

The Only Way Out is Through (Or: How to be Almost, Mostly, Okay Again)

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The Only Way Out is Through (Or: How to be Almost, Mostly, Okay Again)

by [electricteatime](#)

Summary

"Terrible as it is, it's easier to cling to the hope that there were good reasons for what they did. That the people who treated him well were at heart good people, and they hadn't just been lying to him the whole time, that the small amounts of affection he'd been given were real and tangible. Even when he knows the truth somewhere deep inside it doesn't mean he wants to acknowledge it.

But, like all things, it's only a matter of time."

The only thing Dirk Gently has ever learned to do with his trauma, is shove it down as deep as it will go, lock it away, and hope that ignoring it means it isn't really there. For a while at least, it works. But when the past comes knocking looking to make amends, and pretending that none of it was as bad as it seemed isn't an option anymore, the delicate balancing act he's been practicing for years finally tips over the edge.

Healing is painful, recovery isn't linear, sometimes you have to tear everything down before you can start to rebuild.

His own demons might be the scariest thing he's ever had to face, but it's not something he has to do alone, and in the end that makes all the difference.

All things, in time, make themselves known.

Chapter Notes

Hello it's me, trying something new!

I was going to save this fic and post it as one big block of text when it's finished, but chaptering fics is something I struggle with and so I thought as this is my next long project I'd give it a go. As such, I can't promise that my chapters won't split in weird places, and I certainly can't promise to stick to a reliable posting schedule, but I can promise that I love this fic and I wanted to share it with you in the hopes that I'll actually write it.

This fic will deal with PTSD and the aftermaths of trauma, I'll do my best to tag it accurately. Tags and characters will be updated with each chapter.

Hope you enjoy <3

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

In retrospect it should have been obvious that the knock on the door would bring bad news.

Things had been going slowly for just over a week now, and while usually a bit of peace and quiet would be welcome, Dirk had been getting all kinds of antsy waiting for the unsettling feeling creeping up and down his spine to reveal itself to be either nothing at all, a sign he should buy a new mattress, or a hunch. He's been hoping it's *not* a hunch, because the ones that unsettle him before he even knows what they are are never fun to deal with so, naturally, it turns out to be just that.

He doesn't know that when the knock sounds though. It only becomes entirely too obvious when he opens the door and he opens his mouth to speak but chokes on his words before he can get them out, panic washing over him so abruptly he forgets how to breathe. The smile falls off his face, frozen in place and shoulders tense when he realises there isn't anywhere he could run to, and he certainly couldn't bring himself to fight. He feels trapped, a deer in the headlights, a rabbit staring down a wolf. A wolf that hasn't even said anything yet.

Colonel Riggins looks older and much more tired than the last time he saw him but it doesn't make him feel any less intimidated by his presence. If it didn't turn his stomach it would almost be impressive how small he can make him feel just by being here, like he's all of ten years old again with the heavy weight of his disapproval weighing down his shoulders. Like he wants to drop his eyes, like he wants to say he's sorry. He can taste the word on his tongue already like it's begging to be let out. Like it could save him.

It never did before, he doubts it will now.

“Dirk?” Todd’s voice pulls him back to the present, shaking him out of whatever place his mind was trying to send him back to. Riggins seems to pre-empt his movement, putting his hand on the door before Dirk tries to slam it. Gentle force, like always.

“I just want to-” he starts but Dirk doesn't care. He can't be here, he *shouldn't* be here. Not *here*. Not now.

“No!” he shakes his head, moves to take a step back but just ends up swaying on the spot, too afraid to let go of the door in case he opens it further and steps inside. “No. I'm sorry, we're closed. You'll have to come back some other time, or never, really.” It's not true at all but his head is spinning far too much to come up with a better excuse.

“Dirk,” and god he wants to slap that name right out of his mouth because it's not *his*, it's not for him and he doesn't deserve to know it let alone say it, but it's better than the alternative he supposes. He still hates the way he says it, like he's talking to a child even now. He thinks he knows it'll get to him, he was always good at masking his manipulation with caring concern. “I'm not here to do anything other than talk.”

“I don't want to hear it,” he's trying so hard not to let on how much he's getting to him, he doesn't want to give him the satisfaction, but he *always* gets to him. Always makes him want to say yes, want to make promises, want to be good. He hates that he still wants to make him proud, that the thought of displeasing him turns his stomach with fear and guilt and *shame*.

“You don't even-”

“He said no.” Todd. Todd is here and he looks... like he's waiting to be angry. His tone is firm and leaves no room for argument, arms crossed over his chest as he puts himself just in front of Dirk like he's ready to step between them if he needs to.

Dirk doesn't think he's ever been so grateful to see him.

Riggins looks him up and down, looks between him and Dirk like he's assessing the merits of pushing the situation, and eventually sighs to himself.

“I wanted you to have this,” there's a box at his feet that Dirk hadn't realised was there until he moves to pick it up, he recognises the symbol stamped across the top of it and his grip on the door turns so hard his knuckles go white with the force of it. “It's gone. Orders from on high to shut the whole thing down and I wanted to...” he trails off, and *god* he looks tired, but Dirk doesn't want to feel any sympathy for him. He shakes his head. “These belong to you, anyway. You can do what you want with them. If you change your mind about talking then there's a contact number in there. I'm... it's up to you. Whatever you want.” Dirk can only stare at him, he wants to feel angry, to dig down and find that rage that sometimes overcomes him at the thought of the man. To throw it back in his face at the thought of *now* being up to him, wondering what's changed and *oh* how *gracious* he is to *allow* that. It's easier to be angry when he isn't stood right in front of him making him feel so very small though, and all he can do is nod.

Todd takes the box from him, because someone has to and Dirk doesn't look like he's going to move any time soon. This time he does step between them, into the space of the open door.

“You're done. You can go now.” Riggins looks like he wants to protest but instead he nods once, putting his hat back on and there's something almost soft in the way he looks at Dirk. Almost paternal.

“I'm glad to see you're doing well,” he says before turning on his heel and walking away.

Todd sets the box down off to the side, easing the door out of Dirk's grip to close it behind him. Dirk doesn't realise how much he'd been relying on it for support until it's no longer there and he wobbles dangerously, saved from falling by Todd catching him and guiding them both down to the floor, his voice is gentle and reassuring but Dirk isn't listening to what he's saying.

He'd been here.

His skin feels itchy in the worst kind of way. Everything is too close and his chest is too tight, he can't *breathe*, and he scrambles to pull his tie off and throw it to the side, fingers shaking as he undoes the top few buttons of his shirt to try and alleviate some of the pressure. It's still there though, whatever that feeling is, clawing its way up his throat and threatening to suffocate him. He'd been *here*. In *his* space. *His* new life. He wasn't stupid, he'd known Blackwing had known where he was, he has a giant sign with his name on it for fucks sake, but for some reason he'd never contemplated seeing him ever again. He's trembling all over he soon realises, gasping for breath and *oh*, that's why he feels dizzy. He doesn't even realise he's tugging at his hair until there are hands, strong and steady around his wrists and he tries to jerk away but there's nowhere to go because he's sat against the door and they *never* like it when he gets like this, and oh god he'd shouted at Riggins, he's going to be in *so* much trouble.

“Hey, *hey*. Dirk, c'mon. You're going to hurt yourself.” The voice doesn't fit. The words don't fit. The tone doesn't fit. That *name* doesn't fit. For one wild moment Dirk wonders if he's straight up lost his mind.

Then his breath finally catches and he inhales sharply. It's not much better than before, the staccato rise and fall of his chest as he tries to get some semblance of rhythm back into his lungs, but at least now he's breathing at all.

“Come on,” there's a hand rubbing circles between his shoulder blades, steady and grounding as he tries to find a way to tether himself to the present.

“I- it's- I c-can't-” the words are no easier and he abandons them in favour of shaking his head and pressing his lips together.

“You *can*. You can, come on. In and out, you can do it.” Something in the back of his mind tells him that the voice is familiar, *safe*. He doesn't know how true that is but whoever it belongs to is tugging his hand away from his hair and pressing it against their own chest. “Just like this, breathe with me.”

It takes him a minute to work out what he means, and then he's letting himself fall into the steady rhythm below his hand and trying to copy it. The choppiness of his breath finally

starting to calm down after a few long moments as he starts to piece together his surroundings.

Sunlight. It's bright in the room, one long window spilling it over the floor and up the walls. Nothing like being in a box. The door at his back is solid, the floor too. His shirt is soft against his skin and far, far removed from the itchiness of military issue jumpsuits. It smells familiar, light and clean but not overly sterile. Somewhere there's a hint of something berry scented. A candle, he remembers. One Todd had laughed at him for buying but he'd caught him lighting later on.

Todd.

The heartbeat under his fingers is strong and steady, he can still feel the evenness of his breaths, the firm pressure of his fingers around his wrist, the warmth of his skin through his shirt. Todd's hand settled between his shoulders feels like the most solid thing in existence right now.

"You with me?" he sounds concerned, well, he sounds like he's trying not to sound concerned and failing badly. Dirk feels a sudden wash of guilt for worrying him like that.

"Fine. I'm fine. Excellent assisting Todd, we're all good here. You can go now." His voice is shaky, fake cheeriness fraying at the edges of it like he might shatter altogether if he keeps talking. Dirk *desperately* doesn't want him to go, fingers curling into his shirt in contrast to his words, but he doesn't know what else he's supposed to say. Usually he's alone when this happens, he's never had to deal with having someone else in the aftermath.

"Dirk. You just had a panic attack," how he manages to sound both derisive and worried all at once is a mystery to him.

"Don't be ridiculous," his voice wobbles, and for a terrifying moment he thinks he's going to start crying. "It was just some... mild alarm."

"You stopped breathing!" It's exasperation more than anything but it still manages to make Dirk tense up. Todd rubs his hand on his back again as he back tracks. "Sorry. I didn't mean- it's okay to not be okay. You don't have to... pretend, or whatever. You have, well. Me, I guess. And Farah. People who care about you. It's not- we're not going to go anywhere if you're not always fine."

The thing is that Dirk *knows* this, but on some level he's terrified of it happening all the same. "You don't even know who that was," he says in lieu of argument, voice small as he fidgets with the edges of his shirt where it's come untucked.

Todd shrugs, "I know enough." He moves to sit down beside him, keeping close.

Dirk huffs, rubbing a hand over his face, "you don't know *anything*."

"I know he's an asshole. I know he upset you. I know I'd punch him in the face if I saw him again," it's enough to pull a weak smile to Dirk's face.

“He’s military. CIA.”

“Good. I’d hit him twice as hard, I hate the government.” Dirk snorts, Todd smiles at the sound of his laughter.

“Aren’t you a little old for classic teenage rebellion?” he sounds more like himself, and Todd is willing to play along with that if it helps.

He shoots him a dirty side glance, only half joking with it. “You don’t outgrow punk. Telling the world to fuck off is a lifelong commitment.”

“Ah. I see.”

Todd rolls his eyes fondly. “No, you dont.”

“No, I don’t. But you’re not that great at it. Does it count as telling the world to ‘fuck off’ if you don’t mean it?”

It’s Todd’s turn to snort at that, “I mean it.”

“Do you though? You were being awfully nice just then,” and there it is, the vulnerable insecurity that creeps into Dirk’s voice sometimes that Todd wants to find the source of and beat the hell out of it. Maybe he might have a chance to if his suspicions are correct and it had just turned up at their door.

“Yeah, well. ‘Fuck off’ is only really meant for the bad parts,” he shrugs, letting some of his own insecurity out because he knows it’ll put Dirk at ease. “You’re not one of them.”

An interesting expression comprising mostly of shock, delight and disbelief crosses Dirk’s face, and Todd hates that he’s always surprised when someone says something even vaguely nice to him. It makes him feel guilty for some reason, an ache deep in his stomach he can’t place.

“Oh. Right. I suppose... well, you *did* throw a shoe at me,” he’s looking at Todd like he’s not sure how that will go down.

“You broke into my apartment, it was completely deserved.”

“I didn’t *break in*,” he says, affronted, “the window was already open.”

Most of the tension is gone from his shoulders now, but Todd keeps his hand pressed there just in case, watching him with a soft expression and debating his next words.

“You want to talk about it?” he asks, cautious as he glances at the box he’d set down to the side of them. Dirk hunches his shoulders again, only a little this time though.

“Not really,” his eyes flit over to the box, briefly resting on the symbol on top before he looks back at Todd. There’s something assessing in his eyes when he does, and a moment later he corrects, “not yet.”

Todd watches him right back, nodding after a moment. It's enough, and it's what Dirk needs right now. He'll take it. "Alright. I'm gonna make some of that weird, shitty tea you like so much, go pick a movie."

Dirk eyes him suspiciously like it might be a trap, Todd is quite strict on movie choices and few of Dirk's favourites ever make the cut. Todd rolls his eyes at his expression though, pushing himself off of the floor and holding out a hand to tug Dirk up with him, and it seems he's in one of his rare moods where Dirk could probably push his luck quite far and only get minimal complaining. He takes his hand with a soft smile.

"Don't forget-"

"An entire bag of sugar?" he raises his eyebrows in a way that takes the sting out of the mocking. "I know."

Dirk can't help but smile at that, and Todd sends him a soft smile of his own in return. It feels, for a moment, like everything will be okay.

Dirk seems to settle after a while, curled up on the sofa cradling his tea and watching Legally Blonde completely enraptured like he hasn't seen it a million times before now. He has. Todd knows all too well that he has. Still, he can't bring himself to begrudge him the simple things right now, not when Dirk moves to curl into his side with a pleased little hum when Todd sits down next to him. Not when Todd spends most of the film watching Dirk watch the screen and trying not to think too much about what happened earlier.

There are a lot of things he wants to ask, a lot of things he wants to understand, there always have been when it comes to Dirk. He wears his heart on his sleeve, but anything else is locked down and shoved away under god knows how many layers of doors and walls and barriers, and if he's honest he's already accepted that there are plenty he might never get through. He wonders sometimes if Dirk thinks he's protecting him by not telling him, wonders if maybe he's right. He wouldn't know how to ask anyway, wouldn't know where to start, wouldn't know how to handle it with the care Dirk deserves for something like this. For anything really. Todd already knows there are things Dirk could tell him that will only leave him feeling filled with a violent defensive rage, and he knows that isn't what he needs. Their relationship is still new, still finding its footing, but Todd has found himself wanting so badly to be able to give Dirk what he needs. Perhaps part of the reason he hasn't asked is because he's so worried he'll fail him.

There's no need to ask now though, Dirk has all but cuddled his way into his lap at this point and he's had enough stress for one day. It's still lingering around the edges, the way he can't quite keep his fingers from fidgeting over every little thing, and it only becomes glaringly obvious when the movie credits start rolling and Todd suggests they go to bed.

He feels the way Dirk tenses all the way down his spine at the thought of it, smooths his hand across his shoulders without thinking.

“You need to sleep,” he says softly, firm with it like he's not going to stand any arguing, and Dirk glances up at him before his eyes flit away back over to the screen.

There's a long silence where Todd just waits for him to speak, knowing at least if he's taking this long to say whatever is on his mind it isn't going to be the usual bullshit he tries to pull when he wants to get out of things. He doesn't mind waiting for something that matters.

“What if...” Dirk speaks up, breaking the silence for a moment only to shake his head and pull away. “No. No, you're right. Sleep is important and we should... do that.”

Todd catches him by the wrist before he can pull away completely.

“What if what?”

Dirk shakes his head again but he doesn't try to pull away this time. “It's... stupid. Not worth thinking about really,” he tries a smile but it's the thin, tired kind that Todd hates seeing on him.

He hates it even more now.

“But you *are* thinking about it,” because telling Dirk it's not stupid before he even knows what it is is a surefire way to get an eye roll and have him close off entirely. “So just... it can't hurt to share it, right?”

Sometimes Dirk will find a way to circumnavigate any logic thrown at him, and Todd's is admittedly weak, but it's almost like he was looking for an excuse to tell him, because as soon as he decides he's not going to argue it all comes out at once.

“What if he comes back?” he asks, voice a rushed whisper as he drops his gaze downwards, sure that Todd isn't going to think it's worth worrying about. “What if... he knows we're here now. Knows I'm here. What if he comes back with more people? What if he comes back with...” the name sticks in his throat but Todd knows who he means, squeezes his hand tighter. “What if he takes me again? What if he... what if he takes *you*? What if he hurts you? What if he... it might not be safe.”

Todd doesn't really have any idea where to start with that.

“He said it had closed down, right? That they'd shut it all down and that's why he came by? They can't come here if they don't exist.”

“But we don't *know* that! He could have been lying! He always... well. No. Not... he never really *lied* I think that might have been... or did he? I don't... It doesn't matter. He could be lying now. He could be making it all up. We don't *know* anything, and we *can't* know anything until it's too late.” He looks up at him, eyes wide and desperate and Todd isn't sure how to reassure him but he has to try.

“Dirk,” he says softly, reaching out to take his hands where his fingers are twisting themselves into agitated knots. “I don't think he's going to come back,” he starts, cutting

Dirk off when he opens his mouth to protest, “*but* if he does... isn’t he going to do it anyway?”

Dirk frowns a little, “well, *yes*, but-”

“So doesn’t that mean it doesn’t matter where we are?”

“I mean, I *suppose* so...”

“So if we need to sleep, and it might happen but it might not and there’s nothing we can do either way, shouldn’t we just go to bed?”

Dirk sighs, holding out for a minute before burying his face into his hands tiredly. “I’m *scared*,” he whispers, exhaustion peeking through the words, and Todd might not know how to fix everything, but he thinks he might be able to fix that.

“I know,” because even if he doesn’t really know what happened, who that man was, or why Dirk was so shaken by him, he knows none of the answers to those questions are good. “I know you are. But just- come to bed. You don’t have to sleep, just take it one step at a time, yeah?”

It feels like years pass before Dirk nods his agreement, letting Todd pull him up and herd him through to the bedroom. From there it’s easy enough to get them both stripped down and under the covers, both too tired to make it difficult. Instead Todd finds Dirk curling into him, a rare thing seeing as he usually sleeps flat out on his back with an unnerving degree of stillness, but Todd takes it in stride as he wraps an arm around him, letting him settle his head on his chest.

There’s quiet between them for a long time, but neither are sleeping. Dirk is away in his head somewhere and Todd is loathe to leave him to it, brushing fingers lazily through his hair while he waits for him to relax.

“Do you want to know?” he murmurs, breaking the silence of the room. Todd hadn’t been expecting him to speak at all, but he manages to get his words together fast enough to reply even through the hazy way sleep is starting to call to him.

“Only if you want me to,” because he *does* want to know, that’s unavoidable, but knowing when Dirk doesn’t want him to feels like it would be a violation and he’d rather never know anything than have that happen.

“You’d be okay with it, if I never told you?” he sounds uncertain, like he’s waiting for Todd to prove him wrong.

“I’d still worry about you,” he doesn’t think he’ll ever stop doing that. “And I can’t promise that I wouldn’t *think* about it. But... if you never wanted me to know then I’d be okay with that. As long as you didn’t think you’d have to shut me out when it hurts you.”

Todd can hear Dirk thinking and he’s happy to let him, this is something that he needs to find his patience for, he knows that much.

“I *do* want you to know,” he admits after a long moment. “It’s just... it would be hard to tell you. And you might not- well, no, you won’t like a lot of it. It’s not... I’ve never really told anyone before. There’s never really been any point, but...” he trails off, Todd can hear him swallow, feel the way he presses his hand down over his chest like he can keep him there. “I don’t want you to... you’ll see me differently, I think. You might...” pity him, maybe. Be scared of him. Be disgusted. Dirk knows his childhood wasn’t exactly normal and there’s really no telling how Todd would react. “That’s not what I want.”

Todd isn't good with words, and he doesn't want to make promises he can't keep, but the thought that it would change anything between them makes an ugly feeling fill his chest. He places his hand over Dirks where it's pressed against his skin, slotting their fingers together and squeezing softly. “It... it might change, a little,” he shakes his head because he's not sure he can make his thoughts make sense to Dirk. “It might change how I understand you, but it won't... It won’t change what I think of you.” He's already in far too deep for that. “I mean... after all the crazy shit we’ve seen you really think I’m going to give up now?”

“I...” Todd finds himself suddenly afraid of the answer Dirk is going to give him. “I know this isn’t exactly... *normal*. It can be a lot and I suppose... I’m already prepared for the idea that one day it will probably get to be too much for you. If you left... well. I wouldn’t want to put up with this, if I had the choice. I don’t think I could *blame* you for it.”

“Dirk...” he feels helpless, like someone has pulled a rug out from under him and he falters while he tries to work out what to say. “Look at me,” he says, feeling more than a little desperate in a way he’s unfamiliar with. They can’t see each other very well in the dark but Dirk shifts to look at him anyway, eyes wide and uncertain. “I’m not going anywhere unless it’s with you. There’s *nothing* crazy enough to make me leave.”

“You say that but-”

“I’m saying that because it’s *true*. Maybe you don’t believe it, maybe it’s easier or whatever to just not believe it, but there is nothing that could ever convince me to leave you. Even if we end up fighting, fuck... I don’t know, an army of fire breathing unicorns from space, I’m gonna be there. So you’re just gonna have to... deal with it.”

There’s a long moment of silence before Dirk asks, “fire breathing unicorns from space?” in a way that Todd knows means he’s being mocked.

“Shut up, our lives are crazy. I’m keeping my options open,” he’s relieved though, glad that the worst of it seems to have passed.

“I sincerely hope we never meet anything like that, but if we do...” he looks a little nervous, Todd wishes he didn’t find it cute. “I’d be glad to have you with me.”

“Good. Because I’ll be there whether you like it or not,” he knows he’s said the right thing when Dirk makes a pleased little hum and cuddles in closer. It’s good for now.

The title may be subject to change, and the best way to keep updated with this fic is to subscribe to it (or me, or both) and you'll get a little alert when I post something.

Comments will make me write faster, feedback is the fic writers fuel, so let me know what you think! I like getting words in return for these words. I hope you like it, I'd ask you to be nice but I already know you're a lovely lot.

You can catch me at kieren-fucking-walker on tumblr if you want to yell at me/talk to me about Dirk Gently/generally freak out over these two idiots.

Thanks for reading! Hope to see you for Chapter 2!

Something old, something new.

Chapter Summary

Dirk has learned by now to expect the unexpected, but no matter how he tries he can't prepare himself for everything, especially when it comes to things he's been trying not to think about.

When something he'd thought he'd lost forever comes back to him, he's not quite sure what to do.

Chapter Notes

Hi, it's me, back with a second chapter! I thought I'd get this one up quicker than I actually did, and it's shorter than I originally intended, but it's here now and I hope you enjoy it.

This fic will deal with PTSD and the aftermaths of trauma, I'll do my best to tag it accurately. Tags and characters will be updated as needed with each chapter.

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

The box sits unopened under Dirk's desk, and for a time it seems almost like it's been forgotten about.

Dirk wishes he *could* forget about it. Instead it sits at the back of his mind, too heavy to ignore and he knows it's only going to be a matter of time before he gives in and opens it. He's afraid of what he'll find there when he does.

In some ways he already knows. Files and records, all the information Blackwing had collected on him but had never thought to share with him. There's nothing in there that he hasn't lived through, and that means that there's also nothing that should surprise him, but it's not that simple. He knows better than to think that reading some things they did won't shock him to read about even if he had dealt with it before. Getting himself through it in the moment is entirely different to seeing it printed out in black and white, harsh clear letters that leave no room for justifications or escaping the reality of what had been happening. There are things that he'd always suspected, but never truly *known*, that the information in there has the power to confirm and he doesn't know if he wants to know for sure. Terrible as it is, it's easier to cling to the hope that there were good reasons for what they did. That the people who treated him well were, at heart, *good* people and they hadn't just been lying to him the

whole time, that the small amounts of affection he'd been given were *real* and tangible. Even when he knows the truth somewhere deep inside it doesn't mean he wants to acknowledge it.

But, like all things, it's only a matter of time.

It's late one night when he first thinks about opening it. Lying awake on the sofa, having promised Todd he'd follow him to bed in a minute a few hours ago now, but Todd hasn't come to find him which means he's long since fallen asleep. It's good, he thinks. Todd needs the sleep, and Dirk needs the space.

But now he's wishing he'd at least *tried* to sleep, staring at the ceiling and trying to find patterns in the plaster like it might distract him from the overwhelming feeling of uncertainty that simmers low in his gut. It's like a bomb, he thinks. Sat under his desk downstairs, biding its time until he's stupid enough to open it and likely blow himself up in the process. He's waiting for something, some kind of sign to say it's the right time, that it's safe to do it now, but he knows deep down it isn't going to come.

He wishes he could burn the damn thing without looking and have done with it.

But...

And that's the thing, really. Dirk has always been insatiably curious, always wanted answers, especially for the things that had happened to him, and now he might have them right in his grasp. What he sees in there he can't *unsee* and it scares him, but he also thinks that maybe he *deserves* this. Deserves to know what it is they wanted from him, what it is they thought he could do, what the *point* of all that was. Because there had to be a point, didn't there? There had to be a *reason*. The thought of anything else is too much to contemplate, and perhaps... perhaps with the right information he can start to understand. Perhaps it'll be enough to prove all of his justifications correct, and he'll realise that it *was* as necessary as they always told him it was.

Maybe that will make it easier.

He considers the silence of the room, watching the bedroom door thoughtfully, before pulling himself up off the sofa and heading for the door that will take him out of the apartment and down to the office below.

It takes him a moment to find the right key when he gets there, fumbling in the dark and cursing himself for not turning on a light before creeping downstairs, until eventually he manages to get the door unlocked and makes his way inside. It's just as they left it, but seems almost unfamiliar like this. Silent and empty even when he flicks the light on, smiling at the organised row of post-it notes stuck to Farah's desk, the half empty cup of coffee left on Todd's. Little things that might not mean much to anyone glancing in, but mean the world to him when they broadcast the fact that he's not doing this on his own. The excitement of having people actually stick around hasn't worn off yet, and part of him hopes it never does. His own desk is cluttered with all sorts of things, an abandoned pile of half finished paperwork, strange items he's been given as gifts for working cases, books he never intends to read, a small potted plant, a never ending supply of fidget toys that delight him and

frustrate everyone else. He has to make room before he hauls the box up into the space. It's heavier than he'd expected, bigger as well. He's not quite sure what to do now he's got it here.

He traces his fingers over the symbol on the top, something he'd tried to make sure would never be applied to him again, but perhaps things like that are beyond his control. There's an instruction labelling the box as government property, saying it's not to be removed, his hand drifts to brush over his shoulder without thinking before he shakes himself out of it, taking a breath to steel himself as he fights off the way his body tries to freeze with indecision.

It feels imposing, like it's taking up all the available space he has and draining the light from the room. But that's ridiculous, he *knows* it is. They aren't supposed to have a hold on him anymore, *certainly* not through something as simple as a box full of files. It's nothing he doesn't already know, he tells himself. He'd handled everything in there once, he can handle it again and even if he can't nobody is here to *make* him do anything. This is his decision. He clings to that thought desperately as he pries the lid off, quick, like a plaster, only to slam it shut almost immediately when he catches a glimpse of yellow and the bottom drops out of his stomach.

His knuckles are white where they're clenched around the edge of the box, eyes screwed shut and biting down on his lower lip because he'd thought...

He opens the lid ever so slightly, peeking inside, just to make sure. His heart is racing, but slowly he takes the lid off and sets it down to the side, fingers trembling as he reaches out to touch the soft leather of his yellow jacket. He's confused, and maybe a little awed to see it here, seemingly in one piece. It takes a moment before he spots something else underneath, and he lifts the jacket out carefully, eyes filling with tears as his suspicions are confirmed.

The Mexican Funeral shirt that Todd had given him, the one he'd made him promise not to get shot in, the one Dirk had cherished from the moment it had been handed to him, the one he'd lost mere hours later when they'd stripped him down and forced him back into those *awful* jumpsuits, sits folded carefully on top of the box like it had never been taken from him at all.

He pulls it out of the box, fingers tracing the pattern carefully as he tries to comprehend that they'd kept it, tries to work out *why* they'd kept it. For a moment all he can manage is a confused type of relief, but then a sudden hot flush of anger overtakes him in a way he's never really felt before, because they didn't have any *right* to take them from him in the first place, let alone to give it back like a *gift*.

He wonders if it would have been used as a reward, something to be given and taken away on a whim, dangled in front of him and serving of a reminder of everything he'd had, everything they'd dragged him away from. If Riggins had been there he knows it would have been, but Friedkin either wasn't that smart or wasn't that cruel, and Dirk doesn't know whether he's grateful for that or if he's angry they hadn't even taken it for a purpose. They'd just taken it for the sake of *taking* it. He likes to think if they had given it to him he would have torn it to shreds so they couldn't use it again.

He knows in reality he wouldn't have been able to, he'd been too scared that they'd destroyed it already.

The anger dissipates as suddenly as it had come, and he slams the lid back onto the box before he can see any more of what's in there. He can't face it, thought he'd be strong enough but of course he isn't, he never *is*. He shoves it back under his desk where he doesn't have to look at it, gathering up his jacket along with the t-shirt and holding them close to his chest like he can stop them from being taken again. That move turns out to be a mistake.

They smell like Blackwing. Sterile and clean, a little metallic, it clogs his nose and sits unpleasantly at the back of his throat and before he knows what he's doing the anger is back, surging in a way he couldn't hold back if he wanted to, and he's slamming the door behind him as he storms upstairs. He doesn't give any thought to the hour, or the possibility of waking Todd as he makes his way through to the kitchen and plugs the sink, turning on the water and dumping the clothing under it. It's far too hot for his hands, but he ignores the way it burns, intent on scrubbing them clean as best he can because apparently there's *nothing* Blackwing can't get into, can't sink its teeth into and stay there. These things aren't part of Blackwing, they're *his* things, that overly familiar, startlingly oppressive scent never should have been here, and he wants it *out*. If he can't get it out he can't keep them, and they're *his*. Not theirs. He's not theirs.

"Dirk," the sound of his name comes tired and confused from the doorway behind him.
"What- what are you doing?"

He didn't hear Todd get up, and he doesn't even flinch when he turns on the light, bathing the room in a bright fluorescence that doesn't match the anger boiling in his chest as he keeps scrubbing, ignoring him altogether. He can't explain it to him, he doesn't *want* to. There's nothing he can do anyway, he just has to keep going until it's out. Until it's all gone. Until he can pretend it was never here at all.

"Hey, *hey*," Todd's voice is soft but his hands are strong as they wrap around his wrists and tug him away from the water. He tries to pull away, but Todd just holds tighter, and for the first time in his life Dirk feels like he might actually try to hit him if he doesn't let go. He doesn't *understand*, he *needs* to do this.

"Let go of me," he sounds far more panicked than he'd expected, even to his own ears, and Todd doesn't look any happier for it. He hates the way he looks almost...sad. He doesn't *need* his sadness, he doesn't need his *pity*. Why is it the one time *Dirk* is angry is the one time Todd *isn't*?

"*Dirk-*"

Dirk just shakes his head and pulls back against his hold, trying to sound as angry as he feels. He *does* feel angry. "I said let *go* of me!"

"Stop, *stop*. Dirk-" he's worried, Dirk can tell, but right now he doesn't even *care* as long as he can just get that fucking *scent* out of his clothes where it can't make him feel like he's suffocating.

"Let go! Let go of me, just-"

Todd doesn't, because he's stubborn, and it turns out to be the right thing to do when Dirk's protests catch in his throat and he chokes on a sob, trembling even as he tries desperately to twist his wrists out of Todd's grip because he has to, he *has* to.

"Please let go," he asks, voice little more than a whisper as he shakes his head and tries to pretend there aren't tears streaming down his face. "Please."

"Okay, okay," Todd nods his head, eyes wide with worry, brow furrowed in concern as he eases his grip, standing in between Dirk and the sink like he's worried he might lunge for it again. "I'm sorry. I'm- I didn't- you were going to hurt yourself. You *were* hurting yourself and I didn't-"

Dirk's lower lip trembles, shaking his head as he fists his hands in the old band t-shirt Todd had been wearing to bed and buries his face into his shoulder. "I'm sorry," he whispers, clinging onto him as much as he can. "I'm sorry, *I'm sorry*," he can't stop saying it, trembling against him even when Todd shushes him, wrapping his arms around him and brushing his fingers through the short, soft hair at the back of his head.

"Shh," he tells him, rocking them ever so slightly in a way that seems practiced even though he's never done it with him before. "You're okay. You haven't done anything wrong."

Dirk's laugh is weak and bitter, tightening his grip on him. "I lied to you, and I woke you up, and I *upset* you," he's surprised the words make sense with the way his breath is hitching, but Todd just sighs and pulls him in closer.

"I don't care that you woke me up," he promises, pressing a kiss to his temple. "You- you're more upset than I am, I'm just worried about you."

"I still lied."

"About what?"

"I said I'd come to bed."

Todd huffs out a breath of laughter that ruffles his hair, "that's okay. I forgive you."

Dirk squeezes his eyes shut, pressing his face into Todd shoulder hard enough that he starts to see stars behind his eyelids, holding his breath like it might make it all go away.

They stay there for a while, Todd swaying them gently and humming something under his breath while Dirk tries his best to get his breathing under control. Todd rubs his back and shushes him whenever he tries to apologise or the sobbing picks up again, Dirk has no idea how much time has passed before the room falls quiet around them.

"What happened?" Todd asks eventually, words soft in a way that Dirk knows means he'd accept if he didn't want to talk about it. The feeling in his chest swells and threatens to overwhelm him, but he can feel the need to get it out like a physical ache, knowing if he doesn't it'll just get worse.

"I opened it," he whispers back after a while. "I- they-" he shakes his head, Todd tightens the arm he has around his waist and spreads his legs a little more so Dirk can fit better against him. "I thought they'd- they took them. And I thought they'd destroyed them because- because they didn't *use* them but... they just *had* them. And now they're here. And they're *supposed* to smell like *you* but they don't because... they just smell like..." he swallows heavily, nuzzling in close. "It's... It's *stupid*."

"Okay." Todd sounds tired, he realises abruptly, but he turns to press a kiss to Dirk's temple anyway. "Is that why... you were doing the... thing? With the water?"

Dirk nods, and it's starting to feel silly now, like he may have overreacted. "I know it's... I shouldn't have... I don't know what happened. I just-" he's working himself up again and Todd shakes his head.

"We have a washer, you know." Dirk would be insulted at the insinuation that he never does any laundry, the fact that he *doesn't* notwithstanding, but he's too tired to argue about it now, feeling more worn out than he has in weeks.

"I needed it gone. It wasn't quick enough."

"Alright. I mean... I'm pretty sure you'll ruin the leather by putting it through the washer, and I don't know how much the water messed it up, but we can put the shirt through at least, and take the jacket for dry cleaning? I know it's not right now but... it might help."

Dirk is suddenly struck with an overwhelming surge of just how very *much* he loves Todd Brotzman. It's not something he knows how to deal with right now, not this tired and shaken up, not when their relationship is still new, but he presses in just a little closer like Todd might be able to get the message that way.

"It won't smell like you," because that's what had hit him the most, more than just the smell of that *place*, but the realisation that it had taken a part of his family, a part of *Todd*, away from him.

Todd is here now though. Real, and present, and warm, pressing a smile into his hair where Dirk is hunched over to cling to him. "I'll wear it afterwards. For like, a week, if you want. It'll be gross."

He huffs out a weak breath of laughter, even though the thought of Todd doing that for him makes him feel all kinds of warm, filling up all the spaces left empty by his crying. "You admit it then?"

"What?"

"That wearing the same item of clothing for multiple days when you have the option not to is gross?"

Todd rolls his eyes, and says what he always says. "It's good for the environment."

Dirk isn't quite tired enough that he forgets how to counter. "It's *lazy*."

Todd hums noncommittally, and Dirk takes it as a win. “You going to be okay?” the concern is still there in his voice, but lessened somewhat now Dirk has calmed down.

“I... I think I need to sleep. For a week. Or a month, maybe. And then...” he trails off, unsure he wants to think about it.

“Then?”

Dirk sighs, shaking his head. “Then I can work out how to deal with the rest of it.”

There’s a moment of silence while Todd shifts, moving to encourage Dirk to stand back so he can look at his face, blotchy and tear stained as it is. “Not until you’re ready.”

He bites his lip, but he doesn’t look away. Todd is watching him carefully, like he’s ready to argue if Dirk tries to contradict him. “What if I’m never ready? I can’t just... *leave* it.” It’s a real fear of his and it must show, because Todd softens, pressing their heads together in apology.

“Then... when you feel like you can. And... a little at a time. As much as you want but... not too much, okay? I don’t-” Todd struggles with the words for a moment, like he’s not sure how to phrase his thoughts. “Look. I know... I know it’s gonna be shitty. But I don’t want you to get hurt. Which... I guess it’s kinda inevitable, but if we can- I don’t know, minimise it? I’m not- I’m not saying you can’t handle it or anything like that,” because Dirk is one of the strongest people Todd has ever met in his life really, “I just want you to be careful.”

Dirk releases his death grip on Todd’s shirt so he can lace their fingers together. “I know,” he promises, because he *does* know that Todd worries about him. He can have a strangely reserved and grumpy way of showing it at times but he always *does*. “Can-can we talk about this tomorrow? I’m- I don’t even know what time it is,” he laughs.

“It was four am when I got up,” Todd tells him, standing up onto his toes to press a soft kiss to Dirk’s forehead, a reversal of their usual roles for that particular gesture. “Go on. Bed. I’ll...” he tilts his head towards the sink, not sure *what* he’s going to do about it, but it’ll be *something*. “I won’t be long.”

Dirk nods, offering a soft, tired smile as he lets him go. Todd catches his wrist before he can get too far though, and he turns back, raising his eyebrow curiously.

“I-” Todd looks vaguely panicked, like he hadn’t thought this course of action through entirely, but he sets his shoulders anyway in the familiar way that tells Dirk he intends to follow through. Then he does something Dirk can’t make any sense of at all, by stripping off his shirt and holding it out to him before he can think twice about it.

“Todd?” he asks, clearly puzzled by the gesture even as Todd flushes and looks away, his sudden burst of determination dwindling.

“I- It’s not the same but...” he shrugs, sheepish. “It’ll smell like me?”

This time Dirk feels like crying for an entirely different reason.

“*Oh*. Right. Yes, of course, that’s...” he can’t find the words he’s looking for, and curses his own inability to be articulate right when he *actually* needs it. Todd is fidgeting, like he’s regretting his decision and it’s enough to shake him out of it as he takes the shirt from him and leans in to kiss his cheek. “Thank you.”

He shrugs, trying to brush it off like always and the familiarity of the gesture makes Dirk smile. Some things in his life are consistent now, he needs to hold onto that.

“Don’t be too long.”

Todd nods his agreement, tilting his head towards the door with a fond smile. “Go on. I’ll be right there .”

Dirk offers him a smile of his own, making his way through to the bedroom and throwing his clothes into the corner to be dealt with later once he’s stripped them off. He pulls Todd’s t-shirt on over his head, still warm and smelling just like him, but he steals his pillow too just for good measure. He’s determined to stay awake until Todd comes back to bed, but it isn’t long before the last few hours catch up with him, and eventually he drifts off to the sound of him cleaning up the kitchen, content to know he’ll be here soon.

Chapter End Notes

The title may be subject to change, and the best way to keep updated with this fic is to subscribe to it (or me, or both) and you'll get a little alert when I post something.

Comments will make me write faster, feedback is the fic writers fuel, so let me know what you think! I like getting words in return for these words. I hope you like it, I'd ask you to be nice but I already know you're a lovely lot.

You can catch me at kieren-fucking-walker on tumblr if you want to yell at me/talk to me about Dirk Gently/generally freak out over these two idiots.

Thanks for reading! Hope to see you, and Farah, in Chapter 3.

The sun behind the clouds.

Chapter Summary

No matter how much he wants to help, Todd isn't sure he's particularly suited to it. He'd promised Dirk he wouldn't have to do this alone and he'd meant it, but somewhere in there he'd forgotten that he wasn't alone in helping him either. Things always feel more hopeful when their family is back together.

Chapter Notes

Hello! It's me again. This chapter took longer than I thought it would (don't they always?) and I procrastinated posting it because I'm not 100% happy with it, but it was going nowhere just sitting in my docs so I figured the best thing to do was to just post it anyway and move on.

Farah is here! And with her comes a brief reprieve from the angst.

This fic will deal with PTSD and the aftermaths of trauma, I'll do my best to tag it accurately. Tags and characters will be updated as needed with each chapter.

Hope you enjoy <3

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

Todd had really underestimated how good it would feel to have Farah back.

He knows it's important to her, getting into some kind of routine with their new friends, keeping tabs on Lydia, trying to salvage what she can from before everything went to shit and rebuild from there, but it never feels quite right without her there. Unbalanced, he thinks, even with her regular check ins. It might be that her routines had become part of their lives as well, or just that having her around made it more likely that they'd actually get some work done, but having her home feels right. He thinks they might need her.

“Are you going to tell me what happened?” she asks, raising an eyebrow at him over the edge of her coffee cup. “If you two are... I don't even know what a domestic with you would look like, actually. I'm not sure I'd *want* to, but...” she shrugs one shoulder, “I can tell something is wrong.”

Todd finds himself smiling a little, shaking his head as he considers his own mug, glancing over at the bedroom door behind which Dirk is soundly asleep despite the hour.

"It's not... it's nothing like that," he promises, unsure where to start when he's not completely sure what's actually happening himself. "It's... worse? Bigger? I don't know, but it's... bad. It's bad."

She frowns, losing the teasing edge to her questioning as she sits up straighter. "Are you okay? Is Dirk okay? Is anyone in danger? Did someone get hurt?" It's a rapid fire line of questioning and he holds his hand up to stop her before she can work herself up, not wanting to make her panic.

"Nobody's hurt," he promises, "and... I don't think we're in any danger. It's just... look I don't even really *know* what happened but... someone came looking for Dirk. Military."

"Blackwing?"

"I... yeah. I think so. He... hasn't really said much about it but... the guy said it had shut down? He gave him a box full of stuff and said... I don't know, some weird shit about wanting to meet up and make amends or something, but Dirk..." he sighs heavily, shaking his head. "He had a panic attack, I guess. He... stopped breathing and then he got like, really paranoid it was- And then last night... I don't even know *what* it was, some kind of anxiety attack? Some kind of... he opened the box and, I don't know. It got to him. He's not... he hasn't been sleeping well, so I don't want to wake him up."

The room goes quiet around them, Farah watching the bedroom door while Todd stares at the floor.

"When did that happen?"

"Last week. He... was doing okay for a little bit before last night, or at least he was pretending to. He... you know how he is."

"I should have been here," she says after a moment, "I should have-"

"Don't," he tells her, soft with it. "I think it was on purpose, coming round while you weren't here. And I... I was gonna punch him, to be honest, but I don't think Dirk needed that and, I don't know. He didn't seem to want to hurt him." Not physically, anyway. Todd can't deny that Dirk *was* hurt by it. "Besides, you're here now. It's... good to have you back. And I think it'll help."

She nods, decisive, but he can tell she's touched by the words. He wonders if he needs to get better at telling her how important she is to them.

"What about you?"

He frowns, confused. "What about me?"

"How are you... you know, handling it?"

"I-" Todd shakes his head, sighing when Farah tilts hers questioningly at him. "I don't know how to help him," he admits, low and filled with regret. "I mean... I'm- I'm *trying* but, I don't know what I'm supposed to do. He's just... he's not coping and I can *see* him not coping even

when he pretends he is, but I don't know what to do about it because it's not like... whenever I ask him he just says he's fine and... I don't know. Sometimes I want to just... but I don't want to start an argument and I'm trying to-" he cuts himself off with a self deprecating laugh, because god knows trying isn't the same as achieving.

"I'm trying to be *patient*. And I'm trying to give him what he needs, but I don't even know what that is and he won't *tell* me." His hands grip his mug tightly, the remainder of his coffee already gone cold as he stares into it like it will distract from the fact he's tearing up. "Maybe I'm... I don't know. Selfish? Well, I *am* that's... but this is isn't about me, it's about him and I don't want to be selfish I just want- I want to help. I want-" he closes his eyes tightly, clenches his jaw as if he's trying to keep the words back. "Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and he's just... crying. And it's *quiet* you know? In a... a really bad way," he swallows heavily with the admission. "I don't know how to fix that."

Farah stalls, she's no better at this kind of thing than he is, in all honesty she thinks she might be worse. It doesn't mean she doesn't want to help though, it certainly doesn't mean she doesn't care, even if she's not quite found a good way to express it yet. "I-" she starts, hesitant and careful with her words. "I don't think you can fix it, Todd. I don't think you *need* to? Just... be there. For him. I know it's not- it might not feel like much, or anything really but- I think the best thing we can do is just be there, and when... *if* he wants to talk about it with us then... he knows he can." The prospect of Dirk actually talking about it is both relieving and terrifying, and Todd can tell that Farah feels the same. The promise of him opening up and getting out whatever it is he's stowing away in his head is a good one, but the fear of being inadequate in their reactions, in not being able to help, in *letting him down*? It's almost too much to bear. "I'm worried about him," he tells her. She just smiles sadly. "We both are. But... he knows, doesn't he? Do you think he... I'm not very good at- or maybe I'm just not used to... telling people things that I could, *should* tell them. Do you think..." somehow watching her stutter around her thoughts makes him relax a little, glad he's not the only one who feels like he's going to utterly fail at this.

"He knows," he promises. "We both know. You... you know too, right?" Suddenly worried that while it's something he says often to Dirk, their relationship is different and it might not be so obvious to Farah. She just raises an eyebrow at him. "You're not as subtle with it as you think you are." "Yeah, that's..." he huffs a soft breath of laughter, shaking his head at the realisation that while having people *know* he cares about them might once have been something he'd want to keep secret, he no longer feels the need to withdraw from it entirely. "Good." "You're not- helping him isn't something you're doing on your own. Dirk... he has a lot of people who care about him. We all want to. We're all *going* to," she reassures him, the familiar determination he knows he can rely on is so clear in her face. "He's... we've got each other, okay? If that means right now he needs us to have his back then that's what we'll do. It'll just... take some time." He nods, knowing she's right and feeling some of the tension in his chest unravel. "Guess we're gonna have to be careful not to fuck it up, huh? We'd never hear the end of it." Farah rolls her eyes, but fixes him with a soft smile anyway. "We won't," she says, and the surety in her voice is almost enough to make him believe it. He nods his agreement, settling back into the couch when he smiles over at her.

"So... how was Tina?" it's suggestive enough that he can see the way Farah flushes at his implication.

“Tina? Tina’s...fine, she was- she *is* fine. She’s...” she manages to shake off her initial flustered reaction to give an actual answer, “good, actually. She’s been doing these talks at the school? All the kids love her.”

Todd snorts but it's fond, “yeah, I can see that.”

“They think she's cool, she has secret handshakes with half of them now. It might do some good, you know? Kids liking her, they won't want to get into trouble with her.”

“Or it'll make them do it more because they'll get away with it,” Todd argues.

Farah just snorts. “I don't need to ask which you'd be.”

“Hey! I never... it doesn't count if you don't get caught.”

She laughs, shaking her head. “If you say so.”

“Listen, some laws are *meant* to be broken.”

“Uh huh,” her voice is dripping with sarcasm, “and what injustices were you protesting with your casual drug use?”

Todd flails for a moment, looking for answer. “The injustice of... having to be an active participant in a capitalist hellscape.”

She raises both of her eyebrows at him this time and he just shrugs.

“Realising you can't do the one thing that'll make you happy because you need money to live is a hard thing to come to terms with,” and god, that turned quickly, sometimes Todd wonders if it's even possible for him to have a casual conversation without making it depressing, he's lucky Farah seems to have other things on her mind.

“Oh! Speaking of!” she leans over to search through her bag, “Tina wanted me to give you this.”

His brows furrow in confusion, but a minute she holds a CD out to him, and it's enough to make him laugh when he sees the cover.

“*Jesus*, where did she dig this up?” he asks, taking it from her and flipping the case open. “We made like, maybe a hundred of these? They're not even the official album.”

He'd lost most of his old band stuff when the Ridgely had been burnt to the ground, and while he's sure there's still some knocking around at his parents house, a CD full of Mexican Funeral demos is not something he'd expected to just show back up. It's strange, he thinks, looking at the picture of them all together, younger, before everything went to shit. It feels like a completely different life now.

“She said she had a couple of them and she thought you might like one. She *also* thought it would embarrass you, and that Dirk might want to hear it,” she smirks, knowing damn well he *would* be embarrassed if any of them actually listened to it.

“Yeah, no. Dirk isn’t going to find out about this. He wouldn’t like it anyway.”

“Wouldn’t like what?”

They both look up to see Dirk in the doorway, sleep ruffled and yawning as he makes his way over to drop down on the couch next to Todd. Farah’s mouth twitches into a fond little smile as Todd turns absently to press a kiss to the top of his head.

“Tina gave Todd a copy of one of his albums,” Farah tells him, earning her a glare from Todd who had fully been intending to pass it off as something else.

“It’s...” he tries to think of how Dirk would describe the music. “*Shouty* and angry and you wouldn’t like it,” he argues, trying to stop the inevitable when Dirk perks up and reaches out to pluck the album from his hands.

“I’ll be the judge of that,” he sets it aside happily, pressing a kiss to Todd’s cheek when he frowns. “It’s lovely to have you back, Farah. I’m assuming everyone is surviving without us?”

“Yeah. Hobbs wants you to come for a visit sometime, says he’s got some... *Holistic stuff* to show you. He’s really gotten into that,” the tone of her voice tells them both exactly what she thinks of that, but it doesn’t seem to bother Dirk in the slightest. In fact, the suggested combination of ‘Hobbs’, ‘Visit’, and ‘Holistic’ has him looking like he’s about to bolt out the door to do just that right this second.

“Well yes! Of course! That sounds wonderful, *brilliant* in fact, when should I-”

“Maybe try calling him first?” Todd suggests gently, not that he thinks Hobbs would be anything other than delighted to find Dirk randomly dropping onto his doorstep, but he’d like a little more planning at least.

Dirk scoffs at the idea, but he’s stopped looking like he has to leave right this minute, and Todd is willing to count that as a win. He watches his face for a moment, noting that even though he still seems a little unsteady, he looks a lot better for the sleep.

“Right. I gotta go and-” he doesn’t want to bring up last night, but he had every intention of taking the jacket to be dry cleaned and hopefully cleared of any long term damage today and the time to get that done is running out. He throws a quick glance at Farah. “-get some shit done. You gonna be okay?” It’s not like he’s leaving him alone, but he *worries*, moreso when things are already so precariously balanced.

“I’m sure we will survive without you for a little while,” he promises, only a little teasing as Todd rolls his eyes and shrugs on his own jacket, digging through his pockets for the keys.

“Yeah, well if I come back to find the place destroyed I’ll know who to blame.”

Dirk’s eyes go wide and he nods solemnly, “the Rowdy Three.”

Todd snorts, but it puts him at ease to see Dirk a little better. “Right. I won’t be long,” he hesitates for a moment, aware of the fact that Farah is there now, but he leans over to steal a

quick kiss from him anyway before he leaves, pulling the door shut in a rush behind him as if he's trying to put as much distance between them and himself as possible. Farah watches fondly as Dirk stares after him.

"You two are really getting into it, huh?" she asks, grinning when Dirk blushes bright red and looks at her with an expression that's some strange mix of undiluted joy and horror.

"I- well- yes I suppose you could say that. I mean we've- well *no* we haven't actually-

"Woah! No. No thank you. I don't-" her face is pinched and she looks for a moment like she's regretting her choice of words entirely. "I don't need to know about... *that*. I just meant... you seem, you know, *happy*."

"Oh," Dirk's blush has settled a little now but he still fidgets with his fingers, a little embarrassed. "Well... yes. We are. Or, *I* am at least. I don't know if he's-" he frowns, second guessing himself. "Do- do you think he's..."

"Happy?" she finishes.

Dirk nods rapidly, he looks a little ill. "Yes."

"He's happy. I mean, he's *Todd*. But yeah, Dirk. It's very obvious that he's happy."

"Oh good," Dirk breathes a sigh of relief, sinking down against the couch cushions as Farah shakes her head in wonder at the stupidity of asking such a thing. "That's- that's good. I just... he can be quite hard to read sometimes, can't he?"

"Dirk," she says, the amusement filling her voice clearly now. "I think *anyone* can tell he's head over heels for you. It's obvious. Even *he* knows it's obvious. It's kind of...sweet."

"Don't let him hear you call him that," he warns, but he's clearly pleased with her assessment of the situation. Farah watches him carefully as he smiles down at his hands, unsure if now is a good time. Unsure if there will *ever* be a good time.

"Todd... he told me. About what happened, while I was away." She winces when the words come out blunter than she intended, but holds her ground when he looks up at her questioningly.

"About what?" it's avoidant, she knows that much, but she also knows they can't *not* talk about it and from experience the longer it sits between them the more awkward it will be when the time comes.

"About Blackwing," it's gentler this time, but Dirk still drops his gaze, smile slowly disappearing from his face.

"Ah. Yes. That."

"I'm sorry I wasn't here."

He shakes his head, "it's not like you *knew*."

"I know. But I should have-"

"He wouldn't have dared come round with you here. He'd probably-" Dirk swallows heavily, "probably been watching for weeks trying to find the right time. It's... fine."

And god she's no good at this. Dirk looks like he's closing himself off, body tense as he mentally puts up walls between them in the small space of the room. She doesn't know if she should let him or not. Doesn't know what to say either way.

"It's..." she sighs heavily, annoyed at her own incompetence. "If you don't want to talk about it then you don't have to. I'm not... *equipped* to... be good at that. But if you *do* want to, I'll be here. Even if I'm *terrible* at it," it's an awkward promise, but one she means all the same, and when Dirk softens just a little she knows she's done something right. "And... and it's not fine, Dirk. He came here, and he made you feel unsafe. I know it's... *different*, but I understand what it feels like to have someone invade a space that's supposed to be safe for you. I know how much that can... make things difficult so. So I-" and here's where she really trips up, but the least she can do is *try*, she wants to try, she knows he'd do the same for her. "I want you to know that- you *are* safe here, Dirk. I'm... not good at much, and I know I wasn't much use when Lydia- or the last time you were- or with the whole Wendimoor thing that was-" she takes a deep breath, shaking her head to clear her thoughts. Steady herself. "But I am not willing to let anything happen to you here. You or Todd. And I don't think Todd is going to let anything happen either. You... we care about you. And whatever this is... we- we have a family now. A little... a mess. Of a family. We're a mess. But it's worth protecting. I'm going to do that."

There's a horrifying moment where Farah abruptly realises that Dirk is *crying*, and that she's not sure if it's *good* crying or *bad* crying, and that knowing either way would hardly be helpful when she has no idea how to deal with that at all.

"Sorry," he says after a moment, shaking his head as he brushes away the tears before she can find the right way to react. "My eyes seem to be doing that a lot lately, *without* my permission I might add. It's terribly inconsiderate of them."

"No, no it's... fine," her hands hover uncertainly, feeling like maybe she should hug him even though she's not sure it would be any more than awkward at best. She settles for placing her hand over his, a little nervously herself. "You've... it's a lot. It's... whatever you need."

He smiles at that, turning his hand under hers to lace their fingers together and squeeze gently. It surprises her, but it's not unwelcome. She finds herself squeezing back.

"You're a good friend, Farah. We're lucky to have you," it's sincere, the way it always is whenever he says things like that. Farah often finds herself wondering how it is that she got caught up in all this, how it is that of all the ways none of them should ever have met, let alone become close, Dirk had somehow managed to bring them altogether. Even if he *can* drive her to the brink of insanity at times she'll never not be thankful for it.

"We're... lucky to have each other," it's the most she can give him right now, but he smiles anyway, nodding his understanding.

"I do... I feel *safer* now that you're here," he admits, quiet as anything as he stares at their hands. He looks vulnerable. "Not that I didn't feel safe with Todd just... it's different. You're, well. *You*." She's not quite sure what to say to that, a surge of pride and protectiveness welling up in her chest. All she's ever really wanted is to keep people safe, the thought that she *actually* inspires that feeling in someone is a lot to take in. It's easy to forget sometimes, that she'd found a place to be, people she fits with, but it's never more obvious than in moments like this.

"Well I'm not going anywhere for a while," she promises decisively, making plans to double check her calendar and rearrange if that proves to be untrue. "But I think maybe for now we could... try not to dwell on it?" she feels like a hypocrite saying it, but Dirk really *does* look tired. She can only imagine the whirlwind of thoughts in his head whenever the topic comes up.

"Yes," he agrees, sitting up a little straighter and turning his eclectic attentions back to the CD case he'd plucked from Todd's hands, turning it over thoughtfully. "Have you listened to it already?"

"I-" Farah shifts in her seat, pulling back from him and blushing with her guilt. It's enough to give him an answer. "Tina played it for me, yes."

Dirk's eyes light up, leaning in with what she can only call mischievous intrigue. "*And?* What did you think?"

"It's... not my taste. But it's... good? As far as I can tell. Music was never really my... *thing*. He's right though, you won't like it."

"It's *Todd*," he informs her, like she's somehow forgotten this most important fact, "how could I possibly *not* like it?"

"It's..." she shrugs. "Not your type of music?"

"I'll have you know I like *many* kinds of music."

"Do you like any of *Todd's* music?" she challenges, with the confidence of someone who already knows the answer.

"It's... *fine*."

"You hate it."

"I do *not*! I just... prefer other things."

"It's okay to say you hate it," Farah laughs, "he's not here."

Dirk looks around like he might be hiding under one of the chairs, ready to jump out and lecture him at the mere suggestion that his music taste might be bad.

"It's a bit... *loud*. And not very fun," he admits after a moment. "But I'm sure this will be different. It actually *is* Todd."

Farah hums, unconvinced but willing to let him have it. “The guitar is loud, but the singing is-”

Dirk’s head shoots up to look at her wide-eyed, “he *sings*?”

“I- yeah, Dirk. I thought you knew he was the front man?”

“I didn’t know that meant he was *singing*! He’s never sung to *me*,” he seems to be affronted by this, and Farah watches with amusement as he pries the CD case open to look at it like it holds the worlds greatest treasure.

He stares at it for a moment like he’s unsure what to do, and if Farah hadn’t seen him with one before now she wouldn’t be at all surprised to learn that he’d never seen a CD before.

“Open the book in the front cover,” she suggest, smirking because she knows Todd will *never* hear the end of it. Dirk looks up at her quizzically before doing as he’s told, and she doesn’t have to wait long for the pay off.

“*Oh my god.*”

“*Right?*” she joins in, trying not to laugh.

“Oh my- *Farah*. Look at his *hair*!”

She leans in to look again, giggling along with him at the sight of Todd, significantly younger than he is now, with his hair dyed blue and spiked up in a look that she’s *sure* went down well at the time, but now just looks ridiculous. Along with the rest of his questionable mid-2000’s punk get up and the ever-present middle finger it makes for *quite* a picture.

“Do you think we could get him to do it again?” Dirk asks, seemingly unsure whether to be delighted or horrified by the sight, but taken by it all the same. “Do you think there are *more* of these pictures?”

Todd would hate her if he ever found out, but the look on Dirk’s face and the thought of how funny it would be to see him pissed about it has her shrugging and suggesting in a tone that implies *you didn’t get this idea from me*, “maybe you should ask Amanda.”

“Farah,” he says, serious as anything when he looks at her, pulling out his phone. “You’re a *genius*.”

When Todd comes back an hour or so later it’s to the sight of Dirk and Farah hunched over Dirk’s phone, red faced and giggling on the couch. It’s not an unwelcome sight, but it leaves him feeling a bit bemused when the first thing both of them do when they look at him is burst into another round of laughter.

“Do I *want* to know?” he asks, even though he’s already fighting off a smile. Farah shakes her head, pressing a hand over her mouth even though her eyes are bright with mirth, and Dirk just waves his phone in his direction.

“*Todd*–” he manages through his laughter. “You...” he shakes his head, unable to do anything more than hand his phone over and watch the way the colour drains from Todd’s face when he sees what it is that they’re laughing at.

“What- where the *fuck* did you–” he cuts himself off with a groan. “*Amanda*.”

Apparently this is enough to set them off again, and Todd wants to be angry, he *does*, but no matter how much he wishes it wasn’t at his expense it’s the biggest relief he’s felt all week to see Dirk laughing again. He tries his hardest not to smile with them.

“I’m *sorry*,” Farah manages after a moment. “It’s just- you- you look like–”

“*A grumpy pink hedgehog*,” Dirk informs him when he catches his breath.

“Yeah well,” he grumbles, still a little put out at the appearance of pictures he’d hoped had long since been lost. “It was cool at the time,” Todd can’t find it in himself to do anything but shrug, blush rising to his cheeks as he does.

“Oh I’m sure,” Dirk agrees, attempting seriousness even though his attempt at a straight face is laughable at best. “You’re *very* cool, Todd.”

Todd huffs, picking up a cushion from the couch and throwing it at them. “What would you know about it, *losers*.” He’s laughing too now though, giving up on trying to be mad about it and dropping down onto the couch between them, smacking Dirk with the cushion again. “I was cooler than *both* of you.”

“And we’re very proud of you,” Farah grins at him, fond more than mocking.

Dirk sighs out the last of his laughter as he cuddles back into his side, Farah eyeing them like she’s debating whether or not she should leave them to it.

“You should stay,” he tells her, before she can make her excuses. “We’ll get take-out.”

“Pizza,” Dirk insists, looking over at her hopefully from his place on Todd’s shoulder.

“Pizza,” Todd concedes, agreeable. “You can tell us what other shit you got up to. Dirk can tell you how he cheated at cards.”

“How I *won* at cards,” he corrects. “There was *no* cheating.”

Todd rolls his eyes out of Dirk’s view and she smiles, relaxing back into her seat, decision made.

“I suppose it would be okay to stay a while,” she agrees.

“Yeah,” Todd finds himself smiling, knocking their shoulders together as he settles, it feels for the first time since it happened like they might have a chance of getting through this. “We missed you too.”

Chapter End Notes

The title may be subject to change, and the best way to keep updated with this fic is to subscribe to it (or me, or both) and you'll get a little alert when I post something.

Comments will make me write faster, feedback is the fic writers fuel, so let me know what you think! I like getting words in return for these words. I hope you like it, I'd ask you to be nice but I already know you're a lovely lot.

You can catch me at kieren-fucking-walker on tumblr if you want to yell at me/talk to me about Dirk Gently/generally freak out over these two idiots.

Thanks for reading! Hope to see you for Chapter 4.

It's supposed to be bulletproof.

Chapter Summary

The incomprehension on his face lasts longer than he thinks it should, but it slowly ticks over into realisation, and Todd doesn't get chance to say anything before Dirk registers what had happened. His eyes go wide, and he pulls his hands out of Todd's grip as hastily as he can manage, looking some mix of guilty, embarrassed and vaguely ill as he scrambles to extract himself from the covers and bolts for the bathroom.

Chapter Notes

Hi! This was meant to be up in December, but that month got far too busy and ran away from me entirely, so it's appearing now. This chapter and the next chapter were originally going to be one, but I split them into two after much debating with myself (and some others). It might leave the next chapter a little shorter, but I think it works better on balance this way.

Anyway, I'll shut up now! I hope you enjoy this chapter.

This fic will deal with PTSD and the aftermaths of trauma, I'll do my best to tag it accurately. Tags and characters will be updated as needed with each chapter.

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

Dirk's nightmares are silent.

He sleeps in a way Todd suspects is a learned behaviour, a way that no matter how often he sees it appears entirely unnatural and fits him all wrong. It's something he's getting used to, but it still unnerves him from time to time, because he doesn't move at *all*, and sometimes Todd's paranoia drives him to check that he's still breathing, having taken to sleeping with his head on his chest where he can feel his heartbeat. More unnerving than that though is that at some point in time Dirk had managed to teach himself to live out his terror silently, and it makes Todd feel enraged and helpless in equal measure. Dirk's nightmares leave him with wet cheeks and red eyes, occasionally little hitches of his breath but never anything more, and if he wakes up he makes no sound at all. Todd has no idea how many nightmares Dirk has had since they started sharing a bed, because even with him sleeping on him the way he does, it's incredibly rare Todd is aware of them enough to be woken by him when they happen. If he does notice, it's because he wakes up first and catches the tell-tale sign of dried tear tracks on his cheeks, or because Dirk extracts himself from under Todd's clinging to go to the bathroom and wakes him up in the process.

It's something Todd has considered *telling* him to wake him up for, especially when Todd's own nightmares are nothing like Dirk's and he *always* wakes him when he has them, if they're particularly bad he wakes up screaming, and on the *worst* occasions he wakes up out of a nightmare and into a paribulitis attack. Compared to him, Dirk is so silent Todd sometimes wonders if he even knows he's had one when he opens his eyes. Which is why when Dirk wakes up screaming, he knows that whatever it is he'd seen it had been *bad*.

It takes him a minute to find his bearings after jolting awake. Confused and blurry-eyed, and by the time he's worked out *why* there's even screaming in the first place it's subsided into little more than panicked breathing where Dirk has curled up next to the headboard.

It doesn't make him worry any less.

"Dirk?" he asks softly, trying his best to give him space while he waits for his eyes to adjust to the darkness in the room.

"Where am I?" he sounds like a frightened child and it twists uncomfortably in Todd's stomach, *wrong* in a way that feels tangible. He knows he's going to have to be careful with this, whatever *this* is, and he takes a breath to steady himself. He'll have time to panic later.

"In your- *our* bedroom. In our apartment, above the agency-" he blanks for a moment, "-in Seattle?"

Dirk doesn't say anything, and it's starting to freak him out, just the sounds of his ragged breaths and the occasional hitching sob in the dark. Todd swallows heavily.

"I'm- I'm gonna turn on the light so you can see where you are, okay?"

He still doesn't get a response, and every minute Dirk isn't responding to him is a minute the worry in his chest has to build up until it threatens to overwhelm him. He makes the decision to follow through anyway, because someone has to do something.

"Okay, I'm just gonna... put the light on so just-" he shakes his head, leaning over to flick the switch on the bedside lamp, illuminating the room around them in a soft, yellow glow.

"Dirk?"

Dirk has his eyes screwed shut, but Todd doesn't know if it's against the lights or if he just hasn't opened his eyes at all yet. He wants to reach out for him, but not knowing how it would be received he doesn't dare.

"You're okay," he tells him instead, hoping to *god* that's true. "Do- could you open your eyes?"

He stays silent, and for a horrible moment Todd wonders what will happen if he just never speaks again, but then he shakes his head the smallest amount, pressing his lips into a thin white line and ducking his chin towards his chest. In the light Todd can see where the tears are still flowing freely out from under his eyelids, and he wants nothing more than to be able to brush them away.

“Um-” because this is the kind of thing he’s *never* had to deal with before, and he doesn’t know what to do if Dirk won’t even *look* at him. Unless the reason he won’t is something he can fix. “I... can you tell me why not?”

He’s met with more silence, and bites back his frustration because if there’s one thing he knows it’s that yelling at Dirk won’t do any good. But then he speaks, a rushed whisper that makes him sound like he’s trying not to be heard.

“I don’t want you to go.”

“Go?” he asks, frowning in confusion. “I’m... I’m not going *anywhere*, you- why do you think I’ll go?”

He screws his eyes closed tighter, shaking his head again. “Because you’re not here.”

“I-” Todd looks down at his hands, he’s *definitely* here, but... he thinks back to the first thing Dirk had said to him when he’d woken up and something clicks into place. “Dirk,” he starts, as softly as he can manage. “Where do you think you are?”

He whimpers, and it’s not a name or a place but it’s enough for Todd to *know* where he’s at in his head. Enough for him to know he has to get him to open his eyes.

“You’re not there, okay? You’re- you’re here. With me. You’re safe. Do you- can I touch you?” Todd is wary of making it worse, but Dirk only nods the smallest amount, like he doesn’t believe Todd will manage to touch him.

“Okay, I’m- I’m going to take your hands now. If you want me to stop just... shake your head?” he reaches out to curl his fingers around where Dirk’s fists are curled into the covers. He jolts at the touch, but Todd doesn’t pull back, stroking his thumbs along his knuckles when his breathing starts to pick up.

“You’re okay,” he tells him again, keeping hold of their one small point of contact like it’s a lifeline. “I- I need you to open your eyes, Dirk. I promise I’m not going to go anywhere.”

“I-” Dirk is trembling, he can *feel* it, but he doesn’t want to touch him until he knows Dirk is okay with it. “You’re here?”

“Yeah, yeah Dirk I’m here.” It’s supposed to be reassuring but if anything Dirk seems to panic more.

“No. No, you- you can’t be here Todd you- *here* is- you *can’t*-”

“*Dirk*,” he shakes his head helplessly as Dirk rambles on in a series of ‘no’s’ and ‘can’ts’. “Dirk, just- we’re safe. I *promise*, and I wouldn’t-” he swallows thickly, unsure if his next words are even going to be true. “I wouldn’t *lie* to you. You- you trust me, don’t you?”

There’s a horrifying moment where Todd thinks Dirk might actually say no, fairly certain that it would rip Todd’s foundations out from underneath him if he did. Eventually though Dirk nods, tiny and barely there but enough for Todd to latch onto.

“I need you to open your eyes. Can you do that for me? You can close them again right after if you want, I just... I need you to see something, okay?”

He feels Dirk’s grip on the sheets tighten beneath his hands, and it feels like he waits for an eternity before he *finally* opens his eyes. Just the smallest amount at first, and then blinking them open when he sees Todd, staring at the room around him in confusion.

The incomprehension on his face lasts longer than he thinks it should, but it slowly ticks over into realisation, and Todd doesn’t get chance to say anything before Dirk registers what had happened. His eyes go wide, and he pulls his hands out of Todd’s grip as hastily as he can manage, looking some mix of guilty, embarrassed and vaguely ill as he scrambles to extract himself from the covers and bolts for the bathroom.

“Dirk, *wait!*” he calls as he tries to follow after him, but it’s too late. The sound of the bolt sliding into place echoes loudly in the quiet of the room, and Todd stares at the door firmly locked in his face. He doesn’t think Dirk could send a clearer message about trying to keep him out, even if he can’t for the life of him work out *why*.

There’s a part of him that wants to bang his fist against the door until he opens it, or beats it down altogether, but that mostly speaks from the hopeless part of him that *knows* there’s nothing he can do. That the window he *could* have helped had closed before he managed it. That he’d *failed*.

“Dirk?”

There’s no answer, and Todd stares resolutely at the painted wood in front of him. It’s something else he doesn’t understand, something else he might not be *able* to understand, and ironically enough the one person who might be able to give him some insight into how to help Dirk is Dirk himself, which given the current situation seems unlikely.

No matter how much he reminds himself it’s not *about* him, Todd can’t help but feel hurt by it. He’s confused by Dirk’s response, frustrated at his *lack* of response. Angry at himself for not being able to help, angry at the world for the reasons Dirk even *needs* help, angry at *Dirk* for not *letting* him help. Or not wanting him to. He doesn’t know which is worse. But he does *want* Dirk to get help, even if it’s not from him, no matter how much he wants it to be.

He’s trying, but it doesn’t feel like enough, and he doesn’t think it’s about to get any easier. He just wishes there was a way to acknowledge that it’s difficult for him to do this without feeling like the selfish, guilty, *bastard* he’s trying not to be.

“I’ll be out here. If you... want anything.”

If Dirk wants space then he can give him that, some small amount at least, no matter how shitty turning away from the door makes him feel.

By the time Dirk re-emerges Farah is pacing the floor of their living room, unable to keep herself still. He’d called her, after he’d spent a good few minutes trying and failing not to cry

at the realisation that he hadn't managed to help Dirk at all, and she'd turned up not twenty minutes later looking about as panicked as he'd felt. He hadn't needed to say much.

In the time since then, Todd had managed to accept he wouldn't be going back to sleep today and gotten dressed, Farah had obsessively checked the windows and exists *just to be safe*, and between them they'd managed to drink six cups of coffee. He knows she's just as worried as he is, and somehow it makes him feel better just having her here to worry with him. She hadn't tried to get Dirk out of the bathroom, despite how much Todd *knows* she's itching to break it down. It won't help, he tells himself when he has the same thought. *We* won't help.

Her head snaps up when the bedroom door opens, Todd's following rather more warily, because no matter how much he'd been trying to prepare for the aftermath, now that it's here he's not sure he's ready.

"Oh! Hello Farah, it's a little early for you to be here isn't it? Did we have plans? If we did I've forgotten them, I've been..." he trails off when he catches sight of Todd, averting his eyes before they can meet. It makes his stomach feel hollow, but he can't stop staring.

Dirk is dressed.

Dirk is dressed, and he's dressed about as *perfectly* as he ever can be. He's clearly showered, and his hair is set in place just *so* in the way that Todd knows he likes, when he can get it to stay and keep everything else from messing it up. His shirt is buttoned, tie knotted and sitting in a perfect straight line down his front, the tiny little dogs that decorate it matching perfectly to the brown jeans he'd recently bought to replace the other ones that had suffered an unfortunate demise at the hands (or rather, *claws*) of a small, angry cat. His shoes are shiny, as is his jacket, the green one, because it's a wednesday, hanging neatly off his shoulders. He looks polished, *perfect*, and any other time Todd would appreciate the sight.

Right now though...

"What the *hell*?"

Dirk's shoulders tense, slight enough that it would have gone unnoticed were Todd not watching him so closely. He recovers quickly enough.

"Oh! I assume that means we *did* have plans. Terribly sorry, I wouldn't have taken so long if-

"No. *No*, I'm sorry this is just- what the *fuck*, Dirk?"

"*Todd*." Farah's voice is warning, trying to mediate the tension that had sprung up at his outburst and he *immediately* feels guilty for it. He's worried, he's *scared*, and he doesn't know how else he's supposed to express it, he never has. He wants to fight whatever it is that's hurting Dirk, except there's nothing *to* fight and he doesn't know what to *do* when he can't beat it back, can't stand between him and it to keep it away.

He *definitely* can't do it when Dirk won't even *admit* something is wrong.

“Sorry,” he mumbles, even though he’s not really. For the tension? Sure. For upsetting Dirk? Absolutely. But no matter how he tries he can’t bring himself to be sorry that he’s angry, no matter the reason.

“I- What I think Todd meant is... Is everything... *okay*?”

Dirk blinks, and then plasters on his fake smile, like they don’t *know* him well enough not to be fooled by now. “Of course. Why wouldn’t it be?”

Farah glances back at Todd for help, he doesn’t know why because all he can do is shrug slightly.

“I...” she starts, tripping over the words already. “Well. We just... worry about you.”

Dirk’s face flips through a complicated series of emotions, settling inevitably on the not quite there but begging to be believed fake smile he likes to wear when he’s pushing everything away.

“Well, thank you for your concern, but I’m *fine*.”

Drop it. He wants them to drop it. *Farah* looks like she’d be more relieved if they dropped it.

Dirk is clearly hurting. Todd *can’t* drop it.

“*Bullshit*.”

“I’m sorry?” Dirk glances to Farah like he can’t quite believe what he’s hearing. But it’s an act. It’s *all* an act. And it’s not that Todd *wants* Dirk to be distressed, or upset, or angry, but he wants him to be *something* that isn’t some kind of show he’s putting on in an attempt to convince them he’s fine. He doesn’t want him to feel like he has to *pretend*. Not with them.

“How the *fuck* are you fine?”

“Todd-”

“No. Don’t- Farah, don’t tell me you buy this? He- You’re doing that... *thing*.”

Dirk laughs, but it’s obvious that he’s starting to pull into himself, trying to keep it together as Farah glances anxiously between them.

“Thing? Todd, I don’t know what you’re-”

“You’re not okay! You- for fucks sake Dirk, you woke up... I don’t even *know* what. You locked yourself in the bathroom for *hours*, and then you just, what? Come out here and expect us to believe that everything is fine? You can’t even look at me!”

“Todd,” Farah casts a panicked look at him, “I *really* don’t think-”

“Oh, I’m *sorry*,” Dirk steps forwards this time, ignoring Farah’s protest and it does nothing to stop the helpless anger building inside of him because this time *Dirk* looks pissed and this?

This is something Todd knows how to do. “Was there a way I could have handled it that could have been more *convenient* for you?”

“Con- You think this is about being *convenient*? You think *that’s* what I’m- No. *No*, this is about *you*. This is- Pretending everything is okay won’t make it okay, Dirk! You can’t just come out here and say you’re fine when it’s obviously not true!”

“So what? I should... spend my days crying in a corner? Decide to stay in all day and do nothing, just wallow in misery until I forget how to do anything else? How *exactly* would that help, because *this* has been working so far and I’d *love* to know if you think you have a better way of dealing with something *you don’t even understand!*”

An angry Dirk is not something Todd sees often, and it’s enough to give him pause. Long enough that Farah can interject before he can say anything to make it worse.

“We don’t understand,” she tells him, still on edge but a lot calmer than Todd had managed to be. “We-”

“We don’t understand because you won’t *tell* us,” he backs off when Farah glares at him, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Todd is- I think... I think we *all* feel a little frustrated. But I think what Todd is trying to say is that... maybe you should speak to someone. Even if it’s not *us*. We- we have *good reason* to be worried about you, Dirk. You *know* that. We’re not... we’re not ganging up on you we just-”

Todd sighs, shoulders slumping in defeat. “We can’t help you if you don’t *let* us. Maybe... maybe not even then,” even if it pains him to admit it. “We’re not trying to *make* you do anything but...think about it?”

When he looks up he finds Dirk staring at the ground, fists clenched at his sides and shoulders pulled tight. He can’t tell if it’s more anger or upset, but it makes his heart ache all the same.

“I am *not* a child,” he starts, attempting to sound calm, but losing control of that quickly, voice growing louder as he goes on. “I don’t need monitoring, I don’t need *babysitting*, and I *certainly* don’t need to talk to a stranger about things I would rather forget even *happened!*”

Just like that, Todd’s frustration is back. “But they *did* happen! That isn’t just going to go away!”

Dirk meets his eyes for the first time this morning. Todd isn’t surprised to see the tears there, but he *is* surprised by how betrayed he looks. The rush of guilt leaves him speechless when he goes to apologise.

“Well *maybe* it would stand a better chance of going away if *you* didn’t keep trying to get *involved* in it. I *want* to ignore it. It *will* go away if I *ignore* it. I don’t need *either* of you talking behind my back and deciding what’s best for me like I can’t make my own *choices*. I’m not a- a *project* you can work on until, what? You get to decide when I’m good enough?

When I can handle it on my own? Well I *am* handling it on my own. I have *always* handled it on my own, and I'm doing *just fine* without help. I don't *need you* getting involved."

He's about two seconds away from bursting into tears, Todd can see how much he's fighting to hold onto his facade. It's enough to make him reach out to him, wanting to comfort but not knowing *how* when even the small space between them feels like miles.

"Dirk-"

He turns away before Todd can touch him.

It's the second time today the door has slammed behind him, effectively cutting them off. Farah sighs, dropping her head into her hands and sinking down to the sofa. All Todd can do is stare after him. But Todd has never been good with handling his own emotions, especially not as jumbled and confusing as they are right now, and so it takes less than a second for the helpless guilt to turn to rage as he cries out in frustration, and punches the wall as hard as he can.

It turns out to be a *monumentally* bad idea.

The plaster gives fairly easily, knuckles throbbing in that satisfying way that tells him they're going to bruise, that he might regret it in the morning, but that's not the problem. The problem is he's angry. The problem is he's stressed. The problem *is*, that he hadn't had chance to take his medication this morning, and physical stimulus combined with that stress doesn't turn out well for him when he *has* done that. When he hasn't, he doesn't stand a chance.

Farah is at his side before he even realises he's screaming, the feeling of his bones being crushed, splintering from his hand and up his arm in an unstoppable domino effect he can only watch in horror, knowing he's seconds from breaking every bone in his body and the pain he feels now will be infinitely multiplied to levels he doesn't know he can even comprehend. Somewhere, deep down, he knows it isn't real. But it feels real, it *looks* real, and the pain is *more* than real. He can't catch his breath, feeling like he's choking and hyperventilating all at once as Farah forces something into his mouth, says something he can't begin to hear over the sound of his body breaking itself apart as she holds him as close as she dares to stop him doing something stupid in his unpredictable state, and in the end it's a small mercy when the pain overwhelms him enough that he passes out in her arms.

Todd wakes up on the sofa with a blanket tucked neatly around him, a pillow carefully positioned under his head, and gentle fingers carding through his hair. Given who was present when he passed out, it's the last thing that confuses him enough to make him blink his eyes open.

"Farah?" And god, his voice is rough enough to tell him that he must have been screaming something awful, but if Farah is petting his hair it's certainly worth asking about.

"Not quite."

The sound of Dirk's voice makes him sit up far too quickly, groaning with the abrupt dizziness that hits him hard enough that he has to lay back down almost immediately.

"*Fuck*. Sorry. Is- are you okay?"

"I think I should be asking you that." He sounds soft, *guilty* or something like it. When the lighting stops feeling so bright and he can open his eyes to look at him properly he can see the tear tracks still damp on Dirk's cheeks as he smiles uncertainly down at him.

"What? Yeah, I'm fine I just... you know," he shrugs, pulling himself up much more carefully this time. "It happens." Dirk doesn't look any less guilty.

"Farah left these," he says, pressing a glass of water into his hand when Todd has managed to get himself upright. The bottle of pills follow, a post-it note stuck to them with Farah's familiar handwriting on it.

I've gone out to look for Dirk. Drink this and take two when you wake up, call me if anything is wrong.

It makes him smile as he unscrews the bottle cap, knowing it would seem abrupt to anyone who didn't know how much she cared, feeling Dirk's eyes on him as he swallows them down.

"Have you told her that you're back?" and god, talking to Dirk shouldn't be this difficult. It shouldn't feel like he's walking on eggshells trying not to say the wrong thing, it shouldn't feel *awkward*. There's a palpable feeling of *distance* between them and he *hates* it.

"Not yet," he shakes his head, pulling his hands back to his lap to fidget his fingers together. "I- I wanted... I wanted to- well I wanted to *try* at least. Maybe. If you're... if you still want to, that is. You can say no! But I thought that, if you *didn't* say no then I suppose I could try... talking to you. About some things. Maybe. "

Todd sighs heavily, leaning back against the couch as he looks at him, tense and uncertain in a way he's growing familiar with. He wishes he wasn't.

"I'm sorry," he tells him after a long moment of silence. "I- *we* shouldn't have pushed you it's just... *we are* worried about you. *I'm* worried about you and- *fuck*. You scared me. I don't want you to think..." he closes his eyes, shaking his head. "It was a bad way to deal with it."

Dirk chews on his lip for a moment, eventually offering him a small, sheepish smile. "I suppose I could have had a more... *reasonable* response."

"No, don't- you just... this is your shit, okay? It's up to you how you deal with it. Or... *not*, I guess. But you don't... if you need to yell about it, then just... yell about it," he shrugs. "I'm gonna worry, and I'm probably gonna screw shit up, but I'm not... I'm in this. With you. As much as you want me to be. And if that means yelling then I can handle it, as long as... even if you don't want me to be *involved*, don't... push me away."

"I..." Dirk huffs out a small, unhappy laugh. "I don't *want* to- I don't *mean* to push you away it's just... I don't have the first idea how to let you in."

"You don't have to." It pains him to say it, a horrible swirling sensation in his stomach and the threat of tears stinging at his eyes, but it doesn't make it any less true.

"Yes, but I *want* to."

It's just enough to make Todd turn back to him, trying not to feel too hopeful.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Yes. I- Of *course* I do. Todd, you're- I *love* you. It's just... you aren't the only one who's scared. Because this is... It's a *lot*, it's so *much* and I don't know if- I've never told anyone, not *really*. I make... jokes, I suppose. I mention it. I try to... *accept* it, as much as I can but I don't... I don't *share* it. A lot of the time I haven't had chance, but if I'm already..." he waves his hands, looking for the words. "It's hard enough finding people to stay without... all that. So... I *want* to. I want to tell you things all the time, things I've never wanted to tell anyone else, and I *certainly* don't want to share it with a stranger, no matter how professional. But I'm still... scared."

The distance between them is too wide, too much, and as much as he was willing to wait for Dirk to reach out he can't help but be the first to bridge the gap. He takes his hand as gently as he dares, a single point of contact that somehow lets them both breathe easier. An end to the worst part of the day.

"If you want to talk, we can talk. Or you can talk and I can listen, or... whatever you want. As much as you want. I'll try to... be less mad about it or something. I know it won't help but... you don't have to be scared, you know? I'm not... I don't let go of things easy. You know that."

Dirk smiles to himself, just the tiniest amount, but enough to light a little spark of hope in Todd's chest at the thought that he might just have gotten through.

"Right. Yes," he nods once, decisive as he straightens out his spine. "I think... I'd rather *not* do it here. If you're up for that, of course." He wants to keep the past out of his future as much as he can he thinks, and there's too much bad that's happened in the room already today. "Maybe... outside, somewhere? It's a little cold, but the weather is still quite nice and, well, the fresh air might do us some good."

He knows it's mostly a brave face, but it still makes him happy to see Dirk seeming more like his usual self. He squeezes his hand, leaning over to press a kiss to Dirk's temple before he lets go.

"Sure. Let me grab my jacket, you message Farah."

Dirk's eyes go wide at that, but he nods as he fishes his phone out of his pocket. "Quite. I expect she's..."

“Worried?”

“I was going to say all over the place, but yes I suppose that works.”

“Yeah, well,” he shrugs, stretching out as he stands to retrieve his jacket. “She’s... stressed. But she’ll be happy to know you’re okay.”

Dirk, who had previously been fidgeting with his phone nervously like he’s afraid even *thinking* about a very concerned Farah would make her appear and give him a lecture of loving concern, smiles to himself as he opens up his messages. They may be good at misunderstanding each other a lot, but with a little perspective they’re good at understanding each other as well. Todd just hopes that when Dirk opens up he’ll be able to understand what he needs him to. But, he thinks, smiling to himself when not a second after the message is sent his phone starts ringing, even if he doesn’t understand, he knows how to let Dirk know he’s loved even if it takes a minute to get there.

Chapter End Notes

The best way to keep updated with this fic is to subscribe to it (or me, or both) and you'll get a little alert when I post something.

Comments will make me write faster, feedback is the fic writers fuel, so let me know what you think! I like getting words in return for these words. I hope you like it, I'd ask you to be nice but I already know you're a lovely lot.

You can catch me at kieren-fucking-walker on tumblr if you want to yell at me/talk to me about Dirk Gently/generally freak out over these two idiots.

I hope you all had lovely holidays, that 2019 is good to you, and that I'll see you here for Chapter 5 and their first real conversation about any of this <3

The art of making sense.

Chapter Summary

Getting Dirk to open up isn't anywhere near as easy as it seems like it should be with how much he talks, but if there's one thing he's good at it's talking without *saying* anything. Changing the topic seems to be second nature to him, and the closer Todd gets to unravelling what it is he's trying so hard to keep hidden, the more threads he finds. To Dirk he's sure they make some kind of recognisable picture, but to him it's just a mess of loose ends, unravelling spools, and knots woven far too tightly to ever be unpicked. It's more than frustrating sometimes to know that Dirk finds it so easy to get Todd to tell him things, finds it even *easier* to help him when he does, and yet Todd can't read him half as well, and he doesn't know any of the right things to say when he *finally* lets something out.

Chapter Notes

I was aiming to get this out a *little* earlier than this, but it ended up longer than I thought it would, and I've also been working on my Valentines Mini-Bang so I think the first half of the month is still pretty good going.

This is a pretty heavy chapter in terms of discussing things. There's nothing too explicit, but things are talked around and emotions are high so please be careful. This isn't the heaviest chapter though, we have a few of those to go yet. Hope you enjoy!

This fic will deal with PTSD and the aftermaths of trauma, I'll do my best to tag it accurately. Tags and characters will be updated as needed with each chapter.

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

The time it takes them to get to the park is passed in anticipatory silence. A handful of words spoken between them, mostly when they stopped off to pick up drinks when Todd had decided they were called for on account of Dirk fidgeting uncertainly with his fingers and clearly needing something more solid to hold onto. He would have offered his hand but it didn't feel right somehow, not right now. He'd forgone his usual tea in favour of hot chocolate, telling Todd that take-out tea was nothing like the proper thing in a voice that was both too soft and too heavy, settling into his stomach like lead when he offered Dirk a weak smile, and received an even weaker one in response.

They've been sat on the bench for at least twenty minutes before Dirk makes any move to speak, staring out over the grass and down to the lake, not quite cold enough to make it

uncomfortable, but enough that people aren't lingering with the threat of an oncoming chill in the air. Somehow Todd is more prone to the cold than Dirk is, and he finds himself wishing he'd brought something warmer than his jacket for the walk back.

"There was a park where I grew up," Dirk says, seemingly from nowhere and just enough to startle Todd, pulling his attention. Dirk doesn't move though, he doesn't really look like he's here at all. "Smaller than this, I think. It seems bigger in my head but... I was smaller too. It's... all a matter of perspective really, I suppose."

There's another lapse, another silence, and Todd wants to fill it but he knows he can't. It's difficult, really. He'd never really realised how much he relied on Dirk to fill the silences for them, for *him*, always better with finding words than he was, even if they weren't the right ones. He can listen though, he *wants* to listen, if Dirk is willing to talk. There's plenty he's wanted to ask about but never known how to or if he even should, if it comes from Dirk on his own terms it feels less like he's being invasive.

"My mother used to take me down there. There wasn't a lake, but there was... sort of a *pond*? It had a little fountain in the middle of it, but it never worked. She used to take me to feed the ducks, but..." he shakes his head, picking up his take-out cup and cradling it in his hands. "I used to get in awful trouble because I'd just... wander off. No matter how small the park was, there were a *million* ways to get lost, and it would seem I was *determined* to find them all." Todd can't tell if it's a good memory or a bad one, but he seems lost in it all the same. "It worried her something terrible, she stopped taking me after a while but... I got out anyway. I don't know why, or where I was going I just... I *had* to go and so I *did* and then... she'd come out looking, or I'd turn up at home, or a policeman would find me and... My father gave me a rather *incredible* lecture on how much I was distressing her, and he told me next time the policeman found me he'd let him keep me overnight for all the trouble I caused. For a long time I wondered if... but it just kept- I just kept getting... *worse*."

Todd swallows, looking down at his own cooling cup of coffee held between his hands like it might offer him an answer. It doesn't.

"I... I think it's pretty normal for parents to worry? Especially... when they love you. You don't worry about people if you don't care about them," he doesn't know if it's overstepping, but he knows he needed to say *something* and they're the only words he has.

"Well. She certainly worried," he laughs, not particularly pleasantly. "They took me to a doctor first, tried me on all sorts of medication but... it doesn't work like that now and it didn't then either. I was doing a lot of... unexplainable things. *Weird* things. Things I do now but... somehow people were more bothered by it in a child, my parents *certainly* were. Worried. *Scared*. And then eventually I did something... *too* unexplainable, too hard to just write off, and it attracted some... *attention*." Dirk sighs, finally taking a sip of his hot chocolate even though Todd knows it must be somewhat cold by now. "That's when *they* showed up. Offering... *promising* to help. To put a stop to it. To... *fix* me, or at least find out what was *wrong*. To... make sure I was safe, by which they meant the world was safe from *me*. And so..."

It's not a conversation he knows how to start, or to have at all really. Who on earth does though? Who knows the right words to explain to someone else that somebody they trusted

more than anything in the world gave them away? That someone who should have loved them only ended up fearing them? That they'd let someone come and take them away from their life and their home and their family, and lock them away in a room with no windows in a facility with no end where they became a rat in a maze with no hope of escape? He knows logically the words he's looking for are 'the government took me as a child and experimented on me for years and it was awful.' But they don't even come *close* to describing the bottomless pit of unfathomable emotion that he doesn't have the first clue how to decipher after all of these years. He doesn't know how to tell Todd that whenever he thinks about it he feels like he's back there, like he's drowning, like it's clawing at the edge of his mind all the time and he has to keep on doing everything, *anything*, to make sure it doesn't get in. That the quiet spaces are the worst, because that's where it waits. That's where it will get him. He can run as far away from them as he wants, but he'll carry them with him in his head anyway.

Sometimes he doesn't think there's such a thing as being free.

"I keep thinking about Arnold Cardenas."

It feels more like a Dirk thing to say, Todd thinks, because he doesn't follow it at all.

"What do you mean?"

Dirk shakes his head, picking at the label on his cup. "About what he said about his brother and... he said he wondered if Francis forgave him, that he wouldn't ever be able to tell him he was sorry for sending him away, for betraying him. I keep... I wonder sometimes, if they thought of me. If they ever... *regretted* it. They were... they were *scared* and they were *desperate*, and I *know* that but... I was scared too. I wanted help too, but I didn't... the only thing I can do is hope they didn't *know*- that maybe... maybe they thought they'd get me back, or maybe they thought it was going to be... *nice*, but... I couldn't control it. I couldn't- I *tried* but even now it's just a *mess* and- they kept telling me if I could *just* do what they asked I'd be able to go home. I know now that they didn't mean it, I think I knew it then too, but... I don't know if they would even have *wanted* me back."

Todd's been holding his breath since he first started speaking, or so it feels like. The knowledge that this whole situation is something *far* bigger than anything he could hope to fix is something he's had from the start, but it's never seemed more obvious than right now. Dirk isn't crying, and Todd almost wishes he would just so he'd have something to do, because right now there's a gaping hole in his chest that's only accompanied by the erratic overworking of his brain as he struggles to comprehend what Dirk has just told him.

"They... sent you away?" it's possibly the dumbest question he could ask, but it's what he's most stuck on right now. He'd never really given much thought to how Dirk had ended up in Blackwing, but he realises now that the idea that he'd been given up by his parents had never crossed his mind. Given up by his parents like- "wait, how *old* were you?"

Dirk shrugs, a little uncomfortable. "I'm not sure. Seven, I think? Maybe a little older. It'll be in the files, but... it's not something I remember particularly well."

"*Jesus*," Todd breathes, slumping back against the bench. It's nowhere *near* enough to encompass all he *wants* to say, to express the myriad of thoughts and feelings and white hot

protective *rage* swirling inside his head. But it's all he *can* say, all that's *safe* to say, because anything more could be too much and the *last* thing he wants is to make Dirk close himself off again.

"That's..." Dirk swallows, fidgeting with the strip of paper he's managed to peel away from his cup. "That's why, earlier, I... I don't like people knowing things are... *wrong*. Blackwing had their own ways of... *detering* incorrect behaviour of course, and I can usually *deal* with that. *That* kind of wrong is... different, and *far* more expansive. It certainly didn't come from a place of-" he glances at Todd for the first time since they'd gotten here, a quick, furtive little thing that he would have missed if he weren't watching him so closely, "-*care*. But... with my parents it was... and then you- you suggested *help* and I just-"

His hands have moved to the edge of the bench, gripping the wood so tightly his knuckles have gone white with a tension that echoes through every inch of his being. Todd can't tell if it's anger or upset or perhaps something else, but he *aches* with the desire to fix it.

"I'm sorry," Dirk whispers, shaky and rushed before Todd can get a word in edgeways. "I never should have- I *know* you wanted to help. I *know* you didn't mean- but I just- because they all said it would help, that it was going to make me *better* but it never *did* and... sometimes- sometimes I'm not sure if they ever meant it to help at all. Help was always... *bad*. In the end."

It's a mess, is what it is. Todd fucked up without even *knowing* he was fucking up, and really if he wasn't so worried about Dirk right now he'd acknowledge how at least not knowing was progress for him, but Dirk looks so fucking *guilty* he can't think about anything else.

"No- *fuck*, Dirk that's... it's okay, I promise it's..." he scrambles for the right thing to say, the right thing to *do*, but it's even harder when Dirk won't look at him and he's so worried that touching him might set him off. It's the memory of Amanda doing something similar, pretending to be angry with their parents when really she was tired and wanting to go home after a long days wait at the airport, that gives him the idea. He moves slowly, trying not to think about the fact that he's putting his cards on the table right out here where anyone can see them, keeping in Dirk's line of sight as he crouches down in front of him, looking up at where he's got his head ducked against his chest. He's not old by any means, but he's older than he was when he did this for his sister and his knees protest at the position now. It's not enough to stop him.

"You..." he sighs, running a hand through his hair because of *course* it hasn't helped him know what words he needs. Todd takes a moment to take a breath, placing his hands as gently as he can over Dirk's own. "There is *nothing* wrong with you. Anything- *anyone* that made you think that... *whatever* it is that makes you... *holistic* is something that needs *fixing* is an *asshole*. If you *ever* need help with it... it's because it's not something *anyone* could carry on their own without needing help, *not* because it needs fixing and not because *you* need fixing." Dirk still hasn't looked at him, but Todd keeps watching him anyway, steady and unwavering. "I didn't know, *we* didn't know that- that it meant something different to you but... it does, and even if I didn't mean to hurt you it still *did*, and you don't *ever* have to be sorry for that because- and I swear I don't mean this badly - but that's *bullshit*. You apologise

when you hurt someone, *not* when someone hurts you. That's *bullshit*, Dirk. And you know bullshit when you see it, I *know* you do."

Dirk exhales a soft, shaky breath, screwing his eyes shut and presumably holding back tears. It's enough to make Todd want to hit something again, because the whole situation is so fucking *unfair* and he can't *stand* feeling helpless. It's something he's going to have to get used to though, he thinks.

"They didn't always want to fix me," he says after a moment. "In fact, I'm not convinced they did at all. They- *he* said that they were going to *help* me. I thought they meant they'd make it go away, but they didn't want that. They wanted me to control it, or they thought I already *could*, or they thought that maybe *they* could but-" the words are rushed, uncertain, and Todd holds onto his hands just a little bit tighter. "They wanted- they wanted to use it, *me*, all of us. I don't know what for but... for *something*. That's why they-" Dirk snuffles, and Todd thinks his heart might break at the sound of it. He squares his shoulders then though, sitting up as straight as he can like he's readying himself for something, even though when he opens his eyes they're carefully averted, not daring to look at Todd. "It was... testing. Experimenting. They were trying to... I don't know, find something I suppose? Of course it was little use, I failed nearly every single one of them, or at least it *felt* like it, definitely more than enough to make them... *unhappy*. I tried *so* hard just to make them- to make *him*... They thought- they thought I was doing it on purpose, or I wasn't trying hard enough, or I just needed some... *encouragement* but... I tried. I tried *so* hard just to make it *stop*, but it didn't make a difference because even when I got it *right* they'd just... keep going and-"

"Dirk-" he's getting worked up, *too* worked up, and Todd doesn't know how to stop him without making it worse.

"-it could have been worse, I *know* it could have been worse. I saw- I saw some of the others and they *definitely* had it worse so I suppose I got *lucky* really and I shouldn't complain because a lot of the testing was just like playing games only with *horrible* consequences if I got it wrong-"

"*Dirk*-" his words are spilling out of him like a fountain, tripping over and running into each other in one, long, feverish sentence that has Todd worried he's going to work himself into a panic attack before he finishes.

"-but it was still just like games, and when it wasn't that wasn't *their* fault it was- they had *rules* and *I* had rules and when I got it wrong then they had to follow their rules because that's how it *works*, and they were just doing their *jobs*, and I *knew* that and it was *important* that they did it right or the results would be wrong and the results *couldn't* be wrong because they had to be *right* because if I could *just* get it *right* then he'd be *happy* and I wanted him to be happy, I wanted him to be *proud* of me and he got *ever* so upset when he had to send in- but it was all my fault because if I'd *just* gotten it *right* then nobody would be hurt and he wouldn't be upset and then he wouldn't have had to- to-"

"*Stop!*" Todd keeps his voice as firm as he can, trying not to give away his desperation and relieved when Dirk *does*. "You need- you need to stop, okay? Just- just breathe for me. Just try and breathe for a minute," Todd sounds every bit as worried as he feels, even if he wishes

he could be more reassuring as Dirk chokes on his breath and curls inwards on himself, pulling his hands from under Todd's to bury his face in them.

There's no real time to process everything Dirk's just said, Todd's not sure he could understand half of it anyway with the way it had all come rushing out of him. He has no context, no real background for it, but he knows enough to know that whatever those *experiments* had entailed it was nowhere near as simple as Dirk had tried to make out, tried to convince himself of. If Dirk didn't need him right now he might just have a panic attack *himself* over the sheer incomprehensibility of the situation, the idea that Dirk had been taken as a child and *experimented* on by the *government*. It doesn't seem like it should be real, like most things when it comes to Dirk Gently, but of all the things he'd come to accept as his reality despite their unlikely nature, this is the one he finds easiest to believe, and it's the one thing he'd give anything for it to not be true.

"You're okay," he tells him, keeping his hands on his knees because he *can't* stop touching him and Dirk doesn't seem to want him to. "You're okay. You're... you're *safe*, and you haven't done anything wrong, okay? Nobody- *shit* Dirk, I don't- It's not your fault. Whatever... whatever fucked up shit they did to you, *none* of it was your fault. You have to- you *have* to believe that. It doesn't matter what you got wrong, or how many times you did it, *none* of that means they were allowed to- to hurt you? They did- I *know* they hurt you, I'm sorry if- if you didn't want me to know that but... I kinda know that without you telling me. It's..." he sighs, shaking his head. "Nobody is going to let anything like that happen to you again. And I know... that might not mean much now, or it might not be easy to believe or *whatever*, but- if you need me to keep telling you that until you believe it then I will. And I'll- *fuck*, I'll tell you that I- I love you, and that you're the bravest, *strongest* person I know, and that whatever those *assholes* did it is *not* your fault, and- I'll tell you whatever you want, whatever you *need* to hear for as long as you want, because *clearly* you've heard enough *bullshit* so- I guess it's about time you heard more of the truth."

Silence falls between them, and he lets it. He doesn't have any more words, not ones that would be *useful* right now anyway so it seems pointless to try and make them happen. Dirk is still crying softly, shoulders hitching with his breath even though he makes little sound past that. Todd's knees are protesting his position even more now, but he doesn't move, doesn't pull away, just keeps his hands on Dirk's knees and circles his thumbs against them soothingly, happy to wait for him.

Eventually Dirk peeks out from behind his fingers, doing his best to wipe away the wetness from his face which improves greatly when Todd hands him a paper towel he'd picked up in the coffee shop. He gets a watery smile for the gesture, watching as Dirk dries his eyes with the occasional snuffle, and hoping the worst of it is over.

"I-" Dirk meets Todd's eyes for a moment, before looking back down at the now damp tissue he's fidgeting with, sighing heavily to himself. "His... The man who came to the door? His name is Riggins. Or, *Scott*, but I never really called him that. He's... he's the man who... I think he ran Blackwing? But he wasn't that to me, he was... I don't know. Something else. But... it makes it *complicated*, our relationship. I- I never really know *what* to think, so I try not to. I think maybe..." he trails off, fingers tightening around his tissue.

“What?”

Dirk looks at him careful, clearly considering before he shrugs softly. “I don’t think you’d see it the way I do. I don’t think *anyone* would.”

It’s not the first time Todd’s had to bite his tongue. He doesn’t know the guy, but having seen the effect he’s had on Dirk he doesn’t think he *needs* to. Dirk’s right in that way, because he can tell even now that he wouldn’t write him off as quickly as Todd did, and he doesn’t really know how to reconcile that other than trying his best to understand that Dirk has a history with the man that Todd might never understand.

“How... how do you see it?” he asks, partly for lack of anything else to ask, but also because he is genuinely curious. It does surprise him a little when Dirk meets his eyes, and it’s the most certain he’s seen him since they came here, even with the air of vulnerability that surrounds him. He may be sure of himself, but it’s clearly not something he speaks of often, and Todd already knows it’s something it’s going to take a lot for Dirk to trust him with. He feels a stab of fear at the thought he might be wrong to trust him.

“He was *kind* to me,” he says, and Todd can hear in his voice how much Dirk is trying to make him understand. “That place, those people it was-” he swallows thickly, but holds his gaze. “Bad. *Awful*. But he... he was *kind* to me. I know it sounds... *crazy*, but- there wasn’t anything else. And maybe it was... bad. If I let him down. But he never... he never raised his voice. He never *hurt* me, and sometimes if I got something right he’d bring me things, or let me do things, or he’d tell me I’d done *well* and he’d... he’d *touch* me. Not in a bad way, or any way that hurt, or for any stupid *testing*. Just... people didn’t do that, but he did. He’d... give me hugs, or ruffle my hair, or tell me it was going to be okay. He’d talk to me like... like I was *there*. Real. A person.” He’s trembling, and Todd wants so much to pull him close and tell him he doesn’t need to say this, doesn’t need to *think* about it, but it’s taken him so much to get to this point it seems cruel to throw it away now. “It made me feel... *human*. Nobody... *nothing* else did. And I- I cared about him to. About what he thought of me, about... making sure things went well. I wanted him to be happy with me, I wanted to make him proud of me. He was the closest I had to... well, *anything*. And I *know* it’s not- I’m not *stupid*. I *know*. But it’s... It makes it complicated.”

Todd knows Dirk doesn’t need to hear about how that wasn’t a good thing. He *knows* Dirk doesn’t need to be reminded of all the reasons that was clearly a manipulation tactic. And no matter how much he wants to argue with him and try to change his mind, he knows that this isn’t some random, objective topic they could argue over without consequences. It’s real to him, it might be the only conviction he has that’s still holding him together, and more than that it’s something Dirk had *trusted* him with. He can’t tear that away, no matter how much he wants to tell him that none of that was *kindness*. No matter how much he wants to track the man down himself and punch him in the face just for making Dirk think it *was*.

“It doesn’t sound crazy,” he promises instead. Because despite how much he knows that it wasn’t at all what Dirk thinks it was, he can see why he’d need to believe it.

Dirk snuffles again, dropping his eyes away from Todd’s as he nods his head, a small, brief smile making itself known on his face. It’s enough to let him know he’s said the right thing, some of the tightness in his chest dissipating now he’s sure he’s not fucked *that* up at least.

“Dirk?” it pulls his attention back, eyebrows raised in question and Todd curses himself for speaking before he’d worked out the right words. Jumping on the moment without a plan is something that could backfire spectacularly. “I... I know you were saying, about the help thing, and how it’s not always...”

“Good?”

“Right. Yeah,” he nods. “And I guess I just... I was thinking about when we met. You... You asked for my help. Remember?”

Dirk looks a little bemused, if intrigued by the question. “It took a little convincing, if I remember correctly.”

“Yeah, well. That’s... not the point.” Todd laughs, shaking his head even as he smiles. “I guess... I guess I was trying to say that I think, maybe, if it’s... not good for us to *suggest* help then... you could always ask for it? And I mean... *obviously* I’m gonna worry, and Farah’s gonna worry, and we’re gonna *want* to help but... if you just tell us, when you need it, and *what* you need then we could maybe, I don’t know. Make sure it was on your terms?”

He’s fairly sure it sounds stupid, he has *no* idea if that’s even remotely what Dirk needs from them, but it’s the only practical solution he really *has* and he’s not sure how else they’re going to move forward if not by taking steps together.

“Okay,” Dirk says after a long moment, sounding *suspiciously* close to tears. “Okay, yes I... I think I could probably... do that.”

“Good. That’s... good.” Todd smiles, relief flooding through his chest as he nods, glad to have settled on *something*. He finally pushes himself back up to standing, trying not to think about how his knees should *not* protest that much, and completely unaware that Dirk is watching him.

“I love you.”

Todd’s suspicions turn out to be correct, Dirk *looks* close to tears as well, but he doesn’t have much time to dwell on that past the way Dirk is also looking at him like he doesn’t quite believe he’s real. For a moment, all he can do is watch.

“I love you too,” he promises, a soft, honest smile making its way onto his face. “You okay?”

“Hm? Oh! Yes, yes I’m just... I think I might like to go home now? It really *is* cold out here and...” he hesitates, eyes flickering nervously over to Todd. “I think, maybe I feel a bit... well. I think... tea and cuddles wouldn’t go amiss.”

He’s asking, Todd notes. It feels like the first, tiny step of progress.

“Yeah,” he reaches out to take Dirk’s hand, squeezing reassuringly. “Sounds pretty good to me.”

They walk back hand in hand, and Todd has never felt so relieved. Dirk is holding on a little too tightly, but it doesn't matter, what matters is that he'd reached out at all, that they'd bridged the gap. It's hard though, to try and stop all the thoughts buzzing around in his head. If anything, having Dirk talk to him has just left him with more questions than before, and a growing sense of dread around what the answers to those questions may entail. He's not sure there will ever be a good time to ask, but now certainly isn't it, and so he contents himself with the fact that even though Dirk is obviously still uncertain and a little skittish around the subject, he'd trusted him enough to tell him things he's clearly never talked about before.

It feels surprisingly good, to be trusted.

Getting Dirk to open up isn't anywhere near as easy as it seems like it should be with how much he talks, but if there's one thing he's good at it's talking without *saying* anything. Changing the topic seems to be second nature to him, and the closer Todd gets to unravelling what it is he's trying so hard to keep hidden, the more threads he finds. To Dirk he's sure they make some kind of recognisable picture, but to him it's just a mess of loose ends, unravelling spools, and knots woven far too tightly to ever be unpicked. It's more than frustrating sometimes to know that Dirk finds it so easy to get Todd to tell him things, finds it even *easier* to help him when he does, and yet Todd can't read him half as well, and he doesn't know any of the right things to say when he *finally* lets something out. For now at least they seem to be on the same page, the question is going to be how long that lasts. He's trying very hard not to be pessimistic about it.

"I want to make this easy for you," he says before he can think to stop himself. Dirk doesn't really react, other than glancing over at him carefully and slowing his pace ever so slightly, but it's enough for him to continue. "This whole... *thing*. I want- Look, I know it's *not*, okay? I get that. It's never going to be easy because it's... shit. It's shit. We can acknowledge that, right? The fact that any of this even happened in the first place..." he shakes his head. "This isn't about me, and... I don't want to put my feelings about it onto you when you're already dealing with... all of it. But- I'm... trying to be, well, *honest*, I guess? So... I wanted to, you know, just... tell you that I'm..." he sighs, muttering to himself, "fuck. This shouldn't be hard for me." He stops in his tracks just before the entrance to their building, pulling Dirk to a stop along with him as he turns to face him because Dirk wanted to keep this out of the flat and there's no way he's not sticking to that now. "Okay. I have questions. And I don't... there's a lot of stuff I don't really... understand? And I don't want you to feel like you have to explain things, or tell me things if you don't want to because I don't... I don't want to put more pressure on you, or make you feel like you *can't* tell me stuff when you *do* want to it's just- Look, I'm angry, about what happened to you. And I wanted to- I wanted to *tell* you that before it all just... comes out at the *worst* time because I think... we both know I'm not good with the whole..."

"Not jumping to the defense of people you care about even when the threat isn't there?" Dirk offers softly, and Todd breathes a sigh of relief when he doesn't sound upset by his ramblings.

"Yeah," he agrees, scrubbing a hand over the back of his neck self-consciously. "I'm just kinda... worried that I'm gonna screw this whole thing up by... not being what you need."

Honesty makes him feel vulnerable, vulnerability makes him feel anxious, and it takes more effort than he wants to stop himself from working himself up into a panic spiral of self-doubt while Dirk finds his words. He only stops digging his nails into the palm of his free hand when Dirk takes it into his own, smoothing out his fingers before twining them together.

“I *am* sorry, about before, with the... *yelling*.”

“What?” Todd looks up at him, eyebrows scrunching in concern. “No, *no* that’s not- *fuck* that’s not what I meant I don’t-”

“I know,” Dirk cuts him off but it doesn’t do anything to lessen the worry that he’s somehow made him feel like he has to be *sorry* about this. “I know that’s not what you meant. I’m not saying it because... Look. It’s all a bit complicated, and I’m not... I’m not sorry for how I *felt*. Well, how I still feel, a bit, really. But I’m... I’m still sorry for *shouting*. I- I don’t think you deserved that and... well. To be honest I’m not really sure where it came from. It just... keeps happening? The- the feeling angry, rather than the shouting. It’s... a little *frightening*, really.”

This time Todd is frowning for a completely different reason, Dirk’s shoulders have that tense set to them again and he won’t quite meet his eyes when Todd tries to look at him.

“You’re... scared? Because you’re getting mad?”

“I-” he sighs, frustrated. “I’m not scared because I’m *angry*, I’m scared because... it just *happens*, without any warning, and then it’s like... I react without meaning to and I don’t- I don’t *like* not being able to just... pretend it’s not happening.”

“Did you... maybe consider the reason it’s all coming out is *because* you’re acting like it’s not happening?”

Dirk rolls his eyes, and it’s a little sharper and more defensive than he usually is with that particular gesture, but Todd takes it to mean he’s at least on the right track.

“Yes, *thank you*, I had in fact considered that. If you have any suggestions as to how *exactly* I’m supposed to react to it *without reacting to it* I’d *love* to hear them.”

Despite himself Todd finds himself smiling just a little, squeezing Dirk’s hands to pull his attention back. “I kinda do, actually,” finding himself suddenly *more* than grateful for his somewhat angsty youth. “Give me a few days, because it *might* require enlisting some... *back up*. But I’m pretty sure I know something that might help.”

“What is it?” Dirk’s eyes narrow suspiciously, jumping on the mystery. Todd feels bold enough to lean up and steal a quick kiss.

“Wait and see,” he smiles. “But I’m freezing my ass off out here so...”

“It’s not my fault you didn’t bring a jacket,” but there’s a smile fighting to make its way onto his face too, and Todd considers that a success.

“It’s not *my* fault you’re abnormally warm.”

“*Abnormally warm?* I think you might be exaggerating a little there, I’m just... used to cooler temperatures.”

Todd snorts, “*cooler temperatures.* You’re like a damn *space heater.*”

It’s enough to make Dirk grin, dropping one of his hands so he can open the door for them both. “Are you *complaining?*”

“No,” he concedes, “makes it more fun to do *this.*” Todd grins, pushing his cold hand up against the warm skin at the back of his neck.

Dirk yelps, skittering away from him with the grace of a baby deer. It’s *incredibly* satisfying.

“*Todd!*” he shouts, betrayal written all over his face as Todd just shrugs, grinning as he makes his way up the stairs, leaving Dirk to catch up.

“If you’re gonna make me stand out in the cold...”

“And you couldn’t have waited, oh I don’t know, *five minutes* until we got inside and you could heat up your hands with coffee instead?”

“Nah,” the apartment is growing dark when he unlocks the door, flicking on the lights as he shuts it behind them. Dirk was right, it definitely feels better now they’ve cleared the air. He’s not going to tell him that though. “Not as fun.”

“You’re a *menace,*” he huffs, but there’s no heat in it. Todd watches fondly as he shrugs off his jacket, flopping face first onto the sofa like he’s planning on becoming one with the cushions.

“A menace who might make you tea if you stop being a dick.”

“*Might?* Please, Todd. You’d make me tea *whatever* the situation.”

“Oh yeah? How do you figure?”

Dirk turns his head just enough to smile at him, between the mischief in his eyes and the way his recent sofa-burrowing has messed up his hair it’s just about enough to make Todd’s heart skip a beat. Traitor.

“Because you love me,” he states matter-of-factly.

He’s not wrong.

“Because you’re unbearable if you go too long without it,” Todd corrects, though his soft smile probably gives him away.

Dirk regards him carefully for a moment, with just enough consideration that Todd finds himself starting to feel self conscious under the weight of it.

“You can ask,” he says eventually, soft, but certain. “You- you said you had questions? And... well, maybe not right now. And I might not be able to *answer* them but... you can ask.”

It feels like something has opened up between them, something that scares him as much as it relieves him, but something he knows they’re going to need to hold onto if they’re going to get through the rest of this together.

Todd nods, just once, just enough to pull a small smile onto Dirk’s face.

“Not right now,” he agrees, reaching out to run his fingers through Dirk’s hair and smiling at his lack of protest.

“*Tea*, right now,” he demands, turning wide, hopeful eyes on Todd, like there was ever going to be a chance he wouldn’t follow through.

“Okay,” he sighs, resigning himself to his fate. If he’d going to be running around after him he can at least take some joy in *pretending* to be a long-suffering boyfriend. “Tea it is.”

It’s a quiet sort of winding down given the way the day had begun, but as Dirk finally curls up against him, he thinks that’s what they need. Neither of them know quite what it is that’s changed, but for the first time since this whole thing started they both find themselves feeling hopeful. Baby steps, Todd reminds himself as he pulls him in closer. A little at a time, and they’ll get there.

Chapter End Notes

Yay for communication! (Sorta.)

The best way to keep updated with this fic is to subscribe to it (or me, or both) and you'll get a little alert when I post something.

Comments will make me write faster, feedback is the fic writers fuel, so let me know what you think! I like getting words in return for these words. I hope you like it, I'd ask you to be nice but I already know you're a lovely lot.

You can catch me at kieren-fucking-walker on tumblr if you want to yell at me/talk to me about Dirk Gently/generally freak out over these two idiots.

Otherwise, I'll see you for Chapter 6 when I get around to that <3

To put your emptiness to melody.

Chapter Summary

Todd doesn't seem to be complaining much, but his knuckles are still bruised, the hole in the wall still in need of fixing, and while the argument had been smoothed over he's not sure the underlying frustrations have entirely gone away. He puts it out of his mind for now though, because for now he *is* happy, and there's no reason not to stay that way.

Chapter Notes

Hey there! I'm pretty early with this one, I know, but I wanted to get it out because my posting schedule may take a bit of a hit in the coming months and I didn't want to leave you hanging.

This chapter is soft, but also emotionally heavy towards the end. Like always, please pay attention to the warnings in the tags.

For reference: [Here is the version of the song Todd is playing](#). Make no mistake, he's *absolutely* showing off, even if Dirk lacks the musical knowledge to know that.

(Also yes I stole this chapter title from one of Hozier's new songs and would wholeheartedly recommend checking Wasteland, Baby! out. That's all.)

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

Things settle. Not easily, not without a little uncertainty from and around Todd, and of course a well meaning, worried lecture from Farah about running off without telling them where he was going, but things settle. It only takes a few days for the air to feel clearer and Dirk knows then for sure that despite his hesitation, getting a few things off of his chest was the right thing to do. The only problem now is that he finds himself wondering what the next step is, where he should start now he's *made* a start, and how much Todd will even be able to manage before he's had enough, because one good conversation doesn't assuage a lifetime of worries.

Getting answers to any of these questions though requires finding Todd, who should by all rights be asleep in the bed next to him, but somehow seems to have opted for the somewhat confusing decision to get *out* of bed. Dirk can't really relate to that. Bed is warm, bed is comfy, but *bed* is currently sans Todd, which means it's sans cuddles, which is easily in the top ten reasons to be in bed in the first place. Without those things it's much less tempting to stay there when he knows finding Todd means finding cuddles, which will be just as good when he manages to drag him back to the couch for a while. Decision made, Dirk reluctantly

rolls himself out from under the covers, stretching out in an attempt to wake himself up, before pilfering one of Todd's ridiculously soft hoodies and zipping it halfway over his well loved Mexican Funeral shirt. He's tired enough that he fumbles with the door handle for a moment, and as such is entirely unprepared for what he finds on the other side of it.

He'd expected Todd to be in the kitchen, trying to coax the coffee machine into being a little faster, or curled up in the window seat reading something Dirk knows he wouldn't have the patience for himself. But Todd is doing neither of those things. Todd is doing something completely *new*, something Dirk hasn't seen him doing before, something he was starting to wonder if he even *did*. But god, if it isn't the best thing he could ever have wished for.

Todd is sat cross-legged on the sofa, sunlight streaming through the blinds, eyes closed against the soft light as he picks over the strings of the guitar he has cradled in his lap. It's not a song Dirk recognises, something gentle, but he's playing confidently enough that it's obviously one he knows well. Dirk's breath catches in his throat, hesitating in the doorway as he just stands and *watches*, because he's never seen Todd so sure of himself before, never seen him doing something so practiced, never seen him look as effortlessly happy as he does right now. It's a moment he wants to freeze and keep forever, but he only has so much time before Todd notices he's there, and the moment comes sooner than he'd have liked.

It's the sound of the door closing behind him that gives him away, distracted as he had been by the sight in front of him he hadn't noticed when the handle had slipped from his fingers. It's a soft sound, but in the relative quiet of the moment it's enough to make Todd jump, strings jarring a little as he closes his fingers over the fretboard to silence them abruptly. Dirk feels like he's intruded on something for a moment, especially with the way Todd just looks at him, shoulders still hunched with residual tension, before he seems to realise that it's just Dirk after all, and he lets them relax with his next breath.

"You're... playing."

It's not a question, even if it is in a way, and Dirk wants to say a good many things about exactly how that makes him feel but he's not quite sure yet what kind of a mood Todd is in.

"Yeah. I just-" Todd shrugs, looking down at the instrument like he's not quite sure how it got there. "I hadn't... she needed a bit of a clean up and then... I guess I got carried away."

"*She?*"

Todd huffs a soft laugh, "I guess it's... I don't know. Respect, or something?"

"For... a guitar?" he ventures further into the room, sitting tentatively on the opposite end of the couch, watching as Todd runs his hands over the contours of the wood somewhat reverently.

Briefly, he wonders if Todd would touch *him* like that, given half the chance, and finds himself glad that Todd's attention is elsewhere if the way his face heats up at the thought gives any indication to the current colour of his cheeks.

“Well... yeah. Like... *it* just... feels wrong. Instruments breathe, you know? Music is... alive? I don't-” Todd sighs, shaking his head. “You kinda just have to get it, *feel* it, I guess.”

Dirk hums noncommittally, inching just a little closer. “It sounded nice. What you were playing.”

For a minute Todd looks almost *bashful*, ducking his head against a tiny smile, fingers tightening around the neck of his guitar. He recovers quickly though, clearing his throat and tilting his head. “Thanks. It's... an old one.”

“One you wrote?” he has to try very hard to keep the excitement that prospect fills him with out of his voice, but he gets a somewhat fond sideways glance from Todd and assumes that means he failed.

“Yeah. Me and... some other guys. I guess. I haven't played it in a while.”

“Farah said you sang. In the band, I mean. She said it's on the thingie she gave me with your songs on it.”

Todd raises his eyebrows. “The *CD*?”

“That! Yes. She said you were the... leader? You did the guitaring, and the singing,” he's fidgeting his fingers an awful lot in an attempt to keep still, watching Todd with wide, expectant eyes.

“*Guitaring*,” is all he gets back, dry and unimpressed, if amused. Dirk pouts.

“You didn't answer my question!”

“You didn't *ask* a question.”

Dirk rolls his eyes, “you know *perfectly well* that it was *intended* as a question, Todd Brotzman.”

Todd holds his glare for all of a minute before giving in. “Yes. I sang.”

This time Dirk doesn't even try to hide the delight spilling across his face, but he *does* bite down very hard on his lip to stop it all spilling out of him in the form of questions Todd certainly wouldn't appreciate. Either way, Todd is perceptive, particularly so when it comes to Dirk, and it doesn't take long for him to narrow his eyes suspiciously.

“*What?*” it's defensive, and he curls in on himself a little under Dirk's enthusiastic scrutiny.

“Oh, nothing! Nothing at all! It's just that, well, I haven't listened to it yet and I suppose I was *wondering* if... *maybe*... you would...”

“I would *what?*”

“Play something for me?”

An interesting flurry of emotions shutter across Todd's face, everything from fear to embarrassment before settling on something reserved and cautious as he watches Dirk's face.

"Why?"

It's the last question he'd expected, although possibly the first he *should* have expected, and for a moment he finds himself at a loss for how to answer. In the time it takes for him to find the right words Todd winds up looking infinitely more distrustful than he did before.

"Well. You don't *have* to of course, I just thought that it would be nice? You looked... happy, before. And I don't know *anything* about music-" he rather heroically in his opinion decides to ignore Todd's sound of agreement, "but it sounded nice. Besides, you're *always* doing things *I* like to do, and while I'm very sure I *would* like this I thought maybe you'd like it too?"

Todd holds his gaze, looking for something in Dirk's face and dropping his eyes when he doesn't find it. "I- I haven't... I mean, I don't know if I-"

"You don't have to!" Dirk rushes to reassure him, sensing Todd's unease and not wanting to further it. "It's... you don't *have* to."

"No- No it's not-" Todd swallows, glancing over at him nervously. "What- what do you want me to play?"

"Oh! I don't mind, anything really, the song doesn't really matter!"

Todd's eyebrows draw together, opening his mouth like he's going to protest but thinking better of it. "*Right*. That's... probably for the best, actually," the last part is mumbled to himself, but Dirk manages to catch it, tilting his head as Todd takes something off the head off his guitar and positions it over the strings.

"What's that?" he asks, curiously. "And what do you mean, 'it's for the best'?"

"It's a capo," he says, strumming over the strings a few times and neglecting to explain any further. "And it means that I don't know any S-Club... however many there were." The way he looks up at him when he's satisfied with his arrangement lets Dirk know he's teasing, but he decides to take offence anyway.

"There were *seven* of them. And now I'm concerned that you don't know any good music at *all*," but Todd seems to have relaxed again now he's decided on what he's playing, and it's a look Dirk likes on him so he doesn't push too much.

"Oh so you don't want to hear it then?"

"No! I mean- *yes*, I just don't want to be... *mocked* when I don't know it."

"You'll know it," Todd assures him, a soft smile on his face. "I'm not singing though."

Dirk pouts, but concedes that particular fight because he's sure he can talk him into it at a later date. One step at a time, or something like that. "I *suppose* I can live with that."

“Glad to hear it.” There’s amusement in Todd’s voice, but Dirk watches as the expression slips off of his face into something more focused. It’s odd Dirk thinks, to see Todd’s attention focused so much on something and not want to draw it back to himself, but nonetheless it *is* rewarded, when Todd starts playing and Dirk feels almost like the room melts away around them.

Todd, Dirk thinks, must be a *genius*.

He doesn’t recognise the song at first, it takes him a minute to catch up, but when he does he realises Todd has managed to pick a song from one of the very few places where their music tastes begrudgingly overlap. Todd of course, thinks the Beatles are overhyped and tends to favour their lesser known songs out of some kind of rebellion against that fact, and Dirk rarely tunes in given that his tastes tend to be more upbeat and modern, but they’re a british institution and even he can’t argue that, especially when they’re just the right level of catchy to keep him listening. All said it wouldn’t be *either* of their first choices, but between the two of them it’s a musical compromise that can keep them *both* happy, and by extension means Farah is happy that they aren’t fighting over the radio *again*. It’s safe to say those crossovers are *rare*.

But then, Dirk thinks as he watches Todd’s fingers perform a series of complex motions that look confusing at best over the strings and the opening notes of *Here Comes the Sun* fills up the space around them, *their* crossover seems similarly unlikely. Todd keeps his promise not to sing, but Dirk can hardly bring himself to care when this is something magical all on its own, in fact he’s not entirely sure he would have *survived* Todd singing as well as *this*. The concentrated look on his face, the furrow of his eyebrows as he focuses so intently on what he’s doing that Dirk feels like he’s faded into the background, a place he’s happy to be where he can watch Todd’s fingers dancing over the strings and finds his mind drifting back to his musings about Todd’s hands from before. He quite suddenly realises just why so many of the teenage girls in the romance movies he loves to watch find musicians so attractive. Of course it doesn’t help when said musician already looks like *Todd*, and is therefore already sporting an unfair advantage in Dirk’s humble opinion. He’s so caught up in the music, in *Todd*, that when the music drifts to its natural ending it’s a good minute before he moves.

“Dirk?” Todd asks, sounding mostly amused but a little uncertain, and Dirk blinks himself back into reality as much as he can.

“Hm? Oh! Yes, well, that was...” his mind goes blank as he tries to work out the right word to sum up *exactly* what that was, but try as he might he can’t find one impressive enough. Instead, his mouth decides to run away with him and speak without permission. “Did you have a lot of girlfriends in high school?”

He barely refrains from slapping a hand over his mouth, standing his ground instead and earning a bright peal of surprised laughter from Todd in reward.

“I uh- not really? A couple I guess,” he admits through his laughter. “Why?” Dirk recognises the tone as teasing, but he can’t do anything to stop the way his cheeks heat up with Todd looking at him like that.

“No reason! It’s just, you’re *very* good at that. People... like that? That you’re good at it, or that you do it at all, or maybe that you’re playing songs for them? It... it *seems* like a thing that people would like, which would be *very* sensible, if you ask me.”

“Uh-huh. What about you?”

“What- what about me?”

“Do *you* like it?” Todd, it would seem, is very much enjoying Dirk’s flustered state. Dirk himself is not so much.

“I- *obviously* I like it, Todd. I’m a *very* sensible person.”

Todd laughs again, softer this time, but he pulls the guitar from his lap and sets it down at the side of the sofa so he can lean in to kiss him. Dirk is a little disappointed at the prospect of no more songs, but the kiss *does* make up for it, and he decides for the moment to lose himself in that instead.

“Good,” Todd says when he finally pulls back. “It’s... nice. Seeing you happy.”

The implication being that he *hadn’t* been happy recently, and he wants to argue that it’s not that bad, but he knows the moments of actual *happiness* had been rare and fleeting for a while now, and hardly ever this effortless. It makes him feel guilty in a strange way, like perhaps he should have tried to *make* himself feel happy, or tried better to hide it. He wonders sometimes what kind of an affect this is having on *Todd*. He doesn’t seem to be complaining much, but his knuckles are still bruised, the hole in the wall still in need of fixing, and while the argument had been smoothed over he’s not sure the underlying frustrations have entirely gone away. He puts it out of his mind for now though, because for now he *is* happy, and there’s no reason not to stay that way.

“You make me happy.”

It’s simple, *honest*, and Todd ducks his head when he smiles, shaking it just a little. At least now they’re *both* feeling flustered, it’s enough to give him a little thrill of victory, enough to make him remember just how *much* he loves Todd, and blurt out the one thing that’s been on his mind since they’d started talking about all of *this*. “I want you to be with me.”

It’s rushed, and he doesn’t really realise that it wouldn’t make sense to anyone outside of his head until Todd looks at him, confused. “What do you mean?”

“I-” it was a lot easier to admit to when he was assuming he wouldn’t have to explain, now it makes him fidget uncertainly, afraid he’s ruined the atmosphere of the morning, or that he’s going to. “When I... when I do it. Open the... *thing*. Downstairs. The box. Or, rather when I try *again* because I don’t think last time went *particularly* well. When I do that I’d... like it if maybe... you were there.”

He doesn’t dare look up from his hands where he’s twisting his fingers into knots, curling in on himself with a defensive hunch of his shoulders. He doesn’t know why he feels afraid, the whole reason he’d wanted to ask Todd in the first place is because he feels *safe* with him,

something he'd only gotten more sure of since he'd started actually *talking*. There's still fear though, the fear of being known, being *seen* for what he really is, *everything* he is, and all the weight that comes with it. Somewhere, deep down, he thinks he's always going to be wondering what it will be that finally makes Todd see him the same way everyone else had, and he's not sure which conclusion it would be worse to see him draw, the one where he's a tool to be used, or the one where he's a monster. He wonders if it will hurt more to be rejected suddenly, or to watch him slowly withdraw over time. He wonders if he'll be the last to leave, or the first who takes everyone else with him. And he wishes, more than anything, that he didn't have any of these thoughts at all when he *knows* how much Todd would hate knowing he even *thinks* it, even if he doesn't really *believe* it. It's the kind of weight he thinks he could collapse under if given half the chance.

"Are you sure?" Todd's voice is soft, just for him, and he reaches out gently to calm Dirk's restless hands with his own. "There could be... *anything* in there. I just- if you're *sure* then of course I'll be there, but I don't want to know anything you don't want me to know, and that's kind of... difficult to prevent when you don't know what's there either."

Dirk swallows heavily, shaking his head as he manages to meet Todd's eyes. "I can't do it on my own." He sounds small, scared, and if the expression on Todd's face is anything to go by he looks it too.

"Okay," he agrees almost immediately, and it's not the first time Dirk has wondered at how Todd can be so fuelled by anger on occasion and still manage to be so soft. He'll never have enough words to show how much he loves him. "Okay. When you're ready, we'll do it together." It's a promise, one Dirk *needs* and he exhales heavily when he hears it. Todd cups his cheek, leaning in to press a kiss to his forehead and Dirk shuts his eyes against the well of tears that flood them. "You know, I uh- I picked your jacket up from the dry-cleaners the other day, if you still want it back?"

The world is still a little blurry when he opens his eyes, and he smiles softly, considering it. "Perhaps... not right now? I do want to! Or... I want to *try* at least but..." he hesitates, clearly thinking something over. "I think... I want to show you something. It's- I've been," he huffs, unused to struggling with his words and unsure how to continue. "I keep *thinking* about it. You're going to find out eventually anyway, and I want- I wanted to *tell* you but I can't- if I think about saying it I get all," he waves his hands, trying to demonstrate the words he can't find. "So. I think it will be *best* if I just *show* you, and then you can... think whatever you like about it. And then I'll... *know*."

There's something in Dirk's expression that makes Todd feel deeply unsettled, and his words do little to inspire him to feel differently. It's big, he can tell whatever this is it's a *lot*, and he doesn't really know if he's *ready* for that. But if ready is what Dirk needs him to be then he's just going to have to try.

"Okay. I mean- are you- do you need me to do... anything?" he tries to keep the uncertainty out of his voice, but Dirk can hear it anyway, eyes carefully averted as he fidgets with the zipper of Todd's stolen hoodie.

"No. No it's- maybe just stay there? It might be easier if you're behind me, actually," a thought that fills him with fear at the knowledge that there's no way to do this *and* see Todd's

face, but also relief that he won't have to *see* the immediate reaction if it's a bad one. Todd is a little confused at the instruction, but he nods anyway, crossing his legs to sit sideways on the sofa as Dirk turns his back to him.

There's a weight in the air Dirk has to force himself to swallow past, and Todd finds himself wishing there was an easier way to reassure him like this when he can't really see what he's thinking.

"What exactly am I looking for?" he asks when Dirk unzips the hoodie decisively, folding it carefully and hanging it over the back of the sofa. The question is cautious, but he sees the way Dirk hesitates in his movements, turning his head towards the sound of his voice just slightly.

"You'll... you'll know. When you see it. Well, there are multiple *it's*, really but- you'll know." His voice is unsteady, fingers shaking where he's toying with the edge of his shirt and Todd aches to reach out and steady them. It occurs to him then that in all the time they've known each other, all the (albeit brief) time they've been dating, Dirk has never really actually been undressed around him. He'd always suspected he'd had his reasons for sneaking off to get changed in the bathroom before bed, but he'd never really thought it would be anything more serious than the way Dirk could be oddly uptight about the way people see him, now he's starting to wonder if he should have thought more into it.

"I-" Dirk shakes his head, but he sits up straighter, like he's steeling himself for something and it pulls Todd's attention away from his thoughts immediately. "I think I need- I need you to promise me you won't... freak out."

If he wasn't worried before, the shaky whisper of his voice is more than enough to do it. Todd can't even begin to imagine what it is that he's so afraid of showing him.

"I'll... try my best." He doesn't want to make a promise he might not be able to keep, not right now, but he has to promise him *something*.

Dirk seems to find that enough at least, because he nods again, a short, sharp thing that seems to be him making a decision because the next thing he does is exhale shakily, and pull his shirt off over his head.

Todd can't help the way he inhales sharply at the sight.

Dirk's back is covered in scars. Mostly thin, clean lines that appear to be surgical in nature, with the exception of a few which are definitely *not*, the couple that Todd knows the origins of, and others he couldn't begin to guess at, though as bad as they are, as *many* as there are, they aren't really what sparked his reaction. The thing that pulls his attention is almost incomprehensible, and for the moment all he can do is stare.

There's something tattooed into his skin. Bold, black lines set against the pale, smooth skin of his shoulder, forming a symbol Todd knows only from the badge he'd had on his jumpsuit when they found him, and stamped atop the box waiting downstairs. It's dark, unavoidable, and below that-

Property of the United States Government.

Project: Blackwing.

It's enough to make him feel sick, *more* than enough to render him speechless, and the silence weighs heavily in the air, making the room feel almost claustrophobic despite the sunlight streaming through the blinds. Todd just stares, unable to do anything else even though he can see the tension in Dirk's shoulders, the rigid line of his spine as he holds himself like he's bracing for something. Every moment Todd doesn't react his muscles notch tighter and tighter, until he starts to worry he might hurt himself, but he still can't find his voice.

"Say something?" His voice is small and scared, on the edge of tipping over into something else entirely and Todd hopes more than anything that it's not *him* he's scared of. He'd hoped that Dirk would know, especially by now, that there's nothing that would make Todd love him any less. But this...

"I- I don't... I don't know what I'm supposed to say."

Not that, it turns out. Dirk reaches for his shirt, shaking his head in something that feels too close to an apology to sit right with Todd. He can see his hands shaking, feels it when he wraps his hand around his wrist to stop him.

"It's... it's okay. If you- if you're-" his voice breaks around the words, sending an ache so strong through Todd's chest that he forgets how to breathe for a moment. "I can... *understand* if it's... upsetting?"

"I'm not upset." He keeps his voice as even as he can, but try as he might he can't soften it the way he wants to. "I'm fucking *furious*." Dirk tenses again, and he's quick to shake his head even though he can't see it like this, reaching out to rest his hand on his unmarked shoulder, stroking his thumb soothingly against his neck. "No, no I'm- I'm not angry at *you*," it requires *so* much concentration, and far more self control than he thinks he has to not give into the boiling pit of helpless *rage* in his stomach. It won't help though, not here and certainly not now, so he takes a deep breath and tries again. "They had no... *fuck*, Dirk, the had *no* fucking *right* to do that to you."

"I know," he says, still holding himself tightly. Todd has never heard him sound so fragile. "But that never stopped them." He sighs heavily, leaning back into the touch of Todd's hand. "It was... not a punishment, not really, but... I tried running away a lot. The last time, before I got out, I was... they drugged me when they found me. When I woke up, I was back in bed and... that was there. I didn't see it for *such* a long time, not properly at least. He said it was... insurance. Marking things so people know where to return them if they go missing. I suppose it... makes sense."

"You're not a *thing*, you're not-" Todd feels like he's going to cry, which feels *ridiculous* when Dirk isn't. He's stronger than him though, or maybe just more used to the ideas Todd is only just being presented with. "You're *not* a thing. You're not their *property*, you're not *anyone's* property and I-" he presses his palm over the ink, like he can make it disappear by force of will alone. "I love you. You're... you're the strongest person I know, and I'm so- it means nothing, I *know* it means nothing but I'm so fucking sorry that any of this happened to

you. If I could- but I *can't* and that's- *that's* why I'm angry. Not at you. *Never* at you. Not for this."

Dirk stays unnervingly silent for what feels like the longest time. Todd just pulls him closer, uncrossing his legs so he can press them back to chest like hiding it from view could protect him. He wraps his arms around Dirk's chest, keeping him close and trying his best not to think too much about the scars he's yet to see that he can feel under his fingertips. He's no stranger to seeing the world as a cruel place, but he's not sure how to face the depths of this horror other than by doing his best to make sure Dirk knows he isn't going anywhere and hoping it's enough.

"I don't know how to be angry about it." It's a whisper, not breaking the silence as much as it just drifts through it to Todd's ears. "I don't know- I want to feel like it's... unfair, or awful, or *something*, but I just... It was *normal*. There are *so* many things I thought- that I still can't understand *not* being normal. I mean, it was *horrible*, I know I felt... something. But... I've never quite managed to think that any of it *shouldn't* have happened. Even if... maybe somewhere I *know* that. It's still... that's just the way things were. It's the way the world makes sense to me. And I think, maybe, I just... *had* to accept it. I *still* have to accept it. Because if I think about it too much then... my whole world just.... It's too much. And I understand if it's too much for you too because... well, who would want to deal with all of... *this*?"

"Nobody," Todd agrees, keeping his voice just as whisper soft as Dirk's. "Nobody wants to deal with that, nobody should *have* to. But... you *do*. You have to, and it's so... *so* unfair that you don't get a choice in that, but you don't have to do it alone. I said I'm with you. That means I'm with you for this, that means I'm with you for *everything*. The bad, the good, the... *really fucking weird*. You... you're braver than I am, but I'm pretty fucking stubborn, and I love you. *All* of you. That's... that's all I can do." And it feels so woefully inadequate in the face of *everything*, but it's really all he has.

Dirk shifts in his arms then, nudging them both until Todd has his back against the sofa and he's curled up small against his chest. Todd knows him well enough to run his fingers through his hair once they're settled, and sure enough it only takes a few passes before Dirk starts to relax into him properly. He doesn't say anything, he doesn't *need* to, there's no words that fit what he's feeling that he can't communicate better just by holding him. They have some time left yet before they have to start their day in earnest, a few hours before they need to leave to meet Farah for lunch, and it's time Todd is more than happy to fill just keeping Dirk close like this. The quiet time is a gift, the way Dirk cuddles in closer even more so, and as much as he likes to keep the silence he knows there's a chance Dirk will dig himself into his own head with too much of it after something like that. Instead of letting it linger, he decides on the one thing he knows will keep him distracted enough to stop him from spiralling down.

It's not much, but for the next few hours the space between them is filled with nothing more than the warm, reassuring press of bodies, and the sound of Todd's singing.

Dirk can't find it in himself to be worried anymore.

Chapter End Notes

So, I hope you enjoyed that.

Comments are pretty much the only way I know people are enjoying this, feedback is the fic writers fuel, so let me know what you think! I like getting words in return for these words. I'd ask you to be nice but I already know you're a lovely lot.

You can catch me at kieren-fucking-walker on tumblr if you want to yell at me/talk to me about Dirk Gently/generally freak out over these two idiots.

I hope the next chapter won't take too long, but if it does take longer than anticipated just know that I'm still writing and will not be abandoning this fic <3

And gentle moments in between.

Chapter Summary

“*Todd Brotzman*,” Dirk declares in his most dramatically unimpressed tone, “are you apologising for *not* having had a highly traumatic childhood at the hands of the United States Government?”

Todd eyes him warily, unsure of the direction this conversation is going but *definitely* wanting to avoid coming down on the wrong side of it. “...No?”

Chapter Notes

So. It's been *nearly* seven months since I updated this fic, and it's not without good reason! In that time I've written 112,600 words across two fics, my Beginner Bang (which is a Tangled AU) and my Big Bang (which is about the universe going horribly wrong) which is, as you can probably admit, a pretty strong excuse for being away for so long.

However! This fic has been playing on my mind the whole time, I've been making plans and outlining, staying on top of where I want to go with it and I did tell you it hadn't been abandoned so I'm here to make good on that promise! This chapter is perhaps a little different from the rest of the story, a pace change perhaps but hopefully you'll be able to see the reasons for that in here.

All my other notes are at the end, and I just wanted to leave a little warning that this chapter contains a blink and you'll miss it reference to past self harm. Nothing at all explicit, I promise.

And with that I hope you enjoy!

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

Mornings become a sanctuary of sorts.

It's not like they can always *get* them, Dirk has often found the universe doesn't care for such things as sociable working hours and sleeping in, but on the occasions they do get the chance to enjoy them both Dirk and Todd are more than reluctant to do anything that might speed the day along.

It's this that finds them still tucked into bed at eleven in the morning, the sun well and truly risen and beaming in through the window as Todd groans and buries his face further into the pillow he's been dozing on for the past half hour or so. Dirk opens his eyes just a little to watch him, arms clutching the pillow like he's expecting someone to try and rip it away from him at any second as he holds it to his face so tightly Dirk has to wonder how he can still breathe.

"I can feel you watching me," he says after a moment, words muffled so much by the pillow he's nearly incoherent. Dirk gets the next bit though, because it's what he always says. "It's creepy."

"Observing the subject is a vital part of any investigation," Dirk argues, nudging at Todd's leg with his foot, because he wants his attention and isn't getting it. "It's *important*."

Todd snorts, finally relenting his death grip on the pillow and turning to look at Dirk, who grins at the sight of him and shuffles in a little closer. "Hello."

"Hi," Todd answers back, amusement creeping across his face at Dirk's more than obvious delight. "How long have you been up?"

"Oh, not long. Not really. An hour, perhaps? There was a *very* obnoxious pigeon outside the window and I considered waking you up because it *hardly* seemed fair that you managed to sleep through it, but it turns out it's actually *really* nice to just watch you sleeping. And play candy crush. But mostly the watching."

Todd rolls his eyes, ignoring the blush he feels creeping onto his cheeks at the thought of Dirk finding him... *nice* to watch. "It's *creepy*," he insists, turning onto his side so he can see him better. "Everyone knows the guy watching people sleep is the bad guy."

"Not in *Twilight*," Dirk points out, knowing the reference will only needle Todd more. "In *Twilight* it's *romantic*."

"*Twilight* is about a hundred year old dude trying to date a teenage girl by breaking into her bedroom and inviting her to join his weird vampire cult." Todd tells him, with the kind of tone he usually reserves for ranting about corporate coffee chains or rich people buying things covered in gold that don't need to be. "It's *creepy*. Anyway, the guy *sparkles* and doesn't drink blood. He's not even a real vampire."

Dirk nods solemnly, biting back his own grin somewhat unsuccessfully. Todd is so incredibly easy to wind up, and when it's something harmless like this doing just that is one of Dirk's favourite past times. "So it would be better if he *was* then?"

"What?"

"A 'real vampire'. Your main complaint *seems* to be that it's somehow *worse* that he won't kill her and drink all of her blood, which- to be honest Todd- seems a little..." he pulls a face, shrugging, "*odd*, really."

Todd rolls his eyes, and promptly smacks Dirk in the face with his pillow. "I *know* what you're trying to do," he tells him as he does it again, relishing in the affronted yelp Dirk gives in return as he scrambles for his own pillow. "I'm not arguing about fake vampires with you."

"I was just *saying*," Dirk argues back, managing to smack Todd over the head with his pillow with no small amount of relish.

"You're just being a little *shit*." Todd counters, losing any amount of venom he could have put into the statement in his own laughter when he ducks out of the way of one of Dirk's swings only to land his own a moment later. "And you *suck* at pillow fights!"

"Well *you* don't play *fair*!" Dirk whines, bashing his pillow repeatedly into Todd's arm as he continues his assault, not at all happy that he's losing so easily and trying his best to wriggle out of his line of fire without *actually* getting up.

"You're not *supposed* to play fair." Todd laughs, landing a final smack of the pillow into Dirk's face and leaving it there, calling it a win. "*Loser*."

Dirk huffs, removing the pillow to glare at him before leaning over and licking a long line up Todd's arm.

"Wh-*Dirk*! That's- *ugh*," he shoves at his shoulder in retaliation, but it's a weak protest, as he dries his arm off on the bed sheet. "You're *gross*."

"You can thank Amanda," he grins, clearly pleased with himself. Todd rolls his eyes because of *course*. Between Amanda dropping Dirk hints on 'ways to annoy or otherwise bother Todd' and Tina introducing him to the *worst* cinema has to offer, Todd is starting to think the universe may be conspiring against him more than it usually does.

Still, Todd can't help but recognise that Dirk is *happier* than he's been in a while. It's a tenuous sort of happiness, the kind that really shines through in moments like this when the smile on his face comes free and easy in the near-afternoon sun, but at other times seems like it could break at any moment if they aren't too careful. Todd is trying to be careful, but he's *also* trying not to treat Dirk like he's made of glass, and it's a hard line to walk when he *knows* there are things Dirk isn't telling him, times that he's struggling that he keeps to himself. So far he's managed to keep to his promise of asking for help when he needs it, but Todd can't help but be afraid that he's not asking *every* time. The most he can do is ask if he's okay, and accept it when he says he is, but that doesn't make the worry go away, and it *certainly* doesn't keep the voice in his head from telling him it's nowhere near good enough, especially when they both know this is far from over, and right now feels more than anything like the calm before the storm.

"Are you okay?" Dirk asks, the smile still on his face but giving way to the beginnings of concern. Todd shakes himself out of his thoughts and nods before it can go any further.

"Yeah, yeah I'm fine I just-" he shrugs. "I was just thinking about... stuff."

Dirk hums, reaching out to smooth out the creases that form so easily on Todd's forehead with his thumb. "Stuff?" he asks, and Todd can hear in his voice that he might have an idea

what kind of *stuff* Todd means.

"Yeah. Y'know just..." he trails off, watching Dirk's expression carefully as he turns his answer over in his mind. The last thing he wants to do is ruin the peace they've created here, but he doubts he'll be able to maintain it much longer anyway if he doesn't abate at least some of his worry. "Can I-" he starts, unsure if it's the best course of action but forging ahead with it anyway. "Can I ask you something? About, y'know. I mean, I *know* you said I could I just don't want to-" his uncertainty is growing by the second, and he's already kicking himself for bringing it up, turning away onto his back with a dismissive shake of his head. "It doesn't matter. Sorry, forget I- I shouldn't have said anything."

Dirk takes his hand, and Todd squeezes his eyes shut, trying his best to ignore the way the sinking feeling in his stomach feels a lot like guilt.

"If... I don't know if I'll-" Dirk swallows, squeezing his hand like he's trying to reassure them both. "I might not *have* an answer but- yes. If you- if you *want* to that is. You can... ask me things. I'm not- sometimes I think it'll be easier if you do because... well. Then I'll know where to start."

He can hear the soft, rueful smile in his words, and despite the way he wants to take it all back and pretend it never happened, he's not sure he can when Dirk is so clearly holding the moment out for him to take. For a minute all Todd can do is turn his head to watch him, eyes trailing over his expression, down his neck, over the pale skin of his shoulder where the t-shirt of his Dirk had stolen to sleep in has slipped down a little too far, trying to find the best way to word his question and finding it more and more obvious that there *is* no good way to ask.

"You-" he stops, swallows, eyes darting up to meet Dirk's again briefly before shifting to hover somewhere just beyond his head that feels a little safer. "Does it- I don't know what I'm..." he sighs, squeezing their hands together and trying to re-arrange his thoughts. "Why don't you... I know, I've *seen*- there's so much I know about you and-" it's hard not to shut off, hard to put it out there when it makes him feel so insecure. "You never push me for... well. *Anything*. You- you keep giving... you keep *trusting* me with so much of yourself but you never... you never ask me to- I don't know. Do the same for you, I guess. And I know it's- *god* this is so stupid. It's not- *none* of this is about me. I just... I guess I wonder if I'm, y'know. Giving you enough."

It's not quite the question he'd *meant* to ask, but it's probably more honest for it, and he can feel the way his body has wound tight in response, actively fighting the urge to turn tail and run away from the situation he'd caused in the first place.

When the silence lasts long enough that he finally *looks* at Dirk he finds him frowning, thoughtful and concerned all at once as he tries to find a way to answer Todd's *mess* of a question. Every moment he waits just makes it feel worse, and the apology is lingering right on the tip of his tongue when Dirk finally manages to find a response.

"Is- is there something you... *want* to give me?" he asks, sounding more confused than upset which is enough to ease the worst of Todd's worry.

"I mean... not *specifically* I just-" he sighs heavily, frustrated with his own inability to formulate his thoughts. "I'm not good at being, y'know, *vulnerable* or whatever and... I know you aren't either but you keep doing it anyway and I just... if there *was* anything that you wanted to *know* or- or anything else you could... ask. That's all."

The silences between them in these sort of moments have only become longer the more they have them. It's not enough to stop Todd worrying, if he's honest Todd doesn't think there's *ever* going to be enough of *anything* to stop him worrying, but it's something he's learning how to be comfortable with either way. They're both trying, in their own ways, to get this right, and if that means waiting longer than usual for the other to get their words out then it's only going to be for the best in the end.

"Todd..." Dirk sounds lost more than anything, confused as to where this is coming from and perhaps a little amused underneath it all. "You told me your biggest secret in the first week I knew you. You didn't even really know *me*. And... I think maybe you were trying to make me not like you which would be a *very* difficult thing to achieve *before* that and arguably *more so* afterwards, but regardless of your misguided motivations you still *did* it. I think the biggest secret you've ever had and never told anyone else is a *pretty* big thing to tell me so... we're not exactly unbalanced in that regard."

Todd huffs, perhaps feeling a *little* silly but still sticking to his guns, not *entirely* convinced. "Well... okay. But me being an asshole isn't like, on par with growing up in a secret government agency or whatever."

"*Todd Brotzman*," Dirk declares in his most dramatically unimpressed tone, "are you apologising for *not* having had a highly traumatic childhood at the hands of the United States Government?"

Todd eyes him warily, unsure of the direction this conversation is going but *definitely* wanting to avoid coming down on the wrong side of it. "...No?"

Dirk snorts, smile breaking across his face as he settles back down into the pillows and shakes with laughter. The relief is enough to make Todd roll his eyes, shoving at his shoulder even as he completely fails to suppress his own smile. "You're such a *dork*."

It makes Dirk gasp, pressing his hand to his chest as he widens his eyes. "Now you're *bullying* me! You're so *mean*, how *could* you? I have *never* done *anything* to warrant such blatant-"

"*Okay*, you know what?" Todd fists his hand in the front of Dirk's t-shirt and pulls him into a kiss before he can get any further in his protests. While it's not necessarily what Dirk was angling for, it's something he's *more* than happy to involve himself in, kissing back with no small degree of enthusiasm once his initial shock passes and taking Todd by surprise in return.

It's the kind of thing that's become more frequent. Not that it was ever *infrequent*, but the building trust between them is only making it easier for them to be *closer* in other senses too. And it's *nice*, having Dirk giggling against his mouth in the mess of sheets still warm from

the night before, but it still takes him by surprise when Dirk's hand creeps up under the edge of his shirt to rest against the softness of his stomach.

Todd pulls back before he can stop himself, some kind of question on the tip of his tongue that his brain can't seem to find the words for. Dirk freezes for a moment, scanning Todd's face like he's trying to work out what went wrong, not quite the level of panic he has when he thinks Todd is on the verge of an attack but still... on it's way there. It makes him feel guilty, *so* stupidly guilty when he can't even explain what's *wrong*, if anything even *is*, and yet he can't help the sinking feeling in his chest when Dirk tilts his head in concern and Todd *desperately* wishes he could rewind a few moments just so he wouldn't have to do this.

"Is..." and Dirk has put it together, because of *course* he has, and his eyes flicker downwards just for a moment to where his hand still rests against Todd's skin. "Is this okay?"

"I..." The funny thing is, Todd thinks, that of all the answers he *could* give, the most pressing thing that springs to mind is that he just doesn't *know*. There's certainly no small amount of fear there, pararibulitis is a tricky thing and no matter how well he sticks to his medication schedule that doesn't make it any easier to predict. There's some kind of embarrassment too, he thinks. The reminder that nobody has touched him as much as Dirk has, and certainly not like *this*, innocent as it is, in a *very* long time. It's perhaps more embarrassing that a part of him that had almost completely forgotten how touch starved he had been seems to roar to life at the feeling of it and is demanding something like *more* but perhaps more in the realm of *don't stop*, which is why when his lack of response makes Dirk start to pull away his decision is made for him. "Yeah. Yes. It's... good." He nods, because it *is*, and Dirk isn't the kind of pushy asshole who'll take that as a go-ahead for anything. "I just... it's been a while. I guess."

"Oh." Dirk nods back, quite happy with that before his eyes widen slightly and his gaze flickers across Todd's face. "*Oh!* I- I *see*. Well. That's- I mean. I wasn't- not that I'm *not* I just-

"Dirk-" Todd sighs smiling softly as he places his hand over Dirks, the flustered rambling putting the last of those *particular* worries to bed for the time being. "I know. It's not... we can talk about that some other time if- if you *want* to, and if you don't that's fine too it's not..." he can feel the heat rising to his cheeks and resolutely ignores it. "We don't have to worry about that right now just. You know. You're allowed to touch me. If... if you want. That's... okay. I'll tell you if it's not."

Dirk nods rapidly, the pink flush covering his own cheeks leaving Todd reassured that he's not the only one feeling as awkward as is humanly possible about this. It seems to be enough to relax him too if the way the tension unfurls from Dirk's shoulders is anything to go by.

"Does... does that mean I can-" the flush is deepening by the second, spreading up to his ears, and Todd doesn't even try to pretend he doesn't find the way Dirk suddenly seems to go shy completely and utterly adorable. "Well," he clears his throat, trying to pull back some of that false bravado he usually wears so easily. "I suppose the question *is*... is it me or is it getting *awfully* warm in here?"

“Are you asking me to take my clothes off?” Todd asks, raising an unimpressed eyebrow at him.

“Well I *wasn't*, and certainly not *all* of them, but now that you’ve mentioned it I suppose that *does* seem a rather handy solution to the issue we’re having, doesn’t it? Excellent assisting Todd!”

His grin is stupid, this whole situation is stupid, and unfortunately for Todd it’s the kind of thing only Dirk can pull off. He falls for it every time whether he means to or not.

He sighs heavily, attempting to sound as put upon as possible as he reaches for the hem of his t-shirt and drags it off over his head. It’s purposefully fast enough to stop him chickening out at the last second, he still feels stupid for being as insecure as he is, but that doesn’t *stop* him from feeling it either way, and it takes all the willpower he has not to cross his arms over his chest and curl in on himself.

“Better?” he asks, just to break the silence, because Dirk is staring and Todd has *never* been good with staring, no matter how well intentioned.

“Hm?” Dirk asks distractedly, a dusting of pink still sitting on his cheeks that gives Todd some kind of *pleased* feeling that settles in his chest when he sees it. “Oh! Oh, yes absolutely! I mean... I *assume* so. You’re the one that was feeling warm!”

“*Was* I?” It comes out dry, but that doesn’t seem to phase Dirk, who is instead watching Todd with the kind of intensity he usually reserves for particularly interesting knick-knacks he’s found.

“Well... even if you *weren't* you seemed to be rather concerned with the concept of balance earlier, and I’ve shown you mine so... now we’re even!” Dirk is clearly pleased with himself, and Todd can only roll his eyes in response even if he feels a surge of affection well up when Dirk places his finger rather decisively on a freckle near his right nipple. “I like this one.”

“...Thanks?”

"You're welcome!" Dirk replies, sunny smile taking over his face with ease. He either doesn't notice how strange the action could seem or he doesn't care, but either way he's clearly distracted. Todd feels a little awkward, unused to this level of scrutiny and not at all sure what to do with it, but it doesn't feel... *threatening*. Dirk's curiosity is something Todd is used to by now, even on occasion directed at him, but never on a level *quite* this physical and he almost has to force himself to relax into it if he's going to get through *whatever* this is without some serious muscle cramping. Not that anything about this is leaning in the direction of *sexy* as such, but he knows for a fact that certainly wouldn't be.

Dirk barely touches him at first, a light brush of his fingers here and there that Todd finds himself shuddering against more often than not. It's quite not enough to be fully ticklish, but when he skirts down the side of his ribs Todd squirms with something close to it. It's intimate, he realises. The kind of intimacy he's not really used to, the kind he doubts Dirk is either, and something about it makes him feel a little safer, more okay with it than he would

be with anyone else. Whatever it is they're learning about each other it's something they're doing together, and Todd is more than thankful for that.

Eventually he settles, tracing a finger over a small raised scar on Todd's side. He doesn't ask, but Todd can feel the question in it anyway, and he looks down at where Dirk's fingers are resting with a slight smile.

"I uh," he clears his throat, not expecting his voice to sound as rough or as loud as it had in the quiet. "I fell out of a tree." His smile is a little self depreciative, but the memory is far from a bad one. "My grandma had this old tree in her garden and I used to climb up there and... I don't know. It was fun. She always told me to be careful and I never listened so uh, eventually I fell out. Hit a few branches on the way down, cut myself up pretty badly. That's the only one that stuck."

Dirk smiles, fond and amused at the idea that Todd had *always* been as unwilling to listen to people telling him to be careful as he is now. "It looks like a cat," he tells him, tracing the lines of imaginary whiskers out from the centre of the scar. "See?"

Todd snorts, head falling back against the pillow. "Sure, I guess. I always kinda liked it, actually."

"Ah," Dirk nods sagely. "It's very punk of you."

This time Todd's laugh is warm and bright, shaking his head at him. "Only if I don't tell people how I got it."

"Hm, I suppose." Dirk agrees, abandoning that scar in favour of another, pale and thin, nearly invisible just under the line of Todd's collarbone. "How about this one?"

It occurs to him that Dirk has many more scars than he does. From what he'd seen, what he's *felt*, he can't imagine the stories behind them all, he imagines none of them are particularly pleasant when even the ones he *had* been there for seemed to be the result of the universe playing a cruel kind of joke on him. Still, Todd's own stories are nowhere near as bad as that, in fact a lot of them are down to his own stupidity and a childhood spent falling off bikes and running headfirst into trees. However exposed it makes him feel, it's not the *bad* kind, and even if this was the kind of thing his younger self would have scoffed at, the idea that Dirk wants to know at all fills him with some kind of warmth that makes it all the more easy to answer him.

"Guitar string. There's a few more," he points out a similar sliver of a line on his arm.

"Guitars can *cut* you?" Dirk asks, sounding somewhat alarmed at the prospect as he turns wide eyes on Todd. "You didn't tell me it was *dangerous*!"

"I- I mean it's not *really*," he huffs, rolling his eyes. "Just sometimes the strings snap, and they're really sharp so if they get you," he shrugs. "They just sting usually."

Dirk makes a discontented sound, clearly not happy with the situation but accepting the answer all the same. "Well, if it happens again I will be having *very* strong words."

"With... with my guitar?"

Todd's amused tone seems to be enough to clue Dirk in to what he thinks of his response, but he sticks to it anyway. "Yes."

"Alright." It's not like it's a hard thing to agree to, and Todd is pretty sure Dirk having 'strong words' with his guitar would at least be amusing to watch. "I'll let her know."

Dirk sniffs, aware he's being made fun of and tickles his fingers in against Todd's ribs, smiling smugly when he yelps and squirms away.

"Dirk," Todd warns, but he's already dropped it by then, trailing his fingers down until they rest at a small patch of skin just above Todd's hip. He frowns at the raised lines under his fingertips, a small cluster of them, too neat to be truly random, and if the way Todd tenses up underneath him is anything to go by, not something he particularly wants to talk about.

He can't help but ask anyway.

"What about these?"

Todd's eyes flicker to his and then away guilty, shrugging in a feigned attempt to play it cool. "Uh," he swallows, shifting uncomfortably. "Just... something I tried in college. Not- nothing serious. I thought it might... help? But it... wasn't really for me in the end. I didn't- I only did it a couple of times. Just to see. It was dumb."

Dirk frowns, rubbing his thumb carefully over the uncomfortably purposeful lines of the scars. He's not *entirely* sure he follows, but he understands enough to know it's... an idea he certainly isn't fond of. He trusts Todd though, enough to believe him that it hadn't stuck, enough to understand that this is probably a conversation best dropped if he wants to keep the easy laziness of the morning so far. Dirk is learning a lot about speaking up when he needs help, but he's also learning about when to hold back for Todd's sake. It's not necessarily a bad thing if he were to just leave some things alone.

It's with that in mind that he brushes his fingers over the spot one last time before leaning up to press a kiss to Todd's cheek, and perhaps give away his true motivations for getting him at least somewhat undressed in the first place.

"Amanda said you had a tattoo."

It's the right thing to say, and Todd groans as soon as he does. Clearly he's not *happy* about the revelation, but it's in that soft, familiar kind of way rather than the uncomfortable tension of before.

"The thing *is*," Dirk starts before he can say anything to derail him. "I can't see any tattoos. In fact, I can't recall *ever* having seen a tattoo on you, and correct me if I'm wrong but this seems like the kind of *vital* information one should know about one's boyfriend."

Todd side-eyes him, it's a look of betrayal but it still belies his resignation to the conversation they're now having. If there's one thing Dirk loves about Todd it's that he can be consistently

relied upon to give into his whims.

“You did this whole thing to try and snoop out a tattoo you’ve been told by *Amanda* that I have? *Why* am I not surprised.”

“Well...” Dirk grins, propping himself up on one elbow to hover over him. “I *am* a detective. It’s in my nature to detect things! Like the location of said tattoo that you haven’t told me about.”

Todd stares him down for a full minute, unimpressed and unyielding in the face of Dirk’s dogged determination. Dirk just watches him right back, eyebrows raised expectantly until Todd, as he is prone to doing, gives in with a heavy sigh and rolls his eyes like he already regrets saying anything.

“It’s *dumb*. I got it when we were on tour, it’s not even- our bassist did it with a sewing needle in the back of a van after a show. I was drunk. Stop looking at me like that!”

Dirk pulls his most innocent expression, which only serves to make him look the least innocent he’s ever looked. “Like *what*? Who’s looking? I didn’t do *anything*.”

“You *know* what you’re doing.” It’s accusatory, but Dirk can see the flush rising to Todd’s cheeks, and if he didn’t already know from the fact it was Amanda who told him about it, it’s enough to tell him that this is probably going to be *good*. “It’s... it’s just a stupid little smiley face. We all got them. It’s faded now anyway.”

Dirk nods, because a defensive Todd is a Todd close to breaking and he *could* stare him down until he says but it’s probably quicker just to ask.

“And *where* did you get this ‘stupid’ tattoo?”

Todd’s glare is scathing enough to reheat one of Dirk’s forgotten cups of tea. He grits his teeth like it’s being forced out of him against his will, and to be fair on some level it probably *is*, but Dirk suspects he’d find out either way sooner or later, he’s just not that patient.

“It’s on my ass.”

Dirk splutters, part laughter and part shock and apparently taking him by surprise is enough to lift Todd’s spirits from defensive to smug.

“I’m *sorry*? You got it *where*?”

“It seemed funny at the time!” Todd argues, crossing his arms over his chest. “I was twenty, and I was *drunk*. It... I forgot I even had it until the next morning, that whole trip was *hell*.”

Dirk rolls onto his back, the air around them filling with the sound of his laughter as his shoulder shake. It doesn’t take Todd long to join in, even if he smacks Dirk in the shoulder for it. It’s hardly the worst thing he’s ever admitted to but somehow the fact that it makes Dirk laugh so easily makes him glad he did. There’s a part of Todd that desperately wishes he could give every piece of himself to Dirk if it would make him as happy as he is right now, in their little corner of space that remains relatively untouched by the chaos around them.

“*Shut up*,” Todd tells him anyway, whinier than he wants it to be and unable to keep the smile from his face. Dirk’s eyes are bright when he turns to him, shoulders still trembling with mirth.

“And I thought *mine* was bad. At least I have an *excuse*.” Dirk grins, and even though the reference is enough to make Todd falter he’s *trying* to take Dirk’s lead on this. He’s not entirely convinced joking about it is the best way forward, but if Dirk wants to... well. It has to be up to him. Todd can’t tell him he can make his own choices about how to handle things if he’s not going to *let* him when he does.

Even so, it softens him a little, leaves him watching Dirk more carefully than he was before.

“Oh yeah?” He asks, perhaps a little wary but trying not to let it show. “What’s that then?”

“Well I didn’t *choose* mine.” Todd sees him falter just a little, and he wants to say something but- “*Honestly*, Todd, sometimes I do rather worry about your life choices.” Dirk interrupts before he can and when he looks back at Todd, his smile is softer too.

It’s nothing really, of all the ways Dirk has reacted so far, trying to make light of something so deeply painful isn’t the *worst* of it, but Todd reaches for his hand anyway. He squeezes it tightly, and after a moment Dirk squeezes back, the silence that settles is comfortable, if a little heavy.

“Do you think-” he starts, frowning when he cuts himself off like the words he’s thinking aren’t quite right. “Does it... *bother* you? That I have... *that*?”

Todd can’t say it was a question he was expecting, but it’s one that’s easy enough to answer in the end.

“No.” It’s firm, leaving no room for argument. “I mean... It *does*. It- it bothers me that someone *did* that to you but... no. It doesn’t change anything. You don’t... you don’t *believe* it, do you?”

The look on Dirk’s face is one Todd can’t place, but for a brief moment it makes him look both older and younger than he is all at once. It makes his heart squeeze tightly in his chest.

“I... I don’t know. Sometimes- sometimes it’s not as *easy* to separate out those parts of myself and I think- I just get kind of *jumbled up* in the middle of it all. I try to ignore it, mostly. I try not to think about what it *means* but- I think maybe... it might mean something different now, to what they meant at the time. I’d- If they tried- if someone asked me if that’s what I am now I think I’d... Even if I don’t *always* believe it I think I’d be able to say no.” He sighs softly, looking to Todd for some kind of reassurance. “That... *counts* for something, doesn’t it?”

Todd can’t help it when he reaches out to cup Dirk’s cheek, thumb stroking over his cheekbone and smiling with something that comes close to *pride*. Close enough that he has to make sure to keep the edge of tears out of his voice when he speaks.

“Yeah, Dirk,” he tells him, voice a little too raw for his liking but not quite able to care.
“Yeah, that counts for something.”

Chapter End Notes

Comments are pretty much the only way I know people are enjoying this, feedback is the fic writers fuel, so let me know what you think! I like getting words in return for these words. I'd ask you to be nice but I already know you're a lovely lot.

So, I hope that was at least somewhat worth the wait! I have no reference for how long the next chapter will take because I'm also trying to be gentle with myself at the moment, but rest assured they are still coming,, and the distressingly emotional stuff will be back in the next chapter! If you've stuck around for this long thank you *so* much! I appreciate the heck out of you <3

You can catch me at kieren-fucking-walker on tumblr if you want to yell at me/talk to me about Dirk Gently/generally freak out over these two idiots.

A second glance.

Chapter Summary

“I-” he blinks rapidly, swallowing heavily as the crease between his eyebrows deepens. His head jerks a little like he wants to look at Todd but can’t tear his eyes away from the page, and when he speaks it comes out in little more than a disbelieving whisper. “December. The seventeenth of December.” He shakes his head, like he’s waiting for the words on the page to disappear.

Todd just finds himself more confused, brow scrunching with it as he asks, “what about it?”

Chapter Notes

Sneaks back into this fic over a year after my last update.

Hello.

There's a lot of explaining I could do, but I'm not going to. The people who need to know do, and everyone else? Well, it's been a time, hasn't it. I never intended to leave it this long, and this chapter definitely took a lot to get out, but it's here. I can't promise I'll be updating again any time soon, but I've said before that I have no intention of abandoning this fic, and that's true no matter how much time passes between updates.

If you're still here I love you. Please do take care <3

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

The funny thing about the way it ends up unfolding is that Dirk never actually set out to do any of it. Slow days always seem to drag more now they have an actual office, nothing to do but sit there and spin idly in his chair and think of ways to annoy Todd. Or ways to distract Todd from whatever it is that has him frowning at his computer screen like he's personally offended, he doesn't ask, the last time he asked it was *taxes* and he never wants to have someone try to explain that to him again. Instead he just stares at the ceiling, sighing heavily as he spins himself again, wondering what the point of having an agency even *is* if he doesn't have anything to *do* with it.

It continues on in this fashion for quite some time, listening to the sound of Todd's typing, underlined by the music he's listening to *far* too loudly if Dirk can still hear it all the way over here through his headphones, and he's just about wondering if he should send Farah a

message to see if she'll pick up some pastries on her way back from lunch when his spinning is rudely interrupted by his foot catching on something that is *not* the table leg it should have been, and jerking him to a complete stop rather unceremoniously. He frowns, reluctantly dragging himself upwards so he can look down at the offending object, and freezing in place when he catches sight of the all too familiar box lid.

It's not that he'd *forgotten* it was there, just that he'd been so caught up in trying not to think about it that it had in fact slipped his mind. The sight of it makes him feel... strange. Hot and cold all at once, some kind of uncomfortable fluttering in his stomach that's almost enough to be nausea. Anger too, he can feel that, a helpless, childish kind of anger but present nonetheless. He has a suspicion it's that more than anything that has him dragging it out from under his desk and dropping it down atop it with a heavy *thud*. It's not like last time, the desperation isn't there, not yet. This time he just stares at it for a long moment, like he's trying to work out what's inside without having to open it. It makes him feel on edge, like he should run away, but he doesn't *want* to run away. It can't possibly be as bad as he's imagining, it's just a box full of *stuff*, and okay perhaps last time he was taken by surprise but he also overreacted! He's prepared this time, in a much better headspace for it, and Todd is right there which... to be honest he'd kind of forgotten about until he looks over at his desk and finds him watching him right back, headphones pulled down to rest around his neck and looking at him with no small amount of concern.

"You okay?" His voice is soft, but it sounds loud in the relative quiet of the office and it's enough to pull Dirk out of whatever strange mood he'd slipped into, nodding his head and offering him a smile.

"I... suppose if there's nothing *else* to do it wouldn't be a bad idea to-" he swallows, glancing back down at the box and trying to ignore the way his hands are clenched into fists at his sides. Nervous. He feels nervous. "I mean, it's just *sitting* there!" And he wants it gone, he realises suddenly. As much as he's not been thinking about it, he's been *actively* thinking about not thinking about it, and it's been *exhausting*. Having it here is taking up space, not just in the office but in his head too, as if he's been carrying it around with him ever since Riggins had dropped it at his door and he's well aware that opening it might just add to that weight, but he's more than a little hopeful that it might also ease the burden just a little.

It must show on his face, because Todd has moved now, standing out of his chair to lean against the front of his own desk, hovering anxiously closer to Dirk while leaving him some of his own space as well. It's almost sweet, Dirk thinks as he watches him, trying his best not to feel overly observed as he curls his fingers into his shirtsleeves.

"D'you wanna open it?" Todd asks carefully, glancing to the box for a moment before he looks back to Dirk. It makes him feel small, not because Todd is doing anything *wrong*, but because Todd knows too much now. He can't hide from him. Not being able to hide makes him feel skittish at best and downright agitated at worse, and he finds himself wondering if Todd would leave if he asked him to.

"I- *well*, it's..." he stutters for a moment, huffing his frustration when he can't find the words. "I don't want to *not* open it. Not that I *want* to as such either but- I can't just throw it out, and I can't... it can't *stay* here. Not forever. I can't keep just *hoping* it will disappear like all the

pens do, and my socks, *and* the cactus, did we ever find out where the cactus went? I'm not sure we did. Strange, really, I'm not sure succulents have a reputation for disappearing but then I don't really know much about plant care in the first place and I think that perhaps it just--"

He stops, not because anyone stops him, but because suddenly Todd is in his space and it makes him realise just how wide-eyed and panicky he feels. It's something Todd is good at, stopping him from sinking too far into that headspace, but Dirk still feels like his head is spinning and everything around him is a little *too* bright and a little too *loud* and- oh. Apparently Todd had noticed that too, because he takes hold of his hands ever so gently, squeezes in that reassuring way he does, and just like that Dirk's mind goes blissfully, impossibly quiet. His next breath shudders out of him, and he closes his eyes, letting Todd pull him into a hug and holding him close as soon as he gets his arms around him.

"I didn't mean- You don't have to." Like this Dirk can feel the vibration of his voice in his chest, and it's rather nice, actually. He focuses on that. "You're right, it's not gonna disappear. But, you know. You *can* just get rid of it without opening it, if you want. I mean, I'm pretty sure Farah has enough explosives that we could pretty much obliterate it, and we could always set it on fire? That's what people do in movies I guess. Nobody is gonna make you do anything you don't want to do, okay?"

Dirk squeezes his eyes shut harder, buries his face into Todd's shoulder and pretends for a moment that they're all that exists.

"You make me do the dishes," he accuses, ignoring how wobbly his voice sounds.

Todd huffs a laugh that ruffles Dirk's hair where he's turned to press a kiss to the side of his head. "That is *not* the same thing, asshole."

It's enough to make him smile, swaying them both slightly as he thinks about his words. "I want to," he tells him when he's sure he can say it without his voice shaking. "I want to open it. I... think I might *need* to? Not in a *universe* way just in a..." he swallows heavily, wondering why it makes him feel guilty to think about. "Just for *me*."

He presses his face into Todd's shoulder, wondering why of all things, he's afraid of hearing Todd's response. Guilt, he thinks. Guilt at the thought of doing something for himself, something that might make him feel better. Guilt for dragging Todd into it when he knows as much as he knows anything that the feeling better part may take a long time to come around.

"Okay." Is what Todd says eventually, simple as that, and Dirk squeezes him tighter just for a moment because *god* as much as Todd can be a scattered mess in his own right, Dirk never finds him anything but solid and steadfast when he needs him to be. "Okay, well... lets not do it on your desk, it's enough of a mess as it is. We can... open it on the floor, maybe?" His desk is equally a mess albeit in a different way to Dirk's, and he wouldn't dare introduce any stray papers into Farah's immaculately faultless filing system. "Do you... want me to be here or- I mean I can wait outside if you'd rather--"

"I want you to stay." It comes out a little more forceful than he intends, and he pulls out of the hug to soften it with a "please?"

Todd smiles, squeezing his hand reassuringly. “Sure, I’ll stay. Just- tea?”

“Tea would be *marvellous*, thank you Todd.”

It earns him an eye roll and a kiss on the cheek, but Todd disappears into the small kitchenette they have strictly for tea and coffee purposes and it’s not long before Dirk hears the sound of the kettle boiling. He fidgets with his fingers, rocking back and forth on his heels before deciding that instead of waiting for Todd it might be best if he just got *on* with it, picking the box up and depositing it unceremoniously on the rug, where he drops down next to it cross-legged.

In the kitchen Todd stares anxiously at his phone, eyes flicking to the doorway every now and then as if he’s waiting to be caught. It’s hard, working out how to phrase it in a way that won’t bring Farah rushing back in a panic, but also lets her know what’s going on so she isn’t completely unprepared for the disaster that may follow. It’s not that he thinks Dirk isn’t strong enough to deal with it, Dirk is possibly one of the most resilient people he’s ever met, but that resilience has to end somewhere and he knows how likely it is to end in the place he feels safe enough to let his guard down. Todd feels *immensely* lucky, and to some extent *proud* that he’s managed to somehow gain that kind of trust from him, but that doesn’t mean he’s exactly prepared to deal with every possible outcome.

The kettle boiling pulls him out of his thoughts. Aware that he only has so much time before it becomes suspicious, he starts to type out a message on his phone. It takes a few revisions, deleting it all and restarting from scratch more than once, but eventually he manages to fire off something that hopefully isn’t alarm-inducing.

To Farah: Dirk’s decided that now is the best time to open the box of stuff Blackwing dropped off. I think we’ve got it handled, don’t worry. Just wanted to let you know in case you walk in and it’s blown up in our faces.

It’s the best he can do, shoving his phone back into his pocket as he pours out the water for Dirk’s tea, adding his own to the shitty instant coffee they’re living off while the coffee machine is broken, letting the familiar routine soothe him somewhat in preparation for what’s to come.

When he makes it back to the living room Dirk is already sat on the floor, box lid removed and a small pile of paper haphazardly dumped in front of him. He approaches slowly, like he doesn’t want to startle a particularly jumpy animal, but if anything when he sets Dirk’s tea down next to him and sits down on the floor as well, he doesn’t seem jumpy at all.

“You know, I do sometimes wonder what the *point* of all this was,” he says after a minute of frowning at the page. “There’s an entire folder dedicated to my various *bedtimes*, surely they had something *better* to do!” He discards the paper onto a smaller pile that Todd hadn’t previously noticed, clearly he hasn’t been overly interested in combing through them in detail, and Todd isn’t sure he can blame him. “Like here, *look*,” he points to a line on the page that Todd can’t read from this distance, but it doesn’t matter when he proceeds to read it out anyway. ““Trialed subject with staggered sleeping times. New conditions had no bearing

on subjects ability at testing” he quotes in a haughtier-than-usual voice. “And they’re *all* like that!” Dirk picks up the pile, flicking through them and reading out. “‘New conditions had no bearing on subjects ability at testing’, ‘variables did not influence subjects ability at testing stage’, ‘altered mental state had no effect on subjects test performance’, ‘no change’, ‘ineffectual’, ‘no noticeable improvement.’” He scoffs, waving the pile of papers in the air before handing them over to Todd, “I mean, they had me for *years* what on earth were they *doing*?!”

Todd takes the papers from him, eyes only leaving Dirk to scan over the top page. It’s a report of some sort, as he flicks through he realises they all are. The idea of reading them sits wrong with him, uncomfortable and heavy in his stomach as he swallows a mouthful of coffee. Dirk had given them to him, but that doesn’t mean he wants him to read them either, and curious as he is it feels oddly detached and impersonal to read about it in reports like this. He doesn’t want to think of Dirk in that way. Even so, merely flipping through the pages and scanning over them tells him all he really needs to know, things he already suspected. As the reports go on the variables they’d decided to introduce seemed to get increasingly unpredictable and desperate, and Todd eyes the remainder of the pile with a sinking feeling suspecting it only gets worse as time goes on.

“Trying anything, from the looks of things,” he offers, setting the pages down to one side.

“Yes, well, the certainly did *that*,” Dirk replies bitterly, scanning through the rest of the pages from that particular folder before shoving them aside with enough force to knock the top few pages off. “You’d *think* that with it getting them *nowhere* they’d know how to take a hint.”

He can recognise the attitude for what it is, but he lets him have it. There’s no real disguising the underlying fear in Dirk’s voice, even if he is trying to be flippant about it. Todd isn’t about to stop him, he’s well aware that if they’re going to do this any way it has to be the way Dirk wants it to be done, he just doesn’t like watching like he’s waiting for him to crash. He’s prepared to be patient though, as much as he can, and resigns himself to cradling his coffee mug and sipping it at occasionally as Dirk digs through the papers in the box, snorting at some, muttering under his breath about others, occasionally reading a line or two out loud when he thinks it’s something particularly worthy of derision. Todd tries very hard not to let his concern show on his face, or the feeling of helplessness it instills in him for that matter. It’s more difficult than he realised it would be, watching Dirk sift through the box that makes up the majority of his childhood when instead of old toys and family photos it’s just page after page of governmental reports of unethical experimentation. It’s not his place to feel as upset about it as he does, as *angry* and frustrated as he can feel himself getting, but it’s no use knowing that when he feels it anyway. It’s his first instinct these days, protecting Dirk, but he can’t protect him from this, not from things that had already happened, not from things *so* much bigger than the both of them. He hadn’t known just how heavy the reality of that realisation would feel.

Dirk is making his way through the box at a fairly steady pace, and if it’s just papers like this then Todd thinks they might actually get through it sooner than he thought they might. It’s a relief as much as it is a worry, concerned that Dirk will need to go through it again after this if flying through it now isn’t enough. It’s just as he’s had the thought that it seems like an oddly redundant pile of things to give him as a peace offering, when Dirk pauses in his

routine. He's just opened a new folder, eyes scanning the page as usual when he stops, staring at something in particular with a growing frown on his face. He looks stricken, disbelief mixed with shock mixed with grief, something about the expression making Todd's chest tighten with worry.

"What's wrong?" he asks when it becomes apparent that Dirk isn't going to move any time soon, keeping his voice as soft as he can. "Dirk?"

"I-" he blinks rapidly, swallowing heavily as the crease between his eyebrows deepens. His head jerks a little like he wants to look at Todd but can't tear his eyes away from the page, and when he speaks it comes out in little more than a disbelieving whisper. "December. The seventeenth of December." He shakes his head, like he's waiting for the words on the page to disappear.

Todd just finds himself more confused, brow scrunching with it as he asks, "what about it?"

"It's..." Dirk laughs, but it sounds like more of a sob, wrenched from his throat all rough around the edges. "It's my *birthday*. I- I have a *birthday*. I didn't... know."

He sounds small, a sense of wonder in his voice that's almost childlike, tainted with the ugliness of the realisation. Todd feels something twist uncomfortably in his chest, desperately trying to hold his own emotions at bay when he *knows* they aren't going to be productive. He can't quite wrap his head around it though, the casual cruelty of it. The fact that Dirk hadn't even known when his *birthday* was seems to Todd like the most jarring thing he could have learned from anything in these papers. He's sure there's plenty he'd find horrifying in there, plenty that's cruel and unjust and all kinds of *wrong* but this is... something he struggles to even comprehend being taken away from him like that.

Dirk is shaking. It's something he realises when the paper in his hand begins to tremble, body still frozen in place in a way that can't be comfortable and even though Dirk might not be crying at the moment Todd can recognise the signs. As gently as he can he reaches out to take the piece of paper from his grip, setting it aside when Dirk lets him without a fight. He keeps his eyes on his face, trying to catch his gaze where Dirk is staring into the middle distance looking completely and utterly *lost*.

"Hey," he takes his hands, giving him plenty of space to pull away if he wants to and not finding himself particularly comforted when Dirk doesn't put up any kind of resistance.

"Dirk, can you look at me for a second?"

When their eyes meet it feels like Dirk is staring through him. His eyes are wide, shining with unshed tears that he blinks away as he shakes his head in a jerky movement.

"It's- of course I have a birthday. *Everyone* has a birthday it was *obvious* I'm-" he cuts himself off with a derisive laugh that's more of a sob than anything. "God I'm so *stupid*-"

"No." He doesn't mean to interrupt, and Dirk's eyes finally meet his properly, startled by the sudden interruption. Todd feels guilty immediately, trying to soften his tone as he backtracks. "You're not stupid. Not for that. I mean, you can't know something if nobody ever told you, right?"

“It’s my *birthday*, Todd. Everyone knows that.” It’s clear how hard he’s trying to make this into something it isn’t, like scorning himself will take away the way his lower lip is trembling and his entire body is tensed with the effort of keeping it at bay. Todd just shakes his head softly, reaching up to brush away the single tear that’s managed to escape past the barricade. It’s such a simple gesture, but it appears to be enough to finally push him over the edge.

Dirk is crying. Not the overwrought gasping sobs he’d seen from him before, nor the empty silent tears that filled Todd with dread whenever he saw them, but just... crying. He buries his face in his hands as he leans back against the wall, pulling his knees up to his chest and sobs quietly to himself in a way that seems to Todd like something long overdue. He doesn’t interfere, not this time. It’s not an explosion of emotion or a repressed kind of despair, not something that needs to be managed for the sake of the emotional fallout that will follow. It just is. A purging of sorts, the kind of tears Todd knows from his own experience *are* the worse before it gets better.

So he lets him. Instead of crowding he just sits next to him, back to the wall and staring at the ceiling, knowing Dirk knows he’s there and waiting for it to pass.

He doesn’t know how long it is before the tears finally subside, and all he can hear from Dirk is the soft sniffing of someone who has well and truly cried themselves out. He rolls his head to look at him, working out the crick in his neck as he does, and finds him still huddled up with his face in his hands. The sight makes him want to reach out to him, a desperate ache in his chest, but Todd has been working on his patience as much as he can and he’s determined to let Dirk be the one to reach out first.

There’s silence for a long time, punctuated only by the ticking of the clock over the door, and Dirk’s occasional sniffles. When he finally speaks up again it’s rough around the edges, worn out from crying.

“When’s your birthday?”

It’s not what he was expecting, but Todd doesn’t look away. “November 15th.”

Dirk is silent for a while before, “I’m thirty six.”

The corner of Todd’s mouth twitches up, he can’t help it. “You’ve got a year on me then.”

His laugh is little more than a soft huff of air, but it breaks the tension in Todd’s chest like a rolling wave.

“I’m taller than you *and* older than you. It’s a wonder how you keep up with me.” Dirk smiles wonkily at him when he looks up, face red and blotchy and hair in disarray, but despite all of that he looks better than he has in a while. Lighter, maybe. Todd exhales heavily in some kind of relief, offering a smile of his own as he shrugs.

“I’m stubborn.”

Dirk snorts, his smile blooming wide across his face as he tips his head back against the wall, shoulders shaking with quiet, easy laughter. Todd can’t quite work out why he’s laughing, but

he's happy that he is, leaning in to nudge him just enough that he loses his balance and topples sideways.

"*Todd!*" It's the exact pitch of scandalised outcry that has Todd laughing too, simple childish delight as Dirk crosses his arms over his chest and pouts. "You're being *mean*."

"Yeah?" he grins, nudging his foot into the side of Dirk's leg. "You gonna do something about it?"

Dirk huffs, reaching for one of the reports he'd shoved to the side. He hesitates just a moment before he takes the top page and crumples it into a ball, tossing it at Todd's head.

Todd blinks comically as it bounces off in the other direction, unable to quite keep up with what was happening. "Did you just..." he flinches as another one hits his head, ducking out of the way. "Hey!"

"They're *my* classified files, Todd," he argues, scrunching up the rest of the folder in one go. "If I want to *throw* them at you I *will*."

"That what you want to do with them then? Screw them up and throw them at me?" It's a half serious question, because he'll have to do *something* with them, and Todd knows somewhere deep down that if that really *was* what Dirk wanted to do then he'd let him. He's not sure what that says about him.

"Maybe." Dirk throws the folder, catching Todd in the shoulder when he doesn't make any move to avoid it. "It's just... nice?" he pulls a face like that didn't come out the way he wanted to.

Todd raises an eyebrow. "Throwing things at me is nice?"

"*No*," Dirk sighs heavily, falling back against the wall as he looks over the file he has in his hands, some kind of report on something that Todd probably doesn't want to think about. He's focusing on it too intently though, feigning casual like Todd doesn't know him better than that by now. "It's nice because I know it won't hurt you."

Todd feels a lump rise to his throat, swallowing heavily around it as he's hit with a wave of emotion so intense he'd probably have to sit down if he wasn't already. Dirk is still staring at the paper, hands clenched a little too tightly around the edges causing it to wrinkle. Todd takes a moment to study him, tries not to choke on the swell of adoration that rises up in his chest. It mingles with the fierce protectiveness that he finds so hard to keep from tipping into righteous anger, the gentle fondness he always feels for Dirk, and the way that right now he feels so *ridiculously* proud of him in ways he doesn't think he could articulate if he tried. Dirk has always been good at turning the awful, deep rooted rot of Todd's life into something manageable, taking the sting out even if the ache is still there. It's not something he's ever seen him apply to *himself* before now though, and he's not sure if he wants to laugh or cry with some mix of relief and pride and *love*.

Christ. He's sappy these days.

Dirk deserves that though, so it's hard to hate it.

"It can't hurt you either," he tells him. "I mean, it can be painful, y'know? Going over old, bad shit always is." Dirk looks up at him at that, and Todd shrugs, resting next to him against the wall, leaning their shoulders together. "But like, it might poke at old wounds but it can't really make any more. Not now."

"It could give me a paper cut." Dirk's voice is smaller than it usually is, and Todd rests his head on his shoulder.

"I've got band-aids."

Dirk laughs, short and sharp and Todd grins in response. Managing to surprise Dirk is one of his favourite things.

"If they're pink, I don't want them."

"Don't worry, I restocked."

Dirk hums, clearly pleased but sighing heavily as he rests his head atop Todd's.

"There's... other things. In there, I mean. I don't *know*, but I think maybe-" he chews on his lower lip for a moment. "There were- they um, recorded a lot of our... sessions. For research purposes I imagine." Todd doesn't say anything, he's getting better at that, giving Dirk space to get the words out instead of jumping in with his own reactions no matter how strong they might be. "I don't- I don't want to watch them. I-" his hands tighten around the file so much the paper creases with it. Todd hears it when he swallows, clearly steeling himself. "I think- if... if you'd be *amenable* then- I'd like it if you and Farah... I mean, I *trust* you. Both of you. And I don't want to just throw it all out *without* having it looked through but I- I think I've seen enough. *Read* enough. And I *know* it's not just reports and recordings and things, I *know* Riggins. I know he's probably- more personal things? Or- sentimental, I suppose? Not that a lot about that place *was* sentimental but, well. There were a few things. And I just- I *trust* you to... know what's worth keeping."

Todd's breath leaves him in a slow, shaky stream. He's never been more glad that they aren't looking at each other, just for a moment to process the way his heart is racing with all that means, how much he wants to protest that he can't *possibly* want *Todd* to do that for him.

"Dirk..." he starts, unsure where he's even meaning to go with it, but Dirk interrupts him before he can get any further.

"Just- think about it? Talk to Farah, or- *I'll* talk to Farah. It's... it doesn't need to be done *now* but I think- it would... it would help. Me. It would help me."

It's that that does it really. Todd has never been able to say no to the people he cares about when they need him anyway, but the fact that Dirk is asking, *finally* asking for something that will help him. Finally *letting* himself be helped, even if he sounds unsure of asking and Todd can see the way his hands trembling with the effort of it. Despite the way his stomach churns

with the responsibility of holding that kind of trust from him, Todd doubts he's ever made an easier decision.

"Okay."

He's sure the uncertainty shows in his voice, but that hardly seems important right now, not with all the vulnerability Dirk is showing. Todd thinks it's probably good to give some back.

"Okay?" Dirk asks, a hopeful edge to his voice. Todd sits up so he can look at him.

"Yeah. I mean, not right now. We might need to- well. Farah needs to know and then we should probably *talk* about... how to go about it? But yeah. Okay."

Dirk smiles, weak and watery as he reaches for Todd's hand, squeezing in a way that feels more intimate than it would have been if he'd kissed him. Like he's holding on and letting go of something all at once.

"You really *are* the best assistant-slash-boyfriend ever you know?"

Todd ducks his head, the earnest way he'd said it raising a flush to his cheeks around his smile for a reason he can't even *begin* to fathom given their current situation.

"Yeah, well. I just love you. Makes it easy."

The smile Dirk gives him in return is dazzling. He still looks a mess from his crying session earlier, hair all out of place, face blotchy and red-nosed, and somehow Todd still thinks he's the most ridiculously beautiful thing he's ever seen. He looks lighter somehow, in a way that reaches all the way to wrap around Todd's heart and ease some of the weight he's been carrying for him there too.

Dirk lets go of his hand for a moment, picking the file back up and giving it a look Todd can only really describe as determined.

And as he watches Dirk tear the the thing in half, he gets the feeling for the first time that they might just be okay after all.

Chapter End Notes

Comments are pretty much the only way I know people are enjoying this, feedback is the fic writers fuel, so let me know what you think! I like getting words in return for these words, and frankly it's only the lovely comments I've had here that made me go to the effort of editing and posting this rather than just writing it and keeping it to myself.

Genuinely have no idea when the next chapter will show up, but I am writing it. It's one I'm pretty excited about actually, so if nothing else we can have that to look forward to!

You can catch me at [kieren-fucking-walker](#) on tumblr if you want to yell at me/talk to me about Dirk Gently/generally freak out over these two idiots.

Take care of yourselves, I'm glad you're still here <3

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!