “Which way?”

“Next left.”

Todd took the turning and prayed to any god that might be listening that they’d find Dirk there. Alive.

Dirk had been slipping in and out of consciousness ever since he had been bundled into the trunk of the SUV. He had no concept of how far they had travelled or how long they had been

going. It was all darkness and pain and incessantly humming engine.

At one point he had woken up to find himself laid out a cold metal table, staring up at a very bright light, and held down by three pairs of black-gloved hands. A surgeon was doing something agonising to his leg, sending burning stabs of pain shooting up into his hip. For a moment, he caught a glimpse of the doctor's face, eyes wide with fear and lips trembling, Priest's pistol pressed against his temple. Dirk passed out from the pain before the inevitable pull of that trigger.

There were only a couple of cars parked outside the surgery when Todd pulled the car into its parking lot. To his dismay, there was no black SUV. This meant that either Priest had been and gone, or they were just simply wildly off his trail.

It was with a mix of horror and guilty relief that the former was proved true. The instant they walked cautiously through the unlocked entrance, the mark of Blackwing's presence was all too apparent. The lifeless bodies of four people lay about the waiting room. A secretary hunched over his computer, single gunshot wound to the head filling the gaps in his keyboard with drying blood. A teenage couple, heads lolled back against one wall, matching bullet wounds in each. A middle aged man laid out on the tiled floor, blood pooled beneath him and walking stick just out of reach of his extended right hand.

It was a disturbing scene. Even more disturbing was that neither Todd nor Farah were in the slightest unnerved by the macabre surrounds. It was a testament to how fucked up their lives had become that none of this came even close to shocking them. A grimace of disgust at the act, a sigh of sadness for the lost lives, but no shock.

They picked their way past the bodies through an open door in the back, finding there a man in a lab coat with several gunshots littering the side of his head and rendering his face a mess of torn off flesh and shattered bone. There was blood on the operating table, too far away and in the wrong pattern to have originated from him. Two bloody bullets lay discarded in a tray on the side.

Combined with the senseless murders throughout the building, that was all the proof they needed that Priest had been here with Dirk, and they were on the right trail. Only one road led

past the medical centre, and since they had passed no one on their way there, there was only one way Priest could have gone.

Farah quickly used the phone in the waiting area to dial 911, being careful not to touch it with her bare fingers since being wanted for multiple murders would really not help matters right now. That single civic duty done, she slipped into the driver's seat. Todd dutifully handed her the keys, jumped in the passenger side, and they set off in pursuit of their target, leaving the massacre in their wake.

If the imminent murder of that poor surgeon had been unsurprising to Dirk, Priest certainly made up for it by his next four kills. After another indeterminate period of time spent stuffed in the dark trunk of the SUV, the vehicle came to a stop and, after a few moments, Dirk heard a rapid round of machine gun fire right beside the car. Then light was streaming in above him, bright and blinding, as Priest opened the trunk and yanked him out. He stumbled and collapsed against the side of the SUV. He hadn't realised until his face hit the ground that he couldn't move his hands. Something hard and sharp-edged bound them tightly behind his back. Even if his face and shoulder had taken the brunt of the impact with the ground, any pain he ought to have felt from that was severely overwhelmed by the searing sensation spreading through both legs. He curled in on himself, squeezing his eyes shut as he desperately tried to breath his way through the pain. A rough hand pulled him into a sitting position, shoving him against the side of the SUV, the movement making his head spin. It was several minutes before Dirk managed to open his eyes and behold the scene of death before him.

Scattered on the ground around the vehicle were the lifeless, bullet-riddled corpses of the Blackwing guards.

“You killed your *own* men?!” Dirk stared in horror at the bodies.

Priest shrugged, “Not my men.”

“Well, that's alright then.”

Priest smiled at Dirk's sarcasm, "Don't be like that, Svlad'. Now we get some valuable alone time."

Dirk's contemptuous scowl drew a smirk from the other man, who had moved to stand over him, a dark blot against the lightening sky.

"What exactly is it that you want with me? You're evidently not acting on behalf of Blackwing," Dirk gestured with his head to the mass of bodies, "Unless they are undertaking a general cull of their populace, or perchance the new management has rendered that thrice damned place so archaic that human life has become even less of a..."

The sudden impact of Priest's leather boot with Dirk's chest put an immediate stop to his rambling. The detective doubled over, gasping for breath and fighting through the sudden searing pain in his chest. Priest crouched in front of him and, grabbing a handful of his auburn hair, forced Dirk's eyes to meet his.

"I need you to take me to where I'm supposed to go."

"And how, pray tell," Dirk grit out, "Am I supposed to do that when you've shot both my legs?"

Priest released him with an amused giggle and stood back up. He began pacing, pistol tapping against his thigh.

"You know, Svlad, you always surprised me."

"How delightful." Dirk continued to glare up at the maniac as he continued.

"No matter how much you might have bin punished, you never learn."

"That really reflects more on your teaching methods than..."

Priest let out another laugh and dragged Dirk to his feet, the movement and sudden weight on his injured legs drawing a pained cry from the man.

“Now, which way to go?”

“I. Don’t. Know.” Dirk scowled, “How do you still not understand? That’s not how this works. It has *never* been how it works. No matter how much everyone at Blackwing wants it to be!”

When Priest drew his gun and pressed it against one of Dirk’s shoulders, his confident anger morphed in an instant to fear.

“No, don’t! I just...that way.” He looked towards a junction up ahead, the turning from which seemed to head away from the city. If nothing else, it would surely be best to get Priest as far away from other people as possible. Dirk hoped that he might even be able to buy enough time to get himself out of this situation without anyone else getting killed, although that hope was as probable as the Purple People Eater swooping down from the heavens to save him.

Priest broke into a satisfied smile and shoved his hostage back against the SUV, where his legs buckled and he collapsed back to the ground.

Dirk watched nervously as the man collected together all the ammunition from the corpses, and then started to unload more of the same from the back seat of the SUV.

“What are you doing?” He asked after a few moments of this, forcing his voice to remain steady.

“By now, your lil’ boyfriend and Miss Black will be awake and lookin’ for you. I don’ need ‘em on our tail.”

Dirk swallowed thickly, feeling his chest constrict at the implication.

“And, why do you...why do you need all that?” He asked, eyeing the man’s growing collection of ammunition.

Priest let out a cackle that became nearly hysteric in its glee when the sound of a car suddenly grew through the silence around them. Dirk looked towards the road and felt his blood run cold

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